



# KitLIST

Each month we ask a different climber to tell us what's in their rucksack. This month it's the turn of a real cold weather expert: **GARY ROLFE**

Dog musher, Gary Rolfe, has travelled 11,000 summer and winter Arctic miles with dogs. Here, he tells an inspiring story of survival and passes on lots of useful tips and gear advice on how to cope with very cold conditions, all of which can be applied to many mountain situations. Alone it's always dangerous. Last March, dreadfully hypothermic with brutally frostbitten hands, his will to survive was made all the more desperate trying to save his dogs. From a sled sinking in the Arctic Ocean, Gary threw off gear and food that helped save him.



Some of Gary's best friends, his dog team. ROLFE COLLECTION

My dogs and I were inseparable.

The love and trust between us was absolutely immense. Last March we were moving over Amundsen Gulf – a route section of the North West Passage – when sea ice gave way. Everything was in the water, my dogs, sled and me, a death sentence. I ripped my mittens off trying to save my dogs. I'd always condemned baring paws in the cold. I sustained fourth-degree frostbite and later was expected to lose both hands. It wasn't enough. Terrifying cold killed 11 of my 12 dogs in front of me.

Out of the water I stripped off sodden icing-up clothing; naked I was so cold. Violent speech slurred and shivers ceased. Alone I was on the verge of no return, I was slowly dying. The site looked pathetic, as if we'd been torpedoed. Barely conscious I kept going, first on with an Arktis Antarctica wool shirt, layers of Rab Vapour Rise. My feet weren't frostbitten. I wore Horizon liner, Outlast and GT socks. From an Outdoor Designs Dry Bag I pulled out my Rab down suit. I put it on with fingers that knocked sounding like wood. My core temperature rose.

In the cold – I mean minus 35°C cold – for day travel I pour food into my mouth from a one-litre GSI Lexan screw top bottle. I'm never without water in an Aztec vacuum flask. Filled with boiling water, left outside for three days at minus 40 it remains brew warm. I prepare my day food by cutting carbohydrate and protein PowerBars into suck-sized chunks and dip these chunks into flour. The flour prevents pieces sticking together before freezing. Sachets of that nasty tasting hydrogenated fat 'expedition food' slop are weighty. Dehydration wizards Just Tomatoes Etc have every fruit and veggie for genuine natural nutrition. Dehydrated food now means I carry more calories that weigh less.

Arctic shorelines expose free fuel. In the west it comes from the Alaskan and Canadian interior and in the east from Siberia; it's driftwood. In summer 2004, I'd walked this coastline. I packed more

than matches in the shape of an Ultimate Survival Strike Force All-Weather Fire Starter and Wet Fire Tinder, this stuff burns when wet. It's a fail-safe stove ignition method too. The Blast Match version is operational with one hand. Summer or not this too was a chilling journey. I was charged six times by bears. Polar bears flipped from shore to pack ice. On separate occasions I walked into three full body bags – think burial at sea. Two other firemaking tools I pack are Gerber's Gator Saw and a dinky Gator Axe.

Tents with snow flaps are warmer. Pull these flaps away from a tent fly before covering

with snow. Ventilate from inside and condensation is non-existent. The CAMP XP2 Plus and XP3 Plus are the only UK distributed tents with skirted snow flaps. Inside, tent floor underlay enhances insulation greatly. Beacons Products have 3mm tent underlay. Folded or rolled, it weighs virtually nothing. I favour hooded silk sleeping bag liners inside a vapour barrier bag. Struggling for alteration materials? Find Point North, they're suppliers of performance fabrics and hard to find accessories.

Find yourself in the high Arctic without a steel-faced shovel and you won't be building snow holes. Made from metre deep compacted snow, coffin trenches are the quickest Arctic survival shelter to build. Roof span is kept within single body width measure so there's no side-by-side occupancy. For two people there's end-to-end configuration with a common entry pit. I use an SMC Summit Snowsaw. Made of aircraft grade aluminium it's a masterstroke design. So too is the Arktis Chest Rig. A mercenary soldier acquaintance introduced me to this brilliant survival load-bearing system. From now on I'll be wearing RHB Designs Mitts with their liner pouches that accommodate chemical hand warmers such as Heat Max HotHands.

From impossible circumstances I survived with one of my dogs. It's been a devil of a summer recovering. Suffocating physical pain and horrific hallucinations have passed; crushing mental stuff is taking a little longer. Now I've got my future dogs to think about and you have your climbing but remember, when it all feels too much, do anything to pull through: crawl on your knees, bleed, cry but never ever stop. Never give up on what you love. ♪

Gary moves to Greenland this winter.  
For more: [www.garyrolfe.com](http://www.garyrolfe.com)