MY NEW YEAR'S POLAR BEAR DIP
By Pat Wolfe

My two mares, six year old Emmeline and four year old Gaja, fell through the ice on my beaver pond the other day. What a shock that was for me and for them. I've been on the pond with the horses for many winters, racing with the cutter, riding, and pulling home heavy loads of firewood in the sleigh. I never go on the ice with the horses without there being lots of ice and I've never had a problem before. I always wait for many days of below freezing weather, and I check the ice many times before the first crossing.

Like I've done for eleven other Januarys on this property, that morning I checked the depth of the ice with my portable drill, and finally it was solid enough, 9 inches thick in the middle of the pond, more than enough to carry the pair, a ton of horse all told, and the sleigh. However, I didn't think to check near the shore. Doesn't it stand to reason it would be as thick or thicker there? There being less water to freeze? I'd never had a problem before.

This year proved to be different and taught me a lesson, one that could have been a very serious lesson. Somehow, after freeze up, the water level in our pond dropped four inches, leaving many inches of ice on top of a four inch airspace and then water, not solid enough to hold a ton of horse flesh.

Getting on the pond on the close shore was not a problem. The mares pulled my work sleigh across the few hundred yards of pond and were just about to climb the far shore when they broke through. When I felt them going through, I tried to push them on, hoping to get on shore before the worse.

But Gaja went through first. She fell down and just lay there. She has a tendency to lie down when something bad happens. She was covered with icy, muddy water with only her head out. As she fell, she pulled Emmeline down on top of her. Luckily Emmeline didn't get as wet. Being Fjords and trusting me, they both lay there quietly while I worked frantically to free them.

The harness was stretched tight and operating as fast as I could in the frigid water, I cut Emmeline's harness in three places with the pocket knife I always carry. The mares were lying in the icy water for about ten minutes while I worked. As soon as they were untangled and cut away from the sleigh which had now sunk through the ice into deeper water, I led them out of the pond and tied them to a tree. I was 20 minutes from the house and the horses were now soaked through their heavy coats. But I couldn't take them back over the pond or even lead the two on my own.

I ran back around the hole, across the ice, and up to the barn for warm blankets. Emmeline was fine when I returned with my wife Jane, but Gaja was shivering. We put their blankets on and tried to figure out how to get them home.

We have a narrow foot bridge which crosses the creek that runs into the beaver pond. It's a few hundred yards up the creek and it's in rough shape with holes in the plank flooring, but that was now the only way back to the barn. Jane led Gaja and I led Emmeline with the harness piled up on her, cut pieces and all, and we walked the

half hour home.

As soon as we got into the barn, I rubbed the mares down and thanked my lucky stars I own Fjords. Would the outcome have been different with another breed?

Gaya looks wet and chilly after her New Year's adventure. She's ready to be rubbed down.

I learned two lessons the hard way. First I will check the ice wherever I drive the horses, every step of the way. Secondly, I need to put quick release snaps on my tugs and also on the neck yoke. At the moment my yoke is fixed to the pole.

Pat uses his trusty come-a-long to pull the work sleigh out of the pond.

After I got the harness fixed I went out and bought a pair of walkie-talkies so I can keep in touch with the house when I'm working with the horses in the bush. I hitched the following day to make sure the horses were fine, and they were. But it was a few weeks before I was driving on the beaver pond again, and only after a very thorough check on the thickness of the ice.