

Diary of Half a Dutchman

Episode 5: Leaving the Floe

06 JAN 2005

Current Position: S 61.54462° W 48.76663°

An uncomfortable feeling in the stomach indicates that we finally and inevitably left the ice-covered part of the Southern Ocean. To most of us, it is unusual again to feel the rolling of the sea underneath Polarstern. Even the last ones realize now that we are on a ship here, not a research station. A fact which might have been forgotten by a number of floe-researchers.

The last two weeks at the floe were stuffed with new situations, unique experiences, and above all some serious challenges to my ability to react to unexpected situations.

Christmas in the ice surely was among the most impressive experiences of this expedition. Although work was done as usual throughout the day, everybody managed to gather in the Blue Saloon on Holy Night, for a decent celebration.

We had it all: A christmas tale – written and read by Claus-Peter, christmas songs and the inevitable christmas goose the next day.

Before that, three christmas trees had to be set up. For this purpose, three teams were formed: the German team (christmas tree in mess 2), the Belgian-Dutch team (Blue Saloon) and the Rest of the World team (mess 1). I joined the Benelux people since there are obviously enough Germans on this vessel, and we had quite some fun in preparing the tree of the official celebration room.

A highlight of the celebration definitely was the singing of famous christmas songs in almost all languages present on board: English,



Everybody is singing Christmas songs. EVERYBODY. Photo: A. Koltsova

Dutch, German, Finnish, Greek, French, Portuguese and as a bonus Latin. Unfortunately a Russian translation of the songs couldn't be found. And – yes it's true: I sang along. Even the Finnish part. You can imagine this took a considerable part of the evening, since we sang *all* stancers of some songs in *all* the languages...



The deformed tip of the davit was all that could be seen from the net on Christmas Day. Photo: R. Kiko

However, with the day of Holy Night came the early end of my sampling campaign. Over night, an enormous pressure ridge had formed close to the net, swallowing the hole and the net and squeezing the davit into an unrecognizable shape.

Retrieval even of parts turned out to be impossible, until it sank to the ground several days afterwards, when the ridge had opened again.

Since the fishing had been of little success until then, the scientific value of the under-ice fyke turned out to be negligible. Of course, things like this must be expected when using a new technique in an unknown environment. Catching no fish and losing the net were among the risks I was aware of while planning this expedition. It struck me nevertheless, as everybody might imagine.

In total, I consider the experience I got from planning and building the net, setting it up in the ice and having to maintain it as the only responsible person as a big personal value itself.

In addition to this, diving had been cancelled for the rest of the sampling period due to the constant presence of Leopard Seals. My own last dive together with Rupert Krapp demonstrated that they can appear without any warning, and can quickly approach the diver: After only two minutes of diving, the Leopard Seal was sighted from the surface crew. They managed to pull the two of us out in 40 seconds – right when it reached Rupert.

The emergency pull-out was an impressive demonstration of the dive group's capability to handle such situations. Nevertheless, dive master Carsten Wanke decided to take no further risks.

My scientific programme was reduced to counts of seals and penguins from the helicopter as a result. A number of counts could be done in the vicinity of the floe and on the way out of the ice. Mr Spindler even gave me the possibility to perform a flight of my own one time when the weather was unsuitable for EM Bird flights.

Looking at the tremendous amount of life under the ice which I had seen with my own eyes, I started a last initiative to get a hold of that fauna. Together with Rupert I set traps during the last days at the floe. They yielded a small number of amphipods of at least two species. Exact taxonomic species determination and careful literature research will tell us if we discovered an unknown occurrence of species from the water column in the ice habitat, or if they are even adapted to it.

Next-door wildlife gave us a good-bye worthwhile to remember on the day before leave, January 1st.



An eusirid amphipod from under the ice.
Photo: R. Krapp



Polarstern – making its way out of the ice

A beautiful young Leopard Seal decided to rest right next to the gangway, while a young Weddell Seal sat in front of the ship. The usual Emperor Penguins were accompanied by their less often encountered siblings, the Adélies.

Clear-up of the floe went surprisingly quick. Everything was back on the ship right at departure time, 12.00 noon, including the ski-doo, the vast meteorological mast of the Finnish group, the sediment traps and the two “tomatoes”.

The way out of the ice was much faster than into it, although we got stuck several times, too. During that time, I started packing and continued ship-based top predator counts when possible.

Slowly but surely gaps between the floes became larger, the ice slowly dissolving into smaller and older floes drifting in the ocean, forming no distinct ‘edge’ to the open water.

Today we saw the last icefloes, before a mantle of fog was set around our ship, softly preventing us from taking a too long good-bye from the ice.

Southern Fulmars, Albatrosses and Cape Petrels are now accompanying the ship again, indicating that we have entered the habitat of Antarctic open waters.

Polarstern is now heading to South Georgia, our last Antarctic destination. Everybody is looking forward to setting their feet on true soil.

Meanwhile, a nameless fear increases among some of us. There are rumors that Neptune's eye is focussing on this ship. He is looking for those who entered the very southern part of his kingdom without having absolved the proper ceremonies...

*Sincerely, Alles Liebe, Groetjes,
Hauke*