

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Ice Road Truckers' burly warriors gear up for Season 2—and we're along for the ride

BY JOE RHODES



The first thing Hugh “The Polar Bear” Rowland tells us when we climb into his massive snow-white Freightliner truck, preparing to head onto the northernmost ice road in the world, is to leave our seat belts unbuckled. He says if something goes wrong out here—on the frozen Mackenzie River, 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle and headed toward the Beaufort Sea—hitting the windshield will be the least of our worries.

He laughs when he says this (Rowland laughs a lot), but he’s not kidding. The temperature outside is 20 degrees below zero, and if you’re in a 50-ton vehicle that happens to go through a soft spot in the ice and into fast-freezing water that will kill you in 10 minutes or less, you don’t want to be strapped in.

He’s got his sleeves rolled up, his window rolled halfway down, like a man going out for a Sunday drive. I, on the other hand, am bundled into as many layers of Gore-Tex and thermal underwear as I can find, barely able to bend my legs and climb into the cab. Just walking across the parking lot of Northwind Industries, on the outskirts of Inuvik, in Canada’s Northwest Territories, the wind feels like a mallet hitting my face. “Welcome to the Ice Road,” Rowland says. And then he laughs again.

If you watched last summer’s surprise hit *Ice Road Truckers*, the highest-rated series the History cable network has ever had, you know the rules of the road are different up here. Viewers were mesmerized by the sight of diesel-powered behemoths making their way across 300 miles of frozen lakes, delivering gigantic loads to remote diamond mines, through white-out blizzards and temperatures that dipped to 60-below.

The roads, of course, aren’t roads at all, but plowed-out paths across slippery, cracking, ever-changing ice. Driving over them is the only way to transport heavy cargo through the Arctic landscape, otherwise navigable only by dog sled and bush plane. When the ice melts in the spring, as it does quickly—and often unexpectedly—the roads disappear. And truckers who don’t pay attention can disappear as well.

“It’s slicker than chicken snot up here,” Rowland says, following a bend in the river, taking his time.

“You’ve gotta respect the ice or you’re gonna die. Or you’re gonna crash or hurt somebody else. If I were to slow down and hit my tractor brakes right now, this thing would be a big V headed into the snow bank.”



See why they call Rowland “The Polar Bear”?

Photographs by Ken Woroner/2008 AETN



Have they gone Hollywood? Sherwood (top) and Yemm are two of the six drivers featured in Season 2.

Most of the drivers from last season—Rowland, grizzled veteran Alex Deborgski, cocky upstart Rick Yemm and breakdown-plagued Drew Sherwood—are back again. But the location has changed, partly due to complaints that the show made the roads look more dangerous, and the truckers more reckless, than they really were. The drivers now have an even more remote base. Inuvik is 2,000 miles farther north of last year's Yellowknife. They travel between there and the natural gas wells being drilled along the Mackenzie River Delta.

For 115 miles, truckers drive on the frozen river, delivering supplies and construction equipment to the gas rigs. Then the route continues onto the Arctic Ocean ice shelf as the Mackenzie empties into the Beaufort Sea. At several points on the way, the “road” is actually 20 miles offshore. The heaving ocean underneath regularly breaks through the ice, forming spectacular pressure ridges that look like miles and miles of motionless frozen surf.

If you stop on the ocean, as we did, you can peer through the ice, 60 inches thick, and see glassy crevice walls that seem to go down forever. There are frozen bubbles suspended in the ice, as if the whole ocean is a giant unplugged lava lamp. It's like standing outside Superman's Fortress of Solitude. When the wind kicks up and the drifts blow in, the sky indistinguishable from the sea, it feels like the end of the world.

"You've gotta respect the ice or you're gonna die. Or you're gonna hurt somebody else"
—Hugh Rowland

Scary as it seems, Rowland and the other drivers agree the Mackenzie Road is less of a challenge than last year's route. The longest haul only takes three to four hours and the drivers are safe back in their Inuvik motel rooms every night. The river is less prone to breakthroughs than the lakes, but because there's less traffic and colder weather (75 below a few times this winter), the consequences of a breakdown are more frightening.

“If you break down, they tell you to stay in the truck,” says Rowland, who got stranded for six hours early in the season. “They’ve seen some polar bears around the rigs.”

Most of the drama surrounding the show, though, has less to do with the elements than the personalities of the drivers—a cranky lot, some of whom have clearly been bitten by the showbiz bug. “I don’t mind the cameras as long as they don’t get in my way and cost me money,” says Rowland, who was the boss of some of the guys last year. “But they ruined a couple of my drivers.

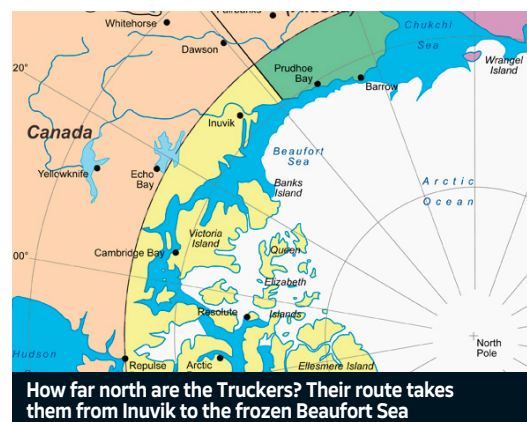
Turned them into idiots. They think they’re movie stars!”

Yemm, for instance, turned up this year with his hair dyed blue, which has other drivers derisively referring to him as “The Parrot.” Sherwood, while claiming that he isn’t looking for attention, makes a point of wearing a hat that says ICE ROAD TRUCKER when he’s drinking beer in Shivers, the fanciest bar in town.

“Last year they made me look like a complete broken-down trucker moron,” Sherwood says. So why did he come back for another year? “I wanted to prove them wrong.” But, he adds, “I’m doing it for the money. But, yeah, it was nice having a camera in your face, thinking you might get 15 minutes of fame.”

So they all came back. They drive the loads that get assigned to them, and they go back to their motel rooms. They drink. They smoke cigarettes. They talk trash about each other. They get in fights. They drink some more. “It’s great being out there,” Yemm says, “but sometimes it feels like being in jail.”

There are days when the sun barely comes out at all, when 50-below is the low temperature and there’s nothing on the horizon but ice. Still, there are also days when they see moose and lynx and nights when the northern lights come out, swooping down from the clear cold sky like electromagnetic angel wings.



How far north are the Truckers? Their route takes them from Inuvik to the frozen Beaufort Sea

“If this show was to die tomorrow, then I rode a really good wave,” Sherwood says. “But if they wanted me to do it again, I would. If they wanted to send us to Siberia, I’d go.”

ICE ROAD TRUCKERS Sundays, 9/8c, History (also online via video.tvguide.com)