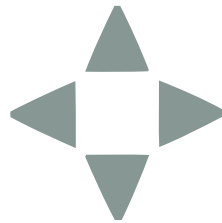




# *Taming*

## the Alcan Highway



*Wolves and  
caribou and  
grizzlies*

BY RICH HENRION #20317



**T**he long-awaited morning of August 13, 2006 had arrived, and I was the first rider on my bike. My 1995 BMW R1100GS is billed as an adventure bike, perfect for the ultimate adventure on which we were about to embark. With me were 21 other motorcyclists, ten cars, and nine support vehicles. This adventure involved about 50 people.

That day, like all days in that rally, began with a time-speed-distance (TSD) section. We were given specific directions for sections of precision driving that would range anywhere from ten to 60 miles. We departed one minute apart and followed precise directions for speed. Judges spread out along the route timed us, and for every second over or under our prescribed time to the checkpoint, we received one point. The lowest score for the day and rally would win. Between the TSD's, we ride at our own pace.

We were all excited about our first TSD as we departed Kirkland, Washington. The first TSD began 60 miles north of Kirkland. We exited I-5 near Alger, Washington and begin 39 miles of twisty two-lane roads. We weaved our way around Cain Lake and Lake Whatcom. It proved difficult to concentrate on the rally control items of speed and distance in such a beautiful setting. This section took us north toward Sumas, Washington and Canada.

The low point of the day was a 30-minute wait at the border crossing into British Columbia. Although it was a sweltering 90 degrees, I knew the heat wouldn't last long. I knew I would likely need the electric liner for my jacket the next day. A ride like

*Rich Henrion on the road in Alaska. The expression captures my feelings after many days of riding in the cold and rain. Did I mention it rained a lot in Alaska?*

this calls for a variety of riding gear, as temperatures will likely be between 90 degrees and 37 degrees Fahrenheit. My riding gear includes my Motoport Ultra II Kevlar jacket and pants with Aerostich Kanetsu electric liner that plugs into the bike. It consumes about four amps of power and raises the under jacket temperature by about 15 degrees. It has been a lifesaver many times in cold and rain.

In addition to riding gear, my bike is equipped with an Aero-flow windshield with lowers, Jesse saddlebags, heated grips, tank bag, Russell seat with backrest, Motolights, PIAA Pro 60 XT driving lights, Garmin 276C GPS, and Sirius satellite radio. In addition to this equipment, many other modifications have been made to accommodate a 6'7" rider.

Once into Canada, we rode east on the Trans-Canada Highway until we reached the town of Hope and turned north. That would be the direction of our travel for the next five days. We got caught in a storm near 100 Mile House, British Columbia and the temperature dropped to 55 degrees.

At 7:30 p.m., we reached our hotel in Quesnel, BC and were in bed by 10 p.m. to rest for the journey ahead.

The next day, we departed at 7 a.m. and ended in Dease Lake, British Columbia after 680 miles and three TSD's, two of which involve long dirt sections. Thick fog greeted us at our departure, along with the 120-mile section of dirt on the Blackwater Road. The road was narrow and slow, but dotted with tall pines and



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beautiful lakes. The lakes outnumber the trees for quite some distance. After three-and-a-half hours, we reached pavement.

The afternoon TSD began at 3:30 in the 'Ksan Village in Hazelton. This TSD was the first 47 miles of 63 miles on the beautiful, rough, rugged, and dirt Mitten Forest Service Road. It was very demanding because of never-ending large potholes and a very narrow single lane with tall brush growing right to the edges. I decided to quit riding for rally time and continue riding just for survival.

It was 5 p.m. and we finally made our way back to pavement. Tired and hungry, my buddy and riding partner, Dan Peterson, asked how far we had to ride to reach to Dease Lake and the hotel.

The GPS said 255 miles, so I encouraged him, "Let's RIDE!"

We had one gas stop figured in at Bell 2 on the Cassiar Highway. It closed at eight o'clock, so we had to take care not to be late. In the previous three hours, we had seen seven black bears on the road. As night fell, we slowed to about 40 mph. Dan and I arrived at 11:30 p.m. after sixteen-and-a-half hours, seven bears, five moose, and majestic scenery. Did I mention I love British Columbia?

On day three, we rode on to Whitehorse in the Yukon. There are 30,000 people living in the Yukon Territory and

23,000 of them reside in Whitehorse, a nice city with temperatures in the upper fifties and blue skies. The Yukon is a cold desert, with little rain and winter temps ranging from -20 to -50 Fahrenheit. We arrived at 6:30 pm after riding 420 miles.

On the fourth day, the group split. Some of the riders headed to the campsite on the Yukon and Northwest Territories border. Their route took them to Ross River and to the end of the North Canol Road. Dan and I took the other option and rode to Skagway, Alaska. There were no TSD's that day. As soon as we reached

the Alaskan border, the rain began. It is 250 miles round trip from Whitehorse to Skagway.

We departed for Dawson City, Yukon Territory at 9 a.m. on the fifth day, with a TSD northeast of Whitehorse that involved all dirt roads, a narrow power line trail, and a ten-minute pause. During the pause, Dan's rear tire went flat. We took a look and found that he had picked up a roofing nail. We removed and repaired the tire, thankful for the group support van in which we had each packed 40 pounds of gear and a set of tires.

During my year-and-a-half of planning





and preparation, my biggest debate and concern was what tires to use. I settled on Continental TKC-80s. They are street-legal knobbies and have provided great traction in the dirt, but will wear out in less than 3,000 miles. This meant a tire change on the road.

We were back on the road within 45 minutes and arrived at Dawson City at 7:30 pm.

The sixth and most anticipated day of the rally included a 510-mile ride. We

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traveled up the Dempster Highway, 20 miles beyond Eagle Plains to the Arctic Circle, and back to Dempster Corner by nightfall. We fueled up at Dempster Corner at 7 a.m. An early start allowed time for speed adjustments on a wet and muddy road. We had hoped to be off the highway by dark and it is 255 miles each way. The lady at the gas station told us it had been raining up north for the last week, but that wouldn't stop a bunch of diehards. We have ridden this far, and were determined to reach our goal.

### Meeting and Avoiding the Local Wildlife

It rained lightly and was quite muddy. I was pleased that I mounted my new tires by hand last night in the parking lot of the Eldorado Hotel so I could handle the soft stuff. The rain quit after three hours. We were pressing on, enjoying the scenery, when at the 120-mile mark, we saw him. He was on the road about 100 yards away. He sniffed the air and slowly walked

toward us. That was one massive grizzly. He got within 30 yards of us, and the cameras were quickly put away as we started to turn our bikes around. He jumped off the road into the brush, and we quickly accelerated past him, not pausing for a second look.

The scenery was gorgeous. It varied from close wooded areas to mountains in the distance with tundra areas. After a quick gas stop at the 235-mile mark at Eagle Plains, we were 20 miles from the Arctic Circle. On this last northbound stretch, we rounded a curve and saw three more grizzlies on the road about 30 feet ahead of us. I don't know who was more surprised, the family Griz or Dan and me. We were motionless. They turned away from us and jogged slowly up the road. We followed slowly, at a safe distance, and they were ahead of us for at least four minutes. About every 150 yards, mama stopped and turned to see if we were still following. We kept our distance. At the top of the hill, they exited the road into a



*Clockwise from top left: Dan at the start of the Dempster "Highway." Don't let the word highway fool you. It is all dirt or should I say mud. • A rest stop about 60 miles up the Dempster. Very wet and muddy. • Dan Petterson at the warning sign at the beginning of the Blackwater Road in central British Columbia. • Rich and Dan celebrating at the Arctic circle. • Dan and friends fixing his flat in the outskirts of Whitehorse in the Yukon. Left to right, Andrew Fekete, Aaron Gibson, Dan kneeling, and Tim Pindel.*



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clearing on the left.

Smiles, pictures, and handshakes were aplenty at the Arctic Circle sign. There are few trees here, just a few black spruces on the barren tundra. They are the only trees that can survive the -50 degree winters. We stayed about 30 minutes to rest and reflect on our accomplishment. Dan and I had our traditional toast to celebrate. He is a Red Bull person and I am a Mountain Dew man.

The ride back to Dempster Corner was spectacular. Temperatures hit 51 degrees and the sun was shining brightly, helping to dry up some of the nasty mud holes. I was thinking of moose, black bears, grizzlies, elk, caribou, and reindeer as I rode. Leading with my GPS, in a tundra section south of Eagle Plains, I spotted a wolf. He was tall and husky, with a light silver-gray color. He walked across the road and stopped on the left edge when he saw me. I slowed down, downshifting to second as I approached him. Within ten yards, we made eye contact, and he started to walk quickly toward me. He was going to chase me like a dog. He began to trot, and when I got within ten feet, I swerved to the right and rolled on the throttle. He chased me, and as he got within 12 inches of my boot, I could see his right front fang. I kicked at him twice with my left foot and powered away from him. He gave up the chase after

about 75 yards.

Dan had stopped back on the road to watch my bout with the wolf, which then went back after him. Dan, a fellow Motorcycle Safety Foundation Rider Coach Trainer, is an accomplished dirt rider who was riding a Kawasaki KLR650, a bike that handles well in the dirt. He did a couple quick moves to get around

the wolf. I watched in amazement, wishing I had my camera out but knowing this moment is about safety, not pictures. He motored up to me and stopped. As we looked at each other's eyes, I don't know whose were bigger. Reaching out for a high-five, I said, "We just got chased by an Arctic Wolf on the Dempster Highway and lived to tell about it." What an





unbelievable thrill on the highlight day of the ride of a lifetime.

Are we having fun yet?

We were back to Dempster Corner by 6 p.m., and the GPS read a daily average of more than 45 miles per hour on this rugged dirt highway.

The entire group was in the same hotel each night, and no matter where we were, we attracted a lot of attention. It was like

“It was like the circus coming to town; the locals anticipate your arrival, are a little nervous when you’re there, and glad when you leave and nothing bad has happened. We were just a bunch of middle-aged riders having a little fun, and boy did we have a story for the riders meeting that night.

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### Coming Back Down

We began the seventh day with a ferryboat ride across the Yukon River, about 250 yards of fast moving water. As we crossed, I pondered the troubles the pioneers must have encountered when they tried to cross this obstacle. We arrived at the Alaska border and had a magnificent ride on the Top of the World Highway, with a stop in downtown Chicken, Alaska. It was raining and 41 degrees as we got back on the road and enjoyed the mountain scenery. To our right was a wide valley with beautiful mountains in the distance that resembled a saw tooth. We reached pavement north of Tok on the way to our



*Clockwise from top left: Rich loading the GPS with the routes for the day. At the Caribou Hotel in Glennallen, Alaska. • Beautiful scenery in British Columbia. Rider #20 is Ken Westfall, #22 is Bob Lisey, and #18 is Rich Henrion. • Two Moose Lake on the Dempster. This is a lake on the permafrost that usually has Moose present. None today. • Rich on the Blackwater Road in British Columbia. • Fireweed along the return ride on the Dempster. Note the sunshine and thick dirt on the road.*



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overnight in Fairbanks.

The rain continued, and we were concerned with a change of route in the plan for the eighth day's ride. We were supposed to ride to Denali Park and then head east on the Denali Highway, another dirt road, for 135 miles to Paxson. We would overnight in Glennallen. We waited for an announcement, only to find out that the road had been closed from Fairbanks south because of mudslides and washed-out bridges. We were getting in on the end of ten inches of rain in seven days. We rode east to Glennallen through Delta Junction.

We had a TSD on our way out of Fairbanks. It was 37 degrees and pouring. I watched for black ice as I rode. About 20 miles south of Delta Junction, we hit a sleet storm. The pellets were coming down horizontally and there were three inches on the ground. I was riding in the tire track of a motor home, so the sleet was only about one inch deep in my groove. It was a good thing I had my snow tires on. I started to move off the road for a photo, but as soon as I applied the brakes, my anti-lock system kicked in. This got my attention. No picture.

The day ended at the Caribou Hotel in Glennallen; ring me out and toss me into bed.

By the final day, I didn't want it to end. We had established a routine and rhythm that was fun and interesting. The roads were beautiful and challenging, and the other participants were fantastic and fun to share this adventure with.

We began with a TSD heading west out of Glennallen. It was pouring rain and 43 degrees. We planned to meet that afternoon at the east entrance to Hatcher Pass for the final TSD. We planned to ride from east to west for 47 miles of dirt on Hatcher Pass Road, but found that it was closed because of more mudslides on the west end. We did the TSD up to the end of the pavement on the east end of the pass, and turned around, riding the last 60 miles to the finish line in Anchorage.

We were welcomed into our last TSD by a tremendous downpour. About three miles into it, rider number 15, Mike Stram, of Gresham, Oregon, applied too much rear brake on a 90-degree turn, released

the brake, and went down hard on his right side. His friends, numbers 16 and 17, passed him as his KTM motorcycle dropped to the right side. Mike was down. Yours truly, rider 18, stopped to pick him up, along with his bike. I talked to him to make sure he was all right and get him back on the bike. His body and ego were shaken and his helmet and bike had scuffs to prove it. Dan and I escorted him to the



*Clockwise from top left: Rich Henrion ready to ride out of Fairbanks, Alaska in the rain. • Home safely in Norway, Michigan. 8,900 miles in 16 days. • Rich Henrion in Fairbanks along with one of the automobile entries. It is a 1954 Morris Minor driven by Kevin Kittle and Tyler Irwin. • #18 Rich Henrion on the ferry boat crossing the Yukon River. Glenn Parker is in the background. • Grizzly Bear family from the Arctic Circle.*





finish line, happy to help a fellow rider finish safely.

The Alcan 5000 ended in Anchorage with - what else - pouring rain. The riding was over, with totals of 4,600 miles, 1,500 of it dirt roads. After a tire change to a more pavement-oriented pattern in Anchorage, I had a quick visit with friends Dave and Jeanne Mott in Ninilchik and head for home. Now I was in for

“Riding with fellow cycle-junkies was a blast, and although the ride is over, the friendships will not be forgotten. True riders understand each other and can relate to the need for open road. True riders know the thrill that comes with a full tank of gas, the wind in your face, and a stretch of unseen road. True riders live the slogan, “It’s not the destination; it’s the journey.”

a solo ride of 3,900 miles to Norway, Michigan. It was six straight days of riding from sun up to sundown.

### In Retrospect

I signed up for this trip because it had MOTORCYCLE ADVENTURE written all over it, and it proved to be the ride of a lifetime. It was a wonderful way to celebrate 40 years of having a motorcycle license. Riding with fellow cycle-junkies was a blast, and although the ride is over, the friendships will not be forgotten. True riders understand

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True riders are hardly home...and already planning their next adventure.

More stories and pictures can be seen at [www.Alcan5000.com](http://www.Alcan5000.com).

*Rich Henrion is a high school auto technology instructor from Norway, Michigan. His adventure with friend Dan Petterson of Ludington, Michigan, on the Alcan 5000, was a nine-day road rally. He wishes to thank Jerry and Colleen Hines and the Rainier Sports Car Club for sponsoring the event..*

