

polar prospects



Michael Whittier

The tenth of March dawned bright and promising for the start of the 1988 Spring Polar Expedition. Our party of three men and two Siberian Husky dogs piled out of my Nissan King Cab 4 x 4 at the Canoe Lake landing in Algonquin Park. The dogs sniffed and jerked at their leads excitedly as we loaded our 2.4-m ash toboggan with the bare essentials for survival in the ice-locked winter wilderness which lay ahead. We were bound for The Pole.

Many months of planning and exhausting hours of preparation had fine-tuned our gear for the rigors of the expedition. The budget, like all polar expeditions, was staggering, but with the generosity of our sponsors the dream was now becoming a reality. Graeme, Dave, and myself skied with laden backpacks, and with every stride our bodies ached under the bone-crushing burden of close to 14 kg of gear in each pack. The dogs strained with the load of bulky software: sleeping bags, a woven polyethylene tarp shelter, and an abundant supply of kibbles. The search for a suitable expedition dogsled had culminated in a windfall discovery in the winter sports department of Canadian Tire where we bought the 2.4-m "Torpedo brand" wooden toboggan and outfitted it with a custom low-density polyethylene underskin (two "Krazy Karpets" jointed end to end). The result was a handsome, graceful craft which glided over the frozen snow with frictionless effort. In order to lighten our load and speed our progress as much as possible, we made the unprecedented decision to take only three days supply of food with us. Dave made chili, I made stew, and Graeme brought the fixings for a hearty potato cheese soup. We had an emergency supply of frozen smelts.

And thus, we headed north to the top of Canoe Lake. The warm, early spring sun softened the crust of the snow-covered lake. The dazzling brightness of the polished landscape was tempered by a cool breeze which blew refreshingly out of the north. Skiing was fast and at times furious to keep up with the eager dog team which had broken into a trot. The unmanned toboggan in tow created not the slightest resistance to their efforts to reach the farthest point on the horizon. (This was a point of concern. During a pre-trip training outing the dogs had impaled a similar unmanned toboggan upon a tree while rounding a bend in the trail at breakneck speed. The predictable result supplied us with spare bits of hardwood for the Expedition sled repair kit.)

The first obstacle was open water at the head of Canoe Lake where the Oxtongue River enters. Because of steep banks and dense alder growth, we were forced to take a detour along some cottage roads. With this we found deep, wet snow rutted with tire tracks made by a "skidder" which had plowed the road prior to the last snowfall. The going was difficult as the toboggan kept trying to turn sideways in the ruts. Conditions were exacerbated as the dogs kept trying to turn sideways in the abundant moose droppings as they attempted to roll in each pile in passing.

During a lunch stop atop the old rail causeway crossing Joe Lake, we met a lone snowshoer--Jerry--who was very helpful in advising us of ice conditions further up the Oxtongue River. Jerry had spent the previous winter at Canoe Lake running a four-dog team up various circuits, and he was openly leary of our plans to reach The Pole with such little

training and experience. He suggested we should be able to make MacIntosh Lake or Grassy Bay before our food ran out, if we really pushed it.

We pushed on up the Western Gap in Joe Lake and into Teepee Lake. By now the afternoon sun was well past its zenith, and the surface crust quite soft. We began to break through with our skis, and the dogs were tiring from breaking through with every second paw plant. Fearing dog foot injuries and exhaustion (and even worse, becoming dog-tired ourselves), we elected to make camp below a section of open water separating Fawn Lake from the upper Oxtongue River. We quickly pitched camp, Dave served up the chili, and the dogs napped and romped in the freedom from their harnesses.

That night we celebrated our highly successful first day. We had covered more than 12 km. The 1988 Soviet-Canadian Transpolar Expedition had only covered 7 km on their first day, so we figured there was a lot more to serious polar travel than hype and snazzy gear. We stood out on the lake ice in awe of the heavens spread before us in the clear night sky. Graeme remarked that indeed we must be getting close to the Pole, as the North Star lay almost directly above our shelter. We bedded down in high spirits while dreams of Polar glory danced in our heads.

The next morning disaster struck. The dogs were gone. The temperature was -10°C, the sun was slowly climbing in a clear sky, and the snow glistened and crunched with the most idyllic sledding conditions imaginable. But the dogs had been absent from camp all night. I said: "They'll be sure to come around when we're serving up breakfast." Breakfast was finished, and still no dogs. "Let's pack up, they can't be far and they are bound to show up with the commotion of breaking camp." The loaded sled and packs sat idle on the ice in front of the empty campsite as we decided our next move. "Let's ski down the lake and look for them."

We backtracked amidst a maze of dog tracks going in all directions all over the lake. Obviously the pups had been busy exploring the new terrain while we slept. I had visions of finding two bushed and bleary-eyed pets too tired to pull a sled after a night of dog partying. No such luck. The tracks disappeared up a system of bush roads behind Camp Arowhon about three kilometres south of our camp. No amount of whistling, hollering, or howling produced any response from the white winter stillness.

We quickly decided not to let this setback dampen our enthusiasm for exploring some of our favorite canoe haunts on skis. We traversed bogs, ascended rocky creeks, and crossed large lakes, all with the greatest of ease on our day trip through Tom Thompson, Sunbeam, and return through Littledee lakes.

On our arrival back in camp that evening we found all our gear packed up as we had left it, but no dogs and not even any fresh tracks to indicate they had dropped by during our absence. The Polar objective was now in serious jeopardy as we consumed our second to last meal of stew.

The following day was grey and threatened precipitation, with the temperature around zero. Another day trip loop out to Burnt Island Lake produced some challenging bushwhacking through alder-choked banks of open streams and some tricky portages with steep hills and sharp turns amidst