

### **Diary 3: 5 June 2011**

#### **Arctic Romance – Polar bear style**

The Twin Otter landed last Tuesday with five passengers, Jannik Hansen, Kim Simonsen, Henrik Spanggård, Dina Laursen and yours truly, Lars O. Mortensen. It had been a fantastic flight with clear sky and breath taking surroundings. As a first time visitor at Zackenberg Research Station, the immensity of the nature here strikes you as soon as you set foot on the gravel air strip. Especially when the plane has taken off and you are left with the sound of nothing but the wind and river.

The ice in the Zackenberg river had broken about 12 hours before our arrival, which meant that the station was now fully functional. The Sirius patrols had, at the same time, completed their spring round of the national park, a small trip of 2500 km, and were gathered at the Zackenberg trapping station to celebrate homecoming. We were, unfortunately too late to participate in the celebrations, so we went there the day after to see the sledges, sled dogs and new born pups. The kind Sirius boys then offered us to ride with them on the sledges for a while, an offer we were not hesitant to accept. And what an exceptional way of travel.

Thursday it was time to check up on some of the fox dens in the western part of the valley, which was undertaken by Lars Holst Hansen and my self. Here we also took the opportunity to set an automatic camera at the den, which was to take pictures on a routine schedule, so we can investigate the usage of the den. We took our lunch break at the Zackenberg trapping station and while having coffee out in front of the station, Lars H saw something on the fjord that he thought was two seals. But with a more careful investigation he could confirm, in a calm voice, that it was a polar bear female with a cub, resting in the sun a couple of kilometres out on the fjord. This was reported quickly to the station so everybody could enjoy this rare sight.

It is the first time a mother polar bear with a cub is seen in the Zackenberg Valley, but they seemed to like the place, because the day after they were still there and yet again the day after. Since none of us have had much experience with polar bears, we could not figure out whether this was normal behaviour of the polar bear, so all the stations occupants spent a great deal of their free time to watch the bears walking back and forth on the ice, seemingly doing nothing. It was not until last night the mystery was solved. Late at night I was watching the bears through the telescope, together with Lars H, when the thought struck me. The small cub did not look very cub like. It rather resembled a small version of the big one. Could this be a small female, while the large one being a male? Lars H and I quickly read through the literature and it all fitted like a glove. Polar bears withdraw from their hunting grounds to mate and stay in these areas for many days. At the same time the male polar bear is about twice the size of the female. So there has yet to be seen a mother polar bear with cub in the Zackenberg valley, but romance is happening on the ice.

So stay tuned until next week, where there probably will be a follow up on the lovemaking on the ice.

All the best from the north

Lars O. Mortensen, Ph.D. stud., BioBasis