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Canadian, British explorers reach Antarctica's Pole of Inaccessibility

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SYDNEY, Australia (AP) — A team of British and Canadian explorers endured seven weeks of howling winds and subzero temperatures to become the first expedition to reach the geographic center of Antarctica on foot.

Dragging 120-kilogram (264-pound) sleds, the team traveled more than 1,700 kilometers (1,056 miles) on foot or by kite ski to reach Antarctica's Pole of Inaccessibility — the furthest point from any ocean — on Jan. 19, according to a statement posted on the expedition's website.

Located more than 3,725 meters (12,221 feet) above sea level, the Pole of Inaccessibility was first visited in 1958 by Soviet explorers who reached the remote outpost in convoy of snow vehicles.

The team — led by Canadian Paul Landry — said it was surprised to find a bust of Vladimir Lenin erected by the Soviets nearly half a century ago still standing amid the ice.

"We noticed a black dot on the horizon — as we got closer an outline of (the) bust started to appear — we could not believe it," the team said in a brief statement posted on Jan. 19. "We are all so exhausted that we have only just put up the tent with Lenin's stern gaze over us!"

The team, called **N2i**, also includes Britons Rupert Longsdon, Rory Sweet and Henry Cookson.

The three Britons won the 2005 Polar Challenge, a competitive 563-kilometer (350-mile) race to the North Pole, with no Arctic experience. They then hired Landry, veteran polar explorer who has led numerous Arctic and Antarctic expeditions, to guide them to the former Soviet base.

It took the group 49 days to complete their journey from the Russian scientific base Novolazarevskaya, located on the Antarctic coast north-northwest of the Pole of Inaccessibility. They will now fly to another Russian base, Vostok, before traveling on to Cape Town, South Africa.

The Pole of Inaccessibility lies some 870 kilometers (540 miles) northeast of the South Pole. It was first reached by Soviet explorers on Dec. 14, 1958, and was used briefly as a meteorological research base.

The area was last visited by a six-man French team, which passed through the Pole of Inaccessibility on a trans-Antarctic expedition supported by dog sleds in 1989-90, according to the Australian Antarctic Division.

Rutgers' robot, studying Antarctic waters, could be research key

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. — Five feet long, cylindrical and bright yellow, Rutgers University's underwater robotic gliders look more like torpedoes with wings than sophisticated scientific instruments that could revolutionize research in the most remote seas.


Already, one deployed two weeks ago off the fast-warming Antarctic Peninsula has collected about two-thirds as much information about ocean temperature, salinity and other conditions affecting the food chain there than ship-based researchers have in a dozen years of month-long summertime visits. The glider beams back voluminous amounts of information to a Rutgers lab every three hours when it surfaces.

Its smooth operation bodes well for the Rutgers project, a new phase in the National Science Foundation's three-decade-long Long-Term Ecological Research project. The foundation is monitoring changes in environmental conditions and plant and animal life in 26 unique,

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sensitive ecosystems, from Antarctica and Alaska's North Slope to the Florida Everglades and eastern Kansas prairie, to provide the knowledge needed to protect those ecosystems and their biodiversity.

The Rutgers effort aims to prove remotely operated, battery-powered gliders can be a key component of long-term research in the Southern Ocean surrounding Antarctica, as well as other relatively uncharted seas — places where underwater study has been restricted by rough or ice-covered oceans outside of summer, and by the high operating costs and limited availability of research ships.

"We're right at the dawn of the new age," said Oscar Schofield, co-founder of the [Coastal Ocean Observation Laboratory](#) at Rutgers' Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences. "For the first time, humans can maintain a continuous presence underneath the ocean."

Schofield and his team at the lab, known by the acronym COOL, received an \$80,000 grant from the science foundation to test the 115-pound gliders' reliability.

The gliders' range now is limited by the life of the 24-battery packs powering their two internal computers, multiple sensors and communications gear — currently a month or slightly longer. But Schofield dreams of having them cycle between a few research stations along western Antarctica, where scientists could pull them from the water, change the battery pack and send them on to the next station.

That would allow the gliders to continuously collect data on ocean conditions over a stretch of about 600 miles, "a huge snapshot that we wouldn't have otherwise," Schofield said.

"In 10 years, we'll probably have gliders circumnavigating the entire continent of Antarctica" and crossing the Atlantic, he predicted, as battery life and energy efficiency are increased.

Such tweaking is in the works at the gliders' manufacturer, Webb Research of Falmouth, Mass., which developed the \$100,000 devices partly through funding from the U.S. Navy. The company counts Rutgers as one of its top customers.

Already, Rutgers marine scientists have deployed their half-dozen gliders up and down the East Coast and as far away as Australia over the past eight years.

On Jan. 7, one of the gliders was deployed from a research ship taking its own sensor readings every 20 kilometers off the western coast of the Antarctic Peninsula, a mountainous finger stretching up from the ice-covered continent toward South America.

Running southwest, parallel to the peninsula, the sensor-laden glider is collecting continuous data at varying depths on the ocean's temperature, salinity and the presence of nutrients, aquatic plants, small fish and shrimp-like crustaceans called krill that are crucial links in the food chain that supports penguins, other seabirds, seals and whales.

Data for the project also is collected by scientists at Palmer Station, a research base on Anvers Island midway down the peninsula.

Already, information collected by the glider has answered crucial questions vexing the ship- and land-based scientists working there, such as why water around Palmer Station is warmer than elsewhere in the region and why the penguins' main food source is changing — both due to a warm current coming from further north, said Douglas Martinson, a senior scientist at Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory in Palisades, N.Y.

Martinson's ship-based research team each January has been measuring the "weather" of the ocean there — temperature, currents and salinity — because that affects life in the ocean and along the peninsula. That work began in 1993.

"We get down there and it just so happens that we are serendipitously located in what could be argued as the heart of the most dramatic climate change on the planet," Martinson said.

Adding the gliders to the rest of the research operation is like putting satellites under the ocean, he said.

"This is a marriage made in heaven," he said of working with the Rutgers scientists "who have been at the forefront of putting gliders around the world."

Bill Fraser, president of Polar Oceans Research Group of Sheridan, Mont., is another scientist on the project who has been doing research on penguins and other Antarctic seabirds for about 30 years. He said the gliders can't replace humans but "in terms of getting physical data and some biological data, you cannot beat the economy of the glider," compared with about \$30,000 a day to operate a research ship, plus the costs of the scientists and their instruments.

Research by Fraser and others has shown that in the area around Palmer Station, the number of Adelie penguins — the classic all-black-and-white ones — has declined about 80% over the past 50 years because receding sea ice has put the penguins much further from their food source in the ocean. Meanwhile, the populations of gentoo and chinstrap penguins, which do better in warmer climates, are climbing, he said.

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