



TREKKING FOR CHANGE IN THE HIGH ARCTIC

French polar explorer Vincent Colliard on his quest to cross the 20 largest ice caps on the planet to help document melting ice fields.

TEXT VINCENT COLLIARD PHOTOS ICELEGACY

In 2010, I took part in the first successful expedition to circumnavigate the Arctic Ocean in one single season. Melted ice fields had left the Northeast and Northwest Passages free for long enough for us to sail through with our 31-foot trimaran. A century ago, the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen took three years to cross the Northwest Passage; we did it in 25 days. I will always remember the way this polar bear looked at me when we stopped, a few feet from the shore. The ice had gone from the Bellot Strait and the bear was deprived of its natural hunting ground. Was he feeding on seaweed and bird eggs? I instantly realized that while an ocean only a few degrees warmer may reveal new sailing routes, it will disturb entire ecosystems. How could we claim success when we had climate change to thank?

A few years later, with my expedition partner Børge Ousland, I set out to cross the 20 largest ice caps on the planet, with a series of expeditions documenting melting ice fields and bringing awareness to ice conservation. We have crossed five of them so far, and hope to reach our goal before 2030.

This is the untold story of our saga's latest chapter, in the Chugach Mountains of southern Alaska.

It's 10 July, and I'm in Anchorage preparing for the journey. The traverse of the Chugach Mountains' icefield keeps me up at night. A satellite image provided by Airbus Defence and Space indicates a narrow piece of ice with lots of compressed areas and very alpine terrain. I am feeling quite anxious this time around. When Børge arrives, we take the time to dissect the images and adapt the equipment list to what we think will be more of a mountaineering traverse than a ski crossing. I suggest: "Let's go for 25 days!" and we both agree.

On 20 July, we get started from sea level at the Columbia Glacier, the site of one of the biggest ice retreats on the planet. As usual, we start slowly. We feel all 175 pounds of the equipment we're pulling behind us on our sleds, which contain everything we'll need for the nearly month-long journey on the ice.

By day three, the sleds had gotten so worn down by sharp stones on the ice, we had to spend six hours repairing them to save us from having to wear them on our backs for 22 arduous days.



CHUGACH MOUNTAINS, AK

Eventually, we make it to the end of the Columbia Glacier, where we're finally met with some snow. We try pulling the sleds again and it works, but at a steep 30-degree incline with that much weight, we're losing our footing. I shout to Børge that I'm "gonna put on my crampons." I spend the next 15 minutes looking for them—no dice. All this back and forth, the bumpy terrain, did they fall out? Did I leave them somewhere? It's the second incident in five days.

I decide to send an instant message via our satellite phone to Matt Keller, an experienced bush pilot with whom I had discussed pickup logistics before the trip. If we were going to summit Marcus Baker, the highest peak of the Chugach, I was going to need those crampons.

Chugach

61°26'N 147°45'W

Chugach is one of Alaska's three largest ice caps. At around 200 km (124 miles) long and less than 100 km (62 miles) wide, its proximity to the Gulf of Alaska makes it vulnerable to changing climate. Its tallest mountain, Marcus Baker, sits in the middle of the ice field and rises to nearly 13,000 feet. Some of its glaciers' arms, including Columbia, Harvard, and Surprise, flow south towards the Gulf, while others like Matanuska, Nalchina, and Tazlina form in the rivers to the north and famously flow alongside the scenic Glenn Highway.

Matt replied the next day. "I have two pairs of crampons that will fit your ski boots!" I'm ecstatic, but then we realize how difficult it's going to be to coordinate dropping them by plane. We calculate a probable GPS position where we aim to be in the afternoon, and the rest is up to the weather. Rushing to make the drop location, we ski down through the beautiful, wide-open crevasses in the mist. Heading west, we make our way into the valley where the surface of the snow is covered in pink algae, also known as watermelon snow. It's so magical I almost forget about my crampons!

I lift my head up and look towards the mountain pass, just in time to see the plane disappear. But we continue to hear the engines so he'll probably circle back. We need to make ourselves more visible, so we run back towards the valley where the snow is stark white, a perfect backdrop. There's a long silence as I stretch my bright red jacket across two ski poles. Once again the plane comes back into view. "He's spotted us!" shouts Børge, and Matt swoops down to make the drop. With his aviator sunglasses on and a huge smile on his face, Matt gives us the thumbs up and flies off. Only after we open the parcels do we realize he's attached some smoked salmon and chocolate to the crampons.



Over the next four days, we face some challenging mountain passes and our pace slows down significantly. With the increase in steep, rocky terrain, we're forced to climb by rope more often. And with the weight of our sleds, now on our shoulders like Himalayan yaks, every step becomes dangerous.

But we keep our heads up. In celebration of how far we've come, Børge surprises me by pulling marshmallows out of his pack. In the evening, we roast them on the mini stove and reflect on the beauty of these mountains, their hanging glaciers, and the incredible weather patterns which seem to be dictated entirely by the summits they crash up against.

As we approach the Matanuska Glacier ahead, it becomes clear that the snow bridges are weakening, and the face directly above us is steep enough to be susceptible to avalanches. We must hurry. Børge leads, probing the ice carefully, and we step together one pace at a time. In situations like these, synchronization is key. We progress

together, the rope taut. Suddenly, the snow underneath Børge caves in and he falls into the crevasse. Somehow, instinctively, I manage to turn my body 90°, catching myself with my skis perpendicular to the rope and anchoring all my weight in the opposite direction. Luckily, the rope is tight enough for Børge to climb back up, but the weight of the situation is not lost on us. "I have only fallen twice in my life. This was the third, and I don't want to imagine how that could've ended with a slack rope," he says, short of breath. I take the lead and we push forward.

On day 17, we finally reach the terminus of the Marcus Baker Glacier. Our destination is only about two days away, and we have about eight days left of food. We decide to leave our sleds in the middle of the glacier and prepare our packs for six days of climbing, in an attempt to traverse a mountain pass that will lead us straight into Knik Glacier. From there, it's possible to ski upwards and establish a base camp before the final summit push.





Following tracks left by mountain goats, we reach the col and start prepping to ski up through Knik. However, Børge and I soon realize we are too heavy, with our backpacks on, for the fragile snow bridges. So we're forced instead to pull them like sleds on the ice. It takes us two full days to reach base camp, and when we finally do, we have little time to rest, as we have to wake up at 3 a.m. for the final ascent. The alarm rings and our anxieties turn quickly to a thrilling confidence. By midday, looking out from the highest point of the Chugach, we see the summit of Marcus Baker poke out from the clouds and start to make our final ascent.

By day 21, Børge and I arrive back at our sleds, where we call Matt Keller to organize a pickup 13 km (8 miles) ahead of us. "Roger that. Tomorrow 10 a.m. if weather's good." But this would prove much more challenging than anticipated. We complete 11 km (7 miles) in 16 hours, through rocky terrain and uneven ice. I start to look for moose or bear tracks for a more defined path, which takes us through the wild-rushing Marcus Baker River. Struggling to keep our balance on wet stones, we're forced to slow our pace. We soon come to the inevitable conclusion that we're not going to make the pickup in time, and call Matt to postpone.

On a light rainy day 23, we set back out to reach the airstrip. At 3:30 p.m., Matt's silver plane comes out of the mist to take us back to Anchorage. With so many things that could have gone wrong, it takes a few minutes for it to set in that we pulled this off.

During the expedition, we took samples of snow and ice that we delivered to the University of Alaska Anchorage to help scientists study the water isotopes. Analyzing the chemistry of the water helps them compare and track glacial fingerprints. In the future, I hope to collect samples of soot (black carbon powder), which accelerates glacial melting. Scientists are able to date that carbon to determine the origin of the molecule—whether by natural (volcanoes for instance) or human-made processes. Understanding these ratios could provide additional evidence of our impact on the icefields.

Ice caps are unique playgrounds where I feel alive, but they are also retreating at an alarming rate. Connecting with them and giving them a voice has taught me the value of engaging in ice conservation, in my own adventurous way. ■