

“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.”

These are the words Ranulph Fiennes used to describe Gary Rolfe, who has done three solo expeditions to the Arctic Circle.

Gary, 38, of Mantilla Road, Tooting, has just returned from a 304km journey upstream over the frozen Mackenzie river in the Canadian Arctic with a team of eight sled dogs. Temperatures on the trip fell to -51°C.

Gary says: “Running sled dogs on the river is very different from doing it in the open spaces of the Arctic Ocean because you can only ever see to the next bend. There were a lot of wolf, moose, lynx and bear tracks. I came across what looked like a lone wolf track but in reality one set of footprints can be a whole pack of them.

“They have a trail-setter who picks out their route and the rest literally follow in his footsteps. Wolves are so slick and efficient – the epitome of an athlete.

“One morning I woke up in camp and found wolf tracks close to the tent. My huskies Pingo and Hansel, who are demon fighters and very smart, weren’t bothered though, so I knew he couldn’t have been a real threat.”

In spring 2002, Gary did another solo expedition for 960km (600 miles) with nine huskies from Inuvik, in the western Arctic, to Herschel Island in the Arctic Ocean.

He says he had two things to worry about – navigation and polar bears.

Gary used the sun, wind, ice formation and his global positioning system to find his way across the frozen ocean.

While he was navigating he was constantly on the alert for signs of wildlife.

Gary says: “The main thing to do is let every living creature around you know you are there so you don’t surprise them.

“We were travelling through an area full of polar bears. I had to make sure I didn’t come between a mother and her cub or stumble across them at a recent kill, which they would defend. Polar bears are at the top of the food chain.

“They look on humans as just another meal and are very dangerous. They weigh half a ton, are 12ft tall and have paws bigger than a man’s chest.

“They can easily swipe your head off. Nobody survives an encounter with one so I did my best to avoid them.”

Gary tests new equipment for explorers on his trips and also



Intrepid snowman: Gary Rolfe braves the frozen Arctic in suitable garb. Pictures courtesy of garyrolfe.com

The iceman goeth

SARAH HALLS tracks down Arctic explorer Gary Rolfe

carries out canine research. But he admits he mainly does the expeditions out of sheer love of the Arctic and the pleasure he gets from working with the huskies.

He said: “The only place I’ve ever felt at home is at Inuvik, in the western Arctic. I used to feel quite lost in my life and didn’t know what I wanted to do.

“One day I was leafing through magazines in the library, turned a page and came across a picture of a guy running sled dogs in the Yukon. I was about 26 and I knew that’s what I wanted to spend my life doing.”

Gary wrote to Ranulph Fiennes asking his advice on how to get a

break and started going on expeditions.

It took him 18 months to get enough money together. He was finally able to fly to Ely, Minnesota and work with Will Steger, a world expert on sled dogs.

It’s clear Gary’s passion is his dogs. He borrowed his last team from a friend but is due to return to Inuvik shortly to put his own team together.

Gary says: “The pups are so interested in everything they see. On the last trip they used to stare at the sky, mesmerised by the Northern Lights, which look like a huge green curtain billowing in the wind.

“They had no idea what to make of it. When I get my new pups I’ll have to train them up and choose a leader. I don’t pick them for their physical strength

in particular – it’s more for their mental capacity to lead.

“They learn fast, respond to my commands and have an above-average willingness to learn.

“A strong bond and trust is something money will never buy me. There’s a lot to do but it’ll be worth it.”

Gary’s next expedition is planned for 2006. Visit www.garyrolfe.com.



Cold comfort: Flicker, a husky pup, stays warm in a kennel.



Love in a cold climate: Pingo and Gary on the frozen Mackenzie river.