

Crossing the Western Arctic on foot with two huskies, pursued by grizzly bears and using a map drawn up 43 years ago, is not everybody's idea of a perfect holiday. But for Tooting explorer Gary Rolfe and his two dogs, Pingo and Hansel, it was heaven. They set off in August to trek 400 miles east from Horton River to Kugluktuk, also known as Coppermine. Here, Gary recalls the expedition with some of his diary entries.

Pole position



Endurance: Gary after crossing the Brock river.
www.garyrolfe.com

August

Friday 13: We were flown in by float plane south-east of the Horton River in the western Arctic. I was violently sick on the flight. There isn't a single tree in the Arctic tundra, but it is home to some of the most amazing migratory wildlife in the brief arctic summer.

Monday 16: Foggy start. Raw north wind. I caught a 10lb lake trout which I ate. Delicious. Geese pass overhead south with their broods.

Thursday 19: Saw two grizzlies. No confrontation. Good headway. Saw tundra swans in the evening and a hunting fox.

Friday 20: A grizzly came into camp last night. He charged, Pingo bayed relentlessly and stood his ground. The bear cleared off. Foggy as well. Get in to Paulatuk at 12.30pm. Good to meet up with old friend Gary Reidford and stay with him overnight.

Sunday 22: Saw grizzly bear immediately after breakfast. Crossed the Hornaday. Saw Inuit fish camps net-

ting the run of Arctic char. I kept clear, fearing a dogfight. Charged by a loan grizzly. Saw six pairs of owls hunting a single area in the evening. Found and collected a bundle of tundra swan feathers.

Monday 23: Heavy rain all night. Caribou bull cow and two calves skirt the ridge above our camp lake during breakfast. Loons chatter on the lake. Very old musk ox bones and scull south of Brock. Frightening crossing of the Brock River three times - once with the dogs, then my pack and then with the dogs' packs.

Tuesday 24: Wet start, cold end. 2 degrees C tonight. Saw golden eagle this afternoon - he had a huge wingspan. Caribou buck followed us and came up close. He was about 40 metres away at times, chancing his arm with Pingo.

Thursday 26: Early morning snow flurries gave way to sun. Peregrine falcons squawked from rock faces opposite my tent. They were flying around like pigeons, two adults, three youngsters to-ing and fro-ing during hunting missions.

Friday 27: Dull start gave way to brilliant evening sun. First sighting of Amundsen Gulf and the Arctic Ocean. I thought of Roald Amundsen making the historic Northwest Passage route discovery nearly 100 years ago through these very waters. Scattered sea ice shone bright in the sun. Saw loan grizzly running like crazy upwind of us. My socks maybe?

Saturday 28: It's hard to understand the hardship the ancient Inuit must have endured. I've walked past some signs of habitation and am in awe of their endurance. While passing tiny tundra flowers with their petals still clinging on, I know summer is only hanging on by its fingertips.

Monday 30: Good progress to get set for crossing the Roscoe River. I'm anxious to see what and where we can cross. Now camped on the beach. Icebergs float everywhere.

Tuesday 31: Find message in bottle, with a note about ocean current study and asking to report the find. Also, see three body-shaped black bags. I think burial at sea and don't wish to investigate.



Dogged: Pingo and Hansel rest by the Arctic Ocean.
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September

Monday 6: Minus 2 degrees C. Sun rose at 6am. Morning of snow flurries. Turned our backs to the ocean and headed inland as planned to Kugluktuk (Coppermine). Stream edges froze. Mocked by four peregrines. One came straight at me head height at speed, then veered off. Up at 3am and saw the northern lights rippling like a curtain in a cosmic breeze.

Thursday 9: My pack doesn't seem to feel any lighter. The 10 miles covered today were a slog. This afternoon I slumped down on the tundra to rest. Pingo came up and nuzzled me. At times like this I rely on the dogs most to let me know what's around.

Friday 10: Six degrees C. Another hard day with the pack. I camped alongside a lake where geese have spent the entire summer to rest, lay, hatch and rear their broods. Scant tundra grass tussocks have been pulled and lay in rows. Over the summer this has dried and now provides me hay like bedding to make deep snug nests for Pingo and Hansel.

Saturday 11: Today I had no spare effort for anything but being totally focused on moving forward. This mental state is what I train for before any journey. I'm very familiar with it and as usual push beyond it. I annihilate all thoughts looking to hinder progress.

Wednesday 15: Two beautiful white foxes followed us today, stopped and let out blood curdling screeches as we left them behind.

Thursday 16: Minus 4 degrees C, 14 miles covered. Phoned Kugluktuk

wildlife officer Mathieu Dumond. I'll phone again and he'll bring a boat to meet me.

Friday 17: Late this afternoon, I followed a dry esker, dropped down the ridge and walked right beside a bear den. I took a look and could have crawled in and just about stood up inside. I passed on the temptation. Crunched caribou bones and skulls littered the immediate area. I didn't fancy adding myself to the pile, especially as tonight is our last planned camp.

Saturday 18: Mathieu and Amanda's beaming smiles were a wonderful greeting. We shook hands, loaded the boat and headed for town. Kugluktuk was a hive of activity. Other boats were pulling ashore, their owners bringing home Arctic char and ring seal catches from nets set out in Richardson Bay. Kids were playing, grown-ups were chatting and all of a sudden life didn't appear so serious compared with the last 36 days. It was strange. Inside my head I knew the journey was over but I continued to think about river crossings, bears and being chased by the cold.

Friday 24: So what now? After two years of form filling, waiting and forking out immigration lawyer fees, I've now been granted Canadian permanent residency. I've a brief visit to the UK before making the Canadian western Arctic my home. Here, I'll be training a young team of dogs throughout this coming winter and plan for a journey on the Ocean ice next spring.

□ These extracts were taken from Gary's website, www.garyrolfe.com. Extracts edited by Sarah Halls.



Grizzly sight: Bear tracks on the edge of the Arctic coastline. www.garyrolfe.com