

arctic traveler

with Joe Henderson & Andrea Loveland

Arctic Expedition Logistics

The logistical coordination behind an Arctic expedition is a **continuously evolving thing.**

No matter how much planning you do, you have to be ready to roll with the punches of Mother Nature and adopt a “plan B” at a moment’s notice.

Food is obviously an important part of an expedition and probably the most stable factor when it comes to planning. Man and beast alike must eat well to keep their strength up and stay in optimum health for a successful expedition season. Through decades of experience, experimentation, and establishing a kennel with a solid bloodline whose consumption is predictable both at work and at rest, Joe has the dogs’ dietary needs down to a science. For our expedition team of 22 dogs, Joe never goes through more than 35 lbs. of high quality kibble, like National Competition Extra, per day regardless of weather conditions or how hard the dogs have to work to break trail. They maintain their weight very well on that ration.

Joe’s personal dietary needs are fairly simple. His diet is restricted by a gluten intolerance and is further complicated by an extreme sensitivity to processed sugars and salt, so a lot of the foods that most folks would think to take on a wilderness expedition are off the table, so to speak (e.g. freeze-dried meals, granola bars, store-bought beef jerky). Joe sticks with whole foods, the main staples being beef, pork, chicken, brown rice, frozen fruits and vegetables, frozen home-cooked meals, and cheese. These items are bulky and heavy, so it’s a good thing our sleds are built like school buses and that our dogs

have no problem dragging around a few tons of gear and supplies.

The years when Joe takes clients for part of the season, we add more variety to the menu for their sake, but nevertheless, trying to predict someone else’s consumption is tricky and we don’t want anyone to go hungry. It’s not as if there’s a cache of food waiting at a check point and there’s no one out there to share their stash if you don’t ration wisely. Needless to say, it’s quite an ordeal shopping for, preparing, and packing three or more months worth of food regardless of whether it’s for a solo expedition or if clients come along.

Joe makes almost all of his own mushing gear and preparing it all is one of the most time consuming parts of expedition planning. Once the darkness settles on Interior Alaska for the winter, it’s time to start assembling everything and our home transforms into Santa’s workshop. For a few weeks we sit around the house in the evenings amongst a sea of cables, ropes, snaps, and fids, and construct all the gang, picket, neck, and tug lines. We repair chewed up harnesses, replace worn spreader bars, and evaluate how many new freight harnesses we need to order. Joe builds new sleds to replace the irreparable ones and repairs the sleds that aren’t too crippled to withstand another year of abuse. Everything has to be super heavy duty because there’s an awful lot of force on the lines with 22 dogs pulling anywhere from 2,000 to 4,000 lbs. of gear and sup-

plies. We also have to make extra everything because if something breaks beyond repair and you’re not prepared, it could mean serious trouble.

Route planning is a whole different beast. You can pencil all the lines on the map you want, but until you are out there and see the ground conditions it’s nearly impossible to plan a definitive route. Maps don’t show crevasses, deep snow, thick brush, and overflow, which are all obstacles that can hinder travel. Weather patterns are another wildcard. Weather conditions are very localized in the arctic. There might be a raging blizzard in a valley, yet in another one a few miles away it might be calm. Some areas are just prone to bad windstorms and deep snow. And of course weather varies in these areas from year to year, so it’s hard to know exactly what to expect.

During this season’s expedition, Joe has had 16 blizzard days with winds ranging from 40 to 70 mph and the deepest snow the North Slope has seen in many years. Last year he had just one blizzard day. It makes a substantial difference to a route plan. When Joe travels solo, as he’s doing this season, he takes the conditions into consideration, but the key to a successful expedition (besides careful logistical coordination) is our Alaskan malamutes. Whether the snow is waist deep or Joe and the team are dealing with blizzards, they still manage to travel through it. Sometimes, when conditions are really bad they only average one



mile per hour through the most treacherous terrain but they never turn around until they reach their destination or exhaust their supplies.

With clients, however, it's a different story. The clients' physical abilities determine the extent of travel and the route. One of the great advantages of Joe's technique of travel wherein he carries all the gear and supplies needed for the duration of the expedition (there are no food drops along the way), is that he can alter the planned route any time the conditions change or if the clients feel fatigued, or more energetic as the case may be.

Transportation to and from the expedition starting and ending point can be quite a nightmare. With 22 malamutes in the bed

of the truck and in a trailer we haul (we don't use dog boxes because the mals are just too big), Joe gets dropped off alongside the Dalton Highway (Haul Road) with 3 months worth of supplies. Driving a truck and trailer full of excited malamutes up the Haul Road during the dead of winter is interesting to say the least. If any road trip could make a person cuss like an Ice Road Trucker, well, it'd have to be on the Haul Road! Thankfully, between ourselves and the help of a few great friends, we have been able to accomplish this logistical feat safely and successfully for several years without much commercial involvement. There have been a few seasons when we've had Carlile Transportation bring most of the supplies, and they've done a great job for us. We've had our share of issues on the Haul Road, the most memorable being the time we blew the transmission in

our truck coming down the Chandalar Shelf in the springtime. Whew, that's a story in and of itself. Nevertheless, driving the Haul Road with 22 of your best friends is an adventure of its own and it's a great way to bookend the expedition season.

Joe Henderson has been conducting remote expeditions in Alaska's Arctic with his team of malamutes for nearly 30 years. By the end of the 2011 season, he and the team will have completed a three month solo expedition. For more information please visit www.alaskanarcticexpeditions.com.

Andrea Loveland, Joe's wife, is a geologist by day and the logistics coordinator for the expeditions by night. The couple is looking forward to the birth of their first child in July!