



# northern ICE ROAD realities

story & photos André Fecteau

The drama of Saskatchewan's northern ice roads isn't what you find on reality television, perhaps. But the roads are a unique place from which to observe the effects of the province's resource industry.

No, it won't be the tremendously fearful ride Rick Yemm and Hugh Rowland promised, and the stakes won't go up on foul language before the commercial breaks. Forget *Ice Road Truckers*: haulers will tell you it's full of moose dung and other expletives.

Ice roads in Saskatchewan don't star in a pumped-up show: they're a reality for hundreds of people in the province. They're the symbol of the modern northern mind, the intricate relationship between commodity and solitude. It's man harnessing the environment for his own means, yet beholden to the beauty and peace of the country. It's the sound of a semi-trailer truck on a frozen Precambrian lake.

The morning air here is crisp. Many would shudder at a thermometer close to  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ , but it is characteristic of a bright March day. The skies are dressed in the palest blue and stripped of clouds and life. A touch of rose, crafted by the nascent sun, hangs low above the evergreens up on the far hills.

Thick forests, big hills, and pure lakes may not be the first images associated with Saskatchewan, but past Prince Albert, the iconic never-ending golden fields waving to and fro under the infinite prairie sky quickly disappear. The northern half of the province is rocky and solid Canadian Shield.

In this scenery, long past La Ronge, Highway 102 unravels up and down following a sinuous path. The area is serene. Even the few traces of

civilization in the small settlements along the way do not disturb the quiet.

Just before the hamlet of Brabant, a private road branches off. It veers once to the right and gives way to a clearing used by tired truckers who have racked up enough miles or hours for the day. Then it slowly turns left and suddenly, unexpectedly, the sun's rays bounce back from the snow and blind the eyes: it's pristine white Brabant Lake and, like a big scar running in the middle of it, the ice road.

It is in fact not so much a road as a clearing of snow large enough for four trucks to drive side by side. Every year it follows the same windy path and swirls around uninhabited islands and headlands. It hops 28 times from water to land over 53 kilometres and a dozen lakes. At the end of it, like a spaceship in a New Mexico desert, stands the Seabee gold mine, owned by Saskatoon-based Claude Resources.

To many, an ice road sounds like a crazy and treacherous idea, but truckers think about it differently, including Dave Doucet. Approaching Brabant Lake at 10 km/h, he explains why he has returned to these roads for the past five years. "There's nothing here. It's a nice and relaxing day," he says. The idea is appealing: no four-wheelers whooshing by, the slow pace on the ice, and the dollars accruing by the tick of the clock rather than by the mile. And the added perk of being home every other day, depending on your destination, as opposed to multiple-day hauls to Dallas, Los Angeles, or Toronto.

There's also the enjoyment of nature: despite the sparse wildlife during the winter, some lucky truckers have been escorted by curious foxes on Brabant Lake and creative otters have been spotted surfing—literally—the snow.

Doucet admits, "It's actually pretty boring."

below: Trucks like this tanker travel the ice at low speeds of 25–30 kph to avoid creating a "wave" beneath the ice that can travel ahead of the rig and cause the road to buckle and fail.



**B**oring. What to make then of the combined weight of his truck and load of propane nearing 36 tons, and the fact that he's driving on about 29 inches of ice? Boredom is relative in this country.

The risk of breaking through the ice may seem high, but several preventive measures make the roads safer and alleviates the level of stress, says the road veteran from Osler, a bedroom community 30 kilometres north of Saskatoon.

On the Seabee road, the thickness of the ice is monitored by marshals from Saskatoon-based Northern Resource Trucking, the main company hauling on the road. They measure the ice regularly to ensure it can support the loads and that it is at least 26 inches thick.

Speed limits are strict and truckers slow down for their own benefit. Cruising speed is 25 km/h when hauling, and 30 km/h when empty. Speeds in excess of these limits could give a wave under the frozen surface the momentum necessary to create enough pressure to break through the ice layer, swallowing in a big gulp the truck, its load, and the driver.

Although nobody has ever gone through the road to Seabee, it does happen and some lakes are known for being more prone to such malevolence.

Brad Caisse is one of those who can tell such a story firsthand. Ten years ago, the Saskatoon resident was hauling on ice roads for the first year for a company contracting on Lake Athabasca. One day, the rear wheels of his truck broke through, jackknifing the trailer and the truck vertically.

Panicked, he rolled his window down and tried to escape, but his leg was jammed behind the steering wheel. He paused for a moment and considered his predicament.

"I realized the truck wasn't going anywhere," he says. "So I came back in, got my jacket, and got back out." He laughs, pounding the floor with his strong legs. He doesn't wear boots.

Unfortunately, nature is not kind to everyone. A week before this meeting with Caisse in February 2011, a 54-year-old man driving a bulldozer on Cree Lake fell through while working at the Cree East uranium exploration site.

Regardless, ice roads constitute one of the mainstays of the mining industry at a time



when mineral extraction is getting good press in Saskatchewan.

A survey conducted in 2008 by the Saskatchewan Mining Association found that 82 percent of Saskatchewan's residents thought the mining industry was important to the province and that 92 percent were supportive of this economic sector.

This was reflected by premier Brad Wall's manoeuvring to keep Potash Corp.'s ownership in Canada in 2010: mining is faring well in Regina, too.

Not all minerals enjoy such a good reputation, however, according to trucker Tom Grimsdale. Despite Saskatchewan being home to the largest uranium mill in the world, its mining and transport remain sensitive issues for residents, he says.

Despite the controversies, the mining industry remains central to northern Saskatchewan, not only in economic terms, but also socially, says Caisse, the bootless trucker. The Île-à-la-Crosse native is of mixed Aboriginal ancestry and describes himself as Cree. He has contended with a depressing state of affairs in the Precambrian back country.

He's fighting a lifelong battle against drug and alcohol abuse. As a young man, he sought a better life in Saskatoon, which did not materialize,



and his substance dependence led him to a stint in prison. It was the birth of his first child that helped him turn it all around—he wanted to be a good role model for his kids.

Today he says he's proud of his achievements: four teenagers at home, all fluent in Cree and with aspirations to post-secondary education, and most importantly, clean from drugs and alcohol.

Caisse says the mines are the northerners' chance to avoid the mistakes he has made. Mines provide work and good salaries, and with the one-week-in, one-week-out work arrangement, people can achieve a good work-life balance.

His optimism stops short of saying the situation is perfect, however. "If only [the mining companies] could give 0.75 percent back to the communities," he says. Northern towns would be then in a much better position to cope with the social problems plaguing the almost 35,000 residents.

A 2010 report published by the Centre for the North systematically ranked northern Saskatchewan (Division No. 18) in the top three of Canada's most underprivileged regions, along with northern Manitoba and Nunavut. The criteria assessed included "homes needing major repairs" (ranked first at 38 percent), "homes with six or more people" (ranked third at 18 percent), and "adults between 25 and 64 years old without a high school diploma" (ranked first at 49 percent).

According to the same report, northern Saskatchewan's median annual income (the midpoint amount where half the population earns above and the other half earns below) bottomed at \$13,600, second only to Manitoba's Division No. 19 (North East).

However one must be cautious in making bold negative statements about economic developments in the region. Saskatoon-based trucker Harold Brand says he has seen some improvements since he started hauling to the north in 1993.

The 65-year-old, who has been sitting behind a wheel since the mid-1960s and is driving for "another couple of years" before retiring, says the presence of mines in the area means infrastructure upgrades. Highway 2 is now asphalted past La Ronge, and northern highways are well maintained and in good condition, he says.

For the furthest and most isolated communities, these roads created more reliable links to the larger centres in the south, increasing access to certain services and opportunities, such as higher education. Speaking strictly of the First Nations youth, Brand says that they have a chance to pursue academic dreams that were not always

available, and he believes they should take advantage of it. "There are lots of bright young Natives," he says.

He says he's confident they can improve things, because of their resiliency and their good spirits, which always surprise him. "Have you noticed their sense of humour?" he asks.

Wittiness and congeniality are traits to which truckers respond well. Despite what some people might say about drivers doing what they do because they don't play well with others, the reality is that their world is filled with camaraderie, and maybe even more so on the empty northern roads.

Their life of solitude is made easier through technology, and the most important instrument in their cab is arguably the CB radio. "They are life savers," says Gerald Braeland, a veteran trucker who crisscrossed the province for 29 years, and who has hauled on ice roads for the past six winters.

Braeland, like most truckers, has the formidable capacity to differentiate countless voice registers and tones, even on speakers that are not very clear, which allows him to recognize colleagues and friends immediately and catch up on the latest news.

Information travels fast on the CB. When a pickup truck collided with a trailer at the Otter Rapids' bridge about six kilometres north of Missinipe in March 2011, the dozens of truckers on the 400 kilometres separating Prince Albert to Brabant Lake relayed the details in no time. No need for smartphones.

Other information, however, might not travel as quickly. At the Seabee gold mine one night, an ice marshal, who doubles as a runner to assist truckers, returned to his room at the hamlet of Brabant at 3 a.m., after waiting for four hours in his pickup truck for a trucker who didn't make it to the mine. He acknowledged that communication between dispatch, himself, and the truckers is not perfect and he doesn't always know when his drivers will show up. (Satellite phones aren't exactly reliable in the area.)

But who knows where the trucker had spent the night. Tucked in his berth between the mini-fridge and the microwave, he was sound asleep, alone in the comfort of his cab. Outside, the roar of a tractor-trailer engine was resonating in the middle of the Precambrian forest. 🌲

see more

>Ice Road Truckers - SeaBee Gold Mine 1991

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kncngDeLupM>



Typically northern ice roads are ready for heavy traffic by late January or early February.