

DRIVING THE DEMPSTER

**How to Tackle the Dempster Highway
with Confidence and a Smile**

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PROLOGUE

The drive from Dawson City to Tuktoyaktuk—where the Dempster Highway ends and the Arctic Ocean begins—is one of North America’s great road adventures. You’ll pass through jaw-dropping scenery, cross the Arctic Circle, and cruise into communities where the road literally ends. But this is no ordinary road trip. It's remote, it's wild, and there's only one way in... and one way out.

So how do you prepare for a trip like this? You plan smart, travel safe, and embrace a little frontier mindset—with a well-stocked vehicle and a flexible attitude. Here’s how to do it without losing sleep, traction, your sense of humour—or your lunch to a pothole.

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Before You Go: Planning for the North

Road Condition Services

Before heading out, check road conditions daily. Both Yukon and Northwest Territories offer essential services that can help you avoid trouble before it starts:

- **Yukon – 511 Yukon:** Real-time road conditions, construction updates, webcams, and ferry schedules.
 - Website: 511yukon.ca
 - Phone: Dial **511** in Yukon or **1-867-456-7623** from elsewhere.
- **Northwest Territories – DriveNWT:** Interactive maps showing highway status (open, caution, closed), ferry operations, and live traffic cameras.
 - Website: [DriveNWT Road Conditions](http://DriveNWT.Road.Conditions)
 - Phone: **1-800-661-0750** for recorded updates, or **867-777-7146** (Inuvik Region).

Let's start with the obvious: this is not a Sunday drive. The Dempster Highway is 740 km of mostly gravel road, extending over permafrost, tundra, mountains, and rivers. And you're headed to a place where roadside assistance is more of a theoretical concept than a reliable service.

Preparation is everything



1. Know Your Route

Get a current hard-copy map and download offline maps to your GPS or mobile app. Cell service along the Dempster is sparse to non-existent. Plan your fuel stops—Eagle Plains, Fort McPherson, Inuvik—and don't just hope they're open. Call ahead before leaving Dawson City, as they occasionally close due to weather, power outages, or northern life doing its thing.

2. Timing is Everything

Plan your trip between late June and early September, when ferry crossings are operating and weather conditions are generally more favourable. The ferry crossings at the Peel and Mackenzie rivers run only during the open-water season. Outside that window? You're either waiting for ice roads to form or break up. Neither are travel-friendly times unless you're filming a documentary.

3. Watch the Wildfire Forecast

Wildfires are a real and growing risk, especially in late summer. Before you travel, check the [Yukon](#) and [NWT](#) wildfire and road conditions websites. Download the *Wildfires Near Me* app or *Firesmoke Canada*. Carry a portable weather radio. If the wind shifts and the road closes, you'll want a heads-up sooner rather than later.

Vehicle Prep: Make Your Rig Dempster-Ready

The Dempster doesn't require a 4WD, but it does require a healthy, well-prepped vehicle. This road eats tires for breakfast and suspension parts for lunch.

1. Tires, Tires, Tires

Fresh, 10-ply LT-rated tires are strongly advised. Carry two full-size spares—not donuts, not run-flats. And yes, you need to know how to change a tire on gravel in the rain while swatting mosquitoes the size of hummingbirds.

2. Fluids and Filters

Top off all fluids, double-check your coolant, inspect belts and hoses, and take a look at your wheel bearings—they get no love and all the punishment. Bring engine oil, transmission fluid, and windshield washer fluid (you'll use a lot). A clogged air filter can ruin fuel economy—dust is constant. It's smart to check it mid-trip or even bring a spare if space allows.



3. Emergency Supplies

Think beyond jumper cables and flares. Pack a tow strap, tarp, traction aids, tire plug kit, 12V air compressor, and a quality jack. Toss in duct tape and zip ties—you'd be amazed what you can MacGyver with those two.

What to Bring (Besides a Sense of Adventure)

There are no fast food joints up here, no charging stations, and no convenience stores for 300 km in any direction. What you bring, you depend on:

- **Fuel containers:** Not optional. Carry at least one extra 20L jerry can—two is better. If you're running diesel, double-check availability at each stop.
- **Food and water:** Pack enough to last several days, just in case. Protein bars, canned goods, and snacks you won't hate on Day 3.
- **Clothing:** Layers, rain gear, and spare boots. Arctic weather changes on a dime.
- **Communication:** A *satellite messenger* or *inReach* device is your best friend out here. Cell phones are mostly useless north of Dawson.
- **Shelter:** Even if you have a van or RV, bring a tent or tarp shelter. If you break down, it may be your living room for a while.
- **First Aid Kit:** A real one. Not just Band-Aids and aspirin. Include insect repellent, antihistamines, burn cream, and a good tick remover.

Personal Experience: Rolling the Dempster Twice Over

I've had the privilege (and let's be honest, the occasional headache) of driving the full length of the Dempster not once, but twice—and in very different rigs.

The first time? An ambitious undertaking in a 43-foot diesel pusher motorhome. That's right—over 30,000 pounds of comfort crawling up and down gravel inclines and rattling over frost heaves. It all went surprisingly well until nearly 100 miles north of the Arctic Circle, on our trip back down, when mechanical trouble left us stranded. Roadside assistance wasn't just a phone call away—it was a long, complicated process of coordinating recovery and waiting patiently. Help eventually came, but the lesson was clear: when the road says it's in charge, you listen.

The second time was in a trusty 4x4 Jeep Wrangler, where the terrain was more exciting than a barrier. That trip included one particularly memorable moment—changing a flat tire on the Jeep, 60 miles north of Eagle Plains, while being absolutely devoured by black flies and mosquitoes. Even if I'd been dressed in layers, they would have had a feast—I was in a t-shirt and shorts. It was like being the buffet at an insect family reunion.

Both trips taught me the same thing. The Dempster is not just about where you're going—it's about how you handle what it throws at you. And sometimes, it throws a lot.



On the Road: Driving Smart

You're ready, your rig's ready, and you're cruising past Tombstone's jagged peaks. Now what?

1. Slow Down, Seriously

Gravel roads can lull you into a false sense of confidence—right before you fishtail into a ditch. Keep speeds under 80 km/h. Drop to 60 in loose gravel or poor weather.

2. Watch for Washouts and Wildlife

Rain can turn sections into tire-sucking sludge. And yes, you might meet a moose, caribou, or bear on the road. Give them space—and your respect. They're locals.

3. Fuel Up—Every Time

Never skip a gas station, even if you're half full. And make sure your jerry cans are topped up before leaving Dawson City. Assume the next one may be closed, dry, or 300 km away.

If You Break Down

Here's the thing—you probably won't. Most people who come prepared finish the drive with bragging rights and great stories. But if you do:

1. Stay With Your Vehicle

Unless you're 100% sure help is just over the next rise, don't wander off. A vehicle is easier to spot from the air than a human in a raincoat.

2. Communicate If You Can

Use your satellite device to check in. Some allow two-way messaging. Share your location and what help is needed.

3. Signal for Help

Put your hood up. Lay out bright-coloured tarps or reflective gear. If someone passes, they *will* stop. Travellers help each other up here—it's part of the code.



If You're Trapped by Fire



Hopefully this remains theoretical, but with fire seasons getting longer, it's worth knowing what to do.

1. Tune In and Track the Fire

Use your weather radio or satellite device to get updates. Fires can move fast with the wind, but roads rarely close without warning.

2. Don't Drive Through Smoke

Visibility drops to zero and fire behaviour is unpredictable. If caught in light smoke, turn on your headlights, hazard lights, close your vents, and stay in the vehicle until it's safe to move. Turn back, or stop at a safe area—gravel pit turnouts can work.

3. Contact Authorities

Use your device to reach RCMP or territorial fire services. If you're in a safe spot and waiting it out, they need to know.

Final Thoughts: Yes, You Should Absolutely Go

Is it remote? Yep. Is it rough in places? You bet. But that's what makes it *worth* doing. You'll see wild landscapes few ever will, meet people who live with true northern resilience, and reach the Arctic Ocean under your own steam.

Go in prepared, not paranoid. Adventure likes company, but it loves preparation. Respect the road and the land. And when you dip your toes in that cold Arctic water at the end of the line, you'll know you've done something unforgettable.

So load up the truck, check your tires, and point yourself north. The Dempster isn't just a road—it's a rite of passage.

