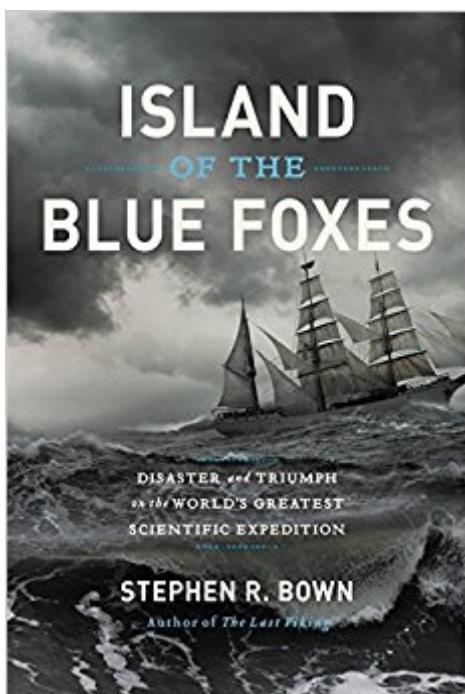


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# Island Of The Blue Foxes: Disaster And Triumph On The World's Greatest Scientific Expedition (A Merloyd Lawrence Book)



## Synopsis

The story of the world's largest, longest, and best financed scientific expedition of all time, triumphantly successful, gruesomely tragic, and never before fully told. The immense 18th-century scientific journey, variously known as the Second Kamchatka Expedition or the Great Northern Expedition, from St. Petersburg across Siberia to the coast of North America, involved over 3,000 people and cost Peter the Great over one-sixth of his empire's annual revenue. Until now recorded only in academic works, this 10-year venture, led by the legendary Danish captain Vitus Bering and including scientists, artists, mariners, soldiers, and laborers, discovered Alaska, opened the Pacific fur trade, and led to fame, shipwreck, and "one of the most tragic and ghastly trials of suffering in the annals of maritime and arctic history."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A gripping account of 'the most extensive scientific expedition in history,' whose impressive results were certainly matched by its duration and miseries. A rapidly paced story of adventure 'to be appreciated as a reminder of the power of nature and of the struggle and triumph over disaster...and of the powerful urge to persevere and return home.'" — Kirkus Reviews

Stephen R. Bown is author of *The Last Viking: The Life of Roald Amundsen* and *White Eskimo: Knud Rasmussen's Fearless Journey into the Heart of the Arctic*, which won the Williams Mills Award for the best book on the Arctic in 2016. His award-winning books, including *Scurvy* and

Madness, Betrayal, and the Lash, have led to a reputation as "Canada's Simon Winchester."

This book details the triumphs and tragedies of a ten year expedition that would test the endurance of its members. Commissioned by the Czar Peter the Great it shares insight into the workings of the Russian Court. Drawn to the project were the famous but difficult and despised Vitus Bering, naturalist George Sterling and a naval officer Sven Waxell who showed his strength of character in the worst of times. In the end, the expedition mapped Siberia, discovered Alaska and began the lucrative fur trade between Russia and America. Ultimately it was a measure of the strength of human spirit. Through dire circumstances including shipwreck, near mutiny and the harshest of conditions, the expedition challenged all. It was not the grand success that Peter envisioned and it ended more with a whimper than a bang. But its achievements cannot be underplayed. This book is a lean telling of a little known expedition. I enjoyed the intrigue as well as the adventure. It draws on the writings of Stellar and Waxell which adds authenticity. Exciting and brutal it is a taut read for the armchair adventurer.

This book details a fascinating account of one of the world's largest but little-known voyages of discovery. In 1733 Vitus Bering is commissioned by the Russian government to begin a ten-year journey that eventually encompasses Siberia and the coast of North America. The saga is written in a concise manner, and I learned a lot about Russia of the era, which I found very enjoyable. This was an adventure that I knew little about so nearly every aspect of the journey was a revelation. I had no idea that the men who embarked on it endured so much and suffered so much hardship. The opening chapter foreshadows how it all ends, but I won't give anything away. Suffice it to say that if you love historical accounts, especially those such as the journeys of Lewis and Clark, travelogues in general, or accounts of shipwreck and survival against insurmountable odds you will certainly love this book. My only complaint is that at 242 pages it was too short. The author is a fascinating writer, and I found I could not stop reading this fascinating volume.

The 18th and 19th centuries were the age of the 'Journey of Discovery'. Humboldt, Cook, Lewis & Clark, Darwin, Wallace, Huxley, Hooker, Shackleton, Franklin ... all famous men whose reputations were made on the basis of exploration and discovery. For the biologists, their concepts of nature and evolution were molded by their experiences. It's hard to overestimate the importance of these voyages to science. But these voyages were not without serious difficulty. Wallace lost all his specimens on one voyage when his ship burned to the waterline. Franklin and his crew all died in

the frozen arctic. Shackleton came close to the same end in the Antarctic but through heroic effort managed to save his crew. This book describes an absolutely amazing journey that I was completely unaware of ... Vitus Bering's two land journeys across Siberia from St. Petersburg to Okhotsk on the Pacific coast of Siberia (the second with ~ 3,000 people), and then his subsequent voyage across the Pacific to the Alaskan coast of North America and back. The hardships were astonishing, with much loss of crew to scurvy and malnutrition. While Bering's name is familiarly associated with the Bering Strait, the person of interest on the sea voyage is the German naturalist Georg Wilhelm Steller. Naturalists will know this name from Steller's Jay and Steller's Sea Lion among others. (Steller's association with this Russian expedition is interesting in itself; many German intellectuals were part of Peter the Great's efforts to bring Russia into the modern age.) I found this book to be thoroughly engaging. Both the land and sea expeditions pushed the limits of human endurance. And as a biologist, the contributions and activities of the famous Georg Steller were enlightening. The trans-Siberia journey had me running to Google Earth to locate and identify the Siberian way points mentioned. The author includes the modern name of many of the islands on the Alaskan coast and these too can be found using Google Earth. (This review is based on a pre-publication copy. There is no index and the end notes not yet numbered. I hope the final hard cover edition includes suitable maps of each stage of the two phases of this incredible journey.) Highly recommended!

Island of the Blue Foxes: Disaster and Triumph on the World's Greatest Scientific Expedition offers the story of an interesting expedition but the writing style is not engaging. Vitus Bering's expedition isn't well known, which adds to the appeal of this book. Unfortunately, the writing style is rather old-fashioned, being more cumbersome than it needs to be. I ended up skimming over parts of the book to avoid the most tedious parts. Overall, I would recommend this book to those with a true interest in the topic, but would suggest that those looking for a good read keep looking. Since, at least at the time I am writing this review, there is no "look inside" feature for this book, here are the table of contents:

PART 1: EUROPE  
1: The Great Embassy  
2: The First Kamchatka Expedition  
3: The Best Laid Plans  
PART 2: ASIA  
4: St. Petersburg to Siberia  
5: Quarreling Factions  
6: Phantom Islands  
PART 3: AMERICA  
7: Bolshaya Zemlia, The Big Land  
8: Curious Encounters  
9: The Scourge of the Sea  
PART 4: NOWHERE  
10: Island of the Blue Foxes  
11: Death and Playing Cards  
12: A New St. Peter  
Epilogue: Russian America

I was interested in reading this because of my ignorance of this period and place(s) in world history.

I filled in those gaps in my knowledge. Russian history tended to get covered quickly when I was in school and may be handled the same way today. The book would have read better had it been jointly written with a fiction writer who has an interest in history. There were too many repetitions and way, way too much of the book read like a textbook. (Not required for required reading and certainly not required for popular history reading.)

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