9-28-1881

The Jeanette Search. Exploration of Herald Island-No Signs of the Missing Ship. Dangers of Arctic Exploration-Fauna and Flora of the North. (Special Correspondence of the Bulletin.) Steamer Corwin (Off Herald Island), Arctic Ocean, July 31, 1881.

John Muir

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmb

Recommended Citation

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the John Muir Papers at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in John Muir: A Reading Bibliography by Kimes by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact mgibney@pacific.edu.
THE JEANNETTE SEARCH.

Exploration of Herald Island—No Signs of the Missing Ship.

Dangers of Arctic Exploration—Feasua and Flora of the North.

[SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE OF THE BULLETIN.]

STEAMER CORWIN (OF HERALD ISLAND.)

ARCTIC OCEAN, July 31, 1881.

We left Herald Island this morning at 3 o'clock, after landing upon it and exploring it pretty thoroughly from end to end.

A WHALE REPEATED IN WINTER.

On the morning of the 30th we were steaming along the coast a few miles to the south of Icy Cape, intending to make an effort to reach Point Barrow to give aid to the whaling ship Daniel Webster, which we learned was in the ice themselves, and was in great danger of being lost. [The total loss of the Daniel Webster has since been reported.] We found, however, that the pack extended solidly from Icy Cape to the southward and pressed so hard against the shore that we found that it would be impossible to proceed even with the steam launch. We therefore turned back with great reluctance and came to anchor near Cape Lisburne, where we ministered and took on about 100 tons of coal. About 4 o'clock P.M., July 30th, we hoisted anchor and sailed toward Herald Island, intending to make a general survey of the edge of the great polar ice-pack about the island of Wrangel Land, hardly hoping to be able to effect a landing this early in the season.

MAKING HERALD ISLAND EFFECT A LANDING.

On the evening of the 30th we reached Herald Island, having been favored with delightful weather all the way, the ocean being calm and glassy as a mountain lake, the surface stirred gently here and there with irregular breaths of air that could hardly be called winds, and the whole of this day from midnight to midnight was all sunshine, contrasting marvelously with the dark icy storm-days we had experienced so short a time ago.

Herald Island came in sight at 10 o'clock P.M., and when we reached the edge of the pack it was still about 30 miles distant. We made our way through it, however, without great difficulty, as the ice was mostly light and had openings of clear water here and there, though in some close-piled fields the Corwin was pretty roughly bumped, and had to steam her best to force a passage. At 10 o'clock P.M. we came to anchor in the midst of huge calms and blocks about 25 feet thick, within 500 or 600 yards of the shore.

EXPLORATION OF THE ISLAND.

After so many futile efforts had been made to reach this little ice-bound island, everybody seemed wildly eager to run ashore and climb to the summit of its sheer granite cliffs. At first a party of eight started from the harbor chains and ran across the narrow belt of margin ice and maddened began to climb up an excessively steep gully, which came to an end in an inaccessible slope a few hundred feet above the water. Those ahead loosened and sent down a train of granite boulders, which shot over the heads of those below in a far more dangerous manner than any of the party seemed to appreciate. Fortunately nobody was hurt, and all made out to get down in safety. While this remarkable piece of mountaineering and Arctic exploration was in progress, a light skiff-covered boat was dragged over the ice and launched on a strip of water that stretched in front of an accessible ravine, the bed of a ancient glacier, which I felt assured would conduct by an easy grade to the summit of the island. The slope of this ravine for the first 100 feet or so was very steep, but insensibly as it was full of firm, icy snow, it was easily ascended by cutting steps in the face of it with an ax that I had brought from the ship for the purpose. Beyond this there was not the slightest difficulty in our way, the glacier having graded a fine, broad road.

ON THE SUMMIT.

Keltie, who discovered this island in 1849, and landed on it under unfavorable circumstances, describes it as an inaccessible rock. The sides are indeed, in general, extremely sheer and precipitous all around, though skilled mountaineers would find many gulches and slopes by which they might reach the summit. I first pushed on to the head of the glacier valley, and thence along the backhouse of the island to the highest point, which I found to be about 1,500 feet above the level of the sea. This point is about a mile and a half from the northwest end, and four and a half from the northeastern end, thus making the island about six miles in length. It has been cut nearly in two by the glacial action it has undergone, the width at
Written, July 31, 1881
Pub. Sep 29 "  

this lowest portion being about half a mile, and the average width about two miles. The entire island is a mass of granite, with the exception of a patch of metamorphic slate near the center, and no doubt owes its existence with so considerable a height, to the superior resistance this granite offers to the degrading action of the northern sea sheet, traces of which are here plainly shown, as well as on the shores of Siberia and Alaska, and north through Siberia Strait southward beyond Wrangell Island. Traces of the subsequent partial glaciation it has been subjected to are also manifested in glaciated valleys of considerable depth as compared with the size of the island. I noticed four of these, besides many marginal glacial grooves around the sides. One small remnant with nodose action still exists near the middle of the island. I also noted several eroded and polished patches on the hardest and most enduring of the outwelling rock bosses. That little island, standing as it does alone on the Polar Sea, is a fine glaciated monument.

A MIDNIGHT OBSERVATION.

The midnight hour I spent alone on the highest summit, one of the most impressive hours of my life. The deepest silence seemed to press down on all the vast, immeasurable, virgin landscape. The sun near the horizon reddened the edges of belted cloud-tops near the base of the sky, and the jagged ice-bound cliffs crowded together over the frozen ocean stretching indefinitely northward, while more than a hundred miles of that mysterious Wrangel Land was seen blue, in the northwest, a waving line of hill and dale over the white, and blue ice-prairies, and pale gray mountains beyond. It was well calculated to fix the eye of a wanderer, but it was to the far north! I ever found myself turning where the ice met the sky. I would face, have watched. Here all the strange, white, and the cold was compelling me to make haste and return to the ship as soon as I should find it possible, as there were 10 miles of shifting, drifting ice between us and the open sea.

LAND-LIFE ON WERANGEL ISLAND.

I therefore began the return journey about 4 o'clock this morning, after taking the compass bearings of the principal points within sight on Wrangel Land, and making a hasty collection of the flowering plants on my way. I found one species of poppy quite showy, and making considerable mass of color on the sloping uplands, three or four species of saxifrage, one silene, a drain, dwarf willow, saxatilis, two golden compositae, two edges, one grass, and a veronica, together with a considerable number of mosses and lichens, some of them quite showy and so abundant as to form the bulk of the color over the gray granite.

INHABITANTS OF THE CLIFFS.

Innumerable gulls and murres breed on the steep cliffs, the latter most abundant. They kept up a constant din of domestic notes. Some of them are sitting on their eggs, others have young, and it seems astonishing that either eggs or the young can find a resting place on cliffs so severely precipitous. The nests form a lively picture—the parents coming and going with food or to seek its thousands in rows standing on narrow ledges like bottles on a grocer's shelves, the feeding of the little ones, the multitude of wings, etc.

VIST TO A POLAR BEAR.

A fox was seen near the top of the northeast end of the island, and after we had all returned to the ship and were getting under way, the Captains discovered a polar bear swimming dexterously toward the ship between some floating blocks within a few yards of us. After he had approached within about a dozen yards the Captains shot at him, when he turned and made haste to get away, not diving, however, but swimming fast, and keeping his head turned to watch the ship, until at length he received a ball in the neck and stilled the blue water with his blood. He was a noble-looking animal, and of enormous strength, living bravely and warm amid eternal ice.

SO-SEE OF THE JEANNEET.

We looked carefully everywhere for traces of the crew of the Jeanneet along the shore, as well as on the prominent headlands and cliffs about the summit, without discovering the faintest sign of their ever having touched the island.

OFF FOR WRANGELL LAND.

We have been steering along the edge of the pack all day after reaching open water, with Wrangel Land constantly in sight, but we find that the ice has been sheering us farther and farther from it towards the west and south. The margin of the main pack has a jagged, sea-tooth outline, the teeth kink— from two to 30 miles or more in length, and their points reaching about 50 miles from the shores of Wrangel Land. Our chances, however, for reaching this mysterious country some time this year seem good at present, as the ice is melting fast and is much lighter than usual, and its wind and current movements after it breaks up, will be closely watched for an available opening.