

A Northern Front

New and Selected Essays

2005 – Borealis Books

"Reading Hildebrand...is like looking through a zoom lens. As you pull back, the view expands and expands until the whole horizon is in your eyes."

—(Minneapolis) Star Tribune

"The deepest northern woods or most barren Alaskan wilderness vibrate with life under award-winning journalist's Hildebrand's discerning eye."

—Kirkus Reviews



The coastal plain is a desert in terms of precipitation—less than six inches fall annually—but what falls as snow stays to be later distributed by the wind. Long, hard-packed ridges, or sastrugi, form in the direction of the prevailing winds, west—east in this case, and as we headed south across the frozen lagoon to the coastal plain, the surface was so deeply furrowed that snowmobiling across it felt like motocross. I was driving a Super Wide Track Ski-Doo that belonged to my Inupiat guide, Robert Thompson. It's designed for hauling rather than racing, he'd explained, so the suspension was fairly stiff. When I asked why most of the foam seat was missing, Robert said that a polar bear had eaten it.

Our plan was to travel southwest across the coastal plain to the mouth of the Hulahula River and follow its frozen course to the mountains, a distance of fifty miles, and set up camp. It is a journey many Inupiat families make in late spring and fall to hunt and fish, a trip that in the future may require crossing oil fields and pipelines.