

Arctic adventure: CK8G – Greens Island

John Boudreau, VE8EV

(Bearbeitet von Dr. Lutz D. Schmadel, DK8UH)

I remember when I first discovered Greens Island. I had just returned from a successful solo operation to Ellice Island (NA-192) as VX8X and my trip to Banks Island (NA-129) for VC8B was already scheduled for July. The next IOTA group on my list after that was NA-182 but I no idea how I was going to do it. Nicholson Island (around here its still called Nicholson Point, it only became an island in the 1980's after a big storm washed away the isthmus) is tantalizingly close at only 150 miles from my home QTH. It has an unmanned radar station and a serviceable runway left over from the old DEW Line days but from my perspective it might as well have been in low earth orbit. I had talked to the techs that did the maintenance on the radar site and they told me that when they go in by helicopter they always carry a full load with no room to spare. Inquiries to the airlines revealed that chartering an aircraft big enough to bring in all the equipment and supplies and pick you up when you're done would cost over \$10000! Tuktoyaktuk, NT is nearby and right on the coast but by boat from there it's still about 150 miles and you'd have to fly all your gear up to Tuk first. It just didn't seem possible and I was beginning to understand why it had only ever been activated once.



On the eastern side of NA-182 was the community of Paulatuk, NT. Much more expensive to fly into than Tuktoyaktuk but it was only 23 miles away from Clapperton Island. This looked like a much more plausible scenario and as I was measuring the distances on Google Earth I noticed there were several other small islands right by Paulatuk that one could almost walk to! I

carefully examined each one but found that they either didn't really exist or did not qualify for IOTA for one reason or another. As I looked farther along the coast I came across a small island only 9 miles away that seemed to meet all the minimum criteria and it had an official name: Greens Island. I sent all the pertinent info to the manager of the IOTA program, G3KMA, and received a prompt reply that yes, it does qualify for NA-182 and would be added to the official list. Now I could start planning an expedition!

I travel to Paulatuk on business several times a year and I started talking to the airport maintainer there, Tim Ruben, about organizing a trip over to Greens Island. Tim is very much a 'can-do' kind of guy and told me that however we wanted to do it he would make it happen for me. By boat in the summer, snowmobile in the winter, supplies, equipment, whatever it took, he'd take care of that end of it. Over the next six months we stayed in touch as the plans developed. My first inclination was to try to organize a big operation. Three or four guys, two stations, round-the-clock operation, CW and SSB. Once I started crunching the numbers, however, I realized it just wouldn't be possible. Air travel in the Arctic is fantastically expensive. A return ticket just from Inuvik to Paulatuk is \$1000 and air freight is \$5 per kilogram. I knew I could count on the IOTA community and a few DX clubs to provide some support but as rare as NA-182 was in IOTA circles it still wasn't a rare DXCC entity. I finally concluded that with a concerted fundraising effort it might be possible to bring along one other operator to work CW. I asked a few guys to pass the word that I was looking for a second op to go with me to NA-182 and I waited.

Summer turned to fall and then back into winter again. I was very lucky for the second time and pulled off a respectable solo operation on Banks Island (NA-129) in July and after my holiday-style operation on St. Lucia (NA-108) at Christmas I turned my attention back to Greens Island. I hadn't had any bites yet for a second op so I posted a message on an IOTA forum that I was looking for another op to join a potential expedition in April. Much to my dismay, the request got picked up by the DX newsletters and was cross-posted around the

world. Surprisingly though, even after going global, there was still very little interest. I did find one guy that was wanting to make the trip but after a few weeks of planning he dropped out of sight. With the proposed trip less than two months away I had to make some hard decisions. I had never been comfortable asking for donations so I had also been counting on the second op to manage a fundraising effort. Now there was no second op, no fundraising done and no publicity. I decided it was time to go solo. Two operators would have been nice but the window for that had closed. I set the target date as April 15-20 and made the announcements that it would be a single-op expedition. With the projected cost somewhat reduced, I set to work trying to raise support for the trip. I contacted a handful of prominent IOTA chasers, explained what I was trying to do, and asked for their help. Incredibly, not only were most of them willing to help but many were willing to send significant donations in advance of the trip! I was genuinely touched at their generosity and their confidence in my abilities. I also contacted several DX clubs that support IOTA activities and was pleased to receive commitments from the German DX Club and the Clipperton DX Club. Of course the one source of funding that I had counted on all along was the Island Radio Expedition Foundation. They had been strong supporters of my plans since the very beginning and I knew I could count on them again. Funding was in hand and all I had to do now was wait.

The exact timing of the operation would be critical. When I say I was lucky on my previous trips I meant just that. Operating in the Arctic auroral zone is tricky. If there was any significant geomagnetic activity then HF propagation from the island would be nil. I took the target dates for my operation and worked them backwards in 27 day increments, comparing them to the geomagnetic situation on those dates. While it is difficult to project that far ahead I didn't see anything that indicated there would be any recurrent instability. The official geomagnetic forecast for the period of my trip wasn't issued until the second week of April but when it finally came out I was relieved to see that the days I had chosen were predicted to be the quietest of the entire month! Could I really be that lucky three times in a row?

As the departure date drew near I talked to Tim in Paulatuk every few days and we made the final arrangements. My original plan was to be fully independent. Rent a snowmobile, sled, tent and generator for the week and take care of myself with only a bit of help from Tim to put up the tower on the first day. A few days before I left I found out that wasn't going to be possible as no one in Paulatuk wanted to rent out their snowmobile for a whole week. After the adventures Cezar, VE3LYC, had on NA-231 at the end of March I was somewhat apprehensive about being left alone on the

island with no transportation but decided I would have to make the best of it. In addition to my satellite phone, I also had a VHF radio to talk back to Paulatuk with and, of course, my HF rig so I was well connected to the outside world.

I was busy the week before I left making detailed lists and assembling all the equipment. I was being extra cautious as I didn't want to end up in the middle of nowhere missing one critical item needed to get on the air. All the important equipment had spares or a backup. Icom Canada kindly provided an IC-7200 that I brought along as a spare radio and I even brought an emergency dipole antenna and feedline just in case there was some sort of mishap with the tower and the yagi. Everything was carefully packed because it had to survive not only the airplane ride but a bumpy sled ride across the sea ice. I shipped most of the gear to Paulatuk the weekend before I left. I didn't want any of my freight to get 'bumped' on the day I travelled.

The weather forecast when I left was for high winds and unseasonably warm temperatures, right around freezing for the entire period. The hour and a half flight into Paulatuk was uneventful and Tim met me at the airport. Our first objective was to get fuel and water before the stores closed for the day. I was surprised to find out that there is no locally bottled water available in Paulatuk and I ended up buying a case of brand-name bottled water. Tim was insistent that he could get me an empty jug and fill it up with water at his house but if I was going to live in a tent for a week I wanted the good stuff! I also needed to get gasoline for the generator. Tim only had three jerry cans so we filled them up at the fuel station and he promised to bring out more as necessary. Then he took me to meet his brother-in-law.

I hold Tim in pretty high regard. His excellent work maintaining the tiny airport was just a sideline to his real job as a heavy equipment operator keeping the streets clear, which is no small feat in a community like Paulatuk. Ferocious blizzards are commonplace and they had just finished digging out from one the day before I arrived. On my last visit I had told Tim what my budget for snowmobile rental and outfitting was and promised him the whole amount if he could get the job done. Instead of taking the money and trying to put all the pieces together himself, he passed the entire job (and the substantial fee) to his brother-in-law, Pat Thrasher. Pat was a local professional guide and had everything we needed to make the trip a success. Snowmobiles and quads, sleds, the tent and a generator were all provided by Pat. Between the two of them I was well looked after and they even took turns bringing extra fuel out every couple of days.

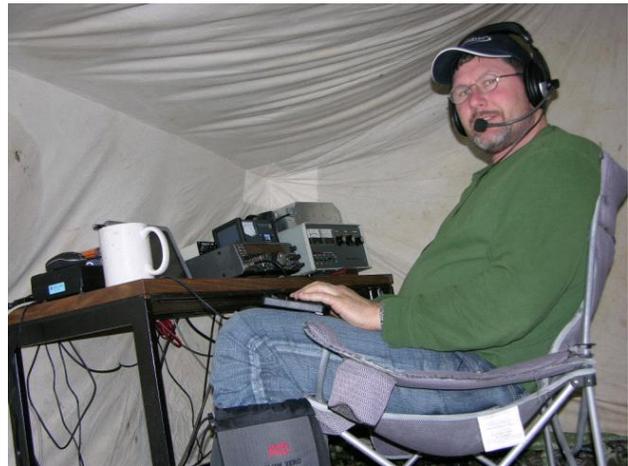
We waited until late evening for the winds to die down a bit before we headed out across the sea ice. I insisted on going slowly to minimize the trauma to the equipment in the sleds so it was almost 10pm by the time we reached the island. The sun was still shining when we arrived, only a few weeks away from being up for 24 hours, but by the time we had the tent set up, the yagi put together and the tower raised it was already past midnight. It was quite dark inside the tent and the small lamp that I brought was the only thing that did not survive the bumpy ride. After Pat, Tim and his wife headed back to town I got the tent squared away by flashlight and went to bed. The wind howled all night long but I was reasonable warm in my heavy sleeping bag and the generator and electric heater ran through the night.

Waking up in the morning was a surreal experience. Here I was, finally, on Greens Island. The wind had died down and the sun was shining brightly. The generator was still humming outside and thanks to the electric heater it was quite comfortable inside the tent. I made myself breakfast and then set up the station. This wasn't my first trip to a rare location so I had a pretty good idea what to expect. I threw out the CK8G callsign a few times and quickly had an enormous pileup. Conditions really didn't seem that good the first day but I still managed to put 1000 in the log. Once the European sunset rush died out I worked more and more North American stations until the JA's and UA0's started calling in around midnight zulu. Then I'd turn the beam west and work Asia until the Europeans started calling again around their sunrise. That was more or less the same operating pattern for my entire time on the island. I got into the habit of taking a short nap every evening as that was the slowest time and then staying up until well after midnight. Conditions improved every day and it wasn't until after I got back home that I found out there had been no sunspots at all. Go figure! I also found out that the geomagnetic forecasts had been accurate and there was no significant auroral activity for most of my time on the island.

Most days were very much like the first. I kept to my stated intentions to give special attention to Europe and Japan. Europe was easy. Every day I would get up in the morning and start with the antenna pointed over the pole to Europe. The pileups were big and sometimes unruly but after three dxpeditions and lots of contesting I was fairly comfortable. The important thing was to keep the rate up. By-the-numbers, split operation, whatever it took, just keep growing the log. European cluster pileups can be worked through but you have to know what you're doing. After all these years it's nice to finally have the mental tools required to pull off this kind of operation and it was especially gratifying after the operation to look at the comments on the dxcluster and see nothing negative. In fact, the only thing even close to a negative comment

was early on when one op posted 'why no split?' The answer, of course, was that I had the attenuator on and the gain turned down and I was still working the loud guys at a decent rate. Running split takes up twice the bandwidth and I'll only do it if I can't maintain a decent rate running simplex. If you ever hear me spreading the pile out over 5kHz then you can bet there's a LOT of people calling me.

From a logistics point of view the operation was a smashing success. Other than a couple of mysterious glitches on the second day, Pat's 3500W generator ran flawlessly throughout the operation and it only burned about 30 litres of gasoline per day. Camping with a big generator is totally different than 'roughing it'. I had a 1500W electric heater that kept the tent cozy and warm. I brought along my drip coffee maker which, in addition to providing a nice cup of coffee on demand, also doubled to make hot water for instant soup. I had lots of cold cuts and bread and I even brought along 8 litres of fresh milk. The four cardboard cartons almost didn't survive the sled trip and were all leaking from broken bottoms but luckily I was able to decant them into empty water bottles. Every morning I had a nice bowl of cereal and milk in my coffee right up until the very last day!



John, VE8EV in his tent

After the first few days I started to notice a lack of North American and Asian stations in the log. I had very good propagation to the USA and Canada so I'm at a loss to explain why it seemed so hard to fill the log with W/VE stations. I received excellent signal reports, there just weren't a lot of callers. It was the same situation with Asia. I had received a considerable amount of support from Japan so I wanted to make a good showing there but they just didn't seem to be around in large numbers. On the other side of the Arctic Ocean, the band (I only worked 20m) was open to Europe almost around the clock. More than half the stations in the log were

European, over 300 from Germany alone! For the last four days I spent each night calling CQ with the beam pointed west to Asia and worked more JA's and numerous VK/ZL stations. I even found a long-path opening to Africa in the wee hours that was previously unknown to me! In the final analysis, there was a fairly good mix of stations in the log and unlike my previous trips, this time I had lots of rare DX call in including a couple of dozen African stations and a smattering of rare Pacific islands. Final breakdown was 48% Europe, 37% North America and 14% Asia.

Like the propagation, the weather also steadily improved except for the third day. It had been windy since I arrived but on that day the winds were gusting to 80km/h. I turned the antenna edge on to wind and left it there most of the day, afraid to turn it against the wind. The tent flapped violently and I thought for sure I was going to lose the tower. I went out a few times to check the guy ropes but since there was not much else I could do about it I just hunkered down inside the tent and kept making contacts. I kept one eye on the SWR meter all day watching for signs of impending doom. The next morning dawned calm, clear, and warm. When I crawled out of the tent I was surprised to find everything was just as I had left it. The tower was still standing, the antenna looked fine, and the generator was still purring away. The band was in excellent shape that day and after a great European sunset run I continued to work a mix of European and stateside stations well past midnight zulu.

Every expedition usually has a goal. Since this was strictly an IOTA expedition (ie; not also a rare DXCC entity) I didn't have to worry about working multiple bands and modes. My only goal was to work as many unique stations as possible. In that respect as well, the operation was a huge success. Over 4500 different callsigns made it into the log. I can't complain about the high number of duplicates (almost 400) as most of them came while I was calling CQ and guys just wanted to say hello and let me know I was getting out ok. In fact, I had a LOT of people mention how loud I was. It's a little bit surprising since I was only running about 500 watts to the little TH3JRS yagi at 30 feet off the ground but I'm pleased all the same. I know there were many that had no idea who, what, or where I was and made the contact with me just because I had a big signal and an unusual callsign!

By my last full day on the island I was starting to get the feeling that I was scraping the bottom of the barrel for contacts. Outside of Europe the pileups were mostly gone. I called CQ a lot and worked many QRP and mobile stations. What had really happened was that the aurora, absent for several days, had now returned and conditions were getting back to normal. I had received a few requests for some CW operation and in reality my CW skills are

not all that bad but they're not up to running a huge pileup. Now that things were quieter I did get on CW but I was short one USB port on the computer and could not use the mouse, keyboard, and CW keyer all at the same time. It was a bit awkward but I still managed to make a few dozen contacts in that mode.

I'd been living all alone in a tent in the middle of nowhere for a week and by the end I was ready to go home. The entire operation had gone very, very well and all I needed to do now was get myself and all my equipment off the island and safely back home. With the aurora out in force I made the last few contacts in CW and then pulled the plug. First thing next morning I started tearing down the station and by the time Pat arrived on the island at noon all that was left was to lower the tower and pack up the yagi. It was still unseasonably warm and there were several inches of water on top of the ice all the way back to Paulatuk. The huge snowdrifts that had greeted me on my arrival were all but gone and we had to use a truck to pull the sled into town and over to the airport. Once again luck was on my side and there was enough room on the plane for myself and all my equipment, even the tower sections! A few minutes after takeoff we flew past Greens Island and I couldn't resist staring as it slowly passed and disappeared from view...



CK8G – A great success