

In his final article in this series, Gary describes his final stretch to Hershel Island, and the mental and physical strength needed to complete the treacherous journey
Gary Rolfe



The snowman

Gary Rolfe leads the field of polar expeditions with sled dogs. He has represented England on several long-haul polar expeditions, notably a 3,500km journey from the US, through the Yukon, the Canadian Northwest Territories and on to the Beaufort Sea.

More recently, he has favoured expeditions alone with nine dogs. Last spring, he successfully completed a 1,000km journey from Inuvik, in the western Arctic, out on to the Beaufort Sea to Herschel Island, 320km above the Arctic Circle on the Yukon's North Slope. It is an area infamous for its violent storms, thin, cracked floe edges (much favoured by hunting polar bears), and the debilitating cold. Average springtime temperatures were -48°C.



The last push

The hazards of working in such weather extremes are numerous, and frostbite is a particular danger. In the event of treating a frostbitten area, it is very, very important to warm the troubled area slowly. Areas most susceptible, even to the most well-furred sled dog, are: the ear tips, around fresh surgery areas where fur may have been shaved away, and the penis and testicles.

Any stitching should be done with absolute minimal coat loss, or else the wound will fail to heal, which could lead to complications. Suturing or gluing wounds is a last resort – it is best to shave the fur and use butterfly strips.

Model manicure

Sled dog dewclaws are removed two days after whelping; from then on, particular attention is paid to their claws. Uneven claws can lead to damaged toes. They must be evenly worn, and clipping them is not usually necessary. Sea and river ice can be particularly hard on a dog's feet but they help to keep claws trim and even. Grappling for good footing on sheer ice is not easy, and their claws here are especially important.

Cold feet

Checking the dogs' feet is a strict routine. Huge dumps of fresh snow, on ice, sees a massive weight pushing down to cause water to burst up

through fresh ice cracks. This is called overflow and can be brutal on the dogs' feet. At temperatures in the minus 40 region, a dog's feet can ball up and freeze. Paying attention sees they do not.

It is attention to detail and routine that saves the feet of the dogs – and mine, for that matter. Preventing cold-related injuries is entirely preferable to treating them, and improper treatment is inexcusable in the light of widely available frostbite prevention information.

Good gnashers

I also pay particular attention to the dogs' teeth. I can deal with teeth emergencies, but would rather know they are in as good a condition as possible even before heading out. This goes for my own teeth too. I have lost fillings due to the cold, and split a molar from eating frozen chocolate in the past.

This makes you think about yourself as a machine. If anything is not quite performing or feeling right, the cold hones in on it. >

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Everything but the kitchen sink...

Packing for an Arctic expedition is no mean feat. Here are just some of the articles and equipment taken on Gary's journey...

- Sled**
- Runners**, one spare 3.6 metres long
- Bed**, 3 metres long, 76 cm wide
- Dog food for one month** 180kg
- Tent**
- Axe** (used to create a sled width through impenetrable pressure ice. Day after day this seemed an endless task)
- Ice-axe** (to lever ice blocks and form some negotiable path)
- Bow saw** (for sled runner repairs)
- Snow shovel**
- Rifle**
- Knife**
- Satellite telephone** (to give position, weather report, the condition of the dogs and myself, the time of the next communication and my next co-ordinates. Also used to relay critical medical or circumstance diagnosis in an emergency)
- Skis**
- Maps**
- GPS** (hand-held global positioning system)
- Pocket-sized anemometer** (to measure wind speed and temperature)
- Compass** (with an expanding diaphragm housing a balanced needle to compensate for the downward magnetic force that would otherwise cause the needle to tilt – being so close to the Magnetic North Pole)
- Ice screws** for the stakeout chain and the tent
- Stakeout chain** (with this, the



- dogs are safely secured for feeding and resting overnight)
- Carabineers** (for dog harnesses, stakeout chain, tent guys and sled fittings)
- Spare harnesses**
- Fleece booties** (for dogs)
- Fleece dog jacket**
- Collar**
- Necklines**
- Tuglines**
- Mainline section**, wired (the dogs climb up and the mainline is repeatedly snagged on jagged ice. It frays and can then snap if it not wired through the middle)
- First-aid kits** (see list overleaf)
- Sewing kit**
- Awl**, for harness repair
- Zip poles**, various sizes
- Duct tape**
- A regular hot-water bottle**





Mr Motivator

While travelling, decision-making is made threadbare. Falling through waist-deep snow on the tundra, or avoiding sea ice fissures needs unbelievable concentration. Infiltrating, nihilist, trouble-making thoughts would try to take over. Positive thoughts then drill into discipline, with explosive will-power taking direct action to thwart the mutiny inside my head.

Fear, sadness, love, boredom, anger and expectation create emotions; a catalogue of imaginative pictures painted from previous adventures or life experiences. We all have them. Whether we choose to remember them or not, they are within us. Those that create conviction and blind belief spawn in a burst. Consciously they are flicked into mind and the first dribble of nihilistic introspection is thwarted.

At worst, I have dogmas. Single words, a snappy lyric from a memorable song. Repeating over, over and over. Positive thoughts would not make me feel physically comfortable, but they were enough. Well-practised small mercies.

Over time, they become an involuntary conditioned reflex. Nothing has to stay the same, but you must make it so. Every negative thought must be turned into a positive one. You become trance-like –

unfeeling, hollow, vacant, desolate and devoid of thought. Inside of myself, this is not a place I like to visit. But it is necessary to know how to pull through these phases.

Fear factor

It is good to be frightened. It shows you're thinking and not getting complacent. For me, time in such conditions is like taking a deep, deep breath before diving under fathomless, dark, cold, unknown water. That breath is my experience, my gear, the mental and physical condition of the dogs and myself. Before diving, everything is checked, checked and checked again. All 'what if' scenarios have a plan that has been practised.

Ice conditions

Each year, the same area can be different. The freeze-up conditions during late summer, the previous year, were warmer than usual. This caused ice to freeze slower, thicken less, continually buckle under the ocean currents and create pressure ridges. It was not long before the scene changed and set the precedence for the rest of the journey.

The constant grinding of the ice, night or day, would let off a tension-splitting crescendo unexpectedly, until the pressure was so intense that a snap at the weakest point sounded like a high-velocity, explosive crack

During our long journey, the dogs gave me their absolute best. In return, they got my undivided attention. Through very difficult times, there were no questions. Our loyalty to each other was unflagging

from a pistol at very close range. The sound made me wince every time.

Then the echo. Fading, freezing, lost in the deep, lurking black; leaving behind snapped, forked, splintered, spangled prisms on the ocean surface; as beautiful as highly polished gems. Blanketed with blasted spindrift, they cunningly offered assuring comfort. Uncovered, however, these deep pans of black exposed reality.

Ten years before, a Frenchman had been discovered alone in this area, with his dogs. He was overdue on his estimated time of arrival. A search and rescue party was implemented, and he was quickly found. The dogs had survived. He had not. He had broken through the ice and perished. The ice around him set fast and there he remained. The dogs had survived by eating him head first, down to his trunk, where, with encroaching ice, they continued to claw away at his frozen body.

Ice covered with snow gives a sense of false security; with a large pan exposed, it is then that the realisation hits of where you really are. On these large black pans of ice, travel was fast, but potentially dangerous for the dogs. Their footing was inconsistent, with little purchase on the slick surface. This was an area that had frozen fast and remained undisturbed by the huge currents underneath. At this point, looking down into the black, fathomless sea, it was difficult to determine the thickness of the ice. Cracks and fissures on the surface created white, sparkling splinters below – then there were gaps of just black. Deep, deep black.

In here, I imagined a distorted frozen body, with an ashen-white face pressed against the ice, eyes staring at me with the agonising pain of death. Clothes tattered and shredded. Maybe a long-lost sailor, I thought. Or maybe it was me looking down on myself. Maybe I was already dead. After all, there was no feeling where I was.

There she blows

During the pre-expedition flight just 17 months before, I remembered isolated areas of open water, where pure-white pods of beluga whales broke the surface in between areas of impenetrable ice.

Belugas have few predators other than man, the exceptions being killer whales and polar bears. Killer whales tend to avoid areas of heavy ice, but are killed in the Canadian Arctic with

impunity, due to the fear they inspire. They hunt in packs, tipping basking seals from ice flows. They have been known to herd pods of smaller whales and seals close to shore, to strand, attack and eventually eat. Other marine mammals reportedly take shelter in deeper water. The narwhal, with its unicorn-like spiral tusk, is found in the eastern Arctic.

Belugas (the word comes from the Russian for 'white') are still hunted extensively in the western Arctic, in the Mackenzie Delta, and along the coast towards Herschel Island. The communities of Inuvik, Aklavik and Tuktoyaktuk move to their traditional whaling camps in July and return in late September. Hunting in small motorboats, the presence of a whale is spotted by its bow wave. It is approached and harpooned when it surfaces, then followed and killed by rifle once it surfaces a second time. Their skin is used as leather, but muktuk (the outer skin plus a layer of the whale's blubber), is still a prized delicacy for the Inuit. It is eaten raw when fresh. They then boil it, so it remains 'good' for the winter months. It then has a very strong taste. Some people don't object to the flavour. I do.

Island destination

We reached Herschel Island on 29 March 2002. To the south were the saw-tooth Richardson Mountains, which are the most northerly reach of the Canadian Rockies to the coast. To the south of these mountains stretched the 3,680km Yukon Territory; to the east, over the Beaufort Sea (even



though all we could see was a vast stretch of ocean and coastline), was our way back into the Mackenzie Delta, that stretched 1800km through the Northwest Territories.

In 1905, before his famed journey to the South Pole with dogs, Roald Amundsen sailed to Herschel, before making a 500-mile journey, with dogs, to Eagle, Alaska. From here, he telegraphed to the world the news of his Northwest Passage discovery.

The island was soon to become a port for all goods distributed throughout the Western Arctic. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police

(RCMP) had a detachment there until the 1950s – a practical location for their own dog-breeding programme up until the Second World War.

No one lives on Herschel Island now. A customs warehouse, the Pacific Steam Whaling Company house, built in 1893, still stands, as do the bone and blubber houses and signs of the RCMP dog kennels. All remain in good condition thanks to the arid Arctic environment. There are also remains of sod houses, lived in by the Inuit, and permafrost cellars used for storing foodstuffs in the frozen ground.

Four graveyards still exist from the times when severe typhoid epidemics swept through the island, killing many Inuvialuit not yet exposed to European diseases. Because the ground is permanently frozen, permafrost made burial difficult. Today, Arctic gravediggers have a pneumatic drill and a compressor.

Time to return...

During our long journey, the dogs gave me their absolute best. In return, they got my undivided attention. Through very difficult times, there were no questions. We lived, lay, travelled – and yes, at times, cursed together. But our loyalty to each other was unflagging. We helped each other.

The following morning, we leant into the wind for our return journey... ||||

A typical first aid kit for the dogs

Vetwrap (which sticks to the fur, without pulling out the hair)
Medication for infected toes or lips
Kwikstop as a septic powder
Treatments for diarrhoea and vomiting
Medication for ear and eye infections
Skin glue and wound closure strips for closing small wounds
Skin staple gun for not so small wounds
Promace for general cleaning
Cleanser swabs

Bag balm for frostbitten areas (this contains no water and will not freeze once applied – a failure with most protective balms)
Syringes
Thermometer
Cotton balls
Razor blades
Surgical tape
Splints
Irrigation needle for flushing eyes and wounds
Trauma dressing
Assorted bandages
 An assortment of gauze and elastic bandages

Gary Rolfe is in the UK at present writing a book. If this article has sparked any questions his email address is huskynwt@yahoo.ca

