

Rane Willerslev

Expeditions:

From Tundra to Savannah

As told to Tommy Heisz

People's

Prologue

A Voice in the Wilderness

Adventure runs in Rane Willerslev's veins. He felt it from the moment he set out on his first real expedition at the age of twenty. It wasn't merely some youthful dream he had to act on so he could get on with his normal life. The adventure *was* his life. He had to keep going farther out; he had to get closer. He tried settling down among strangers and living with them for long periods of time, yet each time he traveled, he went out a little farther. All of that culminated at the turn of the millennium when he found himself isolated in a hut far out in the Siberian taiga. Emaciated, he lay in his bed as death by starvation drew ever closer.

When Rane entered the world on June 5, 1971, Denmark's Constitution Day, his twin brother Eske had just arrived. The two brothers have been together ever since. They're not merely twins; they're identical twins. They began as one fertilized egg that later split and formed two independent fetuses. Their eyes are the same color, their blood type is the same—their genetic material is identical, which is always the case with identical twins.

Everyone is born with a shadow that follows them everywhere. He learned that from the Yukaghir, who believe that the shadow is a person's soul and doppelganger. Rane was destined to have one made of flesh and blood, a copy of himself, and a guiding force in his life—especially when the two brothers started dreaming about the world beyond Denmark. As small children, one always knew what the other was about to say before he even started

speaking. Opening their eyes in the morning, they frequently discovered that they'd had the same dream. They shared an almost telepathic connection.

The will to knowledge must take precedence over everything else. Rane has been guided by that thought throughout his life. He learned that lesson from his father, a man he says he owes a lot to, even though his father was distant and absent when Rane was little. Among the few childhood memories Rane can evoke of his father is how he tried to harden his twin boys to make them resilient in stressful situations. At the local swimming pool, he would push them off the three-meter springboard, and in winter he would throw them into the icy waves of the Øresund. He said he wanted to make them men. Years later, as Rane approached adulthood, he learned a great deal from his father, who also prized academic learning. In his own way, his father had tried to prepare Rane for all his adventures and sojourns in the wilderness—for life as a grown man.

A voice in the wilderness calls to Rane—it has ever since he was a small child. Eske heard the same voice. As soon as the two brothers were old enough to make their own decisions, they knew they had to leave. They wanted to be adventurers, explorers, and they wanted to do it together. Countless siblings have entertained that thought throughout time, but Rane and Eske actually accomplished it.

As the boys got older, they started taking serious survival trips into nature. Once they were old enough, they went far out into the wilderness—out to where they were certain no one could find them. Later, their paths diverged. After going on several large expeditions with

his brother, Rane realized he had to strike out on his own. Siberia became his home turf, but he has also traveled throughout Africa, once again upending his worldview. And that's exactly what an adventure has to do for him—teach him to see the world and himself in new ways.

This book is based on a long series of conversations between the explorer and the author. We first met on a spring day in 2019 in Rane's corner office in the Danish National Museum's old rococo mansion. On the table in front of us sat a jumble of material from extensive expeditions to Siberia and East Africa—pictures and excerpts from old expedition diaries. "There must be a damn story here somewhere," Rane said, pinching a bit of snuff from his lower lip and placing it in the lid of a can on the table. He was right.

Together we travelled back in time and set out on our adventure. We soon realized that it involved much more than beautiful vistas and hardships. Naturally, locating a place to camp for the night and finding something to eat comprise a central part of any expedition—but for Rane, it involves much more than that.

Throughout his travels, Rane has explored what it means to be human. Meaningful existential issues have become a crucial part of his experiences. He was never the same when he returned home. Although anthropologist Rane Willerslev is a scientist, in his eyes the role of science is not to come up with biased answers and ridicule what we can't immediately explain. A good researcher is curious and open. As he once said in that corner office during one of our first conversations:

"If your experiences out in the world haven't fundamentally destabilized your worldview, you haven't really been on an adventure."

5

Eventually, the Forest Provides

Year: *1999-2000*

Location: *Sakha, northeast Siberia*

Participating: *Rane Willerslev*

Duration: *11 months*

First there's a loud bang, and then a ringing, crunching sound coming from all directions at once. The ice begins to crack. He feels everything start to move beneath his leather boots. With each step he takes, the sound around him gets louder. He knows these sounds might be the last he ever hears.

Crossing a river along these edges is like playing Russian roulette. Even in the dead of winter, with sub-zero temperatures, the ice in many places is thin and unsteady because of local currents and hot springs. If it cracks beneath him, he's a dead man—he'll only survive a few seconds in the icy water.

For days he's been staring into its eyes. Death. You can already see it in his face: his cheeks are sunken and his bones are protruding. Hunger has been gnawing at him for a long time, and he's about to be pulled down by fatigue. But if he surrenders to it, he's finished. And so he goes on, forcing one leg in front of the other.

"It's strange that I don't fear death. Only grief for everyone back home." That's what he wrote in his journal before he went out. As the ice starts to crack, he sticks one hand into his pocket, where he finds four cartridges left—his last faint hope for survival. He fishes out a cartridge and throws it into the river. "This is yours!" he shouts into the clear, frosty air.

Old Akulina told him repeatedly that you have to stay on good terms with the spirits by giving them small gifts. Now, he's given the river sprits one of his most valuable objects—the cartridge.

The ice stops cracking, and shortly thereafter he's walking on land on the other side of the river. Silence descends once again on the snowy landscape. Maybe there's an elk in these parts he can shoot—something to fill the hole in his stomach. Probably not, but he needs to cling to that hope.

Before he goes on, he turns to look back at the frozen river. What just happened? Is it possible Akulina was right?

By 1999, Rane Willerslev believes he knows the meaning of adventure. During his first expeditions, he often felt he was completely at the brink when it came to both dangerous situations and loneliness. Yet, he has no idea that the wildest experience of all still awaits. Over the winter of 1999-2000, a series of events puts him in a situation where he comes seriously close to death.

It all involves a business idea and an aid project that has failed miserably. During his time with the Yukaghir, Rane has come to realize that hunters selling their sable skins are systematically cheated by the mafia. Back in Denmark, he has seen how the skin is sold for up to 600 dollars at fur auction—and he knows that the individual Yukaghir hunter is bought off for about 15 dollars. Something is wrong.

Although the Yukaghir would rather hunt elk, they've been forced into an economic cycle where they have to invest in traps, rifles, cartridges, snowmobiles, and petrol to catch sable—and the profit margin is meager. During the Soviet era, they had to hand over their catches to a state-run farm at a fixed price. The farm, in turn, provided hunting equipment and a fixed monthly salary. In general, fur hunters made half-decent money; the most skilled hunters even received a bonus.

After the collapse of Communism, however, the market economy took hold, and hunting sable became unprofitable for the hunters. Dramatic increases in oil prices helped to destroy the business. Because the regional government in Yakutsk wanted to maintain sable hunting, it established a state-run fur company—but prices were a joke. Hunters were informed that they must continue hunting sable, but no one saw to it that their business model held together.

As early as a 1993 expedition, Rane and Eske got an idea: maybe they could transfer the notion of the Danish co-op to Siberia. Now, Rane has allied himself with a furrier from Copenhagen Fur and established the “Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project.” Their goal is to establish more direct trade connections to Denmark—to avoid all the costly intermediaries, so that the hunters can be assured of a reasonable income. Though it's a good idea and a beautiful

thought, the project runs into huge problems when reality rears its ugly head. Ultimately, all fur trade in Sakha is controlled by the fur mafia, whose hardline representatives in the area have no plans of voluntarily giving up an important part of their business.

Problems begin to surface seriously when the police suddenly arrest the Yukaghir leader. A business partner from the provincial capital who disappears is later found drowned in a river. Rumors soon spread that the police are on their way to the village of Nelemnoye to arrest Rane. At the end of September, he writes in his journal:

“Rumors are flying that Slava has been arrested ... Ivan is nervous. He went to Jura but doesn't know what they were talking about. No one can get anything confirmed. But everyone is nervous. What's happening there? Ivan says I need to pack up my stuff. Who knows what's going to happen. I pack my sleeping bag, the clothes from Akulina, a head lamp—a backpack weighing at least 20 kilograms. It sure as hell isn't fun not knowing what's happening.”

Later he writes:

“Haven't been able to write for several days. Everything's too hectic. The rumor turned out to be true—Slava was arrested. All the skins are with Dudief and the police in Zyryanka. Ivan woke me up in the middle of the night four days ago and said we had to leave—the police were on their way to arrest me. He looked desperate. Jura was ready to go with a snowmobile.... We rode off into the night. Fortunately, I had Akulina's warm clothes on. Because the snow cover is quite low, snowmobiles always get stuck. We're going to Spiridon's old cabin near upper Omulevka. It's so physically demanding to travel, sleep, and put up a tent that I haven't had any time to worry. But that's some serious bullshit.”

The cabin is far out in the wilderness; it takes an entire week just to get out there. Along the way, they spend nights in a canvas tent, out in the extreme cold. The plan is for Rane to stay in the cabin until any danger has passed. He'll also have a man, Ivan, and five dogs with him. Jura shoots an elk, so they have meat for a while, and they're given weapons so they can hunt. They're not sure how long they'll be there. For now, they have to fend for themselves.

The next few dramatic months in the log cabin prove to be a test of endurance and survival.

The log cabin is extremely primitive. It's about twelve square meters, and the ceilings are so low that they can't stand up straight. There's the imprint of a bear's paw on one wall. Apparently, an uninvited guest has been here recently, but according to Jura, it must have been friendly, because it didn't destroy anything. This bear is your friend, he reassures Rane. No timber has been used on the cottage's floor; the constant permafrost provides a permanent substratum of ice. A kerosene lamp and a rusty old metal stove offer light and warmth—one of the first things they do is build a secure foundation for the stove so that it won't burn down the cabin. Two benches of raw planks have been placed on opposite sides; Rane and Ivan lie for hours on their elk skins, staring into the air as they talk. A small table sits between the two benches. Traps

hang on the walls, along with some of the animals they eventually kill on their daily hunting excursions.

Outside the hut are five dogs in chains. Bim, a guide dog with white fur, is an intelligent creature with an amazing sense of smell who specializes in hunting elk. Another of the dogs, Jack, is particularly good at hunting sable, which are plentiful in the area. He's young and full of energy. The others are just stray dogs from the village. They followed when the snowmobiles drove off.

During the day, Rane and Ivan go out with the dogs to check the traps. They're so far north that they only get a few hours of daylight each day—and when there's no full moon, darkness engulfs everything. After a week in the cabin, Rane writes in his journal:

“An eventful day. Got up at 8.45. Ivan had made breakfast (elk soup) and spent the morning boiling the oil off the traps. Left at 11. He has the traps and bread and tea. I put the top of my backpack around my hip belt so I could carry extra mittens, a sweater, my muskrat hat, sugar, and mugs. The temperature was around minus 20, but we're still trudging around in rubber boots, because there's too little snow to pull on our leather boots—and in the middle of the day the snow gets wet. We took Bim and Jack with us. After an hour, we ran into a bunch of grouse, and Ivan shot one with the flint from 1957. The gun barrel takes 32 caliber shells, and the rifle barrel shoots with saloon rifle cartridges. It was originally used for squirrel hunting. Squirrel were once the most important source of fur for the Yukaghir until sables became vulnerable in the 1950s. The grouse is ideal as bait for the sable. The head is put in a hole in the snow, and feathers are laid on top of the trap.”

They're really more interested in the sable than the grouse. Sable meat isn't worth much, but its fur is valuable. They want to use their time here to build up a large stock of sable skin to take back to the village once the danger has passed. On the same day, Rane writes more in his journal:

"We walked on, and after only fifteen minutes Jack started barking. We ran over. A sable had sought refuge in a tall larch tree. I took the old squirrel gun and shot it with the saloon cartridge. Though I hit it in the throat, the sable didn't die. Then Ivan tried but he missed the target. I tried again—and I missed too. The sable had climbed all the way to the top of the tree, but must have lost consciousness, because it fell down and landed on a branch about 3 meters above the tree's root. Ivan shot one last time. We'd used more cartridges than we should have, but we were happy with our catch. The sable's fur was dark and fine; it had a winter coat. We cut down a smaller tree and used it to push the sable down with. Then we smoked a cigarette to celebrate our catch."

The elk that Jura shot for them before he left should have been hung on a rack to keep the meat away from hungry animals. They haven't had time to take care of it—they'd rather go out themselves to search for sable. The elk is buried in the snow a kilometer from the hut, and now and then they take some of the meat. Otherwise, their supplies are limited to a sack of flour, a sack of macaroni, a bottle of vodka, cigarettes, sweets, sugar, and tea. Jura has also supplied them with two firearms. They have 100 cartridges left for the saloon rifle, which has a shotgun barrel under the rifle barrel that can be used for small game. The old magnum caliber Mauser rifle is for big game—and they only have 10 cartridges for it.

Both men look forward to going hunting and the daily checking of the traps; they soon develop a rhythm and set off as soon as it becomes light. The rest of the day, they have to kill time in and around the wretched log cabin. They spend a lot of that time repairing traps and fixing other practical things. They might sit and skin a sable or two—hunting is going really well. Jack turns out to be an extremely talented dog when it comes to sable hunting. On a good day, they can bring back four to six animals. The skins hang on the wall in the cabin and emit an increasingly nauseating, rotten smell. Yet both Rane and Ivan are far beyond the point where that kind of thing bothers them. They continue their daily routines and celebrate their success every time another sable falls into one of their traps.

Ivan spends some of the dark hours in the log cabin learning Yakut. During their hunts, he teaches Rane about their surroundings and the animals in the area. For example, he'll point to a raven in the sky and comment that the black bird is a helper. A raven often flies close to a hunter and leads the way to larger prey, thereby providing itself with a light meal. "Where the raven flies, there are elk," as the saying goes.

There are a lot of wolves in the area also. Ivan teaches Rane that hunters consider the wolf their equal: they acknowledge its territorial rights and agree to back off its prey. Still, that respect has to go both ways, so a wolf must also respect the human hunter's territory. They come upon fresh wolf tracks, and one of the wolves—probably the leader of the pack—has swiped away the two hunters' footprints in all directions. According to Ivan, it's an indication that the wolf is saying: "This is my territory. Stay away." It also indicates that the wolf is not afraid, which means it's dangerous and should be shot if it shows up again.

“I sure as hell don’t like the idea of lying like a frozen corpse out here.”

That’s what Rane writes one day in his journal. At that point every day has fallen apart, and the crisis has seriously taken hold in the small log cabin:

“The hunger is really bad. We’re tired, no energy. Ivan’s foot is bad. No one gets up in the morning to light the fire. Too tired to chop firewood... I asked Ivan if we should try to reach Nelemnoye on foot. But it’s hopeless. We don’t have the strength, and then there are the rivers. We’ll fall through and drown, or the police will get hold of me and kill me. We’re emaciated. If we don’t get food, we’ll die within a few weeks. When I ask Ivan about it, he says, ‘Eventually, the forest always provides.’ Bullshit! Not a trace of elk. Even he just lies there with his hollow cheeks, filthy on his bunk. He’s weaker than me. It’s probably the end.”

Translated by Mark Mussari.