

PICTURES BY GARY ROLFE



• HOME SWEET HOME: Sunrise on the frozen Mackenzie River in Canada's remote western Arctic. Gary's huskies await his call

Sir Ranulph pays tribute to the new generation

BRITAIN'S best known modern explorer knows only too well the dangers faced by his young protégé.

Sir Ranulph Fiennes OBE, Gary's patron, 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 that 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, of Mullion, is understandably proud of her son. She said: "It's a long way and I do worry about him because it's a long time on the ice and you hear what has happened to other people.

"It is dangerous – he is literally on the sun and those dogs, you have only got to make one false move and that's it. I am very proud of him. I think any mother would be.

"This certainly wasn't something I imagined him going into but he has always liked his adventures and he wanted to do something that was different."

Gary is answering the call of the wild

Gary Rolfe grew up in Cornwall wondering what to do with his life. Now he carries out highly dangerous solo Arctic expeditions using the rare method of husky handling. **Claire Watson** reports

WHEN Gary Rolfe talks about the 30 below zero temperatures in which he has been living for the past months, he speaks with an intense passion.

This is a man who has just returned from one of the most desolate areas in the world. He and his team of eight huskies spent 50 days exploring the frozen landscape of the Mackenzie River in Canada – constantly alert not just to the sub-zero temperatures but to the dangers of predators such as wolves and polar bears.

Yet Cornwall native Gary, 38, admits the closest he came to life on the wild side was a trip out line fishing with local fishermen.

Now the man who grew up in Falmouth and was educated at Truro's Cathedral School and Duchy Grammar at Carnon Downs, has become one of the most highly regarded modern trailblazers. Veteran explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes has just become patron of his expeditions.

How did it happen?

Gary said: "There is that 'why?' question and people can't fathom it out, but I feel totally out of place in this country and I always have. I know what my nirvana is and that's why I want to go back. I don't have a partner. I have sacrificed all that. I am so full-on focused about what I want to do. I have total and utter commitment."

His early 20s were spent trying to pinpoint what he should do with his life. An article in an adventure magazine in a library provided the inspiration.

"I remember turning this page with a picture of a guy with a team of sled dogs and that was it," Gary said. "I applied myself to finding out who was the best in the world with expedition dogs and it was Will Steger of Minnesota."

Gary tracked down Steger and spent two-and-a-half years with his team, learning from the best. He then made the decision to break off from the team environment and go solo, returning to England to do anything he could to fund his vocation.

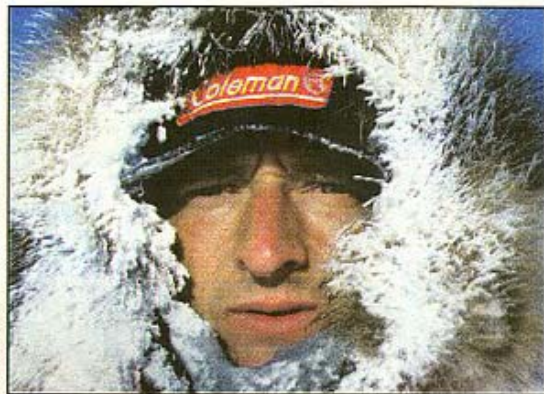
"When I first started this I held down three jobs and did 56 hours

I like to share the experience about things I see and hear

overtime a week to get the money to go back," he said. "If people really apply themselves to what they want to do they can do it.

"I worked on a farm in Lincolnshire after that first journey. I used to run the ten miles to the farm – that was my training out of the way. Then I would finish late and go to work in a hotel, washing dishes. All I was thinking about was that I had to get back out there."

Gary's endurance and constant training in the inconceivable cold is not a competitive thing. Apart from his devotion to his huskies, his strict training is proof that this is an environment Gary wants to be in. In the Arctic, he skis for up to 12 hours a



• LIVING THE DREAM: Adventurer Gary Rolfe swapped rainy Cornwall for frozen Canada

day; endurance training which promotes the physical strength and presence of mind vital when living alongside predators, including wolves and polar bears. The latter can weigh half a tonne, making explorers no match in a hunt battle.

Since 2000, he has completed three consecutive solo Arctic expeditions using the rare method of husky handling: two on the Arctic Ocean and the most recent on the Mackenzie River. He is renowned for combining traditional husky-led adventures with modern accessories – such as the regular use of his laptop computer.

Gary returned to England from the Canadian Arctic a week ago and is focusing solely on preparations for his next expedition this summer. Ultimately, his aim is to live in this frozen desolation, returning to give lectures on his experiences.

Gary hopes to be able to return from his base at Inuvik in the Cana-

dian Arctic to talk about his experiences in schools and universities.

"I like to share the experience about things I see and hear and watch and listen to," he said. "Kids are good for that. They haven't lost this belief in what they want to do."

How to live with the cold is a question at the front of most people's minds when they speak to Gary. Living in temperatures of up to 40 degrees below zero is hard to imagine. "That's cold. People ask how cold it is, and I say it's like spitting ice."

On his last journey, Gary tested this by throwing a cup of just-boiled water into the air and photographing it freeze instantly.

His next trip, in the summer, will involve the initial training of new pups. He will have nine for his next planned major journey in 2006, when he hopes to have a permanent base in his real home – the Arctic.

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