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Duo attempts to cross Bering Strait by kiteboard

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Channel is notorious for rough, windy passage

By MIKE CAMPBELL
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Completing the mythic 56-mile trek across the Bering Strait has mesmerized Alaska adventurer Troy Henkels the better part of a decade.

This weekend, he's headed back to Wales, ready to absorb another wallop from nature at her unbridled best on a kiteboard.

Five years ago, Henkels and Dixie Dansercoer of Belgium tried crossing on foot in winter. Strong winds and fast-moving pack ice left the duo 55 miles south of Wales, where they were airlifted out by Evergreen Helicopters of Nome ahead of a storm moving into the area; Henkels said the duo paid for their pickup.

Today, Henkels, a 43-year-old MTA communications technician from Eagle River, leaves for Nome, then Wales, as part of the Bering Strait Kiteboarding Expedition with Geza Sholtz, a 28-year-old Swiss dentist and outdoorsman. If the wind and weather cooperate, Henkels believes the duo can cross the narrowest passage between North America and Asia in six to eight hours.

It would be the first crossing of the notoriously rough and windy strait by kiteboard.

Sholtz and the two-man support crew traveled to Nome late last month to assemble gear and make final preparations before moving on to Wales. Henkels had to work through Friday.



Swiss kiteboarder Geza Scholtz, sponsored by the Maurice Lacroix watch brand, performs in Europe before departing to Alaska for an attempt to kiteboard from Alaska to Russia with Troy Henkels.

PHOTO COURTESY MAURICE LACROIX BERING STRAIT EXPEDITION

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The duo hopes to depart Monday if their gear is ready and the weather cooperates. The support crew, including a cinematographer, will be in a Zodiac.

Calm seas, good visibility and winds under 25 mph are ideal, Henkels said.

"We can take quite a bit because the kites are really resilient," said Henkels, who's practiced in winds gusts he estimated at 60 mph in Turnagain Arm. "It's really more of what the Zodiac can handle.

"It's always pretty bad there, pretty nasty."

When gusts become too great, it can become difficult to hold the kite down and control how quickly it's being yanked downwind.

They'll wear life jackets, dry suits, helmets and GPS monitors. Watches from Maurice Lacroix, an upscale Swiss timepiece maker and a sponsor, will keep time.

For decades, crossing the Bering Strait has fascinated and frustrated adventurers.

Russian mathematician Dmitry Shparo and his son Matvey earned a spot in the Guinness Book of World Records in 1998 by becoming the first across the strait on foot. Marooned on zigzagging pack ice that traveled an estimated 300 miles in 21 days, they eventually staggered ashore at Point Hope.

Eight years later, English trekker Karl Bushby and Dimitri Kieffer, his American companion, completed the reverse route. After they reached shore in Russia, Soviet authorities detained and deported them for entering the country illegally.

In an effort to avoid a similar fate, Henkels worked for months to ensure his team had the proper paperwork. The final permits arrived Friday.

"That was time consuming, probably the toughest logistical part," he said. "They don't like you just showing up."

If the team makes the crossing, they'll check in with Russian authorities by satellite phone, be picked up and taken to a border station for processing and to await a charter flight back to Alaska.

While the team aims for success, Henkels harbors no bitterness about the failed 2005 expedition.

"It was a great experience," he said. "I felt privileged and lucky to last eight days without incident.

"It's cold, wet and windy. Any two, you can deal with. But all three are problematic. You end up kind of going where the currents are going to take you."

Henkels has been kiteboarding since 1998, and his preparation for the trip has included:

- A 36-mile run in seven hours on a stand-up board from the Knik River to the Port of Anchorage.
- Riding a tailwind he estimated exceeded 50 mph on a 30-mile ride in Turnagain Arm from Twentymile River to Bird Creek.


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Nearly every piece of gear, he noted, needs to be modified to withstand the rigors of the Bering Strait.

"All my gear needs to work flawlessly and I must be able to operate every aspect with the blue, dry gloves on," he said.

He's no greenhorn. The Alaska Range peaks he's climbed during his 20 years in Alaska include McKinley and Mount Dickey. He was turned back short of the summit on treacherous Moose's Tooth as well as Aconcagua, the highest peak in South America.


He did a sailing expedition in Antarctica. He rode a motorcycle 10,000 miles in 2006 from Phoenix to Panama.


In Alaska, he's completed Mount Marathon as fast as 53 minutes, 8 seconds in 2001 and won the solo non-drafting division of the 200-mile Fireweed bike race in 2006 with a 10:27:37 clocking.

But the Bering Sea is a different beast.

"It's wild place," he said.

Reach reporter Mike Campbell at mcampbell@adn.com or 257-4329.

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