

The pull of the wild

If you thought raising a puppy was hard work, consider if you have to prepare one to pull a sled thousands of miles across the Arctic when he is older!

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. 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.

When planning a litter of sled dogs, a spring birth is preferable. Very quickly, they develop their love to run. The next step is to channel that enthusiasm and instinct to please. As with any training, these steps must be short and fun.

Puppies must be taught basic obedience, such as sit, stay, responding to their name and understanding every aspect of the word 'no'. In time, potential leaders are taught to make moves to the left or right, to turn around, stop and move forward. They must also learn to live alongside each other. Fighting is not tolerated.

The all-too-brief Arctic summer is a fun time for puppies. I run with litters

alongside the Mackenzie River. They all tumble and splash through the water, socialising with all they discover. In the lakes, I have encouraged them to follow me, while I paddle a canoe. This exercise is good for all the dogs. They love it too. Individual puppies are hitched up to little logs and instinctively just want to pull them around.

The summers may be short, but they are equally intense, temperature-wise. July sees temperatures hover around 25°C. For 56 days, the sun remains in the sky for 24 hours, seemingly stuck.

It can snow in any month of the year in the western Arctic, but

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generally the first snow comes by August. As freeze-up starts, puppies (no less than one year) are introduced to the sled and harnesses, and get used to living on a stake-out chain, and learning to rest when the opportunity arises during gradually increased training runs.

A break, while training, will see me shelter on the leeward side of my sled, stealing time to eat. Puppies learn to snack, nestle into a group and conserve energy.

Training in the early part of the season, new ice can sometimes be disconcerting for puppies, bashing and booming, cracking and shuddering. Puppies must be encouraged and paired up with an older dog who keeps moving without fuss. If the puppy makes a big deal of the situation, the older dog will nip and growl if the pace slackens.

Likewise, they must learn to rest if I stop to check the team. No playing

or tangling lines. Some instantly take advantage and simply curl to rest. Rest is very important. At night they must learn to settle fast after being fed. Lifting the stake-out chain and disturbing the others is another no-no. The older team members teach the pups in no uncertain terms.

There are lots of ways to tell how a dog is doing – not just through his sheer physical performance. The way he hangs his head, the speed at maintaining footing over difficult terrain without looking back, and his ears are good indicators. A dog can tell me if he is happy.

Water – with ice! Maintaining hydration is a challenge. The result of a restricted water intake through huge physical exertion can result in blood circulation being reduced by 25 per cent. Extreme cold causes blood vessels to constrict, increasing the flow resistance,

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impeding performance and ultimately jeopardising the success of a journey.

To judge our state of hydration, I make a mental note of our urine colour. If it is pale, fine. A dark orange colour spells trouble and is a warning to drink more. It is no good waiting to feel thirsty to remain hydrated. Other signs of well-hydrated dogs are moist gums and taut skin.

Frozen meals

The dogs were using up to 10,000 calories in a single day's travel. The metabolism of one gram of carbohydrate yields four calories, one gram of fat yields nine calories and one gram of protein yields little less than four calories. Dogs are able to convert fat to energy more efficiently than they are carbohydrate to energy, so almost 55 per cent of a sled dog's diet will come from fat.

It takes up to four hours in my tent to hydrate the dogs' specially-



formulated diet of kibbles, ground chicken and fat – melting enough snow for the water, then time to soak it all. Once the dogs hear my tent zipper being pulled, they go frantic in anticipation.

At no other time is a single dog treated more as an individual than at feeding time. Even though my team is measured by weight in proportion to size, some dogs always need more food than others.

Their metabolic requirements can only be assessed through observing and maintaining critical body mass. It is no good just looking at a dog and thinking, "It looks in good shape, fine". Even through a beaver mitten, running my hand down a dog's back and legs, I can feel if his body mass is being maintained. This done, I start feeding.

Two lightweight bowls serve nine dogs while travelling. Sherman and Piper first. Fast eaters, these two soon have me filling up for Timber and Hansel. Kabloona next, with Blue and Kavik. Dawson and Pingo are always slow feeders. They both enjoy it in peace, as the others clean themselves and gradually begin to settle. There is no waste. Feeding is over in minutes and so is the bedlam it always creates.

Snack attacks

Throughout training, and in preparation for my last spring journey, several tonnes of ground chicken were flown north from Edmonton. With a chainsaw, I portioned the

frozen blocks, weighing 40 kilos each, into 20 single two-kilo bricks, each equivalent to 800 calories. These were then cubed for dog snacks to maintain their high energy levels.

Through the course of a day's travel, I stop the dogs, check their feet, pick balled ice out from between toes, straighten harnesses, or maybe reposition a pair. Even leaders Kavik and Dawson get swapped around. This is a stressful position for a single dog to maintain. But this break in travelling is a valuable time to give the dogs a snack to maintain energy levels. It is a routine repeated over and over again throughout the day.

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Energy efficient

I depend on heat, generated by skiing at the side of the dogs and sled, to stave off hypothermia. Like the dogs, I snack at intervals and monitor my fluid intake. Luckily, I'm not a fussy eater – eating the same daily menu, week after week, does not faze me.

Weight for weight, my daily food weighs slightly less than one of the dog's daily ration, 1.4kg. For my own diet, a diet with equal amounts of all three food types (carbohydrate, protein and fat) is needed for extended journeys, in order to provide adequate nutrition. Fat is vital, but humans cannot metabolise it fast enough to serve as an efficient energy source during vigorous energy, in violently cold conditions.

Together with nutritional factors come other all-important dietary considerations: it must be easy to prepare, easy to handle, maintain critical body weight and replenish tired muscles. Only by experience can you evaluate food intake results about your own dogs and yourself. There is no room for guesswork. The only way is to watch, feel and monitor.

Rabies

The Arctic is an area of high rabies incidence. In the winter of 2000/2001, I heard reports of 18 dogs that were destroyed in the community, due to infection from wolves and foxes.

Infected animals do not always behave in the same way. The disease may take different forms: 'furious' or 'dumb' rabies, and sometimes the two combined. Animals can show signs of extreme agitation, can inflict terrible



wounds on themselves, and can have a strong desire to lick inanimate objects.

I have seen the effects of rabies on foxes and wolves. It is extremely disturbing. Momentarily, I have been paralysed with unalloyed fear. Nothing infected but my experience.

Trappers, vets, biologists and mushers in the Canadian North, are encouraged to get vaccinated against rabies. All dog owners are held responsible for their dogs. Throughout the Yukon and the Northwest Territories communities, designated areas are set aside for dog teams. Wandering dogs are not tolerated. More than once I have seen dead, frozen, disfigured dogs, left where they dropped. The fear of rabies is real.

Wolves

Wolves are seen repeatedly in the Mackenzie Delta, on the tundra and the Arctic coast. An adult male can weigh 40kg, while an adult female can weigh 35kg. Wolf colour can vary from white to black, but the most common is grey. Their tails are one-third of their body length and were traditionally used by the Inuit for painting layers of water on the bottom of the then steel sled-runners. The instantly freezing water built a layer of ice that made for slick travelling.

Howling and forming packs are well-known wolf characteristics. It helps summon members to a nightly hunt, and sometimes helps to bring a lost puppy back to the pack.

What a howler

In the spring of 2001, I avoided deep snow on the tundra by navigating a course up and through where the Mackenzie River eventually reaches the Arctic ocean. The last morning on the coast, before venturing on to the ocean, I began to strike camp. Then I heard the familiar whine of a

snowmobile. "What the hell's going on here?" I thought.

The snowmobile pulled up. Two Inuit men, armed with rifles, were hunters employed to monitor polar bear movements, in order to protect mining company employees in the area. Oil, gas, gold and diamond companies, who had invested millions of dollars, were exploring the natural resources of the region.

Living quarters, cookhouses, laboratories and stores are all dragged into their respective company camps. Skirting is put around structures such as steps, eliminating the possibility of a polar bear crawling underneath to create an ambush area.

The bear monitors began to talk. Researchers in the Kendall Island area, 150 kilometres east of Herschel, had seen a polar bear kill a worker leaving a camp building. The bear killed him with a single blow to the head, without provocation or warning. Nice.

So why were the bear monitors chasing the dogs and me? Well, the night before, as is usual after a good day's travel and hearty feed, the dogs began to howl. This indicates the team's contentment. Not so for the exploration teams. They had reported the howling, and that night and the following morning all work in the area had 'ceased forthwith' until the 'pack of wolves' had been deemed safe for the exploration teams to continue work.

We continued to talk for a while, laughing at the tale; our faces encrusted with ice. They talked of lost workers in the area some years ago. An artificial island formed a platform from which scientists and research workers could work. A bear made its way, unseen, on to the island and ambushed a man. The bear had killed him with a single blow, dragged the body to an ice floe, and partially consumed it. Very nasty but it was

nothing I had not heard before.

It was ironic that I did see wolves in that area, on my return. These tundra wolves hung back though, using a similar tactic they might employ to taunt a caribou herd; waiting for the stumbling, weak and injured to expose themselves. The wolves I have encountered have always appeared to be inquisitive, at the same time causing little concern.

Pack numbers vary from two to 16. Packs of four to seven are most common. I have heard of groups of up to 40 pack members, from bush pilots flying between Arctic communities.

The Alpha presents himself as the only one with a raised tail. Wolves, incidentally, travel in single file when not hunting, each pad falling into exactly the same impression made by the trail-breaker. This gives the impression of only a single wolf's movements. Crafty.

Dogs have always been with the Inuit in the Arctic, and it has been practice to stake-out their bitches in season for a passing wolf to pass on his genes. It is not a breeding technique I would advocate, but, in the past, was the only option to aid weak bloodlines. ||||

Read next month's instalment for more about Gary's further encounters with the arctic wildlife.

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

