

It was a cold day, even by my standards. We started off for Fort Davis somewhat disappointed at the day's weather.

"We'll take a look at the weather from Fort Davis," my Uncle Knot said. "If it's good enough and if there are no heavy winds farther out, we'll go see, and maybe try a little fishing."

Our alternatives were ptarmigan hunting along the Nome River or fishing for Tom cod near Fort Davis. Either that or going home on such a day: cold and overcast, threatening white-out conditions at least some time during the day.

We fired up our snow-machines. Uncle Knot had an Arctic Cat Pantera, Dewey was driving a Panther, (also an Arctic Cat), and I had a discontinued old, but running, Evinrude Skeeter. While they warmed up I checked the tool box for tools, extra spark plugs, drive belts, and oil for the gas-oil mix for the engines: 24 to 1 on my old machine, 50 to 1 on the newer models, and, oh yes, some machines now even have oil injection! Wow! I checked

for a flashlight and put in extra food and drinking water. I sort of wished I had a flare or two and a compass. Where was that dog-gone compass, anyway?

Uncle Knot's and Dewey's machines were hot and ready at last. We had topped off the gas tanks upon returning from a previous fishing trip to prevent condensation inside the tanks. We also brought an extra 15 gallons of fuel for the trip; I knew I'd need at least two or three gallons extra for the return home, just in case.

Uncle's first check point was near Army Peak on the high slope of a hill looking towards the valley where the Eldorado River lay under ice and snow. The visibility was acceptable. Even I figured I had a chance with my old machine. The wind was only a little stronger there, on the top of the highest hill.

Somewhere behind me was a sun shining. It made the snow and sky brighter in back, and the clouds up ahead darker. It was some kind of a day, like the poems I read, done by stu-

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## Whiteout on a Fishing Trip

by Bob Koweluk

The last time my Uncle Knot, my cousin Dewey, and I snowmachined home from a day's grayling fishing at Eldorado River in April 1978, we almost got lost in a heavy fog which rolled in from the Bering Sea.

The weather that day had started out marginal; lots of wind all day long, some blowing snow and low clouds which merged with the horizon, sometimes near, sometimes far away.

# Whiteout on a Fishing Trip

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PHOTOS BY BOB KOWELUK



In a white-out condition, what would you do? Stay put, head home using the best alternative, or just what? Andrew Koweluk and his nephew Bob stop to wait out the worst of a white-out condition. Lost in fog? Not really. We knew pretty much where we were. But which way was home?

dents at the Barrow Schools ... "It was a no-good day, a real bad day. I should have stayed in bed."

On we went, I was only barely keeping up with Uncle and Dewey. In the valley the snow and our surroundings got hazier; distances seemed flat, like an 8x10 photo of winter scenery with no depth. Everywhere I looked seemed less bright.

The ride over had been uneventful. The snow was powder smooth, the ride

all right for a fast run over a known trail. By the time we had opened holes through the ice to fish for grayling, the sun had burned its way through the clouds, the day was looking better, and it was still early.

I was fully aware that you've got to remember trails exactly from start to finish to get home in a whiteout, or else we should stay put and keep warm while we waited for better weather.

I was uneasy, but my Uncle was wary. It was a difference in training and attention to details in a subsistence lifestyle. Uncle was attentive, aware of the wind, the snow being blown over the far hills and low mountains, of the weather to the north, east, south, and west toward home.

By early afternoon, the weather was deteriorating quickly, the clouds had built up and lowered, and the wind was still blowing. It was cold, very cold. I should have stayed home on a day like today.

We had caught a few grayling, but I didn't feel right about the weather. Time to go home.

A haze set in. We could see less and less ahead and around us. Details. Must

Heading home as the white-out blew away with the wind. The snowmachine has replaced the dog teams which were used to pull dog sleds as shown here. Now we use ingenuity and available technology.....Why do some people always try to keep us from that?



remember details, one after another. Must project ahead; turn this way, travel for so long to find a land-

mark and go on without getting lost.

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# ● Whiteout on a Fishing Trip

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Must not lose sight of one another. Must not lose the ones behind me. Must travel slowly, cautiously, deliberately, without confusion. Whenever confusion comes, that instant: stop and seek counsel with the rest of the group. Must stay together. Compromise. Seek and follow the best alternatives, and continue homeward.

We decided to head down toward Cape Nome almost directly south from our fishing spot. It took us some traveling to get there. We stopped several times to talk about which direction to go and about where we thought we were.

The fog had set in; the sun hazing out and becoming dark, like a foggy eclipse. Visibility decreased quickly; landmarks disappeared, first those farther off in the distance, and then

gradually closer and closer. Somewhere out there is our trail home. Somewhere out there is....

At last, we were sure where we were. Right beside Cape Nome, on its east face. It was just a matter of following the dog team and snow machine trail into Nome along the beach in some places but mostly over the tundra a few hundred yards from shore. Visibility was still poor, but with a marked trail leading home, it was no problem.

We could have used a compass if we had one. We also could have homed in on the radio signal using an inexpensive \$9.95 pocket radio if we had one. We could have stayed at the fishing site and waited for clear visibility.

Or we could have stayed at home in bed on such a day.