

Dear diary...



Returning once more to the Arctic, intrepid explorer Gary Rolfe shares some of his diary entries with us, telling us about the extreme cold, being shadowed by wolves, and his beloved sled dogs...

1st February

It can snow in the Arctic any month of the year. Throughout winter and spring, temperatures of 40 below zero aren't uncommon. In a 33-kilometer-per-hour wind at -33°C, exposed skin will freeze in 33 seconds. The unprepared will freeze - from oil in engines to blood in bodies. Here in London, the drizzle is warm. I'm packed and ready for another journey north.

3rd February

I left England in a T-shirt and gradually added layers after each connection before landing at Inuvik, in the Canadian Arctic. I've a lot of modified gear to put through its paces over the next month and am keen to see how it performs. There's talk from trappers of rabid wolves in the area, and moose too.

It's -30°C and great to be back. The dogs were pleased to see me and I'm beginning to prepare, from my

cabin, travelling alone with them upstream on the frozen Mackenzie River.

4th February

I ran a team of eight on a bright, cold afternoon. Soon, four yearlings - Kimik, Larvik, Denali and Hummer - will experience camping out with four older dogs and me. The more experienced guys - Pingo, Piper, Timber and Hansel - will keep the youngsters moving and focused. The idea is that they experience lots while trusting me. They love to pull and it's up to me to channel that energy efficiently and determine what position each dog in the team should fill. Strength and ability to learn are determining factors.

6th February

Tonight will be the first night that the four youngsters will camp out over night. The sun rose just before 11am. Through falling snow I headed out with Pingo, Sasha, Piper, Timber, Hansel,

Below left: It's -30°C and great to be back. The dogs were pleased to see me and I'm beginning to prepare, from my cabin, traveling alone with them upstream on the frozen Mackenzie River.

Below right: Timber has a lovely temperament with the youngsters. He encourages them to keep moving and not to worry when ice cracks and echoes underneath.

the youngsters and a sled prepared for three days and nights. River ice conditions were good while skiing beside the dogs and sled. I included experienced leader Sasha at the last minute. Soon to retire, she has a calming influence over Pingo (who will be in lead position with her). Pingo can be a little boisterous and I don't want the youngsters overawed.

This year has seen particularly heavy snowfalls here. The colossal weight on the Mackenzie can cause ice to fracture and water to rush up causing overflow and slush. Despite ice over the river, water continues to flow underneath. Bends or creeks running into the river create less stable ice. These are potential nightmare spots. At 30 below zero, this can make for difficult travelling.

Today, our only confrontation was with a hefty cow moose. Pingo noticed her first. With head up and extra zip in his stride, he fancied his chances. The moose stood there, defiant. I was wary

she might have a calf with her. I halted the team 200 metres short and let her decide the next move. She crossed in front of us and up the bank. Then vanished. With over an hour's daylight left, I made camp at just gone 5pm.

7th February

Two trappers hurtled by this morning on their snowmobiles, towing toboggans laden with lynx and wolf fur. They were probably Inuvik bound. Wolf colour can vary from white to black. I recognised only the most common tundra wolf colour - grey. Canadian Renewable Resource Officers work closely with trappers. Government-controlled management guidelines enable fur-bearing animals to be harvested at a responsible level. Renewable Resource buildings in the Arctic are a depot point for trappers to off-load their furs. From here the best prices are found from southern fur auction houses. This creates valued revenue for the Inuit and Gwich'in Indians.

8th February

On breaking camp and returning to my cabin, I noticed tracks in the overnight snow, evidence of a lone wolf passing while we slept. A passing pack would be less likely to go unnoticed and make me somewhat twitchy. Waiting for violent storms to abate in my tent on sea ice can be a little anxious too. The thought of ice breaking up underneath me while I sleep is only surpassed with the vision of a pitiless crushing white blow punching through my tent. Nobody survives a polar bear attack.

The dogs' finer sensory perception gives them a different world of understanding and emotion to mine, or yours. In poor light a dog's eyes are able to trace and expose minute movement. Their noses and hearing are also far superior to a human's.

Pingo and his henchman brother, Hansel, are demon fighters - and smart with it. They buy me time to

Below left: The sun sets behind boreal larch and the Mackenzie's shoreline.

Below centre: Wolf tracks, twice the size of a man's fist, often give the impression of a loner. Sometimes on closer inspection it's possible to see where a pack has followed a trailbreaker by planting their feet in exactly the same footing.

Below right: It is safe to drive over river ice just outside Inuvik - but always best to drive in pairs, just in case.



de-fuse life-threatening wildlife confrontations. They shadow me like bodyguards. Curled close, sniffing, watching and prepared, they anticipate trouble. Pingo and Hansel were obviously just not bothered last night. Despite dogs receiving free rabies immunisation every year, reports of rabid wolves hassling dogs in Arctic communities are normal, and I think of the reported killings in Inuvik this year.

We ran into another moose around noon. We're 97km from the Arctic Ocean. There, in good visibility on flat pans of ice, I can see a good 5km all around. At that distance, a polar bear, wolf or Arctic fox will be able to smell the dogs and me. Here on the Mackenzie, visibility is down to the next bend and banks of haggard boreal larch. Close wildlife encounters are not good news. Attacks from moose do happen. With legs like ranch posts, they can be defiant in trampling sled dog teams and drivers. I've heard of a complete team and driver being killed in Alaska. Today, our moose meeting thankfully passed without incident. We arrived back safely this afternoon.

9th February

Ran with Pingo in the morning dark. During the 56 days of 24-hour summer here, locals hunt and fish the river with canoe and small aluminium-hulled motorboats - but not today. We headed along the river and ran over the ice. The soles on my trainers quickly stiffened in the cold. My pace quickened and I soon settled into a steady plod. Pingo, in his gorgeous thick white coat, just ambled along, oblivious.

Pingo and I ran again in the evening for another hour. Ravens follow us with their 'gluk, gluk' call. These birds amaze me. What on earth do they survive on? >



10th February

I've absolutely no interest in racing dogs, but I hear that the Yukon Quest sled dog race starts out from Fairbanks, Alaska, on Saturday, and is scheduled to finish in Whitehorse in the Yukon on 20th February. Regarded as the most challenging race of its type in the world, there has been concern over how fluctuating temperatures this week may affect the trail, especially sections over the Yukon River.

The northern lights tried to push through with wispy spiral greens, but the moon, still full and high, proved too bright. When moving like a thick baize curtain, puppies howl, unable to fathom what they're witnessing.

11th February

Ran early on the river. Then I picked up a few supplies, including Coleman white gas (naphtha) from North Mart in Inuvik. This was formerly owned by The Hudson Bay Company. Wolf, beaver, wolverine furs, moose hide, bullets and Bowie knives are still sold from here - so are baseball caps and fast food.

12th February

Early one-hour run. Spending some time with lead dogs Piper and Pingo. I don't choose leaders for their physical strength but more for their mental capacity to lead. They learn fast, respond to my commands, and have an above-average willingness to learn. A strong bond and trust is something money will never buy me.

With a team of eight dogs and a minimal load, 15cm of ice will support us. There are rare times when I fall through and get soaked. At that point, up goes the tent, into my sleeping bag I go, then I eat and drink to raise my core body temperature.

I finished the day by running for an hour with Pingo and eating copious amount of food.



13th February

10.30am. I'm just back from running on the river, a slither of sun reluctantly showing itself in the east. It's 40 below zero. Freezing breath around my eyes make them feel like clotting wounds.

I wait for the sun a little longer and boil some water in my cabin. From a steel vacuum flask, I pour the water into a beaker and throw it skyward. It instantly bursts into snow and ice.

Metal and extreme cold don't mix. Skin can rip as a result. There are several people with their wedding fingers missing from such experiences in the Arctic. Similarly, extremely cold alcohol freezes instantly to the lips, tongue and any other tissue it touches. If the liquid reaches the back of the throat and the oesophagus, the resulting injury is often lethal.

Below left: I wait for the sun a little longer and boil some water in my cabin. From a steel vacuum flask I pour the water into a beaker and throw it skyward. It instantly bursts into snow and ice.

Below centre: Brothers Pingo and Hansel.

Below right: Made from moose hide with canvas uppers my Inuit mukluks have no left or right.

14th February

I was diagnosed as asthmatic at five years old and I've never forgotten the relief at being prescribed drugs to treat the condition. As a little boy, asthma had me gagging for breath, which frightened me. Today, I read online an article I'd written for the National Asthma Campaign's magazine. I wrote it to encourage others to reach out and not hold back on their ambitions simply because they're asthmatic.

Hansel, a Siberian Husky-Malamute cross, sat and watched as I prepared the food for the dogs and me. I'll eat anything and have a healthy approach to my diet. I'm never fazed by eating the same thing over and over again.

15th February

I headed out from Inuvik and on to the

Left: Soon to retire Sasha enjoys life on her totally synthetic PetLife Vetbed. This material remained dense and ice free. Some synthetic furs tend to ice up offering no insulation.

Below left: Another wolf trail left us this afternoon. At that point I felt we were being watched. Sometimes I've picked out a wolf trotting and watching me from a shoreline thicker. As we've passed wolves have followed. On the Arctic Ocean I notice them more. Grey tundra wolves show up when they leave the camouflage protection of the willow thickets. I've often wondered how many white wolves have followed.

Below right: The dogs busied themselves while I melted snow in order to hydrate their feed kibbles. Warm food was enough for them to curl-up for a good overnight rest.

Mackenzie with a dog team of eight to test some gear and give the four youngsters their first taste of a multi-day journey camped out on river ice. I left Sasha behind.

The youngsters have all maintained voracious appetites. This at least indicates that the new experience hasn't fazed them. Denali is the biggest and boldest. He encourages his buddy, Larvik. They've learnt a lot over the last few days. Hummer is always a little reserved. He reminds me of a younger Timber. He just likes to be left alone to pull... hard. Kimik digs in with little fuss and loves to get his head down. Tonight they soon settled, looking forward to their next adventure tomorrow.

16th February

Breakfast was porridge, dried fruit and powdered milk, all covered with a sport supplement powder enriched with vitamins. Huskies can hydrate themselves by metabolising animal fat. Sometimes I feed up to 40 per cent of their diet as fat. They also produce their own vitamin C. Humans can't. Without vitamin C you'd end up with scurvy, which was the scourge of early polar travellers.

We begin moving in brilliant sunshine. With a stretch and a yawn, everyone wants to get going. My routine is to travel for 55 minutes then allow for a five-minute break. Pingo, Piper, Timber and Hansel know the routine and value it. The youngsters have this to learn. It is important that they use the breaks to rest and to conserve energy - while I check their pads and claws for balled ice.

The nearest vet to Inuvik is at Dawson City in the Yukon, and fly-in visits north are occasional. Stool, urine and blood samples can be flown out for a vet to analyse. From this, a vet



can divulge a fund of information over the phone about a dog's health, nutritional value of the diet, possible infections, parasites or mineral balance. Here alone, responsibility for the dogs' health is mine. I watch for many things, but a basic one is to prevent or stabilise any injury by watching closely for subtle changes of a dog's running gait and behaviour.

I stopped the team just before 4pm to untangle young Kimik's harness. Then it happened. A blood-curdling distant howl to the north of us. It was a wolf.

Amazingly, a wolf's howl will indicate the individual's position within the pack, as well as the animal's physical condition, sex and intentions. It seemed very early for this to be a courting wolf because they look to mate in late-March. So maybe it was a lost wolf cub trying to get itself back to the pack. I know night-howling wolf packs help summon members to a nightly hunt, so I prepared myself, thinking we might well be the centre of attention.

17th February

Broke camp this morning, and, after 15 minutes, hit on to fresh lone-wolf tracks. The wolf trail was heading our way, so it was easy work for Piper just to follow. The wolf footings were frozen hard and its striding gait was longer than a dog's.

We made camp in good light after 5pm. I was pleased to get a warm meal inside the dogs. They soon lifted when they heard me pull down my tent zipper.

18th February

This morning was very cold but bright. Tent life revolves around my stove and lantern. Valuable stove heat also helps to air my clothes. Despite the wonderful wicking properties of my clothing, daily I strip off everything to a base-layer and peg my clothes to dangle and air above the stove.

Once aired, I stuffed superfluous clothing into a dry bag, and fed the dogs and then myself. The tent's temperature dropped as usual as I melted more snow to boil and pour into my steel flasks ready for breakfast. I then zipped myself



into my sleeping bag and fired up my laptop.

All day I've been looking forward to seeing some of the pictures I've shot. Digital cameras are the only way to go. The wait after a long journey is always an anxious one. With a digital camera, I can make sure I've got the pictures right and send them almost immediately.

Laptops have been an integral part of my gear for years. They're vital for sharing my experiences with the outside world. Using IT delicacies in extreme cold has created a minefield of problems in the past. Rugged laptops are now available; in the past, however, for fear of creating a short circuit due to condensation, I used to wait nearly five hours before booting up in the warmth of my tent.

My current computer struck up in less than two hours. I'm safely storing data, this diary, and downloaded digital images from my camera on to its system. It's important to monitor each dog to achieve ultimate performance. I used to use just a notebook with simple headings (such as name, age, weight), together with their worming and vaccination dates, and comments to describe the dogs' general condition. On my laptop, it's easy for me to archive or email all my data if necessary.

19th February

To fall through while moving over the river ice would see my immediate future revolving around what's directly on top of my sled. In an emergency, I want shelter, heat and food. A valuable addition is my roomy polyester sleeping bag liner.

It wasn't long before we picked up another set of lone-wolf tracks again. Pingo and Piper turned to each other as if to ask, "Shall we follow these or what?"



These are all new smells for youngsters Kimik, Larvik, Denali and Hummer. They're learning not to fuss and to keep moving. Then, this afternoon, all of a sudden the lone track converged into one flattened area of converging tracks. This was a wolf pack kill site. A moose will outrun any wolf, so a pack splits. One team will manoeuvre the prey into the other team's striking distance as they lay in ambush. That's what it looked like here. The same fate happens to ailing caribou a little way north on the tundra.

We passed two more kill sites later on in the day. All that remained were bone splinters and frozen beads of blood. Bones in crap and urine marker posts littered the biggest site.

At that point I felt we were being

Below left: Downloading my pictures to my laptop frees up the memory cards on my digital camera so I can shoot more pictures.

Below centre: On all journeys I pack four types of emergency distress flares. They must be protected from moisture.

Below right: I feel there's a strong bond and trust between Piper and me.

watched. Sometimes I've picked out a wolf trotting and watching me from a shoreline thicket. As we've passed, wolves have followed. On the Arctic Ocean, I notice them more. Grey tundra wolves show up when they leave the camouflage protection of the willow thickets. I've often wondered how many white wolves have followed.

Up here in the summer, a warning sign for a grizzly black bear or a wolf kill is to spot the migratory bald eagles circling overhead. For now we learn from what we see. Piper couldn't take his eyes off the shoreline for about 20 minutes this afternoon. We kept moving.

There's a new moon tonight. On the Arctic Ocean this change in tides brings unnerving bashes and booms when I try to sleep. The Mackenzie has been pretty quiet, but every now and then it rockets

Left:

The Arctic is an area of very high rabies incidence. Wolves and Arctic foxes are prime carriers. Control is very difficult and eradication almost impossible. Rabies is not only a dog killer, but it's also an infection from which very few people survive to tell the tale. It's for these dangers that wandering dogs and wolves hanging around aren't tolerated in Arctic communities.

Above right: The youngsters are now learning to rest and conserve energy during this time. It allows me to check their pads and claws for balled ice.

Below left and right: Originally from the eastern Arctic, Peter's dogs pull hard over river ice. Peter favours running his dogs in the fan hitch method.

off a cracking boom as it reminds me that the river ice is always in a state of flux. We're travelling and sleeping on nothing more than a frozen crust, which separates the dogs and me from a forever flowing river. It's a learning process for the youngsters and they're doing well.

20th February

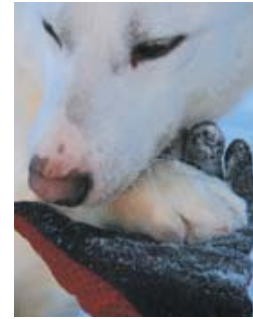
I regret bringing a tent with a dark flysheet. As each day passes, I gain a seven-minute earlier sunrise. This tent robs me of beautiful bright mornings. Annoyingly, it also means I need to use more gas in my lantern.

Today was beautiful. I could feel the youngsters were really getting to grips with their new routine. That night, I made camp, got all eight out of their harnesses and had a play session with them. There was lots of powdery snow flying around, and they relished leaping about without responsibility. Walking away from my tent, the sun was priming itself to a blazing tangerine. I turned around and our camp looked lonely. But I didn't feel like it inside. Pingo came up to me and launched his great white feet on to my chest to say, "Hello, dad." I gave him a hug and tossed a snowball at him.

21st February

Temperatures rose overnight and we'd had a fresh dump of snow. The dogs broke trail through deep snow initially, before we hit on to an old hard snowmobile track, probably the one from the trappers who'd past our camp a few days ago.

This afternoon we passed the abandoned tiny cabin of Joe Adams. I have heard people talk about Joe before, saying he was well-respected professional trapper here in the 1930s. From a distance I noticed animal tracks in front of Joe's old cabin. Seventy



years ago, the animal might have thought twice.

Apparently Joe, his wife and three kids lived in that cabin. Imagine what it must have been like to live there, raising a family.

Today is my 38th birthday. I saw my mum just after Christmas. She handed me an envelope with a card inside to open today. The envelope came with me and I opened it after feeding the dogs. My eyes welled up as I thought about her. Tomorrow we'll make it back to Inuvik.

22nd February

Even though Inuvik was only half-a-day's travel away, I wanted a good start. The sky was thick grey and it's been snowing all day again, but we're all back safe. The cabin stove is lit, we've eaten and we're all smiling. I've already started assessing how some of my new gear has performed. I'll continue to use most of it. Pingo ran with me this evening, and, as a treat, he's staying inside my cabin tonight.

24th February

I was first up. I wouldn't mind if Pingo slept on my cabin bed, but he won't.

He prefers the below-freezing bare floor. We ran on the river. I left the others resting. Most of the 22nd and yesterday were big "sort out gear" days. Today, I made a start at organising, into specific folders, more than 5,000 digital images shot over the last three weeks.

Pingo ran by my side for an hour this evening. He's here now. I look at him and know I'll miss him very much.

25th February

Willie Simon called around to see me tonight. Willie is a Gwitch'in Indian friend. He thoroughly enjoyed viewing a few pictures from the screen of my laptop and wasn't surprised to hear about all the wolf activity. Willie was once a full-time trapper. Alone from September to March, he worked a vast trap-line, travelling between log cabins he'd built. Sporadically, bush pilots would fly in to take his fur bundles.

28th February

Peter Krizan is a friend from Inuvik. We spent a couple of hours talking dogs this afternoon. Originally from the eastern Arctic, Peter's dogs pull hard over river ice.

2nd March

The first leg of my flight left in the early hours of the morning from Inuvik. I flew back to the UK. After the in-flight movie, the dropdown screens informed us passengers that we were at 10,600 metres, moving at more than 500mph and the temperature outside was -52°C.

3rd March

This evening I ran around Tooting Common in London, unfortunately without Pingo.

To keep up to date with Gary's latest adventures, and to find out more about his life as an explorer, visit: www.garyrolfe.com

