



the traditional summer whale-hunting grounds of the Inuit, into Shallow Bay, and on to the Beaufort Sea. Further north-west, alone with nine dogs, I would journey 1,000km to and from Herschel Island. The island is eight miles long by four miles wide just off the Yukon's North Coast and 50 miles from the Alaskan border.

In the 19th century, Herschel Island was favoured by European whale hunters as a natural wintering refuge until the return of the all-too-short Arctic summer. During this time, ladies' fashion to wear corsets stipulated a demand for the best material available – baleen from the bowhead whale. In relentless pursuit of depleted whale stocks, the Beaufort Sea was found to harbour one of the last refuges for the prized bowhead, and commercial whaling began with a vengeance – very nearly bringing the colossal animal to extinction.

Meet the dogs

The dogs are: Dawson, Kavik, Pingo, Hansel, Timber, Sherman, Piper, Blue and Kabloona. The bond with them is a powerful one. They need me and I need them.

At night, they settle, well nourished. The snow on sea ice is

packed solid from thousands of hours of relentless wind. On making camp, after each day's travel, I would hack down with an axe and shovel to create pits for each dog. Then I would build ice and snow walls, on the windward side, serving as windbreaks. Through tired eyes, there was always a thank you. A gentle blanket of spindrift was not long covering them.

The dogs are purveyors of excellent efficiency. Thick, well-furred coats, deep chests, strong feet, a sagacious willingness to learn, and courage are the tools of their trade.

Of dogs and man

I am often asked why I travel alone with dogs. Few people have the self-discipline to endure polar travel. As such, I find the inevitable personality clashes that ensue more sinister than the demands of prolonged mental sabre-rattling than when done alone. Fitness is important – but anybody can be fit. Not everybody can numb his or her mind to alleviate the immediate and to attain the iron will to keep going.

Sled dogs just have that 'thing' and I love them for it. I live an unsophisticated life, but follow a genuine instinct from within my heart

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to be with, and travel with, Huskies. The dogs and I love space, distance, and, of course, the cold. They love to run, love without lying, and look for nothing but a decent meal.

But they deserve more and I make sure they get it. I see them lap the love and encouragement they are all worthy of. We have endured, learnt, and returned safe from it all together, many times.

The blend must be right, and knowing each dog, is vital. Like people, they do not all live at the same intensity. It is feeling, seeing, and sensing who wants to go further that sees a team truly blend and develop together, thriving in and towards a common goal. Simply put in expedition terms, going from A to B.

I love the way the dogs remain lively even in the most appalling situations. I know there have been many times when my encouragement has lifted their spirits. Equally, I often respond to their expressive fizz and vibrant, assertive eyes. Then, every now and again, some bonds develop stronger than others.

Pingo has that 'thing'. Throughout a day's travelling, his head was down, driving hard, never giving in. With them all, I pushed and

Spirit of adventure



Fewer men and women have ventured on to the Arctic Ocean than have scaled Everest. Fact. Even fewer have travelled there solo, let alone with a team of nine Huskies

Gary Rolfe

Polar adventurer Gary Rolfe has recently favoured expeditions alone with nine dogs. This 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.

In the beginning... The planning of a polar expedition is intense. Like an iceberg, what you see is only supported by everything underneath it. Thousands of hours are spent on the logistics, pouring over maps, and working out time-scales. Information and suggested modifications, gleaned from previous training missions, are made and acted on by sponsors of the equipment, food and clothing. Serious planning was taken into account about polar bears. About

15,000 polar bears roam the Arctic Ocean within Canada, just over half of the world's total population. More than 2,000 polar bears are known to thrive in the Beaufort Sea area off the Yukon North Slope and along to Herschel Island.

The plan For spring 2002, the plan was to venture from Inuvik, a westerly native community in Canada's Northwest Territories, west through the Mackenzie Delta, to break out over





pulled, and a tear fell, followed by another, only to freeze on my face. Then to bend down over Pingo to adjust his harness, I would get a big, sloppy lick. He knew what I was thinking, and that is all I needed. "Come on, Dad – not far now," his eyes would say.

Team training

Dogs that are capable of making these journeys do not grow on trees. It takes a long-term kennel plan to develop a full team of sled dogs. The survival selection process of all Arctic dogs has, over countless generations, been ruthless in the extreme. What you are left with are efficient, tough, unrelenting powerhouses.

From being pups to conditioned, mature adults, each potential sled dog needs hours and hours of attention.

A natural rapport, the relationship between dogs and mushers (dog drivers) is sometimes never developed, no matter how much time is committed. People assume that a dog team will perform regardless. Forget it. Most dogs like to test their own boundaries.

Another problem for rookie mushers, is not only the dogs' lack of trail experience, it is the Northern winter. There is so much more to learn. Training, feeding routine, run/rest cycles, attention to feet, equipment, and cold-weather skills. Without all of these under your belt, a team of dogs will make you out to be exactly what you are – a novice.

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Some dogs learn faster than others. A watchful eye on progress and suitability will soon highlight a particular dog's potential within a team. They are essentially pack animals with a need for encouragement and authority.

I recognise where they are best suited within a team and with whom they are to be paired alongside. Stronger pullers will be put in the wheel position, nearest the sled. Potential leaders will be put in tandem with an experienced leader. Leaders are not chosen for their physical strength but for their willingness to learn, their response to my commands and their mental capacity to take pressure from the front.

I have ten points I live by, while with the dogs:

- 1) Practise – train with purpose.
- 2) Give generous praise.
- 3) Make corrections count.
- 4) Do not nag.
- 5) Give commands in a loud, clear voice.
- 6) With puppies, master each stage before moving on.
- 7) Be consistent.
- 8) Check over the dogs to anticipate problems.
- 9) Treat each dog as an individual.
- 10) Ask questions and find out the answers. >



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Treacherous conditions

For days on end, I may just have been able to see the front of the dogs. But it is the combination of complete white-out conditions and fearful winds that halt progress completely. There is nothing for it but to make camp, stake out the dogs, and sit it out.

The wind blows with damning ferocity, raging outside. Food and fuel is worked out always with a margin of safety. This comes with experience and is never compromised. Bad weather is inevitable, so you prepare for it.

The constant grinding of the ice, night or day, would, without warning, let off a tension-splitting crescendo... then the echo. I would not move, but listened. My tent floor separating me from the ice, I could hear, feel and sense an immense heaving power – weighted pressure pushing all the great ocean. The urgency that, one night, I might have to scramble and break camp in darkness, in water cold enough to burn and certainly kill, was one I lived with and was prepared for.

Feel the fear

Lonely no, frightened yes. Very frightened at times. The cold, open water, wind and bears are all feared.

Glistening scarlet clods of sea ice indicate a seal blowhole has been visited. Unsuspecting surfacing seals here are bludgeoned by polar bears, with no remorse. Seal pups are not left

orphaned, struggling to find their mother's milk, for long. Bears scent seal nests under ice within a 2.5km radius. These areas witness stealth, patience, instinct and execution.

Arctic foxes are one such species that can survive on the ice, thanks to the polar bear. Keeping their distance, these pure-white foxes scavenge like beggars, with minimal effort. They follow the bears to make a living from the frenzied, spattered ice and its bloody remains. This was not a good place to be.

Mind over matter

In a 33km an hour wind at -33 Celsius your exposed skin will freeze in 33 seconds. This spring, the temperature averaged -48 Celsius. The wind was violent and debilitating. Extreme cold causes blood vessels to constrict, increasing the resistance to flow. Simple tasks become a struggle.

When you move or think, it is done in an exact way. It must improve your immediate situation. You look no further than immediate. You are cold and you will die unless you change the way you feel. You are alone. Nobody is going to change anything for you. It is not just the cold that has the potential to kill you – it is the way you think.

A good day's travel can see 40km covered in eight hours. At worst, I have struggled to cover 3.2km in 14 hours of muscle-cracking hell. There is no respite. To believe is to survive.

In the dark, thinking of the day's travelling and what lay ahead, at times my imagination painted a fearful picture. The sea ice on which we slept was the only thing that separated the dogs and me from the fathoms of deep black Arctic Ocean

Outside ourselves, we have little control. One thing we are in total control of is the way we think and all we believe. Whatever the odds, you must believe in yourself, your dogs, and your gear.

Exposed to environmental extremes over long periods of time opens inner beliefs. Travelling for 12 to 16 hours a day for weeks on end, the day does not end when you stop to make camp. The dogs must be attended to, and daily camp-making takes up another intense four hours. Only when this attention to minute detail is complete do thoughts of sleep become real.

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