White Whales in The Arctic

by VEN. DONALD B. MARSH

The sun shone but faintly through the smoke-filled sky as we boarded Thomas Unnok's whaleboat all set for the hunt. The crew were Thomas Unnok (the only ordained Eskimo in Canada), Felix Nevolmak, Jim Edwards, Nevolmak's son and myself. We had hardly pulled away from shore when Felix got to work arranging the gear so that the lines would spin out without tangling. He sharpened the harpoon heads and bound them in place on the shafts. The inverted sealskin, when inflated served as a float, was repaired by the simple method of securely tying up the ripper wherein had appeared a leak. Taking this painted bag and withdrawing the stopper from the centre of the stomach, he blew with distended cheeks until the skin could grow no larger. He then slipped back the wooden stopper into the hole, and there the float lay, looking like a very puffed-up and satisfied pig.

Rifles were next on the list, and soon Felix had each one checked over, loaded and laid ready for action. Though we were but a mile or two from shore by this time, it was nevertheless time for tea, and Felix busied himself with the primus stove. We had just finished a meal of dried fish, bannock and tea when Nevolmak, who was steering, shouted out "taimak, taimak!" ("there, there!"). All jumped up in a flash, and there, a long way ahead, we could see the pure white patch as the whales slowly turned and twisted in the sunshine. Nevolmak steered for the middle of the group, while the others stood by the gear. Thomas waited by the engine to answer immediately any call for slow, full-speed ahead, or reverse. Felix and Jim Edwards each grabbed a rifle and stood on the raised platform in the bow. Both seemed carved from stone, save for the upper portions of their bodies as they moved from side to side in the motion of the boat and in constant search for the tell-tale patch of white which marked the rolling movement of a whale. Immediately ahead a white back rose to view and seemed to surge forward; at the same instant two rifles were raised and sighted. Too late! The whale had gone. There it was again. "Bang, bang!" went the rifles, and the next time it came up to breathe, a trace of red marred the white skin. With a great flip of its grey-edged tail (the darkest edge indicating that the whale had not yet reached maturity) it dived, and a swirling trail of water showed the underwater route of the mammal. The bowman motioned the steersman to follow. Up again, a flash of white — and down; another long, long search when nothing was to be seen, not even the slightest movement, across the whole surface of the sea, for the other whales had long since departed for parts unknown.

Forward and aft we searched, scanning each foot of water, the boat turning from this way to that, until sharp-eyed Felix saw a small patch of oil. The whale must have been there, and the scanning went on with renewed vigour. "There he is!" shouted Jim, and almost as if the whale heard him it dived.

We followed close on that swirling wake, and were soon twisting and turning, everyone's eyes glued to that spot ahead, until, with a great rush and swirl of water just in front of the boat, a patch of white appeared. The report of the rifles sent echoes across the sea; and the great body turned over as the

The adult white whale or Beluga (Delphinapterus leucas) is pure white all over and grows up to eighteen feet in length. These shown were small enough to be towed ashore before being dissected.
The rifle crack, and a white whale (which can be glimpsed behind the bowman) is wounded just before it dives.

As the engine races and the boat darts forward the bowman balances with raised harpoon, awaiting an opportunity to plunge it into his victim.

Right—After the whale has been killed by a final lashing it is pulled alongside the boat and secured; the harpoon head is being removed.

shots took effect. In an instant Felix dropped his rifle, poised for a moment with the swiftly caught-up harpoon in his hand, and with a quick thrust plunged it down at the white body.

At last the thrashing of the tail caused him to throw overboard the painted sealskin float, and in a moment or two it was quietly bobbing up and down on the surface of the water. We hauled in the line, made sure that the whale was dead, and then cast off in search of other prey. Hour after hour passed and we could spy no more whales; and so, with reluctance, we returned to the first kill.

It was amazing to see how far that white float showed in the sea. Drawing it on board was a simple matter. It was, however, quite a different story when it came to cutting out the harpoon head, and tying lines on one flipper and the tail, as these were extremely slippery. The great body was fully fourteen feet long and more than half the length of the boat. It seemed impossible for us to haul it inboard. A conference was held; should it be blown up with the aid of the blower (two cylindrical, hollow-cored sticks of wood bound together) or hauled inboard whole?

An inflated whale (its stomach filled with air and the hole plugged with a round wooden bung) (two with ease, and even three or four of them can be hauled by a fairly small boat. Eventually it was decided that the carcass should be cut into pieces, and to this end knives were sharpened. To sever the tail from the body was no great task, while the severance of the head was fairly easy with the aid of iron hooks and ropes. It simply meant that while three persons held the whale another used a great butcher knife and with sure, even strokes slashed through skin, flesh and bone. With one final cut between the vertebrae the job was completed and the head and tail hauled in.

The skin and fat are gradually peeled loose from the carcass and drawn, inch by inch, over the side of the boat.
The body itself was too huge to drag inboard and, indeed, when we tried the boat beached until it had a scant two inches of freeboard, even though the whale was scarcely out of the water. A long cut was then made down the underbelly from end to end and the fat with the skin and outer skin were flayed inch by inch from the carcass itself; then, one after the other, they were hauled on board. It was all we could do to get the body over the gunwale, but finally, with a flop, that rocked the boat, it landed on top of the skin.

"Puff, puff, puff!" sang the engine as we skipped over the sea on our way home, and all the members of the crew except myself chewed on small hunks of walrus' skin of the whale cut from the edge of the tail. Straight for the drying racks steered Thomas and soon Susie, his wife, and seemingly numberless women and children gathered to view the catch.

A rope was thrown ashore and caught by the onlookers; then, a moment later, the head was being drawn in. Soon the tail, the flukes, the great skinned carcases and, lastly, with many men and women pulling, the vast expanse of skin and blubber slipped over the side of the boat into the water to be hauled up on the sandy beach out of reach of the tide.

Each member of the crew now received his share. The owner of the boat naturally took the largest, and also distributed to the others those portions of the meat, skin, blubber and internal organs which fell to their lot. These they carried to their tents in various craft borrowed for that purpose.

Thomas, assisted by Susie, hauled up their share of the skin onto the grass above high-tide mark, and by this time it was dusk, or as near dusk as the Arctic night ever gets in the latter days of July. Seven o'clock in the morning once more saw them both down on the beach working at the whale. The multiuk, if allowed to remain in the sun, turns poisonous; and neither was satisfied of the death which had already resulted that spring for one who had eaten some skin that was tainted.

The flesh was stripped from the bones by Thomas while Susie, expertly wielding her woman's knife, carved off huge slices, up to twenty inches across and at a scant half-inch thick, from the great masses of sleek, rich, black-brown meat. These large wafers she laid on a rack to dry as quickly as possible in the warm sunshine where, besides the warmth of the sun, the meat received visits from colonies of blue flies until the surface was too hard for them to devour.

The multiuk is very nice to eat without being cooked. It is impossible to describe the taste, though it much resembles, when cooked, the white of a hard-boiled egg. When raw the flesh-like skin is tough and takes a lot of chewing; but this, of course, means nothing to an Eskimo with his powerful jaws and teeth.

Cutting the multiuk into squares, Susie put it into a half-drum of salt water which she brought to the boil over a fire of driftwood. After each lot had cooked for an hour or so it was removed and laid out to cool. When stored in wooden or steel barrels the blubber and fat on the inner side renders down and "pickles" and ripens the skin, making good winter food for both Eskimos and dogs.

The stomach of the whale is very carefully turned inside out and washed, pains being taken to ensure that all fleshy parts are removed. When scraped clean of their outer coating the skins are dried and used for boat eakes, mats, boat covers (as here) and as waterproof material for a variety of other purposes.

Susie changes over a partly dried 'sheet' of sun-dried whale meat. Though rather strong, this has a not unpleasant flavour and is eaten by both men and dogs.

Thomas, Susie's husband, sharpens his knives preparatory to cutting up the bones. The rich, black meat having been removed, these will serve as dog-food.
moved. When inflated it has the appearance of a great pistol or a portion of a set of bagpipes. When cured it serves as a container for many articles, such as berries, oil, muktuk and other kinds of food.

Susie moved from rack to rack all through that day and the succeeding ones, turning and adjusting the great slabs of drying meat until they were as hard as iron. Such ironations serve well in the winter as dog food, or can be pared with a knife and eaten with relish, but in small quantities, by the Eskimos themselves.

Not all the blubber is used for preserved muktuk; some may be left on the thick, white outer skin and dried so that it can be pared off with a knife to form a delicacy.

Eskimos who live in areas where there are caribou use the skins of these animals for making bags, boots and a thousand and one other objects. Similarly, the seal-hunters use sealskin, while the Eskimos in the area around Tuktoyaktuk (Port Bannat) do the same with the skin of the white whale.

When the thick layer of fat has been removed the whiteskin is laid out in the sun so that the outer cheesy covering rots. The women then cut this off with their knives, wash the skin, dry it on a rack, or peg it out on the ground to dry. The yellow parchment,

No box of chocolates could produce a more appreciative smile than these few slices of boiled and preserved muktuk.

when dried, has a variety of uses: it is excellent for boot soles, makes good bags, at one time provided kayak covers, is used as a mat, or a covering for boats, and, in short, serves as a fine waterproof material for many purposes.

Nothing is wasted, for the bones upon which shreds of meat remain serve as food for the dogs, and no one, I am sure, can excel an Eskimo dog (particularly if it is hungry) at picking a bone. The head is often given to the dogs as a tit-bit, and if there are any of the old houses left, built years before, some of the meat and blubber may be placed inside them for use in the winter, when they will emerge from their frozen state in perfect freshness.

So the white whale serves in the economy of the North. It forms a great reservoir of food and energy for men and dogs for the long Arctic winter, and provides a delicacy for every one of the several hundreds of Eskimos who assemble at Whitefish Station on the Arctic coast for the annual hunt each spring. This hunt is for them both business and sport, and provides a happy time to which they look forward year after year.

The stomach of the white whale forms a useful, though bulky, bag for carrying either liquids or solids.

A N I M A L  S E R I E S — P a r t  I I

Photographs and Notes by W. V. CROCH

F A W N  O F  T H E  W H I T E - T A I L E D  D E E R — O d o c h r o n e s  V i r g i n i c o n s

All who have flushed deer suddenly from their merry beds will agree that the White-tailed Deer is appropriately named. The tail comes up at every leap, flashing a vivid white signal. The purpose of this signal is debatable. Perhaps it is a signal to enable the young ungulate fawn to follow its mother more easily. Or again, it may be to confuse the aim of the hunter. Find a dash of white and then the deer appears to melt into the environment, only to be followed by another dash at another time and another place.

The young fawns are born in May and June and twins are quite common. The fawns are a dull rusty brown marked with a series of large, irregular patches that conceal them from the early summer months. This coloration resembles very closely the brown of the forest floor spckled with spots of leaf-filthered sunlight. This scheme of camouflage is quite effective, drawing the attention of the young as it lies on its bed of fern. Fawns are friendly little creatures and quite unsuspicious of people for some time after birth.

The daily press publishes photographs of fawns that have been picked up, apparently deserted by their mothers. This is not the case, and the mother is better able to take care of her offspring than any human foster mother. Fawns are beautiful and appealing; but, being wild animals, they should be left in their native habitat.