



Expedition Gear

"Experience is the best teacher!"

is a phrase I have heard many times from old Alaskan sourdoughs.

How many times have you been camping or on a dogsled trip and find out your new state-of-the-art stove or boots just didn't cut it? The list of equipment for survival and comfort goes from snowshoes, tent, and axe to simple items such as a coffee cup or sunglasses. Where do we start when it comes to preparing for a multi-month dogsled expedition in the Arctic? I am sure these were the same questions asked by the late 19th and early 20th century explorers before they set sail for the Arctic. Their answers stayed hidden until their equipment worked or failed under the severe climate and it became too late to turn back for re-supply.

Pictures of the early 20th century arctic explorers are burned into my memory; Scott, Peary and Cook stand proudly by their countries' flags with looks that tell of triumphs and travails. Their blistered faces and empty eyes look as if they had discovered an enemy that was a true Goliath. We have heard of the tragic endings that ambushed some of these great men, including how some explorers had to eat their beloved dogs in the hope of staying alive long enough to feel the warmth of their home country again. These tales grab a person's imagination and depict the Arctic as an evil foe waiting to devour them.

With a landmass larger than Utah and a population of 7,900 villagers, arctic Alaska is like a giant that could easily swallow up an unprepared musher and dogteam. On a couple of occasions, I have traveled in this area without seeing another human being for 5 months at a time. It's definitely a wild region. The temperatures can drop off the charts during the winter, and the winds can exceed 80 miles per hour. Without proper equipment, these extremes can turn a dogsled expedition into a survival adventure or a tragic statistic.

Clothing

Nowadays, there's a pile of cold weather gear on the market, but with the limited space in a dogsled I've found it best to use time tested and simple equipment for expeditions.

Extreme cold temperature is an arctic ele-



ment that can turn an expedition into a tough adventure. Since we humans don't have the luxury of being furred like our canine companions, we have to armor ourselves with clothing made from either synthetic or natural fibers. My favorite "fabric" is the age-old tested caribou fur. I cannot imagine spending a winter in the Arctic without having caribou fur mats to sleep on or a caribou skin parka and mukluks to wear. When the temperatures drop to between -40F and -60F or the wind chill knocks temperatures off the charts, caribou clothing is the only real windproof material that I have found that can keep me warm and dry. Caribou has kept natives and explorers comfortable through the extremes for hundreds of years.

However, in the Arctic it's not always cold or windy enough to require the caribou fur clothing. On milder days, my outerwear will consist of a thin down jacket with a heavier down parka on top of that. The parka must have a quality fur ruff as a barrier from the cold. Oftentimes, synthetic ruffs will get wet with condensation from your breath and not serve their intended purpose.

As far as the legs go, I wear insulated cov-

eralls. They are not necessarily down-filled, but they block the wind and keep my legs dry. Sometimes it's too warm for the caribou mukluks too, so I'll switch to canvas mukluks with felt liners.

Beneath all the outerwear, I pile on the polar fleece shirts and pants. They wick moisture away from the skin and dry so quickly that they make doing laundry a snap!

Expedition Mushing Gear

There are many different types of mushing and camping gear a person can bring on an expedition, but I prefer to stick with equipment that I am used to and have a history of holding up for me. Snowshoes are one of the essentials that can either break or make a trip. I like to take the longest wooden snowshoe I can find on the market, the longer the better. Iverson Snowshoe Company manufactures an Alaskan Custom 60 inch shoe. With these, I can really clip along and keep ahead of the team.

Another essential item is an aluminum snow shovel for digging out a good tent site, and a 24-inch carpenter's hand saw to cut snow blocks for a windbreak. I also carry along sled

repair tools with extra bolts, screws, hand drill and 5/8 inch bronze snaps. Both the sled gangline and the picket line for staking out the dogs at night are made from 3/16 wire cable, which is easy to splice together if it breaks. Finally, yet importantly, I always have my trusted 300-Winchester magnum rifle at my side, a .22 rifle, and a 6-foot long ice chisel with plenty of fishhooks for those delicious arctic char.

You must be wondering how all this along with several months of dog food can fit in a sled? I have found that attaching multiple dogsleds together as the old mail carriers did in the early 1900's eliminates storage space problems and also distributes the weight



evenly. This creates less drag on the sleds over dry snow, and it is actually easier for the dogs to pull a caravan of sleds rather than one heavily loaded sled.

I have been building my own toboggan-style expedition dogsleds with dimensions of 28-34 inches wide and 10-13 feet long. I use three sleds tied together in tandem. On the last sled, I stand on the runners and operate the brake, which is simply a hinge type steel brake typical of most toboggan sleds. Most importantly, I also carry along three sets of chains (one set for each sled) to wrap around the runners for extra traction on steep mountain descents. These descents can be interesting at times especially with a ton of provisions in the sleds or when visibility is marginal.

I recall one day in particular when the mercury in the thermometer dropped like the red afternoon sun as I stood on a mountain pass in Alaska's Brooks Range. The skies were a clear purplish-blue, yet frost poured down upon us covering the dogs' thick coats and my caribou fur parka. My beard and eyelashes became heavy with ice as I prepared the sleds for the descent down the mountain pass. Although the pass looked like an easy slope, I decided to use chains. Digging through the sandy snow under a sled runner, I wrapped one heavy chain around each runner of the three sleds. With

the leaders poised to head straight down the pass I gave the command to go. The leaders excitedly lunged ahead and started down the slope. The mountain seemed to get steeper as we gained speed. Cold air inversions have quite an affect on visibility, creating optical illusions at times, and in this case they were playing a trick on me. What I had thought was a gentle slope was actually a steep drop to a valley below. Arctic mirages have been mysterious phenomena for centuries. I'll never forget the time I saw some strange caribou; their legs looked at least 30 feet long. They resembled a herd of giant spiders walking across the tundra. I am sure if a pack of starving wolves had seen them they would have turned tail and ran

3 inches in diameter, which fit great in my 10 inch by 12-inch tin stove. These little stoves can blast out some heat! They can be purchased at Alaska Tent & Tarp in Fairbanks. I like to use a 32-inch bow saw to cut the willow up into chunks, although much of the willow can be broken by hand and put in the stove. There is always a tin pot of snow on the stove for water, cooking and coffee.

There's something about the sounds of a warm crackling fire in a stove with smells of fresh brewed coffee in the air and the dim glow of candles that can make a person believe the Arctic's not too bad. One night, as evening faded, the fire in the stove cooled and the sounds of the dogs shaking and fluffing up



completely out of the country. As we cruised down the pass, snow sprayed up like water from the runners as the chains dug deep. The steel chains slowed our momentum considerably, but gravity seemed to be winning the battle and defying my cussing commands for the sleds to back off the wheel dogs. Pushing down the sled brake with all I had while saying a quick prayer between curses, the battle started to turn in our favor. The one-ton load finally backed off the wheelers and we settled down to a slow and quiet pace. I would have been in quite a situation without those chains!

In Camp

Before making camp, I search the valleys and hillsides with my binoculars for willow brush. There are a couple of reasons why I prefer to camp at these small but important willow patches. First, since I don't carry a gas cook stove, I rely entirely on dead willows or driftwood for cooking and melting snow for water. Packing a barrel of gas around for a multi-month trip would be a pain. Second, there's always a blizzard out there just salivating at the idea of catching us off guard, in the open, then pounding us for a solid three days and nights. The willows are our shield and lifeblood.

The willows I use for firewood are about 1-

their coats became more noticeable. Hearing one of the pups whimper, I opened the tent flap and stuck my head out to investigate. Frost glued itself to my hair, and my ears stung instantly. The tundra looked grey and lifeless in the moonlight and my breath sounded like dry leaves rustling in the breeze. It seemed I could even taste the cold. Glancing at the dogs, I saw them dig deeper beneath the snow as a light wind came in from the south. The beast was on her way!

Knowing I had just a few more minutes before all visibility diminished in the blizzard, I grabbed my Estwing 26 inch single bit axe and canvas backpack and trotted to the river. Chopping the ice in large square blocks with the axe, I filled the pack and hauled it back to camp. There's nothing better than coffee brewed in river water rather than snow melt and I would be drinking quite a bit before the storm was over.

By morning, the winds were blasting with sheer brutality. However, I still needed to feed the dogs, gather the firewood, repair the gear, and of course, brew the coffee!

I slipped on my parka, mukluks, and mitts, and crawled out of the tent. As I stood on my feet, an 85 mph wind gust knocked me to the ground. Wet blowing snow found its way under my parka like a sharpshooter finding kinks

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in armor. Visibility was absolute nil; I couldn't even see my hand in front of me. I crawled directly to the buried sled in front of the tent. Digging through the snow with my mittened hands, I pulled out a bag of dog food and dragged it alongside the sleds feeling them as a guide until I reached the gangline. I pulled on the line and broke it free from the drifts. Holding the line loosely in my caribou mitts I lowered my head to protect my face from the stinging snow, and crawled following the line to the first lifeless lump in the snow. "Pete, are you ok?" A black and white fury head popped out of the snow followed by a smack in my face with a drooling malamute tongue. These guys are tough. Experience, instinct, and slow metabolisms have given them the ability to survive some brutal weather. Malamutes are also conservative animals; they will actually gain a few pounds in body weight during blizzards, even with wind-chills -90F to -100F.

Unfortunately, blizzards are not a time to relax and read a favorite book. Firewood is a constant menace that always needs attention during these storms. Securing the firewood can be a challenge in high winds with no visibility. Crawling and digging for this precious commodity is the normal procedure.

I am always on high alert for a blizzard, so every time I make camp I set my tent up about 3 feet from the sleds, hoping they will make a good wind-block. The tent I use is made of insulated canvas and is my own design. It's relatively light-weight and accommodates the

essential woodstove previously mentioned.

Comfortable living quarters are a must-have on an arctic expedition. In the event that a blizzard does find you (and inevitably she will), you never know at the beginning if it's going to be a BIG blizzard, or just a little punk storm that gives up after 12 hours of blowing. In my experience, it is common to be pinned down with hurricane force winds for three or four days. On several occasions, I have endured two blizzards slamming us—one after the other. However, on rare occasions Mother Nature will really toy with her victims and send three storms in a row. After a week and half of constantly pounding winds in a storm like this, a person can lose all of their sense of humor with Mother Nature's jokes.

During an arctic blizzard, everything in the open that isn't tied down will inconveniently blow away and probably end up near the North Pole! Even the dogs' dishes would be swept away in moment's time. I like to use large rectangular bread pans for dog feeding dishes because of their not-so-aerodynamic design. The wind has a hard time getting them to roll. Round dishes will take off in the wind, resembling miniature alien spacecrafts cruising over the tundra.

So what does one do with their so-called spare time during a blizzard when they're not crawling through the willows or tending to the dogs? It's a good opportunity to catch up on some "household chores" like sewing. I always carry with me a heavy-duty sewing

kit equipped with needles that can penetrate thick, tough caribou fur and harness material. A person will become an expert at sewing by hand at the end of a winter on the trail. Every night, with or without a storm, there is usually something to mend. Nordykn Outfitters make a great freight harness for the dogs but the younger guys and gals will chew them to pieces once in a while, and there are always torn mitts and mukluks to sew.

The old timers used the most modern and best equipment available to them. I am sure if they could see our new gadgets today they would have loved to have had them. However, through experience they found what worked best for them in the Arctic. Much of the same type of gear that they used a century ago I still use now.

When I remember those old Alaskan Sourdough stories about their tough adventures, hardships and discoveries of rugged valleys filled with caribou, and seeing amazing displays of the Northern Lights, I realize what they relied on most was simply the grace of God in their hopes to live another day for one more adventure in the Arctic.

Joe Henderson has been working with Alaskan Malamutes for 25 years. He and his team spend most of the winter dogsledding alone in the arctic and end each season offering clients remote expeditions throughout Alaska.

For more information, please visit Joe's website at:

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