

Sisters woman made epic voyages through Northwest Passage

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

Paula von Weller had spent multiple seasons in the Arctic since 2006 when she was presented with an opportunity that explorers have dreamed of since the discovery of the New World.

She was serving as a field biologist on the Arctic icebreaker MSV Fennica in 2015 when she heard the crew talking about sailing the Northwest Passage home. The Northwest Passage is the sea route from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean through the Arctic Ocean. For two centuries it was an almost mythical magnet to explorers who sought a trade route to the Pacific and Asia. Many explorers sought it before a passage was made in 1903-06 by Norwegian Roald Amundsen. Until recent years, the Northwest Passage has not been readily navigable in most

years because of ice. Of late, icebreakers have been able to make the passage more readily.

Von Weller, a Sisters resident, had been aboard the Fennica collecting and assessing data on marine animals. Her role aboard ship was to consult the crew regarding interactions with marine mammals — how and when to avoid them and how to minimize negative impacts.

She asked the obvious question: “What would it take for me to stay on and do the passage with you?”

She received an invitation from the captain and “it was sort of like the most exciting thing that ever happened.” She described herself as “jumping up and down like a little girl.”

The Fennica made the latest passage on record, in October 2015. This year, von Weller was invited to again cruise the Northwest Passage, this time on the Finnish icebreaker MSV Nordica with

a team of researchers and Associated Press journalists — and this time they made the earliest and quickest transit: just 24 days starting July 5 from Vancouver, British Columbia arriving at the terminus in Nuuk, Greenland, on July 29.

The voyages are a high point in a long love affair with the Arctic — one that is difficult for the biologist to explain.

“It’s something magical,” she said. “It’s hard to put into words. I’ve never *not* wanted to go back. It’s just such a special place that so few people get to see. I don’t ever pass up Arctic work.”

Von Weller may have a passion for the vast spaces and silences of the Arctic, but her first love is sea turtles.

Born and raised in Portland, von Weller got interested in marine life on trips to the Oregon Coast. She graduated with a degree in biology from Portland State University in 1999, but she was diverted from a science career for a while when she was offered an opportunity to crew a sailboat in the Pacific. She recalls that she “fell in love with sea turtles along the way.”

Offered a chance to work on a sea turtle conservation project, she took up the challenge and that in turn opened other doors that have led to a well-traveled and exciting scientific career.

“Having *National Geographic* moments at work every day is pretty special,” she said.

Since she travels for her



PHOTO PROVIDED

Paula von Weller, a biologist who lives in Sisters, has made two voyages through the Northwest Passage.

work, she can live anywhere she wants to, and she chose to come back to a place where she spent time camping as a child and youth.

“This has always been one of my favorite places,” she said. “Even when I’m in the Arctic or somewhere super-glamorous, it’s always good to come home.”

Asked about the impact of climate change in the Arctic, von Weller said that she can’t comment on changes in the ice, since, despite their name, icebreakers try to avoid heavy ice. It is clear, however, that “the window of time that ships can get through the Arctic is opening.” And, she notes, natives tell researchers that summer starts earlier and winter starts later than it used to.

There will be an effect on marine mammal life.

“Definitely as we lose ice, it’s going to affect these animals,” she said.

One of the highlights of her passage on the Nordica was sightings of narwhal, a rare species known as the Unicorn of the Sea in part for its single long tusk and in part for the rarity of sightings. Seeing narwhal was a “bucket list” item for von Weller.

“Sure enough, we saw narwhal multiple times,” she said.

Paula is a bit awe-struck by the good fortune she has experienced in making a nautical voyage that has been a lode-star for scientists and explorers since the golden age of exploration.

“Everyone in my field, that’s what people dream about,” she reflected. “And I’ve been there twice.”



PHOTO PROVIDED

The Finnish icebreaker MSV Nordica makes its way through the ice in its record-breaking Arctic passage.

For up-to-date
fire reports go to

www.NuggetNews.com

 Find us on
Facebook