

North To Victory

A funny thing happened
when BMW entered bone-stock X3s
in the AICan Winter Rally: **They won.**

It begins with friendly firm handshakes, wine and cheese, and an atmosphere buzzing with anticipation: anticipating adventure. Anticipating the challenges only the Arctic can offer. Anticipating victory. Bright faces and darting eyes reflect the mood as sixteen competitive rally crews, several workers, anxious family members, and a few well-wishers mill about the lobby of the Silver Cloud Inn in Kirkland, Washington, to celebrate the start of the AICan Winter Rally, an event without equal in North America.

The men and women who team up to drive themselves and their cars to the limit in this event are a varied lot, bound by a single determined purpose: to drive to the end of the road in the frozen north and beyond. Hundreds of miles past the Arctic Circle to Inuvik in Canada's Northwest Territories, then another hundred miles up the frozen Mackenzie River delta, where a winter ice road leads to the Arctic Ocean and the village of Tuktoyaktuk. And "Tuk" just marks the mid-point of the AICan Winter Rally, a marathon time-speed-distance event that demands exceptional

agility and grip from a vehicle—and strict attention from its occupants—over nearly 5,000 miles in eight days, running through territory that is both breathtaking and dangerously remote. The AICan Winter Rally is billed as the world's "longest, coldest winter rally," with temperatures dropping to fifty below zero.

A perfect challenge for BMW's new X3.

This year's event marked 20 years of legendary road trips into the Arctic. Rallymaster Jerry Hines and the hard-working members of Rainier Auto Sports Club put on the first AICan 5000 rally in the summer of 1984, and added the winter version in 1988. The summer events are more relaxed, almost a tour; it's the winter event that draws the serious competitors and manufacturers.

And Subaru is very, very serious.

Having won the last AICan Winter Rally in 2000, Team Subaru has brought back many of the same players—and some very-well-prepared cars to defend their title. Subaru's entries are thoughtfully prepared by a combination of experienced rallyists



BY RUSS
KRAUSHAAR
PHOTOGRAPHS
BY HENRY JOY

and skilled fabricators; they usually prepare each car for just one event, then sell it to one of the team members. For past events, they've removed catalytic converters, installed skid-pans, fuel cells, engine-block heaters, and hot bulbs in the stock lens assemblies, along with blazing dual-beam driving lights. There's little they won't do to win; they even modify the EPROM in cars equipped with automatics to allow the driver to select—and keep—any gears they want. (When I ran with Subaru in the Rally of the Lost Patrol, we had all of the above. They also provided a factory plug-in diagnostic module for troubleshooting problems, an on-call Subaru engineer, and an identical Subaru Outback ferrying checkpoint workers, just in case we needed a few spare parts.)

BMW had a different idea: Take three brand-new X3s from the press fleet and enter them pretty much “as is,” equipped with little more than a skid-pan and low-end driving lights. (Heck, the stickers on the doors were arguably brighter!) They weren't even identical in their options; the heated seats in our car soon invoked

envy from the occupants of the other two X3s. And as if to provide the greatest test our driving abilities—especially on the ice-racing sections that comprise part of the AlCan Winter Rally's charm—BMW NA selected automatic-transmission cars.

Probably that was for the journalists.

That's right: Perhaps it was because these cars came from the press fleet, or maybe they just wanted to give Subaru every advantage, but in any case BMW assigned one car each to *Automobile* magazine, *Bimmer* magazine, and *Roundel*. But at least the journalists weren't tossed out on the ice floes to flounder; BMW also recruited some of the ablest rallyists in America to bolster the three crews. So *Automobile*'s Ronald Ahrens would draw on the talents of driver Gary Webb and navigator Peter Schneider, while *Bimmer*'s Mike Miller—yes, *that* Mike Miller!—had Paul Duchene and Katy Wood, and I had *Roundel* editor Satch Carlson and Henry Joy behind the wheel while I manned the TimeWise rally computer.



After a day or so of rallying, the Roundel X3 begins to show a little dirt.

The team strategies for BMW and Subaru were as different as the levels of preparation. Since the rally offers several different classes based on the vehicle and navigational equipment, Subaru played it safe by entering one car in each of the three different classes. This plan virtually assured them of at least a class win; no matter what the outcome, they could put out a press release stating that they had "finished first." In Class I—sedans with unlimited navigational equipment—they entered a Subaru STi crewed by Glenn Wallace, Greg Hightower, and Francesca Carozza. In Class II—unlimited trucks and SUVs—were defending winner R. Dale Kraushaar, co-driver Jake Engstrom, and navigator Larry Richardson in a turbocharged Subaru Baja. And in Class III—cars limited to stock odometers and calculators—they entered a turbo Forester piloted by Paul Eklund, Kala Rounds, and Gary Reid.

BMW, on the other hand, wanted only outright victory. They entered all three X3s in the class that provided the toughest competition, running against the champions in Class II. And just about the only concession to the realities of the AICan was their selection of studded Hakkapeliitta SUV tires mounted on stock X3 wheels.

To be honest, based on past AICan experience, I thought a team of three unmodified automatic X3s, weighed down with journalists, might be a little like taking a butter knife to a gunfight. But as we sat down for a pre-rally dinner, the mood was extremely optimistic. We felt like a *team*, one that Subaru would have to contend with. After all, we did have experienced rallyists along with the scribes, and some cars had a combination; Mike Miller and Paul Duchene both have considerable Arctic rally experience, and Carlson has driven more winter rally miles than any other AICan competitor without winning. The Subarus had a considerable power-to-weight advantage, but we had BMW's new xDrive—along with heated seats, a bitchin' stereo, and twice as much cargo space. Plus we had a mysterious BMW Advantage: The fact is, we struck terror in the hearts of the competition *just because we were driving BMWs*. Never mind that the Subaru team had matching jackets and hats and scarves and mittens, while we looked like mismatched rag-tag refugees from the nearest asylum; never mind that three different magazines were vying against

each other as well as the Subarus for top honors. At the end of the day, we were united as a genuine BMW team.

Mind games aside, winning the AICan Winter Rally takes a blend of terrific driving talent and spot-on navigation. The scoring opportunities are divided into two main categories; time-speed-distance (TSD) sections and ice-racing solos. In the TSD sections which comprise the bulk of the scoring, the object is to be "on time, all the time." Cars start each section at an assigned out-time and travel at specified speeds; timing control workers hidden along the route time the cars as they pass, and a penalty of one point per second, early or late, is assessed at each control. A typical TSD section on the AICan is about twenty miles long and has four or five timing controls. The speeds are generally brisk, and the roads are usually twisty up-and-down hill excursions on ice and snow. A good computer-class car should score less than a point per control, while the best calculator cars—class III—are doing well if they can average somewhere around two or three points per control.

The three ice-racing solos that make up the balance of the scores had us a little anxious. Here the competition is based on all-wheel-drive versus two-wheel-drive, as well as studded tires versus non-studded—and our Hakkas would give us no edge here, as all-wheel-drive cars with studded tires make up the bulk of the field. Each car may record up to four timed runs, two per driver, with the best two times added together. The fastest AWD studded-tire car earns a zero—which means we were running directly against the 300-horsepower Subaru STi. Slower cars are penalized one point per second, up to a maximum of ten seconds per venue. To help avoid a tie in the rally's final standings, the penalties are further divided into tenths—a car that finishes 4.3 seconds off the fast time receives 4.3 penalty points. Since Sport Activity Vehicles with significant gravitational inertia and automatic transmissions must compete against turbocharged Japanese skates, the Subaru boys enjoyed a distinct advantage.

So as we set out on Day One the next morning through the Seattle drizzle, we know that if we are to finish near the top of the AICan Winter Rally, we'll have to do it in the TSD sections. Simple: All we have to do is put together eight days of mistake-free rallying.



Russ Kraushaar's navigation station was a busy office by daylight... and a neon disco den in the early-morning TSD sections.

Each of the BMW X3 crews had to make a decision about who would drive the TSD sections. In Car #1, the *Automobile* magazine entry, Gary Webb was the logical choice based on his experience running rallies with Peter Schneider. In our rig, Car #3, Satch would drive and I would navigate for the same reason—clear, concise communication is a key ingredient for success on rallies and can take years to develop between driver and navigator. The *Bimmer* magazine entry, on the other hand, was composed of veteran rallyists with zero



experience together. Katy Wood won Class III on the 2000 AICan Winter Rally, but winning the calculator class almost requires that the third person watch the odometer and call out times to the navigator, who is busily doing math, so each person had a well-defined roll. With no experience running together, the *Bimmer* crew opts to switch off drivers until the chemistry provides the best answer.

The rally starts with a fifteen-mile TSD called Paradise Road after the odometer calibration leg. The leg starts with a speed of 35 mph,

and the next instruction is "Left at Stop." Since the rallymaster hasn't allowed any extra time for the stop, I advise Satch to "get a couple in hand"—run a few seconds early—when we get within two tenths of a mile of it. Drivers love the phrase "get a couple in hand"—but no sooner does Carlson floor the X3 than we pass a slightly-concealed timing control just 0.107 miles from the stop. Dohhhh—two miles into the first TSD, and we take an early point at a dubious control location! But we take only one more point through the next four controls in the section—game on!—then we begin the first of many long transits that make up most of the driving time in the rally. This one takes us to the traditional Soda Creek TSD in Williams Lake, British Columbia, 300 miles north of the Canadian border.

The long transit is Henry Joy's first chance to really explore the X3's chassis dynamics, wheeling briskly up past Hell's Gate and through the Fraser River Canyon, a twisty up-and-down ribbon of road that generally leads to the rally's first impact on the local economy. Our man Henry, a former pro rally driver with more than a little skill, makes his contribution to the RCMP in Cache Creek, a notorious BC speed trap. But the other two X3s aren't all that far behind us; like every other BMW, the long-legged X3 makes bending a 90-kph speed limit way too easy.

We make Williams Lake at dusk and Henry jumps out to remove the covers from the driving lights, but when Satch hits the switch nothing happens, so we run the first night-time section in relative darkness. Luckily the Soda Creek TSD is one that Satch and I have run many times; we discuss our memories from previous years and decide where we need to have a little time in hand. Soda Creek is only a sixteen-mile TSD, but you have to be focused on the task every second; the slippery logging roads include a nasty switchback under an overpass where the rallymaster likes to put a control. And this year the road is very muddy, which causes our odometer to drift a bit, so our mileage isn't perfect. I tweak the TimeWise on the fly as Satch drives like a demented delinquent. He doesn't even flinch when an oncoming truck meets us at a small lake in the road, causing a momentary total eclipse—and we manage to get through the section very well, taking only one point at the notorious underpass.



At the overnight stop in Quesnel, BC, we drop off Satch and our gear at the hotel and head for the light and cover of the gas station to fill up and check our driving-light problem. Henry quickly discovers that a wire has fallen off the back of the switch in the console; apparently gravity is to blame for our first rally-related failure. We pull around back to aim the lights, then head off to find the local car wash. After all, it is a BMW. Besides, Carlson has found a way to put mud even on the roof.

Later, in the hotel bar, the first day's score sheets find their way to our table. Seated with several of our well-lubricated friends, we are happy to find the X3s in three of the top six positions: The *Bimmer* magazine team is still working out the kinks, but the *Automobile* team holds first place with only three points for the day. We are right behind them, tied with the Kraushaar/Richardson Subaru Baja with six points; the other two sponsored Subies are tied in fourth with nine points each. We have accomplished the first goal—avoid costly errors on Day One—but we know that morning will bring the first of the ice-racing sections, and the Subaru contingent plans to put some points on us there.

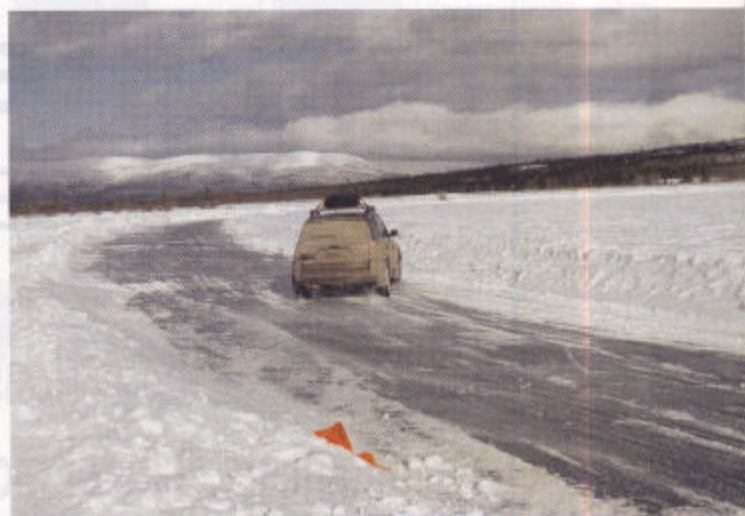
We start the next day with the ice race just a few miles away, so we leave most of our gear at the hotel and point the X3 toward Gold Pan Speedway, a small 3/8ths-mile oval with high snow banks and plenty of loose white stuff on the racing surface; cars run two laps from a standing start to a flying finish. Their "frog power" helps the Subarus, but the long, tight corners are the real challenge. A potent Mini Cooper S would be the best car to have here. However, our "ringer" driver, Henry Joy, sets fast time on his first run, beating R. Dale's ringer, Jake Engstrom, by a quarter second. Henry uses all of the track and then some, blasting past the mid-corner timing line and punching the car through the snowbank at the exit.

But the other X3 relinquishing the lead without a fight. Gary Webb is smooth and fast, as expected, but *Automobile's* Ronald Ahrens is an unexpected talent; he cranks out a run of less than a minute. Then Satch enters the Battle Of The Writers with a spectacular flyer, dusting the spectators with a rooster tail of snow. When the runs are all completed, Car #4, the Class III Subaru turbo-Forester driven by pro

rallyist Paul Eklund, has the best combined time and takes the coveted zero. We take 3.7 points with our two sub-minute runs; the leading X3 isn't quite as fast, taking 7.3 penalty points off the ice. For the moment, the Baja is in first place, the Forester is second, we're third, and the *Automobile* X3 has fallen to fourth.

But the day is young.

Driving back to the hotel to load our gear, Satch notices that the steering wheel is now rotated about a quarter turn when the car



is going straight. We soon see why the steering wheel is skewed: It's just following the direction the right front wheel is pointed. Unfortunately, the other three wheels don't agree. But with no time to address the problem before the next TSD section, it's an issue that will have to wait. Right now we have to deal with a TSD section ominously named 11% Grade.

11% Grade is a 22-mile section with plenty of twists and turns and a few evil surprises. Its name is taken from a steep descent



By dint of a terrific score in the 11% Grade TSD section, the *Roundel X3* took the lead on Day Two.

ending at a one-lane bridge. Of course, this means there's a switch-back hill to climb on the other side—and this time we have plenty of ice, though little snow. To complicate matters, there are several speed changes, so I am busy at the computer as well. 11% Grade proves to be a serious driving challenge, something navigators always enjoy—because while the driver flails about trying to keep us on the road, we can relax, knowing that all the penalty points will be his! This is the sort of section in which I have to tell Satch how late we are, because he is focused on the road, not the Time-Wise driver's display. "You're five down. Four. Three. Two—okay, you're almost there! Why don't you get a couple in hand until we get down to the bridge? They'll probably have a control there."

Satch is in fine form: In what may be the toughest section in the rally, the *Roundel X3* takes the fewest points. We dodge the cows in the road, survive more than a few lurid moments, and emerge with thirteen penalty points—most of them at one especially devious control where as we come out of a long right-hander around a blind ridge, a control car clocks us from across a ravine as we pass a warning sign. It's obvious that they're timing us; we're looking right at them as we slide out of the corner. It's also painfully obvious what the warning sign is for: There is a downhill-then-uphill hairpin corner just ahead of us, and the control workers are waiting to time us *again* when we pass by on the other side of the ravine—oh, Blessed Lady of Acceleration, don't fail us now!

Without the benefit of a manual transmission, Satch has his hands full. We take one point going into the ravine... and six coming out! Meanwhile, Gary Webb, trying to get back some of the time he'd lost in the hairpin, has charged past the control, foot to the floor, and driven the #1 X3 into the snowbank in the next corner, figuring there wouldn't be another checkpoint soon. His sacrificial strategy works; his navigator, Pete Schneider, hates going off the road—the navigator has to push the car back out of

the snowbanks—but he likes taking points even less. Webb's deliberate charge keeps them to eight points.

Even in the transit sections, there is little time to dawdle during a marathon rally. After 11% Grade, we rapidly make our way to Prince George and skip lunch in favor of finding an alignment rack. Hewlett's Alignment and Brakes, just off the main highway, has one available; in half an hour, they do a hasty front-end inspection and align the wheels, and we are back on the road. By the time we reach the passage control in Dawson Creek, we are feeling like the Donner Party, and Henry is threatening to eat his boots and mittens. But his heroic driving has put us back on time, so after a brief stop for photos at the start of the Alaska Highway, we have Satch guide us to Kentucky Fried Chicken; after decades of AICan travel, he has memorized the location of every KFC franchise in the western provinces. A subsequent do-it-yourself section—a TSD section in which you calculate your checkpoint times based on your mileage—brings us to the end of the day in Fort St. John.

And a tough day it has been—for everybody. The top four cars—the *Roundel* and *Automobile X3*s and the Subaru Baja and Forester—have come through without a serious hit, but other teams are beginning to lose ground. Glenn Wallace and Greg Hightower have run into software issues with the STi's rally computer and taken a pile of points, dropping them to sixth. The *Bimmer* team has taken points due to poor chemistry and computer glitches, and have fallen to seventh. By virtue of a clean run—a perfect zero score—in the DIY section, a privateer Class I BMW 325iX driven by Eric Horst and Steve Willey has moved up to fifth. The Class III Forester now holds an uncontested lead in Class III—but in spite of fast times at Gold Pan Speedway, the Class I and II Subarus aren't gaining ground as rapidly as they had hoped. Thanks to our top time in the 11% Grade section, the *Roundel X3* has moved into the lead, just ahead of the Subaru Baja and the *Automobile X3*.



earn the *Automobile X3* top honors on the X3 team. (Henry was slightly faster in the *Roundel X3* on his first run but pushed a bit too hard on the second and paid the price.) The fastest Bimmer, however, is the venerable 325iX; Eric Horst lays down two very consistent runs and is beaten only by the turbocharged Baja and the STi.

But taking a few more points on the ice is now a minor matter; our steering wheel is again skewed slaunchwise. So as the rest of the rally continues north, we head back to Whitehorse to find another alignment shop. Fountain Tire has a rack available, so we leave the car and venture in search of lunch, ignoring Satch's pleas for another hit of Kentucky Fried Whatever. But when we return, the news is bad; with the car still in the air, it is easy to see that our original ice-racing off-course excursion has bent the right front lower control arm. Since it is a cast piece, straightening it or welding it are out of the question; it must be replaced. Unfortunately, we are over a thousand miles from the nearest BMW dealer—and we must be in Dawson City, 300 miles up the Klondike Highway, by 9:00 p.m. or take a 200-point penalty for missing a Main Time Control. That's the bad news. The good news is that Whitehorse is also the one town that we hit twice on the AICan, first on our way to Dawson City and again when we descend from the Arctic and head for Anchorage three days later.

Better still, it has an airport—so we call BMW NA and ask them to send a replacement control arm to Fountain Tire right quick-like. If all goes well, it should be here when we swing back through town on our way south, and we can swap out the control arm and stay on schedule. The Fountain Tire guys aren't thrilled about our heading off for another 1,800 miles with a pretzelized control arm, but we've already put a thousand on it, and it's not like we have a choice—so we put on our sunglasses, hit the Klondike highway, and roll on to Dawson City. We make the MTC on time, and we're up well before dawn to start our ascent to the Arctic the next day.

For the people who enter this rally for the sheer adventure and dramatic scenery, this is where it really begins—deep in the Yukon where the Dempster Highway intersects the Klondike. Here, like the trees that struggle to grow a few crooked inches in the frozen

tundra, the cars and people are dwarfed by the awesome landscape. Heading north through rolling hills, maintenance crews work steadily but often fall behind. The trees thin out, the temperature plunges, and the dry snow is easily persuaded. When the wind blows along the Dempster, bad things happen. If you're lucky it hits before you arrive and just leaves piles of snow in the road. If you're not, the view from the driver's seat can quickly change to an inescapable blinding white. The road simply disappears, and a sick wave of insignificance fills you. If all the fear in your body



Roundel X3 navigator Russ Kraushaar attends to house-keeping chores; it is a BMW, after all....

hasn't been extracted by now, the Dempster will finish the job. The rally has no competitive sections for the next two days; the drive alone is challenging enough.

The Klondike River Lodge at the base of the Dempster offers the last fuel before Eagle Plains, 250 miles up the road, so we stop to top up.

That's when disaster strikes.



With its wheel off, the crippled Roundel X3 awaits the right-sized wrench—and a control-arm transplant.

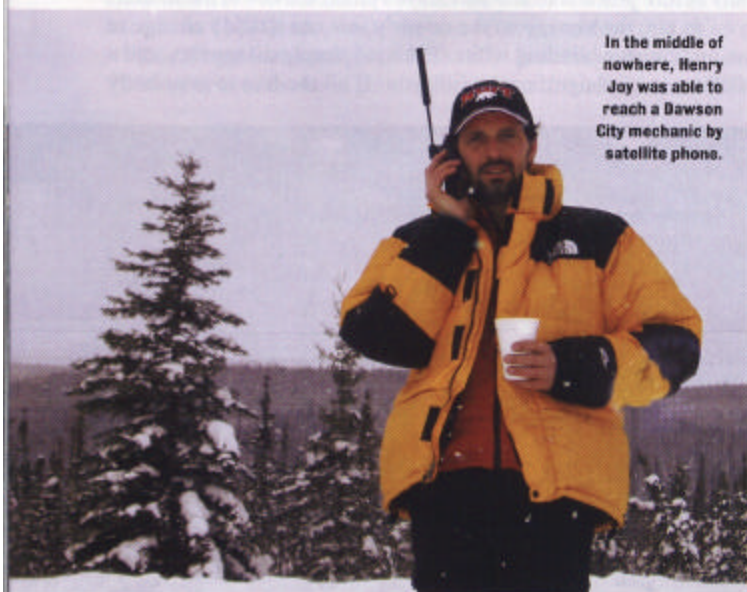
As if reluctant to tackle the Dempster, the control arm snaps with an audible CRACK when I start to back around to the gas pump. So here we are: two X3s leading the rally, the third X3 in the top ten... and one of the leaders is lame. Which is when the Code of the North, the true nature of teamwork, kicks in: Arriving for a last-minute fill-

Now we have to act fast; if the *Bimmer* team's sacrifice is to pay off, we have to swap the control arms and drive the 250 miles to Eagle Plains before the passage-control workers move on. Henry phones Dawson, looking for a mechanic, Satch starts pulling the broken ends of the control arm off our X3, and I back the donor car into the garage and go to work. But it doesn't take long to discover that the Snap-On tool sets, thoughtfully supplied to each X3, stop just a couple of millimeters shy of the size needed to remove the outer nut. We have to wait for the mechanic—who is obviously not attuned to Rally Time. Fortunately, when he does amble into view, he has the correct box-end wrench, and the control-arm transplant proceeds without too much additional ado. But now the alignment change we made back in Prince George has to be cranked back out; lying in the snow, Satch and our newest friend adjust the toe-in by means of a tape measure, and finally we're mobile again.

But it's nearly 11:00 when we finally start up the Dempster.

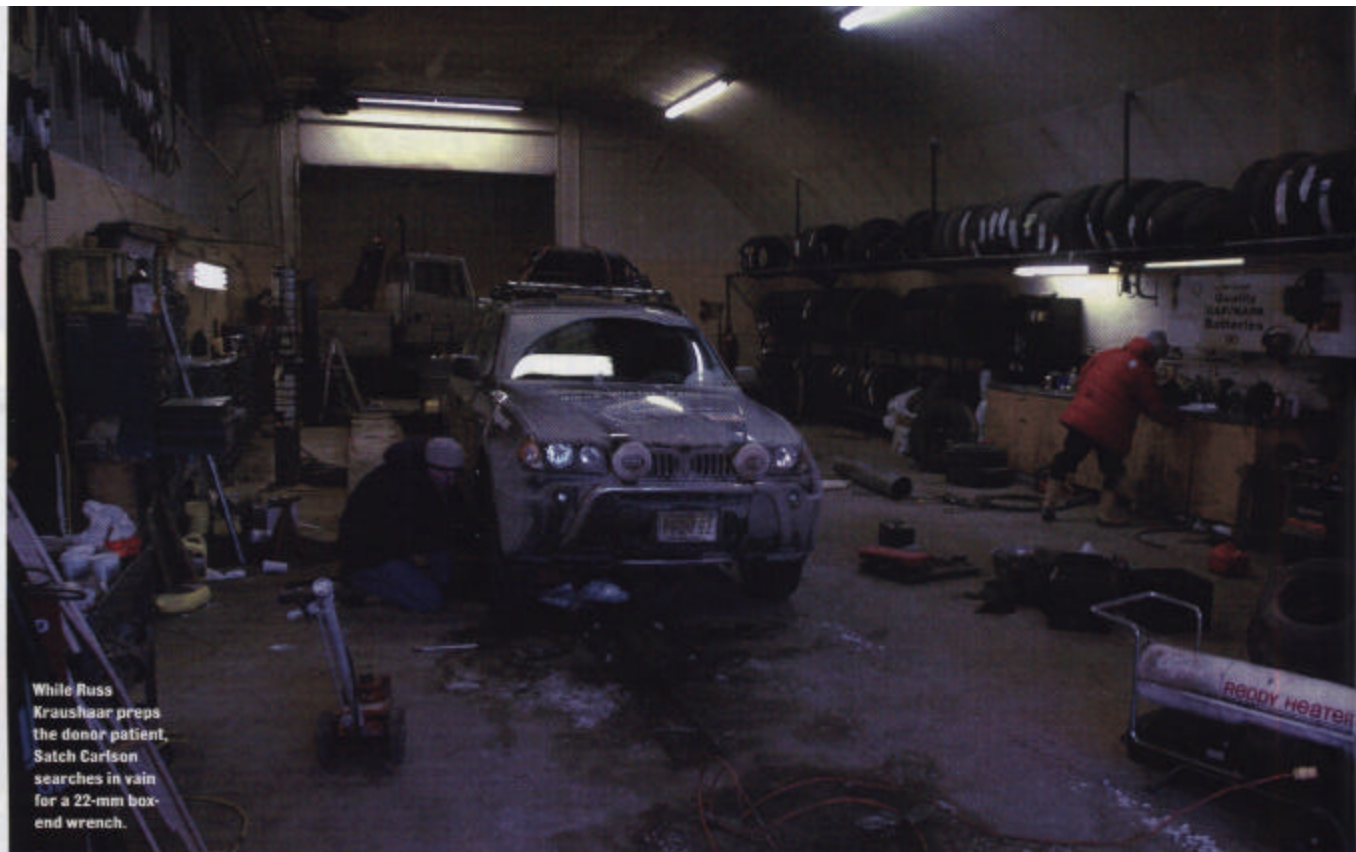
At the start of the day, I had offered to burn up the first tank of gas, but circumstances have changed: Most of the rally—including the passage-control crew—must be approaching Eagle Plains by now. The situation calls for *zu schnell fahren*, so Henry Joy takes the wheel. At noon, some 75 miles up the road, we pass the iX and a Mazda GTX crammed with extra bodies and gear from a stranded Subaru WRX, and we promise to tell the officials that they're on their way—if we can reach Eagle Plains before they close up shop. But about 50 miles later, Henry—who has been putting the Dempster behind us at a significant gallop—punches the RANGE button. "How far is that gas?" he asks. Hard driving in an extremely cold climate—mostly uphill—is killing our fuel economy, and the automatic transmission doesn't help.

A quick calculation confirms the diagnosis. "We'll make it, Henry," I explain, "but only if you take your foot out of it." So Henry adjusts his driving style, and soon we show the range we need to make Eagle Plains—but now we're sacrificing speed. The Dempster has become a kind of tortuous TSD leg: We have to balance maximum speed with minimum gas and braking in an attempt to bring the clock and fuel range to zero at the moment the gas pumps came into sight. Henry



In the middle of nowhere, Henry Joy was able to reach a Dawson City mechanic by satellite phone.

up, the *Bimmer* crew offers us their lower control arm when they learn of our misfortune! As more cars roll in for fuel, the *Bimmer* team unloads their gear and looks for space in other vehicles; we'll have their X3 trucked to Whitehorse, where the new control arm should reach it by the time we get there, and the team can continue—although they will take a 200-point hit by missing the MTC up the Dempster. Mike and Paul find room in the sweep truck, while Katy catches a ride in the *Automobile* X3 with Ronald, Gary, and Peter, and soon Henry, Satch, and I are alone in the dawning cold.



While Russ Kraushaar preps the donor patient, Satch Carlson searches in vain for a 22-mm box-end wrench.

watches the low-fuel light, the road, and the range indicator while gently feathering the gas pedal. The range reading drops steadily: 50 miles. Then 10. Then 6. Finally, while we're still about ten miles from our goal, the range display reads "----."

Fortunately, BMW has been conservative with their calibrations; the X3 climbs one last hill and rolls into Eagle Plains under its own power. While Satch and Henry pump 62 liters of fuel into the car, I run off to see if any officials are still in the lodge—and I



see the last one backing out in his WRX wagon. I chase after him, yelling and waving, but with all the gear piled in the car, he can't see me in his rear-view mirror. He must have heard me, though, because he stops just before turning back onto the highway. I run up and let him know that the *Roundel* X3 has arrived, and that the iX and GTX are carrying the Car 11 crew are a ways behind. "Car Three," he says, marking his clipboard. "Gotcha."

After a rather difficult morning, we're back in the game.

The rest of the day is a glorious tour. Twenty miles up the road we stop for a photo at the Arctic Circle, and another hundred miles later we top up the fuel for the final stretch from Fort McPherson to Inuvik. With no fuel worries, we are scampering along again, and we arrive at the Mackenzie Hotel on the heels of the *Automobile* crew! There, extension cords snake through the snow from car to car, powering engine-block heaters and battery blankets in most every other vehicle. But we're confident that the X3 will start in the morning without any prosthetics, as it's an unseasonably balmy fifteen below zero, so we head for the dining room, where we chow down on musk ox, caribou, and Arctic char at the *Roundel*/BMW CCA-sponsored mid-route dinner. Satch provides the entertainment, reading the column he has written in the back seat of the X3 (see April's *Roundel*) during one of his wakeful stages, since he has forgotten several stanzas of his usual fallback, *The Cremation Of Sam McGee*. We retire early, for morning will bring the high point—literally—of the rally: the drive up the ice road top the Beaufort Sea.

Describing the ice road that starts where the Dempster ends is difficult. The frozen Mackenzie delta takes you from the tree-line tundra near Inuvik to another world on the Arctic Ocean. As we set out before daylight, it's simply amazing to watch the light change from bleak gray to sapphire blue over reflective white. Even through bloodshot eyes, it's rejuvenating. It's the perfect backdrop for BMW's bright blue X3s, and we are footing it in fine fashion, leading the AICan Winter Rally in a race up the frozen river.

With no fuel worries, Henry blitzes past the field en route to Tuktoyaktuk, hitting 111.6 mph on one of the many flat, long straight sections of ice. When we reach Tuk, we refuel, turn around, and head back down the Dempster. It's a mere 300 miles back down to Eagle Plains under a blazing, brilliant, cold sun, with crystal sundogs dancing beside it. With only the occasional whiteout—it wouldn't be the Dempster without at least one stretch where it feels like you're driving inside a bottle of milk!—the southward drive is uneventful, except for my test of the xDrive's agility when I crest a hill to find a head-on eighteen-wheeler bent on collision; with no time to think, I merely react, flicking the wheel right, then left—



At the ice-racing venues, teams prepared their cars by piling up the contents; all of this gear fit into the Roundel X3.

and the X3 jukes and straightens like a go-kart. Slliiick!

After a night at Eagle Plains, we set off on another 700-mile day to our last Canadian overnight stop in Destruction Bay. These last three days of the rally offer only a few scoring opportunities—and plenty of bad news. Yes, the *Bimmer* X3 and the new control arm have both arrived in Whitehorse by the time we get there, but now the poor car has its right front axle dangling, the CV joint torn asunder; apparently instead of carefully lifting it, somebody has tried to move the X3 by *driving* it—with no lower control arm to hold the axle in place. So the *Bimmer* crew, who gave up their top-ten position to keep us among the leaders, now have to surrender all hope of finishing the rally. The intrepid trio pack themselves into various crannies to get themselves, at least, to the finish; their sad blue car will go home on a truck. We vow to honor their sacrifice by staying at the top of the scoring chart.

The rest of the rally is a cakewalk, although we seal our second-place fate by rookie mistakes on the Destruction Bay TSD section. We can see the final control; we know when to drop our speed from 50 to 20 mph; I even count down the seconds to the speed change. But Satch mistakes it for the countdown to the timing line, so we hit it a good three seconds early. The *Automobile* X3 suffers no such confusion and nails the control, solidifying their first-place lead. But we're still secure in our position, too; now the only possible assault on the BMW one-two finish will come on the ice at Big Lake, north of Anchorage, on the last day of the marathon, where Paul Eklund puts on a Subaru display: He scorches the ice with a pair of blistering runs in the turbo Forester, putting the ten-point maximum on every other all-wheel-drive vehicle! Fortunately, we are well out of reach by that time.

We are also out of road food. Out of CDs. Out of sparkling conversation. Out of sorts. Remember those bright faces and sparkling eyes at the beginning of the rally? By the time we reach the finish line in Anchorage, they've changed to grayish stubble and tired, dark red-rimmed pupils. Long days, a steady diet of unidentifiable road food, and the stress of keeping a rapid pace on unforgiving roads dulls the mind along with the finish of new cars, and leaves bodies spent after

countless jolts of adrenaline. Tired and cranky, we check in to the Millennium Hotel and begin our decompression back to civilization.

By the time we assemble for the Subaru-sponsored awards banquet, however, we are clean and refreshed and rejuvenated. It doesn't hurt that Team BMW takes the trophies for first and second overall, and that the *Bimmer* team wins the Sportsmanship Award—but while we are pleased and gratified to be part of the first competitive outing of BMW's X3, and proud that BMW took the lead on the



first day and never gave it back, Gary Webb reminds us all of the underlying nature of the marathon rallying game during his acceptance speech. "We sit around and talk about these rallies," he says, "and we talk about who got lost in the whiteout *this* year, or who ran out of gas on *that* year. Every one of us has a story about any particular rally, and some of us have many. But you know what? Everybody remembers those stories—but nobody remembers who won!"

He's right; the greatest glory of the AICan Winter Rally lies in the sheer excitement of the adventure. Driving where few have driven, seeing what few have seen, and sharing the experience with amiable companions is really what this rally is about. But still, at least a few of us will remember 2004 for the epic battle between two formidable rally teams. So I have to correct Gary Webb. "Well, we'll remember who won this year, Gary," I say as I raise my glass to the *Automobile* team. "And at least you did it in a BMW!" ♦