



Photos courtesy of James Bingham

ATTEMPTING THE CROSSING— Mike Lair and James Bingham attempted to cross the Bering Strait between Wales and Little Diomedé by cross-country skies.

British duo attempts Bering Strait ice crossing

By Sarah Miller

It's March in Nome, the time of year when longer days and sunshine draw us outdoors for all manner of adventures— snowmachine rides, cross country skiing and fat tire cycling, dogsledding, perhaps a walk across the Bering Strait.

Two adventurers from the United Kingdom found themselves recovering from frostbite and a fractured arm in Nome last week after attempting to do just that.

James Bingham of Wales and Mike Laird of Scotland attempted to cross twenty-five miles of ice between Little Diomedé and Wales on foot last week, but were bested by treacherous conditions that made the trek impossible. "We were on middle ground ice — too thin to walk on, too thick to paddle our kayaks through. At some points, we were hauling our sleds over pressure ridges five to six feet high, and other times we were constantly breaking through the ice. It's difficult to stay warm, dry. It's a very difficult environment. This is possibly one of the most dangerous places to put in an expedition," said Bingham.

The trek was a scouting trip for a larger expedition that Bingham and Laird will attempt in spring of 2016.

This year, the goal was to become familiar with the terrain and the conditions, make connections with local residents and lay groundwork for the following year's journey. According to the team's website, www.thedeadliestjourney.com, the 2016 expedition will encompass crossing the entire Bering Strait at its narrowest point of 51 miles, starting on the Chukchi Peninsula in Russia, skirting the Diomedes and ending in Wales, Alaska.

The total distance of the crossing

will depend on the currents, however, which may cause sea ice to drift away from the narrowest part of the strait. This will be one of the trickiest parts of the journey, particularly when the team is camping at night, and the ice may be moving north or south as quickly as two miles an hour beneath them.

Bingham and Laird expect to be accompanied by at least four other adventurers, one of whom hails from Russia and has a background in sports medicine. The other team members, like Bingham and Laird, all have experience in extreme recreational endeavors including mountaineering, water sports and cold weather expeditions. Several have walked to the Magnetic North Pole from Canada, an adventure, which involves similar aspects to the Bering Strait crossing, including variable ice conditions, frigid Arctic weather, and encounters with polar bears.

However, according to Mike Laird, this partial trek was proving in many ways to be far more difficult than the North Pole trip.

Bingham explained that the expedition came together through social media. Bingham has twice climbed Mt. McKinley, and in studying the geography of Alaska, became intrigued by the idea of crossing the Bering Strait.

Meanwhile, Laird, who had long held the dream of crossing the Bering Strait, had begun recruiting interested parties for the crossing, and the two connected on an explorer's website after Laird put out the call for an expedition. This trip is the first for both to this region of Alaska.

Why attempt this crossing? Perhaps the challenge lies in the fact that

so few have been able to do so successfully. As the team's website reads, "Several thousand people have climbed Everest. Less than six hundred have been in space. A few hundred have reached the North or South Pole. But only eight people have crossed the Bering Strait on foot or by ski."

The unpredictable nature of the expedition is the other challenge that lures the adventurous pair. "As soon as you step off the shore ice, you're in a totally dynamic environment. The ice is always moving, and you're at the mercy of the currents. You don't actually know which direction you're going to be traveling. There's an element of luck. As much as you can control certain things, you don't know where you'll end up. You could get washed pretty far north or south. It could work in your favor but you just can't control some of this stuff. But that's the challenge I guess."

Another challenge the team faces as it ponders next year's expedition is the bureaucratic hurdles posed by obtaining visas and travel permission on the Russian side of the Strait. "One of the reasons so few people have done this crossing is because of the incredible amount of red tape in the Russian permit process. Navigating that bureaucracy is an expedition in itself," said Bingham. Despite this, Laird and Bingham still hope to cultivate relationships with Russian adventurers such as their current team member, in order to help facilitate the enterprise.

The two are no strangers to extreme conditions and challenges. Laird, in addition to his trek to the North Pole, has traveled to 72 coun-

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UNSTABLE ICE— James Bingham pulls a sled laden with supplies and skies on the unstable sea ice between Little Diomedé and Wales. The treacherous conditions made the trip unsafe and forced the duo to abort the mission.

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Photo courtesy of Alicia Lane
DRUM MAKING— Raichel Sahlin and Andrew Milligrock are helping Maligiaq Padilla tighten the drum skin. As part of the Alaska Native Education program, Padilla taught 7th through 9th grade students how to build drums utilizing math and science skills in the process.



Photo by Diana Haecker
DANCING— Erica Outwater dances to the sound of the newly made drums, on Friday, March 13.

School district faces funding uncertainty

By Kristine McRae

At last week's school board meeting, Nome Public Schools' superintendent Shawn Arnold echoed the sentiment of many school districts around the state, which is the challenge of funding uncertainties. With many unknowns until the legislative session wraps up in April, it's difficult to make firm budget decisions for the 2015-16 school year.

Last week several community members gathered at the legislative information office in Nome to testify about cuts in funding to programs

from pre-K to broadband services.

Arnold announced that the lobbyist working with the City of Nome in Juneau will also work with Nome Public Schools on restoring some of the budget.

Nome Elementary school principal Paul Clark reported positive news about the afterschool tutoring program. The program started in November and is sponsored by Nome Eskimo Community. It works with seventeen third through sixth graders.

"They are focusing on math flu-

ency," Clark told the board, "and we can see the results of kids mastering the math facts." Clark said that there has been increased engagement from the kids who attend the sessions and that their grades have shown improvement. "It's fair to guess that kids are being more engaged and confident in the classroom," Clark said.

The school is also getting closer to adopting a new math curriculum and will share samples with the community once the materials arrive in Nome.

The new state assessment, Alaska Measures of Progress (AMP) will be administered starting March 30. Since the AMP is a computer-based assessment, each grade will have scheduled testing days and testing will take place over three weeks.

Nome-Beltz principal Harlan Heinrich presented the student-of-the-month award for the junior high to Charles Leroy David Brown and to Elsa Angeline Prince for the high school.

Other news from Nome-Beltz included an after school project that

has students making their own Eskimo drums based on instruction from a master drum builder who visited Ms. Alicia Lang's class; high school Social Studies teacher Kent Runion will travel with a group of students to Fairbanks for an exchange with their sister school in North Pole.

The board will meet for a work session on March 24.

• British duo

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tries, ridden 2,000 miles across the Australian outback, retraced the journey of Chris McCandless to the abandoned bus in Denali National Park where McCandless met his tragic end and attempted to swim the English Channel.

Laird's journeys also include charitable projects in Morocco, working to provide capital improvements to medical and school facilities, and to improve water and sewer infrastructure in several communities. Laird's remarkable resume also includes his work as an embedded photographer with Coalition troops during combat in Afghanistan, and a stint on a Scottish reality show.

Bingham has an extensive background in mountaineering, including ascents to Mt. Everest and Afghanistan's highest peak, Mt. Noshaq, among several others. Bingham also runs and coordinates ultra-marathons, such as the 131-mile Ring O' Fire Ultramarathon in his native Wales, and a 400-mile race through the Wakhan corridor of Afghanistan.

Bingham and Laird came physically prepared and well-equipped for the Bering Strait crossing. Towing buoyant sleds loaded with camping equipment, safety gear including flares, locator beacons, a gun and satellite phone, the two also carried inflatable kayaks, skis, wetsuits for the points at which the two expected to have to swim, and insulated outerwear to contend with surface conditions.

Nonetheless, the going was slow and the two made it only few miles off the coast of Little Diomedede before it became clear that crossing the ice under existing conditions would be impossible. Cold, exhausted and injured, Laird and Bingham called for the helicopter to bring them back to Diomedede after only two days out.

"We do need to find some better gloves," remarked Bingham as he contemplated the blackened fingertips of his right hand. "Mountaineering gloves are usually insulated with down and they're warm, but when they get wet, they lose their insulation. And the neoprene gloves we had didn't keep my hands warm enough. This is the hand I was working with, getting our stove going and the constantly wet and windy conditions were really

tough."

The two returned to Little Diomedede, where they spent two days with the residents of the village before flying back to Nome on an Erickson Aviation helicopter. The timing of the trip was fortunate in that Erickson's helicopter flights to the island have only recently resumed. The village was left without air-service for over a month due to helicopter repairs, helicopter maintenance issues and bad weather. Erickson has come on board as a sponsor for the expedition, and the team was grateful not only for the sponsorship, but for the company's support along the way. Erickson dropped maps for the team indicating current ice conditions just before they started out.

While in Little Diomedede, Bingham and Laird camped in the school gymnasium, where they unpacked their equipment kits and shared their experience with schoolchildren,

community members and village leaders. "When we tell people what we are trying to do, they usually just laugh and shake their heads," commented Bingham. "However, the people in Little Diomedede were surprisingly supportive. We thought they might be dismissive of it, but after we unpacked our kits and gave our presentation about the trip, they saw that it could be possible and have been very supportive."

"We spent a lot of time talking to people like Robert Soolook, on the tribal council, listening to their advice and we really respect their knowledge. He's expressed an interest in joining our team next year," said Bingham.

Soolook was part of the 1989 Bering Bridge Expedition, which sought to reconnect Natives from the Diomededes to those of similar Inupiat heritage living in Russia, bridging relationships that were forced apart by US and Russian foreign policies dur-

ing the Cold War. That expedition traveled a thousand miles by dogsled, skin boat and ski.

Laird and Bingham spent the two days in Diomedede hearing from the locals about their heritage as ice travelers. "Some of the locals have made the trip we were trying to make themselves. In the past, when the ice was better, they would make the journey to Wales for supplies in less than twenty-four hours. But the ice is changing, and they haven't had an ice run for a number of years."

Bingham and Laird spent the last few days of their trip in Nome, reflecting on their experience while awaiting a return flight to the UK. It was only after five days of being injured that Laird finally went to the hospital and discovered his arm was fractured. Now, the two will move forward with the planning for next year's expedition with the advantage of experience on their side.

Despite the lack of a successful

crossing this time, the team's spirits were buoyed by their time getting to know the residents of this part of Alaska. "It's nice to be able to go to places like this and share this place with others. We've met people in Alaska who don't even know where Little Diomedede is, never mind people in the UK. So to be able to go there and put pictures up of the school and share the people and their stories is fantastic. And the people there like it as well- they are keen for the world to see their little island. They are very proud of it," said Bingham.

"In a sense, the success or otherwise of this partial crossing wasn't the be-all or end-all. Just traveling to Little Diomedede, meeting the locals, staying in the school, being with the community was an incredible experience. Their generosity toward us, how they supported us and looked after us was phenomenal," he commented.

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