

● TEMPERATURES SO COLD IN CANADIAN WILDERNESS 'IT FEELS LIKE SPITTING AN ICEBERG'

# Adventures of an Arctic explorer

POLAR bears, wolves, rabid foxes and temperatures plunging to minus 50 degrees Celsius are all in a day's work for solo Arctic explorer Gary Rolfe, whose passion for trekking through some of the world's most inhospitable landscapes was born out of a childhood spent roaming the rugged Cornish coastline.

● By LAURA PARSONS

Gary, 38, recently returned from his latest expedition on the frozen Mackenzie River in Canada's remote western Arctic, accompanied only by his beloved team of huskies, and temperatures so cold it felt "like spitting an ice cube".

Taking a break in the somewhat less harsh surroundings of his mother's home in Cury, near Helston, Gary's passion for adventure shines through as he attempts to explain how it all started.

"I was always a very adventurous kid," he said. "I loved the outdoors and wildlife and was very comfortable with my own company. I spent hours following the coastline and used to tie myself to railings on the seafloor when there was a storm. My parents never used to see me from dawn to dusk."

Growing up in Falmouth, where his parents ran a hotel, Gary was a pupil at the old Truro Cathedral School. He was not a brilliant scholar, but excelled on the sports field, taking up long distance running at the age of 15.

After leaving school, he spent several years trying to decide what to do with his life.

"I had this massive amount of energy but didn't know where to direct it," he said. "I knew there was something out there in the world that I wanted to do but I did not know what it was. I continued to train, and saved my money, but I felt really lost."

Flicking through back copies of adventure magazines in a bookstore one day, Gary came across a picture of a man with a team of sled dogs in the Yukon.

Immediately hooked, he spent another 18 months tracking down the very best in the profession, before teaming up with explorers in North America for several years and then deciding to go solo.

Since then, he has successfully completed a number of expeditions several hundred miles above the

Arctic Circle and is currently making preparations for another trip this summer and a long-haul journey in 2006. He has no desire to go to the North Pole, which he describes as a "tourist destination," preferring to explore largely untrampled ground with only his dogs for company.

A strict disciplinarian, with a daunting training regime, Gary prides himself on meeting the challenges of the landscape head-on.

"Of course you get scared," he said. "The prospect of encountering a half-tonne bear with claws longer than your fingers is scary, but my aim is to avoid dangers like that. It's the same coping with the cold. It can feel like a blowtorch on your legs, but I've never had frostbite. It's all about being physically and mentally prepared."

Gary is aware that people who have not experienced such extreme temperatures have difficulty relating to just what he is facing. Attempting to test his "spitting an ice cube" description on his last journey, he threw a cup of freshly boiled water into the air, photographing it as it froze instantly.

A necessarily limited diet while on expedition has recently been augmented by the addition of an innovative "oven" allowing Gary to bake his own bread. A somewhat more crucial item of baggage is his satellite phone, which could prove a lifeline if Gary needed help from the outside world.

A devotee of the traditional methods of husky handling, Gary is renowned for his use of state-of-the-art outdoor wear and technology, including a lap-top computer which allows him to record his experiences and share them with a growing audience back at home. He is keen to enlarge that audience, particularly among the younger generation by giving talks about his experiences in schools and universities.

"What is the point in doing anything like this unless you can share it," he said. "I want children to know what it is like and to feel they could do something similar if they wanted to."

"When I first started there were a lot of people that tried to pull me down but now I am doing something that makes me happy. If you know what you want to do, just do it. Don't ever let anybody say your dream is too big."



● TECHNOLOGY AND TEAMWORK: Gary depends on both the latest technology, such as this laptop, to communicate from the isolated Arctic wilderness with the outside world and also his pack of huskies, with whom he has developed a special bond

Picture: www.garyrolfe.com



● READY TO MEET THE EXTREME CHALLENGE HEAD ON: Gary sets himself a daunting training regime in order to meet the dangers he faces in the Arctic

Picture: www.garyrolfe.com

VETERAN explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes OBE, who recently became Gary's patron, knows only too well the dangers his young protegee is facing.

Paying tribute to Gary last year, Sir Ranulph said: "The Arctic can be savage. There alone in 2000 I almost paid the ultimate price with my life. Gary's consistent and proven track record sees him now at the highest level as an exponent of a skill few have mastered - the craft of handling huskies in polar regions."

"It's a specialist area that makes huge demands on people, dogs, critical gear and skills alike. The fact he travels alone is testimony to his ability, combined with the magical bond between him and his huskies."

"Gary has over the past seven years cut his teeth alongside the world's most skilled polar travellers - a craft learnt from strong personalities, both men and women who suffer no fools."

"Every now and then someone very different from

each generation appears who is capable of pulling off the unexpected. I believe Gary is one such person."

Gary's mother, Eileen Walker, who lives at Cury Cross Lanes, is uncertain where her son's "wanderlust" springs from.

"My grandmother was a Romany, so maybe that has something to do with it," she said. "I know it's not in me, but both Gary, and his sister, Catherine, who loves rock climbing and diving, seem to have it."

"We let them have free rein when they were children. They never had any constraints, and maybe that's given them the feeling they can take on things that are a bit more of a challenge."

"I am very proud of what Gary does. He has done it all off his own back and he hasn't let things stand in his way. I do worry about him because it is quite dangerous out there."

"You never really know what could happen but at the end of the day I just like to think he is doing something that makes him happy."



● VERY PROUD: Eileen Walker worries about her adventurous son Gary but is pleased that he is doing something that makes him happy

Picture: Laura Parsons

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- Explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes OBE