



A dog's life

Greenland dogs have been bred in isolation on the Arctic island for centuries to be hard workers and faithful companions in a punishing climate. Polar traveller and Greenland resident **Gary Rolfe** explains how he and his animals survive in the vast icy wastes

I LIVE AND WORK IN GREENLAND WITH MY HUSKIES: 17 males and one female. Her name is Girly and she's very popular. Home is a permanent base camp where everything revolves around the well-being of my dogs. From here, journeys are spawned and prepared and trained for.

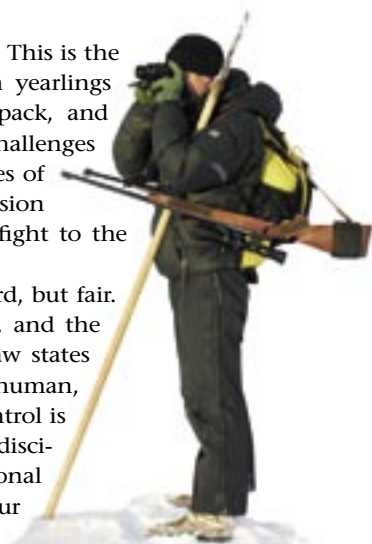
The word 'husky' is a generic term for any mutt that pulls. I favour Greenland dogs because everything about them is vast and strong. They despise physical and mental cowardice, and they are aggressive in their appetite to do what they've been bred to do, which is pull massive payloads in terrifyingly cold temperatures.

For more than 2,000 years, the selection process for these dogs was simple: if you pulled hard, you lived. The result is a breed of incredible canine athletes with unique traits: powerful, dominant dogs that are extremely strong-willed. They are the Panzer tanks of the dog world. Greenland is home to more than 20,000 working dogs – they are living cultural icons.

LEADER OF THE PACK

October to July is my snow season. This is the time to condition my team, train yearlings and travel. My dogs work as a pack, and consequently there's a hierarchy. Challenges can lead to fights of varying degrees of unpleasantness. If there's no submission from either combatant, they will fight to the death if left unchecked.

Knuckle is my boss dog. He's hard, but fair. Ultimately, however, I'm the boss, and the dogs know it. Where I live, the law states that if a dog from a team bites a human, the entire team is shot dead, so control is vital. I use whips, but rarely for discipline; they're essentially a directional tool. In general, however, I favour voice commands.



'A trained and conditioned Greenland dog can carry a third of its body weight and is a vital deterrent against bears'

Lead dogs are the brains: without them, the team goes nowhere. Outstanding lead dogs, such as Loads, send out an invisible thread – they do what I want without being told.

I never run a puppy in a team until it's at least a year old, when it will be harnessed for the first time beside a dog such as Knuckle. He teaches the new dog what not to do and I don't interfere. For example, they must learn not to chase polar bears, which make for thin ice, open water or icebergs when pursued by dogs.

BE PREPARED

Sometimes I'm away from home for three months. When I return, kennel work is dominated by getting dogs journey-fit through feeding, conditioning and training. Worming is paramount. Bayer's Drontal Plus treatment is the only drug that rids dogs of harmful tapeworms, hookworms and whipworms.

I use a Panasonic Toughbook to organise a year's supply of food and gear. Two icebreaker resupply ships visit each year. Their cargo includes my 2,000 kilograms of dog feed. I feed the dogs kibble (pellets) once or twice a day. It's fit for human consumption; I survived an expedition by eating it. This is supplemented with wildlife. A visiting friend yelped when she saw Hot Dog chomping on a seal flipper – she thought it was a human hand.

I love the cold but hate being cold. I average 3,200 journey kilometres every year, running 12–14 dogs in a team, sometimes pulling 500-kilogram loads in brutal cold. I love Arktis all-in-one base-layer wool suits.

I ski beside my sled, or use snowshoes to break trail in front of my dogs. East Greenlandic dog sleds are like no other, and I use nothing else for long-haul journeys. We make our own: they're four metres long with a 90-centimetre by three-metre packing surface. Runners are shod with high-density plastic over steel, and I use a small block planer to maintain slickness.

My sled bag includes an emergency grab bag, a sack with a draw-rope neck for an injured dog and spare H-back and X-back harnesses. On long-haul trips, it's smart to pack different harness types in order to prevent strain injuries. I make all of my own dog traces and pack spares. I dehydrate a lot of my own journey food, especially meat for summer trips.

My belt kit includes knives, a Recta compass and a Gerber



ABOVE: Gary shows off the skull of a polar bear. The polar bear hunting season runs from October to August – the skull and the skin are highly prized; **ABOVE RIGHT:** making a traditional Greenlandic sled. It took Gary and Augo, a 'master sled-maker', a week to build; **RIGHT:** Mikky Dee, part of Gary's beloved dog team

multitool. I pack an axe and a *toq* (a four-centimetre-wide chisel mounted on a three-metre-long handle) to test the thickness of ice, open up seal holes and set nets under the ice.

I always pack an Arva shovel; with smaller blades you shift more snow. I dig each dog a pit and build them a low windbreak wall. Feeding my dogs can be seriously ugly with wind pummelling at a breathtaking velocity. Sometimes it brings me to my knees and I drag myself through dog crap along the stakeout.

I spray my tools bright red: this shows up best when dropped in the snow. My medical kit contains treat-

ments for obvious conditions, sedatives and an anaesthetic. Everything can be administered to man or dog, including skin glue, which hurts less than a paramedic's staple gun. I keep my sewing kit in a felt roll. The awl is for dog-harness repairs and the hide is for mending mukluks (reindeer- or sealskin boots).

When I travel on foot, I do so as the ancient Inuit did during summer, crossing rivers and tundra with dogs. My pack contains supplies and the dogs carry their own food; a trained and conditioned Greenland dog can carry a third of its body weight. For long journeys, I get my resupply depots out by boat, snowmobile and aeroplanes.

Taking the dogs on chartered aircraft involves removing all of the passenger seats and securing the dogs on chains. Alternatively, they are placed in flight crates.

ICE TO SEE YOU

My house is on a riverbank, 200 metres from the Denmark Strait. My dogs are spaced and secured along a stakeout chain. On journey nights, I use the same technique. The chain is secured at either end with ice screws, Seattle Manufacturing

Corporation's I Pickets, Tubbs' snowshoes as improvised deadmen or grinder-sharpened 20-centimetre bolts that I pound into frozen dirt.

I have no plumbing at home and haul all of the water for my dogs. On journey nights, I use my MSR WhisperLite Internationale stove to repeatedly melt 90 litres of snow to boil 12 litres of water to rehydrate us. Some things can be improvised on the Arctic Ocean; a stove can't. In extreme cold, it sustains life.

Naphtha paste leaves residue that eventually clogs and hinders stoves. Before firing them up, I prime my stoves with pure alcohol. I mix diethyl ether with white spirit at a ratio of 1:25 to get a fuel that will ignite at –60°C. The stove is quiet enough to allow me to listen out for a loose dog, fighting or incoming bears. My dogs' reactions to each of these circumstances differs and I want to hear them.

From mid-November, we have 56 days of total polar dark. Temperatures fall low enough to turn spit into ice cubes. Out on the sea ice, airborne tundra stones sometimes pummel me. I wear a contact lens/ski goggle combination that protects my

Meeting

THE LATE SIR WALLY HERBERT



I met Wally – the first person to reach the Geographic North Pole on foot – several years ago. Wally used Greenland dogs during some of his expeditions. I asked him numerous questions, rarely straying from the subject of dogs. He was full of wisdom. When I asked him about what specifics he looked for in a potential dog, he replied: 'Gary, invariably it was dark, so I'd have a torch. I'd shine it on the dog. If it had four legs, that was good enough.'

In his hall, he had a tatty Union Jack. It was the one he had carried throughout the 16-month Trans-Arctic expedition in 1968–69. He set off on that journey with no idea if dogs could survive on pemmican for a year. Until then, the longest-ever journey with dogs had been three months.

The graft to raise and maintain expedition sponsorship has always been difficult. Wally would spend a week in an area giving up to five lectures a day. Once, he lectured to inmates at Parkhurst, the prison for the seriously violent. He told me that wardens had to use truncheons during the Q&A session.

peepers from chronic tear flow, spindrift and stones. A head torch enables me to negotiate bad ice, check my dogs' paws and study gaits and tails (which act as dog mood indicators).

Handguns are illegal in Canada. In Greenland, they're illegal for residents, but not for non-residents (no, we don't get it either). Canadian and Alaskan bear sprays temporarily blind and asphyxiate, but they're also banned in Greenland. So it's full-bore rifles all the way. This isn't a big

problem as rifles are more versatile anyway: you can start a fire, hunt and communicate with them.

Sunglasses are mandatory during the 70 days of perpetual daylight, unless you want burnt retinas or snow blindness. I wear them for protection against blinding water glare, too.

So, there you have it – equipment basics. There's a pervasive attitude that money will buy you everything. With gear, it will, but when it comes to dog respect, it won't. And there's something else: travel long enough with dogs and a combined gear failure could one day turn your circumstances into a desperately harrowing hellhole.

— READ MORE ONLINE —

Gary Rolfe (www.garyrolfe.com) is a professional dog musher who lives in Ittoqqortoormiit, Greenland, the most remote inhabited place in the Western world, home to 500 people and more than 500 working Greenland dogs. To discover what happens to a dog's fur when it moults, visit www.geographical.co.uk/features/kit



GARY ROLFE



1

FLIGHT CRATES

Hagen

£99/19 KILOGRAMS (THE LARGEST DOG CRATE)

Hagen's Pet Cargo flight crates are airline-approved. A dog must be able to stand in the crate. Hagen Pet Cargo crates produce suitable models for every breed



2

DOG FOOD

Nutrience

£30/15 KILOGRAMS (PER BAG)

I feed my dogs Nutrience dog food to ensure their nutritional well-being and health so they can reach their full potential as the ultimate working dog breed



3

COMPASS

Recta DS 56

£55/72 GRAMS

Recta compasses are the only ones I trust. I've placed compasses in liquid refrigerant at less than -60°C. My Recta didn't alter at all, and showed no signs of freezing. Other big-brand compasses froze solid



4

BATTERIES

Energizer Lithium

£5.50/36 GRAMS (FOR TWO AA CELLS)

Alkaline batteries contain water. In the cold, and for extended use, they're hopeless. Throughout perpetual winter polar dark at -40°C, I use Energizer Ultimate lithium AA and AAA batteries to power devices such as my headtorch and GPS

TEN
OF THE BEST

Greenland's Arctic wilderness is as unforgiving as it is beautiful, and a sticky end is never far away for the unprepared polar traveller. Here are some items that will keep you and your dogs going in the frozen tundra

Don't forget...

...when it all feels too much, do anything to pull through: crawl on your knees, bleed to the bone, cry, but never ever give up. Never

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For stockists and information, visit www.geographical.co.uk/features/kit



5

SUNGLASSES

CEBE Kite

£50/30 GRAMS

Have you ever considered what life would be like without your eyesight? Fear of losing my own has had me consider the best options available. I wear CEBE sunglasses so my retinas don't burn out



6

CONTACT LENSES

Ciba Vision

£40/144 GRAMS (ONE MONTH'S SUPPLY)

The Dailies AquaComfort Plus one-day contact lenses are incredible; I never even know they're in. When sleep is out of the question, I wear the Air Optix Night & Day contacts for 30 days of continuous wear



7

DOG PACKS

Ruff Wear Palisades

£82/ONE KILOGRAM (MEDIUM)

I use Ruff Wear's Palisades dog packs. No other dog pack system has been so violently tested as Ruff Wear's. The company also makes first-aid packs and flotation jackets for dogs



8

DOWN CLOTHING

Rab Expedition down suit

£550/1.6 KILOGRAMS

To a polar bear, I'm nothing but a vertical seal. On more than one occasion, staying alive has meant wearing this suit. All I know is that I never want to be without it. And from Rab's Vapour-rise range, I get versatile, fast-drying clothing



9

SOCKS

Bridgedale Endurance Summit

£13/140 GRAMS (PER PAIR)

On winter and spring journeys, I layer Bridgedale's Endurance Summit socks with the company's thermal liners. For summer trips, I wear the Endurance Trekker model. When at home, I run, on average, 160 kilometres a week wearing Bridgedale socks



10

PERSONAL LOCATOR BEACON

ACR MicroFix

£549/285 GRAMS

I never trust a satellite phone. In my opinion, the reception remains dreadful, which isn't much good if your life depends on it. I believe that ACR makes the best personal locator beacons, and I carry my MicroFix with me at all times