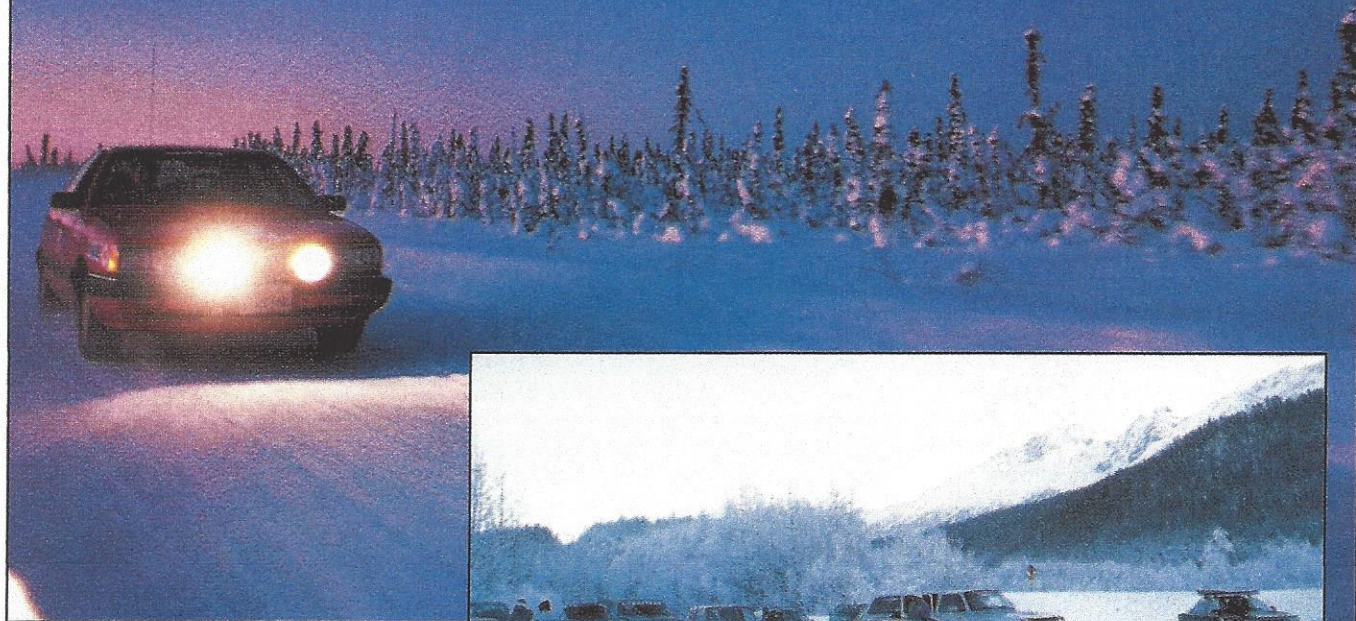


# If Alcan, so can we

*Driving 6300 miles to the Arctic and back is a true test of survival instincts*

By Christopher Jensen



**Dawn on the Dempster Highway (top), heading for the Arctic Circle, followed by an interminable queue for a time-speed-distance stage before the run into Anchorage**

It could be argued with some validity that the 1990 Alcan Winter Rally was a form of Darwinism, an event designed to attract God's less-bright creatures and hopefully remove them from the gene pool.

By flash freezing.

After all, who would be attracted to an event in which the goal is to drive almost 6300 miles from Seattle to the Arctic Circle and back in temperatures that could be expected to hit -50° F?

Does the fact that one entry, a Mazda 323 GTX, had an Alaska license plate that read "MORONS" help answer the question?

Seattle-based organizer Jerry Hines contends the Alcan is the world's longest winter rally. "Competitors in the Alcan," he says, "must possess substantial experience, resourcefulness and good judgment." Hines apparently got no response from people meeting those requirements, but did find enough people to make up 17 teams anyway.

This year, the event turned out to be the *Ice Follies* and *The Big Chill* blended with some supernatural phenomenon such as the disappearing Subaru and the Revenge of the Ptarmigan.

Most competitors had long-distance rally experience and were drawn by the challenge offered by one of North America's most un-

usual driving events. Many entrants had participated in the first Alcan Winter Rally in 1988, which officially classified them as either slow-learners or no-learners.

This year, all the vehicles had four-wheel drive. At the top of the risk-your-financial-investment scale was a Porsche Carrera 4. On the low end were a pair of Suzuki Sidekicks. The most popular single model was the Eagle Talon TSi AWD, of which there were three, including the one in which fellow Clevelander Greg Lester and I were competing (known by the CB moniker of "Bald Eagle," due to genetic circumstances beyond my control).

Before the rally, Hines required competitors to sit through an afternoon session on winter survival. The thrust of it was a list of the terrible things that frigid tease, Mother Nature, can do to your body in the winter.

One of the biggest worries would be hypothermia, the potentially fatal loss of body heat, and our first-aid kit included a 172-page book with the heart-warming title *Death by Exposure*.

One of the warning signs of hypothermia is that the person "acts dull," said guest speaker Alan Errington, a member of the Seattle Mountain Rescue Council. "Hopefully, you know the person before, so you have a basis for comparison."

On Feb. 6, the rally begins and we head north, wondering what grand misadventures await us in the Great Frozen-Solid North, the land of Jack London, Sgt. Preston ("This case is closed, King") and that best-known member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Dudley Do-Right.

Ask any of the drivers and he'll tell you the best parts of the Alcan Winter Rally are

Christopher Jensen photos



the transits, which range from 50 to about 1300 miles. Transits connect the time-speed-distance (TSD) sections on which the rally is scored, and a competitive team cannot afford to be late starting a TSD.

Hines' rally requires an average transit speed of about 52 mph, which is not terribly fast until one considers fuel stops, road conditions and the ever-present bad weather.

That is all the excuse we need for some entertainingly brisk driving. Eighty mph is a common speed. What's more, once we're clear of the towns, there is no traffic, much less police. That makes the transits incredible, wonderful playgrounds, although making a serious driving error could have tremendously chilling consequences.

The roads tend to be two lanes and most are snow- and ice-covered. On one section the ice is so clear we can see the pavement markings underneath.

Interestingly, while some of the sections are quite slick, the traction is much better at -40° F than it would be around zero degrees or warmer, says Kevin Clemens, a Michelin tire engineer who accompanied the rally. With the ultra-cold temperatures, snow and ice crystals are not as easily turned into water by the pressure of tires rolling over them.

Without a doubt the kings of rapid transit are in the "MORONS" 323 GTX driven by Alaska ice racing champions John and Susie Fouse (aka Michelle Mutton) and Gordon Carlson. They make it clear they have three drivers and no navigator, which Carlson calls a "geek-free environment." Without a navigator they finish poorly overall, but on the transits they are the Lords and Lady of Triple-Digit Speeds.

Of course, the traffic one occasionally does encounter—the 18-wheelers—presents a challenge because they throw up huge clouds of snow. Which makes passing an

interesting experience. At one point, Greg times us at zero visibility for 10 seconds after a truck passes our Talon.

On one transit, Bill Sadataki and David Killian are driving their Talon (CB moniker "Spread Eagle") behind Gene Henderson and Ralph Beckman in a factory-backed Subaru Legacy station wagon. They come up on an 18-wheeler and Henderson pulls out to pass, disappearing into a cloud of snow thrown up by the truck. A few seconds later, Sadataki and Killian see another 18-wheeler come blasting out of the snow cloud in the opposite direction.

They can't figure out what happened to Henderson and Beckman except that they must have driven into the 18-wheeler's grille and come out its tailpipe.

In fact, Henderson finally discerned the oncoming truck with just enough time to get back into the proper lane without being run down by the truck he passed. Then, Beckman explained later, the former Pro Rally national champion managed to control the sliding Subaru through the next turn.

"You can't see shit in a whiteout," Henderson observed on the CB.

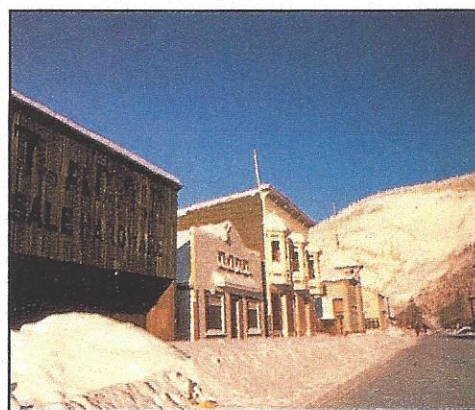
"That wasn't too bad for me, but I bet that boy messed his pants," the truck driver responded on the CB.

Later, following stops for fuel and a TSD section, Henderson and Beckman passed the same truck. "Much better that time, Subaru," the approving truck driver radioed.

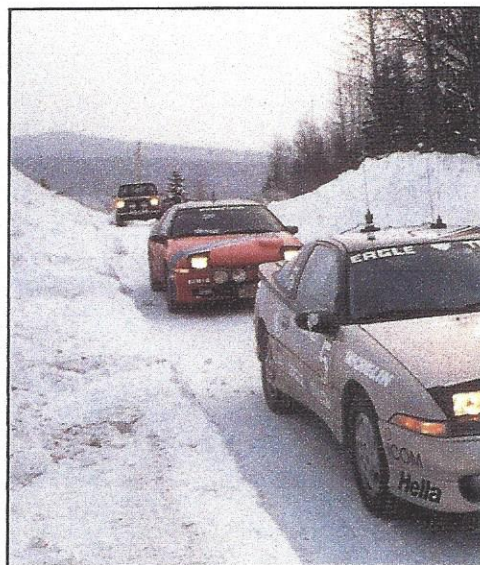
But other difficulties are posed by various arctic creatures.

We have been warned that not only are caribou a problem, but that the extremely cold weather has brought some moose down from the mountains.

Moose, we are told, are smart enough to realize it is easier to walk on roads than in deep snow. They are not, however, smart



Dawson City, (above) is abandoned during the winter months, except for the rally participants awaiting their next stage (below)



enough to realize that despite weighing up to 2000 pounds, they cannot win in an attack on a car. We see several moose, which look like furry houses, and some caribou.

But there are no problems until the Dempster Highway, not far from the lonely monument that marks the Arctic Circle. A Cherokee driven by Phil Berg, Everett Smith and Jack Christensen suddenly finds the road exploding upwards. It's full of ptarmigans—a white, puffy bird renowned by the locals for a stupidity rivaled only by the Alcan Winter Rally participants. Before he can slow, Berg mows down seven or eight of them.

Later that day, the ptarmigans get their revenge. On a return trip, the driver of a Suburban used by rally workers is startled by a ptarmigan. He drives off the road, where the Chevy sinks up to its axles.

Of the 10 days spent driving, we stop eight nights, staying at small motels in places such as Dawson. But two days require about 26 hours of nonstop motoring.

The longest day is the 1300 miles from Fort Nelson in the Yukon to Anchorage, where there is a one-day layover. We have a

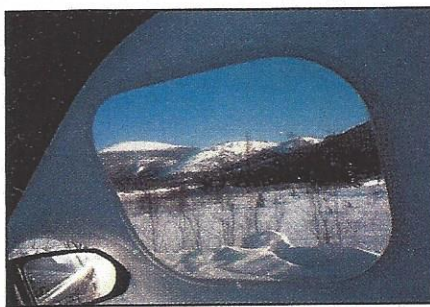
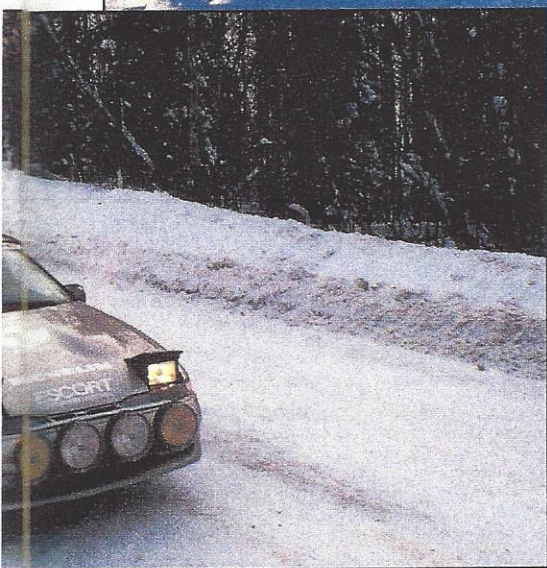


A morning refueling stop is witnessed by more conventional forms of arctic transport





So where's the dotted line? Occupants of two Eagle Talons and a Jeep Cherokee search for Arctic Circle (above). Cool reflections: Daytime view through the frost shield on author's Talon (below)



TSD section in Whitehorse (Yukon) at midnight, then head west winding through the mountains toward Tok, Alaska.

It is -35° F outside. The windshield is clear, but the side and rear windows on the Talon have frosted over, except for some plastic "frost shields." The frost shields resist icing and give us small, lateral portholes through which we can see a full moon and a silver-and-blue landscape.

Driving is wonderful. The Talon is beautifully balanced and stable and the driving lights auger through the night. The only concerns are unsuspecting decreasing radius turns or the crashingly real possibility of moose or caribou on the road.

Elsewhere, however, all is not well. Tim Paterson and Don Gibson in the Carrera 4 (who use the CB moniker "Road Warrior") did not refuel with everyone else. They have boldly chosen this trip to see if they do, indeed, have a 400-mile range.

As the night goes on, they become the Road Worriers. Just short of Tok, they finally run out of gas, but are saved by the benevolence of factory Subaru team members Dave Harcom and Ken Knight, who

loan them a few gallons.

On the seventh day we are headed for Eagle Plains, a motel, restaurant and fuel stop run by 12 people, located 18 miles south of the Arctic Circle. Henderson and Beckman are leading, with the Berg/Smith/Christensen Jeep Cherokee in second place.

After a long, brisk night we stop for fuel at Stewart's Crossing, where the temperature is roughly 60 below. We see Henderson and Beckman's Legacy being pulled into the garage. It'd lost three quarts of oil.

Although they avoided being squashed by the 18-wheeler, it seems likely they're out of the rally. Their one hope is that the Eagle Plains stop is one of the few without a TSD section or arrival deadline.

Henderson and Beckman still have not arrived when we have dinner at Eagle Plains, but later that night they appear. Henderson complains loudly about what he describes as a major mechanical problem with the Legacy. But a factory official later says that in a freak occurrence, extended running in extremely cold weather caused a PCV valve freeze-up, causing a seal to blow. However benign the cause of the oil

spill, one rally wag can't resist dubbing Henderson's Legacy the Subaru Valdez.

By Friday the 16th, amid a small but nasty controversy, we have reached the end of the rally at Harrison Hot Springs near Vancouver. The formidable team of Henderson and Beckman have won, with only 41 penalty points.

But there is a controversy over whether they practiced on a crucial TSD stage on the Cassiar Highway. Although not observed practicing, rumors start because, despite particularly erratic mileages, they had stunningly good scores. In addition, Henderson was also seen fueling the car the night before the Cassiar section and then buying \$14 worth of gas just before the TSD began.

Such practicing is not accepted in TSD rallying, because it removes much of the challenge. But Hines forgot to forbid it in his regulations, nor did he mention it in the driver's meeting at the start.

He consequently refused to discipline the Carrera 4 team, seen practicing on a section in Whitehorse. That basically opened the door for the other teams to practice too.

Right after the Cassiar section, Henderson and Beckman strongly deny that they practiced. But in a conversation after the rally concluded, Beckman explained that if they practiced on the Cassiar TSD, it was only because they were worried the competition was going to do so due to Hines' failure to ban it.

In second place, with 47 points, was the Harcom and Knight Legacy station wagon, a tremendous performance on their first Alcan Rally. The Sadatoki/Killian Eagle was third (52 points), the Berg/Smith/Christensen Jeep Cherokee (53 points) fourth. Lester and I were fifth in the Eagle Talon with 63 points. With no prize money, the idiotic goal of simply reaching the finish was our reward. ■