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UMIAT JOURNAL

For a Town Used to Cold, Summer Brings a New Extreme

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UMIAT, Alaska - The population here was set to drop by almost 40 percent one day in early August. Then the four men who make a living incinerating toxic waste - "dirt burners" to their neighbors - decided not to get on the flight to Barrow.

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Jim Wilson/The New York Times
Bob Brouillette outside his living quarters earlier this month in Umiat, Alaska. His face was covered with soot from burning contaminated dirt.

Umiat is an Alaskan sort of place: a small population set down among great distances. Extremes are a way of life in this industrial hamlet near the bend that the Colville River makes as it meanders toward the Arctic Ocean.

The nearest inhabited place, the Inupiaq village of Nuiqsut, is 56 miles north. The only lodge is made up of small train cars on skids. And the local conversation piece is a one-eyed caribou named Sammy who moved into a corrugated shed next to two yellow snowmobiles.

But one extreme gives the place pride. With an average

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Umiat was built by the Navy in World War II as a refueling base.

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Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Umiat has a landing strip, Quonset huts and housing for workers. The Colville River is in the background.

temperature of 10.1 degrees, Umiat beats out Barrow to claim the record as the coldest place in the United States. Unless, of course, it gets hot.

This summer, Umiat, like much of the rest of Alaska, has been preternaturally hot. The lingering sun of the northern latitudes had a real bite. As the almost-endless early August afternoon slipped indistinguishably into the almost-endless evening recently, the thermometer crested near 80 degrees.

Those in the sweltering 48 states below may be unimpressed. But here, 80 degrees is off the charts.

Dave Yokel, a wildlife biologist with the federal Bureau of Land Management, puts on shorts and a T-shirt when work is done. Mr. Yokel has worked

here for a few weeks every summer for several years, but he never had a snowless sojourn before, or one so dry.

While this has not been the warmest summer on record in Umiat, temperatures both here and around Alaska until early August have been turning heads.

Rick Thoman, a forecaster for the National Weather Service in Fairbanks, demurred when asked if global warming was the cause. But he said the weather in inland Alaska had become increasingly peculiar.

"This would not be unusual in June," Mr. Thoman said. "But this is the third year in four when a big high pressure system has come in north of the Alaska Range in August and blocked the rain. Three years out of four doesn't equal climate change. But we're looking at some funny stuff."

Umiat - named for Eskimos' walrus-skin boats - is a

creature of the North Slope. Built by the Navy in World War II as a refueling base for aircraft headed to the coast, it is used more now by commercial pilots, but it remains a way station for migratory animals and humans.

O. J. Smith, a bush pilot, arrived in 1975 with his two sons and erected a sign that read: "Umiat. Population 1. O. J. Smith, Mayor." His sons were not counted. In 2001, after Mr. Smith's death, the sons and the sign went away.

The Smiths are the reason for Umiat weather records. Along with transporting and housing hunters, Mr. Smith and his family took official observations for the National Weather Service about 15 times a day, at \$6 per observation.

The new owner of the lodge, the Umiat Commercial Company, has no interest in monitoring the weather. So measurements here are no longer official. Sojourners are free to interpret the mercury the way fishermen interpret their catch.

This summer's heat and the haze from forest fires 250 miles to the south remain topics of conversation.

But the common interest of Mr. Yokel, who spent part of this summer monitoring the vegetation; Mike Wood, the helicopter pilot who flew him around; John Dubé, a federal archaeologist; and Bob Brouillette, a dirt burner, is Sammy.

Sammy was attacked by either a bear or wolves. He arrived last summer, bleeding and with his eye injured badly. His antlers were askew.

Troy Izatt, who is supervising Agviq Environmental Services' contract with the Army Corps of Engineers to incinerate the contaminated soil of an abandoned Navy oil well, said that all the ungainly refugee seemed to need was shelter. Sammy soon became a conversation piece.

Conversation among the phlegmatic Alaskans is not the same as the rapid give-and-take of New Yorkers. Short sentences fit into the long, well-lighted hours here the way that the six-inch foxtails, tiny willows and veil of mosquitoes fit the outsized landscape.

What do the people do? "Work, and put on bug dope," said Stan Lagod, who manages the Umiat Commercial Company, which caters to energy workers and hunters.

His sister, Donna - the one woman in town - fishes when she is not cooking.

"We're always moving snow someplace," said Terry Lewis, who works for Umiat Commercial and is the closest thing Umiat has to a permanent resident. He and a fellow worker, Mike Hoyle, who was out of town in early August, have gone a month in the wintertime when the temperature hovers close to 60 below with only each other for company.

Prolonged downtime can breed creativity. Last winter, Mr. Hoyle made a sign that said: "Wal-Mart Coming Soon to Umiat." "It was a 50-degree-below day and he was bored," Mr. Lewis said.

The sign can be seen on the Umiat Web cam at <http://www.colville-watershed.org/stations/umiat/umiat.shtml>, when Sammy doesn't get in the way. The site also records temperatures, unofficially. Some sojourners earlier this month claimed it was the hottest place in Alaska.

Mr. Thoman, of the Weather Service, doubted the claim: the record high temperature in Alaska is 100 degrees, recorded in 1915 in Fort Yukon. But, he added: "People like to say that. It's human nature - we're the coldest, we're the hottest, we're the most extreme."

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