

How being towed in the snow by his dad led to a life exploring the Arctic

# Gary's months on the ice with 8 dogs for company



● **ICE-OLATED:** An Arctic view from the sled of Gary Rolfe, inset, who grew up in Benington and is now a world-renowned husky handler rated by Sir Ranulph Fiennes (s)



**S**PENDING months alone surviving the icy climes of the Arctic with only his huskies for company, avoiding ferocious polar bears and warding off rabid foxes, 38-year-old Gary Rolfe lives a rare existence.

Yet this appetite for sub-zero adventuring began in a quiet East Herts village: Benington.

"Back when it used to really snow in winter, my dad would pull me along Burns Green Lane on a sled attached to the back of his car. Not particularly safe, I admit," said Gary.

Swapping his father's car for a pack of hounds, Gary is now carving a niche for himself as an Arctic explorer who specialises as a 'dog musher' — someone who skis alongside huskies and controls them as they pull the equipment.

Gary's respect for nature and love for exploring was nurtured during the time he spent in his teens in the company of the groundskeepers at Benington Lordship.

"I developed a lot of skills during my time there. I learnt how to follow tracks to find foxes, how to treat firearms with respect and handle them correctly. They used to let me run free around the estate, and I used to take a lot of photos. I learnt to feel very comfortable in my own company," he said.

This is just as well, as Gary's expeditions see him going without human company for months on end. His most recent trip, a solo journey up the frozen Mackenzie River in the Canadian Arctic, saw him travel 190 miles with just eight dogs as companions, sometimes at temperatures of -51C. This could be particularly gruelling at times.

"Sometimes it can take up to 12 hours to travel 400 metres over sea ice. I work my way through it with an axe. It can be pretty soul destroying."

Speaking of the physical strain of such an expedition, he said: "The cold is debilitating. You've got to be incredibly fit, because with the dogs you've got eight other lives to look after too. I need to melt 90 litres of snow every day to hydrate them, and build pits and shelters for them every day when I set up camp."

Travelling alone in the Arctic wilds can be incredibly risky, as Gary learnt from a chance encounter in the Yukon region of Canada with a man going by the name of Trappa Mak.

"In the early 1980s the Canadian government hired him for his tracking skills to help look into the disappearance of several hikers in his tracking area. He worked alone for weeks and hit the headlines when he returned with human heads, hands, and other parts remains from bear attacks," said Gary.

He has managed to successfully avoid polar bears so far, for this very reason.

"There are three vital things to remember with

By  
**TOM PEGG**

polar bears. Don't surprise them, don't get between them and their cubs, and don't go near what they've killed. They bury their food in shallow graves, so don't ever investigate bad smells or circling ravens. Polar bears have claws longer than your fingers, and pads bigger than any man's chest."

The intrepid explorer has received the patronage of legendary Arctic adventurer Sir Ranulph Fiennes. Speaking of Gary's achievements in his field, he commented: "Handling huskies is a skill that takes time, determination and patience to develop, but ultimately, to be any good, it demands talent. Gary has over the past seven years cut his teeth alongside the world's most skilled of polar travellers."

Explaining how important such an acknowledgement from Sir Ranulph was, Gary said: "He is someone whose opinion I value enormously. I got in touch with him a long time ago, as a polar puppy, and we've stayed in touch and exchanged letters. It's something I value hugely. He has laid the precedents for everyone else to follow."

The sheer amount of time Gary spends in the Arctic puts him in a unique position to showcase equipment designed for use in extreme conditions.

"There's not better testing ground than the Arctic at 40 below," he explained.

"Panasonic has a range of laptops specially designed for rugged conditions — I prove they're tough."

"With Rab, the adventure clothing specialist, the fact I operate alone endorses that their gear keeps me safe and warm. My physical well-being has a lot to do with PowerBar, which specialises in sports nutrition — I go healthy and return healthy."

"But none of this has come easily. I used to raise funds by working a 56-hour overtime week as a farm labourer and at night I'd wash dishes in a hotel."

Having carved a niche for himself as a lone explorer, Gary's fitness is all-important. So, one might be surprised to learn that Gary was diagnosed as an asthmatic at the age of five.

"I remember the grief it gave me playing as a kid," he said. "That's why I try to help raise awareness for Asthma UK and where other sufferers can get information to help them with the condition from their website at [www.asthma.org.uk](http://www.asthma.org.uk)."

Gary is currently applying for a permanent residency in Canada. For him, the Arctic is where he belongs: "It's the only place that feels like home. I feel comfortable out there. It's where I want to be."