

arctic traveler

with Joe Henderson

The Grass Isn't Always Greener On The Other Side

I couldn't take another minute of it, and I didn't care about the blizzard coming, I just wanted to get away. The black arctic voles were everywhere. They were crawling in my sleeping bag, scampering across my dinner plate, tangling in my hair at night. Heck, they even took up living quarters inside my beaver fur mitts.

I hated to leave that camp site, especially with that dark blizzard creeping over the hill; from the size of it, it didn't look friendly. I knew I had better stay put and not risk traveling. But, I wasn't going to bed down with those beady, black-eyed varmints again. No... not for another night. I was getting out of there, come hell or high water.

I have to admit, I got a good chuckle watching Little Savage, my 3-month old pup, having the time of her life chasing those buggers around camp. Little Savage would sprint after them, pounce like a fox, clumsily missing her target, then run back to me, scared, as the panicked vole ran in circles searching for something to hide under.

Voles aside, it was a wonderful place to camp, the kind of place that makes you want to hunt and explore. There were plenty of dry willows for firewood alongside the frozen river and lots of ptarmigan roosting in the brush nearby. The snow was only above my ankles and there were fresh caribou tracks on the hill above camp. From the hill, looking south, you could see the narrow river valley that weaved between the hill and a high mountain. Lying directly in the path of the strong west wind, the mountain's gentle slope lay exposed, with tall brown grass and small, intermittent patches of snow. Cut deep into the grass and snow, just below the rock strewn mountain peak was a Dall sheep trail that wandered south. Further up the valley there was a towering canyon, jagged and gray, like a giant stone gate.

The team and I followed the river through that canyon two days earlier, before the vole attack. It was colder then, about -30 °F, and the sun's golden rays had finally pierced over the horizon after being absent for a long two months. It was pleasant, and it didn't feel cold anymore when the sun broke the shadows in

the canyon and settled on the dogs and me. I felt the dogs speed up as the light hit them. They were as glad as I was to see the sun again.

Just past the canyon, the river led us to a small lake surrounded by low hills. The lake, shaped like a half moon with a few struggling willows drooping over its banks, didn't look like much as far as fishing goes, but I thought I'd give it a try anyway. After about 30 minutes of chipping away with my chisel, I broke through 4 feet of ice. Crystal clear water gushed and gurgled up to the top of the hole and seeped around its edges.

I tied some heavy tent thread to a willow stick, pulled off about 60 feet from the spool, tied a hook to the end of it, baited it with a sliver of fresh ptarmigan meat and a small white feather, and plopped it down the hole. The hook and bait sank slowly, and then rested on the lake's bottom. I wound the remaining string around the stick and raised the bait up a few inches off the bottom and jiggled it. Almost right away I felt a strike, nearly pulling the stick out of my hand. I pulled back. It felt solid, like I had hooked a rock. Then I felt the vibration, the kind of powerful thrashing you feel from a large fish's desperate struggle when he's first hooked. Since I didn't have much line to let him run on, I just held the stick tight with both hands, hoping he wouldn't snap the line or tear the hook from his mouth. He tired quickly though, and I worked him slowly up, pulling the string hand over hand with the icy water freezing to my mitts. Before the fish's snout was even visible in the hole I envisioned him sizzling in my skillet and Little Savage crunching on her favorite fish head meal. I eased him up out of the water and tossed him, flailing, on the ice. Little Savage jumped off the sled and ran over pawing and

sniffing the 20-pound lake trout.

But now, I had to leave this place.

"Yes, Little Savage, it was a fine camp," I mumbled as she watched me toss my sleeping bag in the sled.

"Too bad girl, maybe we'll be back when it cools off."

She glared at me with those dark puppy eyes, cocked her head sideways, and turned away. Just then, she swiped a glance at a mouse dashing out of the tent, and pounced on it. "Good girl," I praised her.

The blizzard was coming on fast. Dark clouds rolled over the hill toward us. Strangely though, there was a springtime smell in the wind, the kind of fresh, green willow-budding aroma, which you can almost taste while you walk on the arctic tundra during summer solstice as the wildflowers bloom. It wasn't summer however, and the winter solstice had just passed, but it did feel warm, +45 °F, I guessed. The snow had melted a little on the river bank where the ptarmigan were nibbling on those tiny, white quartz stones, filling their gizzards with them. And the mice were crawling out of their winter nests and pillaging the tundra and tormenting its inhabitants. I knew the Chinook, wouldn't stay long; usually it lasts a few days, and then winter returns. Every year she blows over the Brooks Range from the south, bringing warmth, deep snow and hurricane force winds with her. But those damn voles apparently had no clue.

I quickly took down my canvas tent, folded it up, loaded the sleds and hitched up the team. Little Savage was busy chasing voles when I gave the malamutes the command to go. She came running behind the sleds as the team started down the winding river with her tongue hanging out the side of her mouth. "Good girl," I encouraged her as she caught up to me. Standing on the runners, I turned around and picked her up and set her on the sled. She settled down comfortably on the folded tent with the west wind waving her red and white coat. While she lay there, I noticed how she had grown handsomely in her first three months of life. I wondered if one day she would become a leader; she seemed to have her dad's brains, and she was a fast runner as well.

Little Savage was only 10 days old when



Clockwise from top left: Self portrait with the catch of the day. • Little Savage hitches a ride on one of the freighting sleds. • Major and Little Savage were best buddies on Savage's first expedition. • A great camping site until voles arrived.

we left the caribou hunting camp in November. She hadn't seen another person, besides me, for her entire three months of life. She looked up to me like a child, with vulnerable and trusting eyes. Her entire life's experience had been on the arctic trail, the kind of existence that every Alaskan malamute must dream about.

So often I wonder what their life is like through their eyes. Does a malamute enjoy the freedom to roam across the Arctic Ocean's icy expanse, chase caribou over the tundra's windswept rolling hills, and follow unnamed river valleys into shadowed canyons that twist and cut through jagged cliffs while Dall sheep watch them from above? If not, would they continue pulling with their brushy tails waving side to side, following the mysterious river into the rugged gorge until it falls away, and the land opens up, and there, they rest beside a small lake that sits atop the Arctic Divide while eyeing the distant mountains and valleys below they had explored? I wonder if they ever notice the green Northern Lights at night, shooting across the sky like waves crashing against a rocky shore, and do they enjoy howling with their ancient ancestors,

the arctic wolves? I bet they love every second of this life and they look forward to each and every day when they step into their harnesses, howling excitedly, and begin their new adventure, pulling toward a towering mountain on the horizon.

Little Savage raised her head as the wind hit us with a short, powerful gust. It was just a warning shot, a shot over the bow, so to speak. Now, though, I was committed. I had wished I had stayed but there was no use looking back; we had to keep moving. The freight team of 22 malamutes trotted down the widening river which linked into an east-west trending tributary, which was whipped clear of snow with boulders lying along its sloping banks. The team turned onto it headed straight into the strengthening wind.

I wanted to travel as far as I could that day, despite the storm, for two reasons; first, to get the hell out of the mouse haven while exploring the westerly portion of the mountains, and secondly, to set up camp by a good stand of willows, which are few and far between. Then I wanted to take a couple days off from traveling to repair gear, clothing, and harnesses. As the team followed the river toward

the low hills, the clouds that were dark before had now turned a misty light gray. Those were not the same dark clouds I saw earlier. I knew right then, those clouds meant was a wave of snow, the kind that precedes an awfully mean blizzard. The storm was moving quickly, swallowing the hills as it approached.

We were heading straight into the blizzard's heart. At first, her whipping winds knocked me around a little as I trotted next to the sled, holding onto the handle bars as I encouraged the team onward. Then she tossed a few waves of snow, willow leaves and some sand my way. Nothing I couldn't deal with, she's just harassing me, I told myself. Then I heard that horrible rushing sound, very faint and far away. The sound reminded me of rustling leaves on a windy fall day when I was a kid growing up in Michigan, a pleasant sound, but I knew the very guts of it, and she was about to take off her disguise and turn into an ugly, tearing force. The gust came closer. Soon, you could hear it like a jet coming in for a landing.

I yelled toward the leaders to stop. I doubled over, braced myself against the sled, put one hand gently on Little Savage, and grabbed my fur parka hood and pulled it over my face with my other hand. The gust hit hard and pounded us with a solid wave of snow and let off. I knew it was an early gust; just an appetizer before the main course of bone chilling, whipping, eye-stinging wind and snow. I had no choice but to call it for what it was, and reside to the fact she was going to whip our butts if I didn't find cover, and quick. But what cover? The river was barren of deep snow for the dogs to curl up and shield themselves, and I had to have firewood to wait out a possible 3-day nonstop, blasting punishment from Mother Nature's partner: the blizzard. I knew I had played a game of dead man's bluff with Mother Nature and she had the winning hand. Mother Nature is like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; one entity, split in two, and I didn't know who I was dealing with... the devious Hyde, or Jekyll. Either she'd allow the wind to subside so we could continue or she'd unleash hell on us and pound us without relief. I started to figure it was the latter.

Soon, she opened the wind's gate. The wall of snow hit us, and I lost my footing at first. I held tight onto the sled and reached for Little Savage. She felt fine, shivering yet fine. The team continued though, in a struggled, slow walking pace. I worked my way to the leaders, stopped the team and swiped the snow off the lead dog's eyes. They were traveling blind. I tried to search ahead for cover, but where? I couldn't see any farther than my

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hand in front of me, and the ground and sky were one fluid mass of white that pushed against us like cold steel.

The wind whipped wet snow mercilessly on us. I turned my back to the winds onslaught and leaned back to keep my balance. Mother Nature had us beat. She called my bluff and showed her cards. She caught me foolishly in the open and would pound and splinter me for my hasty mistake. We advanced though, through the war zone, working off the river and searching the tundra for cover. I just didn't have the heart to give up. My shoulders whipped back with her gusts like someone shoved me and my steps seemed to be nothing more than baby steps.

The land was grayish white and getting darker by the minute as I struggled to lead the dogs. I felt the contour of the tussocks and the soft, shallow snow under my caribou hide mukluks as I walked. I heard small sticks tumble past my feet, and then a large, dry willow stick ricocheted off my shin. It was time to admit Mother Nature had me beat and figure out a way to make camp on the miserable, bare tundra.

I decided to search ahead of the team a few more yards before calling it quits. A dark object emerged. A winter grizzly bear! Or so I thought. It wasn't moving and I realized it was a dwarfed willow. As I stepped closer to it my foot immediately sank into knee deep

snow. I worked back to the leaders and urged them to follow until the entire team was in the willows. The dogs immediately began digging into the protection of the deep snow while I set Little Savage off the sled and pulled out my tent and poles. Fumbling, I stuck the aluminum tent poles into the snow, right next to the sled, forming the tent frame. Then I yanked the snapping, flapping, beating-like-a-giant-goose-wing canvas tent over the tent frame. I tried to anyway. It was a tug-of-war. Back and forth we fought, the wind and I. She grabbed hold of it one time with such a jolt I surely thought I'd lose my grip on the canvas, but I held on with my life. I envisioned the tent betraying me and flying off with the wind, then I would be in for a rather disheartening and a not so enjoyable evening, and I probably wouldn't have lived to tell about it.

I managed to get one side of the tent over the poles, loaded several bags of dog food on the edge of the canvas and pinned down the opposite side with more dog food bags, then quickly shoveled snow over the entire outside perimeter of the tent. Now, the snow had the dogs covered, they were safe and comfortable, but Little Savage whined. I grabbed my sleeping bag and floor tarp and tucked her up under my arm and crawled into the tent. I set her down and unrolled my sleeping bag. Little Savage immediately jumped excitedly to her feet, pounced on the sleeping bag and pulled

out a squirming, black, buggy-eyed mouse clinched between her canines. She sat wagging her tail, showing off her prize. "Good girl, Little Savage...good girl," I chuckled.

Now, it's summer, and the aroma of fresh cut grass is in the air at my home in Two Rivers, Alaska. Little Savage is sitting outside my window looking up at the swaying birch trees as the wind rustles through the green leaves. Her brilliant red and white coat glows in the afternoon sun and her chest and shoulders have grown handsomely broad in the last five years since she, the team and I joined forces against the blizzard from hell. I wonder if she still remembers. Does she envision the mountains and valleys that we had explored and the green and purple northern lights that danced across the arctic skies? Does she miss and relish the taste of her favorite fish-head meal? Does she still remember running freely alongside the sled and hopping on for a ride? And does she still remember those mice, those fun little fury buggers that she chased with joyful excitement that nearly drove us to extinction? •

Joe Henderson has spent nearly 30 years traveling in the arctic with his Alaskan Malamute team. Together, they have toughed out many winters and endured many challenges, both big and small. www.alaskanarcticexperiences.com