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Arctic Cowboys | Courtesy

Eileen Visser, Potsdam, part of the Arctic Cowboys team, poses with the team at the start of their historic 1,800 mile journey across the Arctic Ocean from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. After 103 days they became the first paddlers to cross the Northwest Passage. From left, West Hansen of Texas, Visser, Mark Agnew of Scotland, and Jeff Wueste of Texas.

Potsdam woman among 1st to paddle Northwest Passage

BY CHERYL SHUMWAY
North Country This Week

POTSDAM — A Potsdam woman has made history as part of the first team to paddle across the Arctic Ocean's Northwest Passage in one season.

Eileen Visser and her four-person team kayaked 1,800 miles over 103 days. They battled icy waters, high waves, freezing temperatures and a problem polar bear.

"I am the luckiest lady alive to get to see what I saw and be there. It was awesome," said Visser.

"I am not trying to get into the Guinness Book of World Records. For

me, personally, it is the immersion in nature and experiencing the Arctic that is the real satisfaction," she said.

Besides Visser, age 53, the Arctic Cowboy team included two Texans in their 60s, West Hansen and Jeff Wueste, and Mark Agnew, of Scotland, age 32.

"The Northwest Passage is even more pristine and untouched than Alaska. It is the last place we humans haven't messed up," said Visser, who grew up in Alaska until age 16.

But Visser said she had mixed feelings about crossing the route.

"The only reason the Northeast Passage is open long enough to paddle it now is because of climate change. It

ought to still be frozen, and that was definitely on our minds," said Visser.

After two weeks of unsuccessful attempts to start their trip due to prolonged ice and fog, they officially began July 15 at Button Point, Canada.

Moving ice can be a big problem if it moves your kayak the wrong way or tips you over, said Visser. She recalled one time when they were caught between two converging pieces of moving ice, but luckily managed to get out.

The arduous journey was more manageable by chunking it into smaller goals, said Visser.

SEE ARCTIC PAGE 8

ARCTIC...

"Even the days it was the hardest, I never wished I wasn't there. It was more of a gift than it was a struggle," she said.

Viewing the Northern Lights without the light pollution was a special highlight.

During a night paddle to make it to a hunting cabin before an upcoming storm, the team witnessed the spectacular event.

"The light show was just amazing. It took your breath away. The whole universe was celebrating my daughter's birthday that night, Sept. 10," said Visser.

"Of course we saw a lot of wildlife — polar bears, seals, walrus, birds, a humpback whale, and many belugas and narwhal whales," she said.

"Some of the whales were so close I could have touched them with my paddle," she said. But no whales tipped over her kayak as she feared might happen.

Of all the polar bears they saw, only one was a problem. They woke up one morning to a silhouette of a bear just outside their tent.

Not scared away by their yelling and throwing rocks, the bear eventually left. But its claws left holes in Visser's dry suit while foraging in her kayak.

Near the end of their trip, the challenges increased.

"We were running out of time with wintry conditions. We had overstayed our welcome and Madame Arctic was like nope," said Visser.

"We started accepting conditions we would paddle in that we had rejected before. We were getting more desperate. We needed more miles, and it was getting colder and more windy," she said.

Then a new problem developed with no more fresh water because it was frozen solid.

It took several attempts chopping through pond ice with a hatchet to find fresh water suitable for drinking.

"I was always hungry. Food was limited, due to weight and volume in our kayaks," said Visser.

They stopped once midway through their voyage to resupply with food they had flown into an Inuit village on Victoria Island. But food became even more scarce the last few days.

They completed their journey Oct. 11, the night before their food would have been depleted.

A Twin Otter plane picked up the team at an off-strip landing at Nicholson Island.

After 103 grueling days, the team had crossed the historic route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Visser flew into Ottawa Oct. 15, met by family and friends. Members of the St. Lawrence Valley Paddlers also greeted her after she crossed the Ogdensburg border, welcoming her home with cheers and a big sign.

Back to work the next day at St. Lawrence University to teach her labs, Visser was very appreciative of the university's support in allowing her the time off.

"It was a chance of a lifetime to be there and see it," she said.

"It's cool to do something you've never done."

Those wishing to support Visser's many expenses from her trip may donate to her Venmo account @Eileen-Visser.

To view a video of their trip, view BBC News here: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-67133185>