

At Home in the Cold

How the native Northern breeds adapted to arctic temperatures.

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On Oct. 19, 1911, Roald Amundsen hitched eight teams of Greenland dogs to sledges and started across the snow on his second quest to be the first person to reach the South Pole – more specifically, to reach it before his rival, Captain Robert Scott.

Amundsen had aborted an earlier attempt, not because the temperature had reached minus 70 degrees Fahrenheit, not because his men had frostbite, not even because it was so cold the fluid in their compasses froze. The turning point was when two dogs froze to death in their sleep.

This time they were luckier, and on Dec. 14, 1911, his team of five men and 16 dogs reached the pole. There was no sign of his rival, Captain Scott.

On Nov. 1, 1911, Scott set out for the pole using motorized sledges, Manchurian ponies and a handful of dogs. Although advised to buy Greenland dogs, he instead settled for smaller dogs from Russia, which were less suited to the brutal conditions.

The sledges broke down in the cold, the ponies suffered and eventually died from their own sweat freezing to their bodies, and the dogs either died or eventually refused to work. On Jan. 17, 1912, Scott and four others reached the South Pole, dragging their sledges themselves. They found paw prints, a Norwegian flag and a letter left by Amundsen. Scott and his men perished on the return trip.

Cold comforts

In the course of civilization, dogs accompanied humans to almost every part of the world, morphing to fit the environment and needs of each region. In the far North, they helped humans hunt, herd and travel for thousands of years, serving as the principal form of transportation by means of dog sled. When fur trappers and gold miners invaded Northern Canada and Alaska, they found that dog teams were the only suitable transportation – and the native Northern breeds were the best suited for the job, not only because they could pull effectively, but because they could handle extremely cold weather.

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