

MAPPING WEST NILE • CALGARY ON STAMPEDE



# CANADIAN Geographic

EXPLORATION AND DISCOVERY

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## BATTLING THE DRAGON

On the attack with Canada's  
elite boreal firefighters



SOLVING A 156-YEAR-OLD ARCTIC MYSTERY

### Burn season

**F**ORESTS HALF THE SIZE of Nova Scotia go up in flames every year in Canada. On average. Some years, half a million hectares burn; other years, eight million.

It's the big-fire seasons that are increasing in frequency. "We saw a lot more big-fire years in the 1980s and 1990s," says Mike Flannigan, a Canadian Forest Service scientist who is studying climate change and fire. "Instead of one or two every decade, we are now seeing four or five."

Are we ready for more big-fire seasons? The provincial and territorial agencies that fight forest fires can always use more money. But budgets aside,

Canada's forest firefighters are arguably the most advanced, technologically sophisticated and experienced in the world. Last summer, we dispatched writer Michael Clugston and photographer Todd Korol to the front lines in Saskatchewan to report on the latest in firefighting strategies and tactics. It turned out to be a big-fire year; well over two million hectares were consumed across Canada by season's end. What Clugston and Korol found was an aggressive intelligence-

gathering agency feeding such timely information to ground-operations managers that they were able to deploy firefighters and helicopters and water bombers in anticipation of fire rather than after blazes had taken off. Clugston's story is a fast-paced chronicle of the battle against one fire, dubbed the Dragon, as well as the story of one of the best firefighting organizations in the country.

**K**AREN WONDERS is an environmental art historian who contacted us last year with praise for an article we published on the bighorn hunt in Alberta. In passing, she mentioned a book she had written on habitat dioramas, and she wondered whether we knew the work of the great Canadian diorama painter Clarence Tillenius.

She hit a nerve. You can say all you like about your computer-driven, interactive museum exhibits, but if you want to

introduce kids to the marvels of nature, take them to a museum with a diorama, which features mounted animals in their habitats. Their appeal is timeless. And, as Wonders told us, some of the most spectacular dioramas in Canadian museums were created by Tillenius. Contributing editor Dane Lanken journeyed to Winnipeg to meet with an artist who has become a living legend. Lanken's profile of Tillenius tells the story of a man whose mission in life has been to faithfully portray in his art, which is based on close observation in the field, the spirit, character and habitat of Canada's wildlife.



When the smoke cleared, Franz Johnston painted *Fire-swept, Algoma* in 1920.

**W**E HAVE SIR John Franklin to thank for much of the mapping of the central Arctic. He, his crew and his two ships disappeared in 1847 during an expedition to locate the Northwest Passage. The search for the men and ships went on for years, each successive search party returning to Britain with ever more detailed maps of the High Arctic. Although the remains of some of Franklin's men were eventually found, the location of the ships remains a mystery to this day. This summer, Dave Woodman, Canada's most relentless Franklin investigator, returns to the Arctic to continue his methodical hunt for the ships. Bruce Grierson's profile of Woodman in this issue reveals a man utterly absorbed in his pursuit of those lost vessels, one of which may finally lie within his grasp.

Just as we were taking this issue to press, we learned that Franklin was not just an intrepid explorer, he was a sporting man. According to newspaper reports, Franklin noted in a letter he wrote during an 1825 overland expedition that he and his companions played a game of hockey at Fort Franklin (now called Déline) on Great Bear Lake, N.W.T. This appears to be the earliest-recorded reference to ice hockey in Canada. Associate editor Tom Carpenter reports in our "Discovery" department on that historic game of shinny at the lip of the Arctic Circle.

Rick Boychuk



# Contributors



MARTINE DOTYON

## BENOIT AQUIN

*Fire power, page 34*

Photographing razed woodlands, Benoit Aquin found himself wondering whether "drought and wildfires might be related to our exploitation of the forest, since fewer trees means less moisture in the air. I think we don't pay enough attention to these things." Aquin launched his career in 1987 after studying at the New England School of Photography for two years. His work has been exhibited in galleries in Canada and abroad and has appeared in numerous publications.

## DAVID CAMPION

*Rodeo sideshow, page 66*

"Once I started going to the Stampede, I couldn't stop," says photographer David Campion, who often works on projects over a period of years. "It's a visual feast, a crazy blend of past and present, rural and urban, myth and reality — all dressed up in a 10-gallon hat." Campion grew up in England and spent his teenage years in South Africa, where he dropped out of school to start working for the local newspaper. He has lived in Canada for more than a decade, and his photographs have been published internationally. Campion and writer Sandra Shields received this year's Hubert Evans Non-Fiction Prize for *Where Fire Speaks*, a book on their travels with the Himba tribe of Namibia.



FRANK VENA



NIRI KENDALL

## BRUCE GRIERSON

*Woodman's odyssey, page 74*

The more he learned about Dave Woodman, the more Bruce Grierson found to like about the former submariner who will return to the Arctic this summer in search of one of British explorer Sir John Franklin's long-lost ships. When Woodman began his obsessive quest for Franklin, "he was just this kid who wanted to find a wreck," says Grierson, "and then realized he'd bitten down on something bigger than he'd imagined, but it wasn't in his nature to let go." Grierson writes frequently for *Saturday Night*, *Popular Science* and *The New York Times Magazine*.

## WANITA BATES

*Summer in the pits, page 100*

"I love where I live," says Newfoundland-based photojournalist Wanita Bates, "and doing stories on all the interesting bits of Newfoundlandia that people on mainland Canada don't know about." This is Bates's third pictorial for *Canadian Geographic* about life on the island. A regular contributor to CBC-Radio, she recently won an international broadcasting award, the Gabriel, for a documentary on a religious order in St. John's. Her work also appears in many newspapers and magazines, including *Maclean's*, *Chatelaine*, *ELLE Canada*, *Border Crossings* and *Saltscapes*.



LUZ DRIFF

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70 The Esplanade, Suite 400  
 Toronto, Ont. M5E 1R2  
 Phone (416) 360-4151 Fax (416) 360-1526  
 e-mail: [adsales@canadiangeographic.ca](mailto:adsales@canadiangeographic.ca)

ADVENTURES/CLASSIFIED Lisa Duncan Brown  
 Phone (905) 702-0899 or toll-free 1-888-445-0052  
 Fax (905) 702-0887  
 e-mail: [classified@canadiangeographic.ca](mailto:classified@canadiangeographic.ca)

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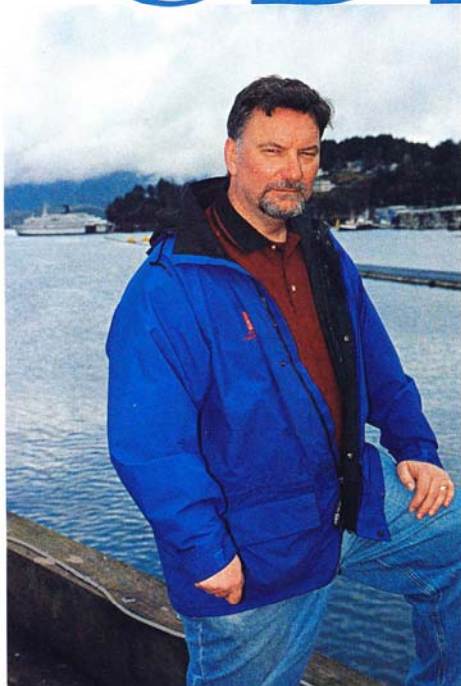
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# Woodman's ODYSSEY



GORDON MANN; RIGHT: J. FRANKLIN WRIGHT



*Sir John Franklin disappeared into  
the wilds of the Arctic 156 years ago.*

*So why is Dave Woodman  
still looking for his lost ships?*

**BY BRUCE GRIERSON**







**T**HE GUY IN THE IGLOO, mummified in caribou fur, waiting out a blizzard, that's Dave Woodman, accidental Franklin scholar. The picture was taken in 2001, on the seventh of the former navy lieutenant's trips to one of the most desolate spots in the Canadian High Arctic. The furs are a loaner from his friend Tom Gross, and the igloo was whipped together by the Inuit guide Saul Aksalook — both of whom have become boon companions to Woodman on a quest that can only be called obsessive.

The picture adorns Woodman's basement office in Prince Rupert, B.C., which he likes to keep just above meat-locker temperature, perhaps for verisimilitude as he patches together PowerPoint presentations of his nearly perennial Arctic excursions. This room does double duty. It's his base for his job as a consultant for a company that handles marine safety and security (chiefly training city firefighters to handle ship fires). And it's also where the Franklin flame is kept alive until Woodman rallies his search team to continue his hunt for a sunken ship in the place Inuit called "Where there are bearded seals." The place where, 156 years ago, the whole plot was set in train.

Sir John Franklin was, of course, the British naval captain whose lavishly funded quest to find the elusive final link in the Northwest Passage was the mid-19th century's equivalent of the moon shot. He never came home, dead or alive. All we know for sure about the good captain and his 129 men is that their ships were frozen into the ice in Victoria Strait. The only written communication ever found tells of a group of survivors trudging southward over wind-blasted King William Island. Forensic evidence hints at a grim end involving exhaustion, disease and cannibalism, even as search parties that would eventually number more than 35 scoured the Arctic in vain for the missing men. But crucial questions remain. How far did they get? How long did they live? Why did they make the decisions they did? And why has no sign of Franklin himself, who died at the

end of that first ice-beset winter, ever turned up?

Some clues almost surely lie in Franklin's two ships, the *Terror* and the *Erebus*. At one time, the ships contained logs, surgeon's journals, meticulous scientific records and perhaps daguerreotype plates with photographic evidence of an expedition that was going to hell. And there are plenty of reasons to believe they still do. "If there's any semblance of paper that's been preserved — and believe me, there are other cases where that has happened in the Arctic — then an expedition that has been silenced will suddenly be given voice," says James Delgado, a maritime archaeologist and executive director of Vancouver's Maritime Museum. That alone nudges the hunt for Franklin's ships toward the top of the list of newsworthy subaquatic searches of the moment — somewhere, perhaps, between the pre-Columbian Chinese junk at the bottom of the Sacramento River and Babe Ruth's piano in a Massachusetts pond. Locating the *Erebus* or the *Terror* would be, in Delgado's estimation, "among the top-10 finds in the annals of shipwreck exploration."

It seems fairly astonishing that neither the *Terror* nor the *Erebus* has yet been found, given that the water in the channel is not deep, remoteness isn't the scientific obstacle it once was and a warming trend has opened some sea which would have been pack ice in Franklin's day. But more surprising still is that the man sitting at his computer in Prince Rupert, munching sandwiches his wife made, is the odds-on favourite to do so — maybe as early as this summer.

**F**RANKLIN SCHOLARS are, as a species, more diverse and lively than your usual group of pale-skinned, nose-to-the-stone academics. But even in this company, Woodman, who is doubtless among the most distinguished, stands out. Built like a quarterback a couple months into the off-season, with just a few mica shadings of grey at the temples, he could be mistaken, if he strode into a classroom, for the guy there to fix the overhead projector (until he opened his mouth, that is, and a general knowledge of tidal breadth issued forth). He is a raconteur by Irish





# Franklin's expeditions



Surviving crew members of the expedition led by Sir John Franklin (BELOW) landed on April 22, 1848, on desolate King William Island (BOTTOM) after their vessels were crushed by ice. Dave Woodman (PREVIOUS PAGES) believes he is narrowing in on the location of one of the lost ships, depicted in this 1990 painting by Cape Breton artist J. Franklin Wright.

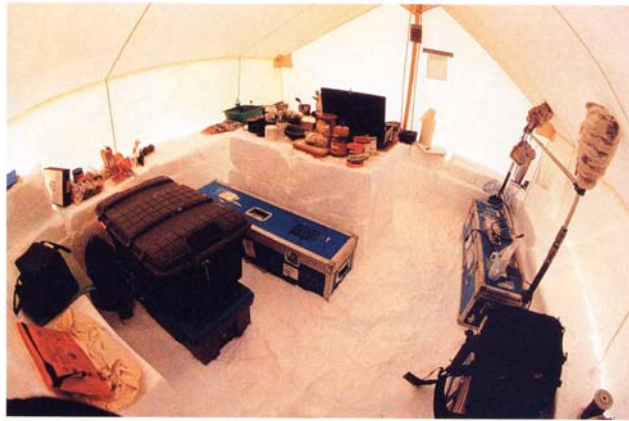


RIGHT: VANCOUVER MARITIME MUSEUM; BELOW: GEORGE HOBBSON

MAPS: STEVEN RICK/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC; SOURCE: G. HOBBSON







BOTH: DAVE WOODMAN; OPPOSITE: NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, GREENWICH, U.K.

Last spring, Woodman (LEFT) narrowed his search to eight sites. Based in a tent camp on a small island (ABOVE), he and his team spent three weeks crisscrossing the ice, measuring variations in the magnetic field on the sea floor.

## HE BELIEVES THE SHIP IS SITTING UPRIGHT IN 30 METRES OF WATER.

temperament and a contrarian by instinct. He must be among the very few historians to have lived aboard a submarine, had a letter published in *Playboy* and kept a to-do list that includes crossing the Gobi Desert and sailing solo around Cape Horn.

In the literal sense of the word, he is an “amateur” historian. His 1991 book, *Unravelling the Franklin Mystery: Inuit Testimony*, began as an on-spec manuscript lobbed over the transom of the prestigious McGill-Queen’s press. (“I was the only author in the history of the press without a degree,” he says, rather proudly. His editor at the press says that while she can’t be sure Woodman was the only, he was certainly “one of the very few.”) Woodman had brought an autodidact’s something-to-prove thoroughness to the task, and after the book was published, and generally embraced (Delgado relied on it when writing his own book, *Across the Top of the World*), he no longer needed a degree for credibility. But he finished his anyway by correspondence. After he’d sewn up his last credit, a mailing tube from the University of Manitoba arrived at the local post office, which in Prince Rupert is in the back of a Slurpee joint — thus providing Woodman with the deathless line, “I got my history degree from the 7-Eleven.”

And unlike those scholars whose fields of expertise seem to spring organically from their deepest passions, Woodman tripped over Franklin in the dark.

The original plan was somewhat grander. Growing up in London, Ont., to an accountant father and a homemaker mother who supported his fascination with the space

race, Woodman decided he would become the first man on the moon — until he did the math one day and realized “the chances of their letting a 13-year-old Canadian kid be the first man on the moon were slim. And if I couldn’t have *that*, I wasn’t interested.” So space was out. His new milieu would be the sea.

In 1974, he was an 18-year-old sport diver looking for a nice sunken ship, any sunken ship. “I wanted to find a virgin wreck that no one else had ever found,” he says — preferably one with a skeleton still bravely gripping the wheel. One Friday night at the University of Toronto, he spotted Captain Francis Leopold McClintock’s book *The Voyage of the Fox* on a library cart and, thinking it a sea adventure, cracked it.

“It said that the HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* were abandoned at 70.5 degrees north, 98.23 degrees west.” Jackpot. A glorious old wooden vessel pristinely embalmed in ice water. “I thought, ‘This is going to be dead simple. Go to those coordinates, drill a hole in the ice, dive down and you’re immediately famous.’ I actually went out and bought the best hiking boots I could find and a good sleeping bag, assuming I would use them the next year to go find the ships. If a little fairy had landed on my shoulder and said, ‘You’ll still be working on this when you’re 47,’ I’d have said, ‘No way. I don’t work on anything for 28 years.’”

That 28-year interval saw Woodman grow up — start a boatbuilding business, join the navy (“a way to get somebody else to pay for my hobbies”), have two daughters and return from sea to land a job as harbourmaster in Prince Rupert.





Franklin had died by the time his crew, lifeboats in tow, set out for land. This 1895 painting by Thomas Smith was based on descriptions of remains found at Erebus Bay.

The more deeply he bore into the Franklin story, the better he understood why it has such a hold on people: it is Homeric in its undertones. "He even has a Penelope waiting for him," Woodman says. "He's basically taken over from Odysseus." In the metamorphosis from callow adventurer to reluctant Franklin scholar (reluctant, that is, to apply the term "scholar" to himself), he had found a unique niche among Franklinphiles. He had become a kind of folklorist.

Part of the reason no one has yet found those ships, Woodman believes, is that historians have tended to be slaves to the conventional wisdom. Or, more accurately put, they are unwisely dismissive of the accounts of the people who ought to know best because they were the only eyes and ears present: Inuit.

Hunkered down in the archives of the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, poring over Inuit stories recorded in crabbed-handed pencil by 19th-century American Franklin sleuth Charles Francis Hall (who lived among Inuit for years), Woodman came up with a kind of counter-narrative. His theory is that Franklin's men lived much longer than conventionally thought; and while one of the ships probably sank near Erebus Bay, the other ended up hundreds of kilometres farther south than many believe, in

an area Inuit called "Utjulik." Where most historians will tell you that Franklin's men abandoned the ships and died en masse after the long march south across the pack ice from Victory Point, Woodman believes they in fact abandoned the abandonment, returned to the ships and, when the ice let go, sailed south to Erebus Bay. From there, the survivors pushed still farther south, and a handful made it to the North American mainland. But some may have lived longer still — integrating into the Inuit communities on Boothia Peninsula, due west of Baffin Island.

There is troublesome wiggle room in the evidence, to be sure. Inuit were strangers to Western concepts of time, distance and direction, and important clues were no doubt lost in translation from original observer to kinfolk to reporter. But steered largely by the vivid testimony of an eyewitness named Puhtoorak, Woodman believes the ship is sitting upright in about 30 metres of water at the north end of a chain of islets off the Adelaide Peninsula — some 140 kilometres south of the original point of besetment.

And in August, he aims to put his money where his mouth is. Aboard two Inuit fishing boats equipped with a side-scan sonar device, Woodman and a small team that will include Irish documentary filmmaker John Murray and a funder named Kevin Cronin will make a slow sweep over specific pockets of ocean. If the sonar detects a bump on the bottom, they will double back, don diving gear and go down with an underwater camera, hoping to make history.

It is by no means a wild guess. This will be Woodman's ninth visit to the area (several of those journeys have received support from The Royal Canadian Geographical Society), and on each successive expedition, he has snugged the net tighter. In 1992, he flew over the area aboard a long-range Aurora patrol aircraft with a magnetometer sticking out the back, hoping the 15 tonnes of cast iron in the engines of the lost ship would produce a signature. (Analysis by magnetometer expert Brad Nelson in Ottawa identified 65 possible hits — five of them "high priority.") Five years later, Woodman finessed his way aboard a Coast Guard icebreaker hired by a film company, and a sonar search reduced the hunting area further. In 2000, he piggy-backed on Delgado's historic Voyage of the *St. Roch* re-creation trip through the Northwest Passage and managed to eliminate one of the remaining three search boxes. (In intervening years, when no ship was available for the wreck search, Woodman organized land hunts for Franklin's grave on the northwest coast of King William Island.)

The sonar work was slow and ferociously inefficient. So in early spring 2001, Woodman fell back on the magnetometer — but this time, he and a team dragged the device on a sledge behind a snowmobile, back and forth, in a finger-(and mind-)numbing grid over the target area. By the end of the next year, he had reduced the search area from the original hundreds of square kilometres to eight points, each the size of a house — small enough to be checked out by a live eye.

"We narrowed the hayfield down to two stacks, and we've taken both of them apart to the point where we're down to handfuls of hay," Woodman says. "We've got eight handfuls left that could have a needle. Now we take those eight apart straw by straw."

**E**VEN THOUGH WOODMAN concedes that he is a driven man by nature, it's still hard to explain his absolute mulish refusal to give up, especially in view of the obstacles. The geology of Queen Maud Gulf makes it among the worst places for magnetic background "noise" on the planet. And landward, the broken limestone of northern King William Island — a terrain Woodman describes as "smashed dinner plates over of a field of bowling balls" — punishes anyone exploring on foot by wrenching their ankles and cutting their boots to ribbons. But his persistence starts to make sense when you consider that he is in much the same position as Franklin was in 1847. Like Franklin, who knew he was close to his goal of "closing the link" to the Northwest Passage (within 116 kilometres, it turned out), Woodman is in this thing too deep to bail out now. And also like Franklin, he has inspired apparently bottomless loyalty from his crew, come what may.

"Whatever I can do to help Dave realize his dream, I will," says Amie Gibbins, a clapper loader in the Vancouver film industry who did yeoman work on the magnetometer sleds in 2001 and 2002 (and happens to be the youngest and possibly the first woman to circumnavigate North America). "He once asked me why I'd keep going

up, given that I'm not going to reap any of the publicity or be in any of the documentaries. I don't care at all. I'm fascinated with the story — thanks to him."

As news of his summer excursion spreads, Woodman is bound to draw comparisons, perhaps to Briton Gavin Menzies, who authored last year's bombshell theory that the globe-trotting Chinese beat Columbus to America by 70 years. To an extent, the comparison holds. Both are retired submariners and amateur historians who came to their subject from a cold-tire start. Woodman, like Menzies, roams widely and pulls in all kinds of disparate evidence to support his claim — and he has his own radical ideas about history. But where Menzies, a self-promoter of P. T. Barnum proportions, has become fabulously wealthy, Woodman's first book, although a Canadian best-seller, won't pay off the mortgage and his second, *Strangers Among Us*, "sank like a stone." If anything, Woodman's approach is the opposite of hucksterism.

**O**N A STORMY DAY in January, Woodman and I settle in in his Prince Rupert living room to watch the Super Bowl. Outside, it is raining sideways. Woodman is nestled in against the winter, not unlike Franklin's men on Beechey Island — if Franklin's men had had a 27-inch colour television to help pass the time. The pre-game show is salted with high-octane ads featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michael Jordan. The hype is impressive.

"The problem with hype is, the actual event can never live up to it," Woodman says, settling deeper into the La-Z-Boy. "It's the same with my Arctic trip. People say to me, 'Hey, you're going to go find Franklin's ships.' I say, 'No, we're going to go look.'"

Is he hoping, ultimately, for vindication?

"If we find the ship or find the grave, it's not a vindication of me — it's a vindication of Puhtoorak and Seepunger," Woodman says of his two prime Inuit sources.

Because all writing about Franklin is inherently speculative, the mystery — no matter what happens in August — will never be entirely cleared up. And that sits just fine with David C. Woodman.

"I don't really know if I want it to be," he says. "To me, the story is more important than what actually happened. And it'll continue to be a great story as long as nobody ever solves it. I'd like to chip away some of the corners. If we find the ship, if we find the graves, if we get some logs — even those logs will only go to a certain date, they won't tell us what happened to the men who walked away from the ship. They'll never 'solve' it. People will be studying the angels on the head of this particular pin forever." ♦

*Bruce Grierson is a writer based in Vancouver.*

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# Re:sources

## An information guide to stories in this issue

For direct web links, visit [www.canadiangeographic.ca/resources](http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/resources)



A ground crew prepares to refill an L-188 Electra air tanker with fire retardant.

### BATTLING THE DRAGON

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For a basic guide to forest fires and fire ecology, check out *Wildfire: A Reader*, edited by Alianor True (Island Press, 2001). Hot spots for watching wildfires are listed in Mike Potter's book *Fire Lookout Hikes in the Canadian Rockies* (Luminous Compositions, 1998). Find out more about fire behaviour and ecology and fires as a natural disturbance at the Natural Resources Canada website, [www.nrcan.gc.ca/cfs-sct/science/resrch/forestfire\\_e.html](http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/cfs-sct/science/resrch/forestfire_e.html). For wildfire-prevention strategies, go to [www.partnersinprotection.ab.ca](http://www.partnersinprotection.ab.ca) and download the manual *FireSmart: Protecting Your Community From Wildfire*.

### SCENE SETTER Page 56

For a virtual look at Clarence Tillenius's paintings and dioramas, click on [www.wilds.mb.ca/tillenius](http://www.wilds.mb.ca/tillenius). Or to explore this great Canadian artist's life further, pick up *Tillenius*, with an introduction and artwork by Tillenius himself (Trails of the Interlake Studio, 1998).

### RODEO SIDESHOW Page 66

For the latest on the Stampede, check out [www.calgarystampede.com](http://www.calgarystampede.com). Surf to

[www.rodeocanada.com](http://www.rodeocanada.com) for information about Canada's professional rodeo circuit. *The Canadian Rodeo Book* by Claire Eamer (Western Producer Prairie Books, 1982) is another great source for tips on the rodeo life. History buffs will enjoy *A Brand of its Own: The 100 Year History of the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede* by James H. Gray (Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985). *Cowgirls* by Candace

Savage (Ten Speed Press, 1996) surveys the women of the Wild West.

### WOODMAN'S ODYSSEY

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For links to the Franklin mystery, cruise through [www.ric.edu/rpotter/SJFranklin.html](http://www.ric.edu/rpotter/SJFranklin.html). To experience the voyage first-hand, read Franklin's journal entries in *Journey to the Polar Sea* (Konemann 1998). For a fictionalized account of the expedition, pick up John Wilson's *North With Franklin: The Lost Journals of James Fitzjames* (Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1999). For an Inuit perspective on the lost ships, read David Woodman's two books, *Strangers Among Us* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995) and *Unravelling the Franklin Mystery: Inuit testimony* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

### WEST NILE MOVES WEST

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Learn about Health Canada's surveillance of West Nile virus this summer, and find links to provincial websites at [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/wnv-wnv](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/wnv-wnv). Buzz over to [www.mosquito.org](http://www.mosquito.org) to see how mosquitoes carry disease.

Compiled by Michael Bhardwaj

It's a boxer engine, front differential, transmission, transfer case, propeller shaft and a rear differential all built in a straight line.

For perfect balance and control.  
Symmetrical All-Wheel Drive. On every Subaru.

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