

Unbearable lightness of being

As Gary Rolfe and his sled team travel on their perilous journey, the days are long – sometimes too long. All the time, they are watching out for the shadows of bears...

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.

By mid-March, I was travelling by 12 hours of daylight. By the end of April, daylight was 18 hours a day.

The area through which the dogs and I journeyed is infamous for its violent north-westerly winds. At -48C, with speeds in excess of 120km per hour, the wind would whip our faces ferociously. It takes a resilient lead dog to keep concentration in these conditions.

Arctic winds are consistent in their direction; with it, spindrift hurtles over the ice, forming startling, glistening, wave-like formations. Combined with the knowledge of the wind direction and by looking at these waves, the course of travel can be maintained for a while, with little need for a compass. Northern bush pilots sometimes use shadows cast by the pressure ridges or those cast by stunted trees in the boreal forests, below the treeline.

In the strongest of winds Kavik (Dawson was my other leader on this journey) shone. He looked to shoulder into the wind, with no fear. Dawson was a little more reticent.

For days on end, I may just have been able to see the front of the leaders. True whiteout conditions then created dense cloud, merging with snow and ice. It was very difficult to judge our footings. Vital depth and height of perception was lost, creating an uneasy nausea; conditions made navigation difficult. This, combined with fearful winds and horrendous pressure ridges,



meant progress would be completely thwarted and I would make a decision to halt. No amount of daylight would make travelling possible. There was nothing for it but to set up camp, stake out the dogs and sit it out.

Bad weather is inevitable so you prepare for it. Storms generally pass quickly, but being tent-bound for days at a time causes the mind to wander. It is a time to realise how irrelevant you really are. The noise inside that tent was unrelenting. The wind gusts and blows with damning ferocity, screaming like a demented Lucifer, trying to get you out. Noting the time, I would try to rest, but managed only to doze, wake and fidget, in a constant state of anxiety.

F-f-freezing

In these temperatures, the dogs are certainly able to withstand the cold. A human exposed to the same conditions, without shelter, would die. For days and weeks you are devoid of all thought but that of warmth, shelter and food. Without this combination, there is no life.

The cold. It humiliates, sees you bow, crawl and cry. You are unimportant, small, meek and mouse-like; capable, at any moment, of being flicked away like a used tissue. If you are there or otherwise, it cares not. The cold triumphs; it reigns supreme and has no equal.

Northern lights

Some nights, with no predictions, the northern lights would appear. Ablaze, their magnificent green molten swirls would fire trillions of watts of electromagnetic energy. Greens and yellows, ever moving in a surreal drunken state across the brightest star constellations imaginable. Shooting stars seemed absurdly close. Arctic light can be magnificent. Even moonlight. So sharp, vibrant, you see everything with crystal clarity. >



Waking nightmares

With my head embalmed in hat, fleece and hood, enabling no skin to be exposed and freeze while I was asleep, my eyes would suddenly open. I would not move, but listen. I sleep on my side and with only sleeping bag, sleeping mats and tent floor material separating me from the ice. I could hear, feel and sense an immense power. Water weight and ice pressure pushing all the great ocean's murmuring. She was a noisy sleeping partner, with her moaning and unpredictable tantrums. Inside that tent, I did not ever let myself be cheated into a false sense of security. The urgency that, one night, I might have to scramble and break camp in darkness, in water cold enough to burn and kill, was one I lived with and was prepared for.

What's cooking?

Combining cooking and sleeping areas in bear country is not a good idea. But when my stove was going, inside my tent, it was an immediate source of vital heat. Heat was to be utilised as efficiently as possible. The idea though, is to keep a clean camp. There was no fear of leaving leftovers lying around, creating rancid, stale smells to get a bear's nose twitching. Our food was freeze-dried and kept in airtight bags so as not to attract bears.

After breakfast and my evening

meal, my utensils were cleaned carefully. It is an oversight to be continually cooking week after week, in and with dirty utensils. Any overlooked remains of food quickly deteriorate into miniature science projects. Cultured botulism at its best.

Bearing up

Killing a polar bear is a poor strategy for avoiding bear problems. It is legal in the Northwest Territories (NWT), but must be considered as the very last resort in self-defence. Be warned: with it come responsibilities. The incident legally must be reported, the bear must be

In the interest of hygiene and so as not to attract bears, cleanliness is vital. After each meal, utensils are carefully cleaned and no leftovers are left lying around, creating rancid smells to get a bear's nose twitching



skinned, and the head left intact. The NWT Department of Renewable Resources must be flown to the incident and fly out with the bear and a life-threatening explanation for it having being killed.

The polar bear is the largest land carnivore in the world, and will consider a human being as a source of food. They can weigh in at more than 600kg, and adult males can easily kill a 250kg seal with a single blow. I weigh 78kg. With varying dispositions, they are all unpredictable. With powertools for paws, and claws the length of the longest human fingers, they are formidable. Swift, agile, and with sudden bursts of speed, they can outrun the fastest human being. They have well-developed hearing and eyesight. They are expert swimmers and divers, with a remarkable sense of smell that can lead them to a source of food several kilometres away.

Polar bears are not territorial, but follow open water in order to hunt. They do protect critical space around themselves. This space varies in size from bear to bear. They will try to eliminate anything that invades their space.

The hunter

The bears favour heavily pressured ridges of near-shore ice along the thin or cracked floe edges, near open water areas in the ice. Under normal conditions, I was practising poor bear avoidance technique. Making camp in pressure ridge ice meant I was not able to eliminate areas where bears may lie in ambush among the high, jagged,



bus-sized ice. Bears are also known to use these areas to take temporary refuge during bad weather.

Extra vigilance was needed when visibility and hearing was restricted. A forever-watchful eye on the lookout for tracks, droppings and wildlife carcasses becomes second nature.

Bears attack if they feel threatened and may charge depending on:

- How close you are
- If it has cubs
- Whether it can pick up your scent
- If it is protecting a kill

While looking directly at you, the bear may charge with its head up, growling or bellowing. This is likely to be a bluff. These charges can happen and stop within several metres, with the bear pulling to the side. With his ears back and head low, however, it is unlikely to be a bluff. Bears will outrun any dog team or the fastest human being, so, hard as it may be, stay calm, assess the situation, and do not run. This is a time to act aggressively, to appear dominant and frighten the bear.

By the way...

In the event of being unarmed, the best thing to do in a self-defence bear attack (where it has cubs or food to defend), is to play dead, in the foetal position. If you are wearing a backpack, keep it on – it will help protect you. Keeping your legs drawn together into your chest, head into knees, and hands tight behind your neck, remain still. The bear will no longer feel threatened, and you will have protected your vital organs from serious injury. Do not move – even if you are being mauled.

Dogs vs bears

I have always felt confident that my dogs are the most effective means of preventing a surprise attack from a bear. My voice commands to Kavik or Dawson and the noise of the sled over hardpacked snow and ice are enough to ensure no surprise encounters.

Dogs are certainly an asset in bear country. As long as they are known to bark at the sight or scent of a bear, you have your own alarm system. They also have the advantage of being able to keep a bear at bay for what could be vital added seconds while you respond.

If I suspected bears, after staking the dogs out at night, digging their pits and building their walls as usual, I would leave Kavik and Dawson loose to alert me of incoming bears. Another option was to circle-stake the dogs around the tent. All the dogs had seen bears before; even the puppies had seen black bears. I knew their reaction. Kavik and Dawson would nip, bite and stave off a bear, giving me time to deal with the situation.

This time, I saw four polar bears (and one black bear and a grizzly in the Mackenzie Delta). The polar bears I saw were two cubs, and the larger bear with them, I presumed, their protective mother. I saw no tracks. The other was a lone bear. Male or female? I do not know and little do I care. To remain unnoticed and unchallenged is my policy. I was not on safari. ||||

The final instalment of Gary Rolfe's Arctic Adventure will appear in the April issue.

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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

