



It's not often we have a polar bear at our meetings. Sven (it's not his real name) was enormous, mature, fierce and happily very flat with a red lining. On the cow scale (we'll come to that) he ranked about 1.5.

Bob described a trip in a friend's Oyster 66 from the Orwell to Spitzbergen. Turn north, run for 1600 miles and then turn right and, a hundred miles on, Spitzbergen will loom out of the mist. Not the most exciting trip in the world you might think – with the North Sea being about as attractive as the Runcorn one-way system – but it was in the Rolls Royce of yachts and it did involve a diversion to the Faeroes, And there was always Tracy for company. Tracy is a blow-up doll which Bob blew up for us. She turned out to be curvaceous but mercifully small – an oversize Barbie - but it was a first for the MCA. Tracy, Bob told us, was normally kept slightly deflated so that she had a pleasing (to his eye) wrinkled appearance.

The sailing was pretty straightforward as long as you avoided the ice. The weather was generally good, there was a little sun and they easily managed any visibility problems with radar. So the interest was the people, the landscape and the wildlife. The first were pleasant and welcoming, the second was stunning and the third was incredible. Bob's photos of the scenery were some of the best we've seen: snowy mountains, icy wastes and beautiful icebergs. But for me the wildlife stole the show: whales, polar bears, auks aplenty, seals and walruses. The polar bears they saw looked interested in them but only in a culinary kind of way - with a terrifying way of sniffing the air as they scented one of those tasty humans. They carried rifles around with them (Bob's party that is) just in case but, since a bear can run at nearly 40 knots, they'd have had to be quick. My money would have been on the bear in an encounter and I somehow knew that poor planar Sven thought the same.

And of course bears are large. If your only real-life experience has been of one on a glacier mint well you've got to scale it up several hundred times. Walruses too are bigger than you might think. Bob said they were the size of three cows (i.e. 3 on the cow scale). And they seemed to have the general personality of cows with perhaps less of an inclination to move about much. Mind you with those mega-fangs they have, I'd have been loathe to approach one with a milking pail.

The photos and videos of the walruses topped even those of the icy wastes. Sir David Attenborough would have fought to do the voice-over.

They made it to 80 degrees north – the aim of the venture. And somewhere in a lonely hut Tracy met Ingrid (not her real name), an identical sibling owned by a lovelorn Norwegian warden.

Bob gave an outline of a similar voyage to the Antarctic – aiming at 65 degrees south – which looked perhaps even more spectacular. Sadly it ended in tragedy when his friend the owner of the Oyster died after falling into a crevasse. An awful and harrowing experience, they brought back his body.

Touched by sadness, members left replete with Bob's memories of his vastly adventurous trips. Old Angus could be seen later, fingering his MCA tie as he gazed fixedly at a herd of cows, assembling them into walruses in his mind and thinking of what could have been if Elspeth hadn't been so committed to the WI in the summer.