



“Wildlife eating people alive is nothing new in the Canadian Arctic.”

Sledge dog Saxon sings at the return of the sun after a long Arctic winter. All photos: Gary Rolfe.

Cold Sweat

Winter - time to curl up in front of the TV and hibernate? Wrong. Here, back in Summit by popular demand is Gary Rolfe with some tips for a world gone soft.

The last thing I want to do is get out of bed and run. It's always the same. A choice. Doze or get up. A futile debate follows. The business starts when I ask myself a question, "Are you going to let yourself down?" It never fails. Up, dressed and out the door I go. Waking up in a tent at 40-below-zero and preparing to rouse is always grotty, and can conjure up pathetic excuses. This process tends to happen every morning before the inward bastard

reminds me there's no excuse worthy of letting myself down, now, or ever. I get moving. I sometimes train three times a day - I won't fool you, it never gets any easier.

Why bother?

In a world gone soft it's easy to say, "Why bother?" If I'm not on an expedition I train. I like being fit. Fitness is the foundation to everything I do. My life revolves around dogs and year round there's a lot to do and every single task is mine, either in kennels or on a journey. I give it my all and train hard maintaining

two training schedules: my own and my dogs'.

During winter journeys my dogs don't carry me on a sled. On ice I ski beside my sled or break trail through waist deep snow with snowshoes. During summertime we move the way ancient Inuit travelled throughout Arctic summers - my pack contains supplies and the dogs carry their own food in special dog packs. I train to carry more than half my body weight. We all thrive on training and routine.

I rarely rest for more than a day after trips lasting a month or more, and begin the drag of learning how to run again. It

always feels very strange and slow but after four weeks of gradual intensity build-up there's improvement. Fitness for us all never stays the same. You get fitter or become less fit. My routine includes a strong emphasis on endurance running, plus weight training to beef up specific back and arm muscles that simulate lifting hefty boisterous dogs or pushing sled bulk. My winters are long and difficult, summers short and difficult.

Spring

Here migratory birds fly towards breeding grounds. I recognise the eagles. To me other birds flit around all fussy and exotic. The main attraction is the sun not setting for 56 days of 24-hour daylight, and the abundance of food. The ground is permanently frozen so there are no worms, but a thousand fly species thrive during Arctic summers. Bugs can be so thick in the air that they make inhaling difficult. Lips, eyebrows and the insides of my ears are all favourite bug biting venues. And on the tundra there's no getting away from bugs, they're oppressive. Driven insane, caribou sometimes make for the coast and walk off the cliff tops for peace.

My summer running is done on the Dempster Highway, basically a dirt road strewn with large bayonet-sharp stone chips. Tarmac only makes up eight miles of the shuttle road from Inuvik's

airport. The remaining 450 miles is dust, dirt or snow, and Inuvik's only overland crossing connection to the rest of the world. Built in the 1970's, this road passes through the Ogilvie Mountains, over the Peel and Mackenzie Rivers and down into the Yukon gold fields surrounding Dawson City. It's an incredible journey and includes everything to do with wilderness and spectacular untainted terrain lacking humans. I've driven it several times. There's so much wildlife it's like driving through a zoo.

The Lost Patrol

Who was Dempster? Way back in 1910 the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) patrolled the north by dog team. One such detachment left Fort McPherson and headed south for Dawson City. In the depths of winter the team became hopelessly lost and failed to make their destination. Frostbitten and hypothermic their situation became desperate. They ate all their dogs, compounding complications. Dog livers contain toxic levels of vitamin D. All the cops were found dead by a Mr. W.J.D. Dempster, and dubbed The Lost Patrol.

This year we've had five bears shot in the middle of the community. They eat dogs off chains. Sometimes a vehicle slows down and the driver warns me they've just seen a meat eater. I

“My eyelids go gluey like sticky clotting wounds”

Gary Rolfe glad to be back after a run at forty-below-zero.



Gary combines two training schedules, his own and his dogs'.

“For six weeks I run in perpetual winter polar dark, sometimes under a performance of northern lights or through huge bumping snowflakes.”

always run with an Outdoor Designs hydration pack carrying a wicked bear repellent spray, bug spray and asthma inhaler. In May and June the pollen puffs up into eye itching clouds from the tundra. It has a crippling effect on my asthma and bothers me greatly for a few weeks. This time of year I run in Rab Vapour-Rise tops and Ron Hill sprint tights. Both I've found to be bug proof.

Wildlife eating people alive is nothing new in the Canadian Arctic or other provinces. Cougars and bears killing to gorge on hikers or moving target runners make the headlines every year. Don't consider it alarming - the human element bothers me more. Last time I ran in London it was a night-time gangland "are you tough enough" initiation requirement to drive the streets without headlights on. First car to flash the mobsters was pursued, the guns came out and fired into the flasher. Nice. On two separate occasions my training run went into streets where armed cops were screaming at me to hit the floor.

Summer is my dogs' rest haven, except for daily tundra walks and dunks in the Mackenzie. By June Mackenzie River ice breaks up bringing warmer water from the interior. Come July I swim in the river and walk dogs. I wash outside. I don't have running water but swim in the river, lakes or douse myself from a bucket. Come winter water would freeze to my hands and face. I tend to wash less during

the winter. Now is also the time to accumulate strength through weight training. I don't find weight training easy, I'm not naturally big. My arms always resemble knots in cotton. Yet despite lack of visible progress I get stronger, and that's what counts. Managing eight repetitions per exercise in sets of four, I consider 80% of my maximum enough to benefit without injury. I increase repetitions to twelve before slapping on more poundage to the weights bar. Drinking PowerBar's Protein Plus helps my recovery process.

Winter

Winter is spent running 150 days, 100 miles per week on the Mackenzie River ice. That equates to slugging out 2,000 miles. Most of the time it's forty below zero, and dark. Training in the cold puts colossal strain on my lungs and heart. Even standing still the heart works over time to keep the body warm. Load it with exercise and sometimes it's a job to eat enough to fuel the body. Operating in the cold, the fitter I am the less work my body has to do to function.

By the second week in December the maze of waterways that makes up the intricate Mackenzie Delta freezes, along with every lake and river for thousands of miles, so too the Arctic Ocean. Between the three communities of Aklavik, Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk snow is cleared to create an ice road system on the Mackenzie

River. The ice road from Inuvik to Tuktoyaktuk is the longest in the world - 74 miles where vehicles weighing up to five tons can drive safely over ice. In November, before the ice road is officially opened the dare is on to see which community drives it first. These early vehicles usually have no driver's cab roof or at least the doors are missing, just in case a fast exit is required. The RCMP doesn't think a lot to this tradition - last year they tried to charge the victorious driver with some trivial breach in the law.

The sun sets for the last time in December. It's always dark at Christmas. For six weeks I run in perpetual winter polar dark, sometimes under a performance of northern lights or through huge bumping snowflakes. The volume of stars captures my attention, they're always so close and bright. Meteors shoot across and fizzle into black. The light of a head torch enables me to be sure of my footing. Running in such conditions can feel cruel - my eyelids go gluey like sticky clotting wounds and are always in danger of freezing together.

Schizophrenic rabid mammals like slippery wolf packs, or psychotic adolescent bears not smart enough to pack on the necessary lard for hibernation are attracted to the community. I run with a dog experienced with furry attacks, I deal with the human aspects. Idiots on snowmobiles tend to be drunk or high after shots of aftershave or drinking mouthwash. Sometimes I see dead animals, frozen solid. Bullet holes are opened into cavity pits by ravens chiselling away with their persistent beaks. They'll eat anything.

On the river it's always several degrees colder. I like running in the cold but I don't like being cold. It takes 10 lbs of running gear to protect me like fur does for my dogs at 40-below-zero. A trapper style hat with earflaps keeps my tabs warm. I wear two, sometimes three, Rab Vapour - Rise smocks with hoods and Trail Pant bottoms. The first layer is a smaller size than the outer. Three pairs of Horizon socks, liners and wool blend varieties, keep my feet blister free and healthy. Like Russian dolls, larger sizes fit over the other. Outdoor Designs Summit mittens with two pairs of Krakatua liners keep my paws warm. I wear trainers a size bigger in winter to make room for layering socks. My trainer soles go a little stiff in the cold but don't crack. Some makes do, disastrously. I tape over trainer breathing mesh and wear quality overbooties, the

type cyclists use in wet conditions. I was prone to stress fractures in my feet, now I line my trainers with Sorbothane shock stopper insoles to avoid injury.

Asthma in the cold

The lack of humidity in the Arctic cold can set off an asthma related hacking cough, feeling like I've swallowed broken glass. I was diagnosed asthmatic as a five year old. It frightened me, especially knowing my grandfather died from an attack. Treatment progress has meant I've never been held back, thank God. Wearing Arktis Merino wool face-warmers over my gob and nose stops the cough. Breathing through wool doesn't freeze up like fleece. I make oversized ones and wear them over the top of a tighter fitting one creating a wedge of warm humidified air. This method hinders facial frostbite too. Running with me my dogs just amble along, oblivious to the cold. Back indoors warm and safe I steam like a race horse. I smear Bag Balm on my face before and after running. This protective gel doesn't contain water that would otherwise freeze to my face.

The return of the sun

Out running in January the sun appears again and I notice Arctic fox, lynx, snowshoe hare and wolf tracks in the snow. Sunshine makes the tundra floor spangle as if crafted from cut diamonds. Avoiding hypothermia while gulping huge intakes of oxygen to perform immense physical output is only managed by being in good shape. Cold (I consider minus 35°C or less cold) air hitting the lungs hard must be humidified else I'm in trouble and that means making sure I drink enough. I drink PowerBar Performance Sports Drink after each run. The taste livens up water and contains valuable vitamins and minerals. I swig an extra litre of water daily to humidify inhaled freezing air. Evaporation burns more energy. Ignoring water intake would lead to dehydration, hypothermia and complications, like death. Pissing into snow is no indication of my hydration condition. Urine always turns snow yellow, it's best to watch the flow for true state of hydration.

By February the forty-ton vehicle weight limit increases traffic on the ice road, it's predominantly monster oil and gas exploration trucks hauling buildings out on skids to tundra locations. The ice is usually 16 foot thick. I don't thank the cretins who throw litter out of their

vehicles. The dogs I run with hurry from one piece to the next. Sometimes they try eating what they find - cultural things like condoms. By May the Mackenzie isn't safe to run on, but snowmobilers try to prove otherwise. Rifles slung over the backs of hunters act as barbs and they die unable to pull themselves from holes in the ice. Drunks try revving from one ice floe to the next. Fine until the floe flips. They die too. Water during spring break-up is cold enough to render a man unconscious in seconds.

Early wintertime training of my adult dogs saturates up to four hours a day. By the end of January this doubles, so too

“Drunks try revving from one ice floe to the next. Fine until the floe flips. They die too. Water during spring break-up is cold enough to render a man unconscious in seconds.”

their payload. Each dog is capable of pulling at least twice its own body weight. My best sessions? I have topped off thirty-mile runs, winter or summer, just in time to finish with an hour's weight training. Mostly, twice daily hour-long runs precede long weekend runs with weights on alternate days. I rest on the seventh or tenth day the same as on a long-haul polar journey.

Large weekly mileages could reduce

Walkies! In the land of the midnight sun, Gary walks his dogs in the early hours of the morning.





Above left: Just going shopping - heading into town on a grocery run. Above right: Piston enjoys a pre-training stretch.

flexibility so I improve muscle length and range of motion by consistently stretching major leg muscle groups such as my hamstrings and hip flexors, and massage calves after each run. The idea isn't new. It reduces injury and strengthens already economical slow-twitch leg muscles to maintain my efficient skiing style too.

Motivation

At school it was enough to drive myself for the sense of well-being generated from training, before it propelled into something more like lifestyle and expedition fitness. Got a dream and you've got incentive, your motivation. I hold this close to my heart and treasure it. I visualize it and plan, always telling my feet where to go. You can do it too, your ultimate I mean. Don't live to regret not trying and don't ever let anyone tell you your dream is too big because some people will try. Identifiable as under-achieving jealous loser types, they warrant a stiff middle finger. Don't be told you're selfish or ruthless. Resist stepping on toes, pay your dues, do the right thing and people around you will benefit from sharing your enthusiasm, your passion.

Dreams come true. They also cost. But you won't care about the sweat, tears,

time for the money thing, energy and nagging doubts, because you'll be on your way. Sacrifices have to be made but you won't care about that either. I'm not for the fancy house, fast car scenario. Just as well because I can't get ten dogs in a car.

Training

I train with purpose and determine weaknesses to define what I want to achieve and improve upon while out alone with my dogs. Fear is powerful and reinforces training motivation for me. I've mind pictures of fretful past journey predicaments that never ever go away. Brutal cold mornings harnessing up, frantic to get dogs going or lifting them sodden out of water installs an urgency to lift those training weights and improve. I don't know where the willpower comes from, but an ever-progressive training schedule bolsters confidence, self-reliance and efficiency. I suppose it goes back to hunger for improvement.

Achieving daily mileage on a journey can be easy. Most of the time it's not. Training runs are for those times. The staple result is performance endurance under mind-bending fatigue. No matter how long a run is I have good and bad sections. I expect them and live with it.

Expedition days are the same. At worst I visualise myself completing the task,

looking out and down on myself. Some training sessions leave me void of memory. Really bad days out on the ice do the same. It's like the very worst times are forgotten and the best keep us going. I'm glad for that.

Conditioning mind and body parts through training isn't meant to be easy. I coax myself with little mantras, nothing embarrassing, just a word or phrase to keep going. By practising and facing up to it on a daily basis my point is to have a better experience when I'm faced with it again for real. I train alone. It's the best way. With others, sessions always reach a point where training partners feel it necessary to direct comments my way with, "you're an animal, " or "you are not normal". That established I think dog circumstances and drive harder. They overlook that training is just as unpleasant for me. Apart from that it's just normal running - and the hardest part is always getting out of the door. ■

Gary Rolfe has clocked up over 10,000 Arctic miles alone with dog teams. Based in Canada's Arctic community of Inuvik he owns ten purebred Canadian Eskimo dogs. Only 300 exist. Arctic temperatures range from 28°C summers with perpetual 24-hour sun and 48°C-below-zero polar dark winters. As you'd expect, he's serious about training. Stay tuned for part two of this article in issue 41, on food for performance.

“Some training sessions leave me void of memory. Really bad days out on the ice do the same. It's like the very worst times are forgotten and the best keep us going. I'm glad for that. “

Further information

- www.garyrolfe.com - Gary's website
- www.rab.uk.com - Vapour-Rise clothing
- www.horizonsocks.co.uk - Socks for all outdoor pursuits
- www.asthma.org.uk - Asthma support and information
- www.outdoordesigns.co.uk - Hydration packs and gloves