

On the Trail in Denali National Park

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Editor's note - The first installment of this series can be found [here](#).

"Agh, six-thirty already? How can that be? Didn't we just lie down? Where am I? Am I talking out loud?" I wondered as I reluctantly unzipped my -40 degree sleeping bag. A full bladder after a toasty night's sleep was just what I needed to prod me out of bed and get this day underway. Riley Cabin had been good to us, but after five days on the trail we were due for a shower and a soft bed. It was warmer outside than in the cabin by a few degrees; practically tropical as the thermometer read 25 degrees below zero! After scurrying back indoors and knocking all the snow off my bunny boots, it was time to get the dogs' breakfast going. As the water began to heat on the stove, my thoughts drifted back to the last few days...

Trish and I, along with Carmen and David Tomeo, the program director for the Denali Institute and long time musher, began our trip in the city of Cantwell. Our goals were to patrol the southern boundary line of the wilderness area, looking for illegal use of snowmobiles, and also to reach Riley Cabin, which had not been visited by mushers since 2003. Our first scheduled stop was Upper Windy Cabin on Windy Creek. Frustration hit almost immediately, so I called Trish over the radio using her call number. "2-5-1, do you copy?" I said. "Go ahead," Trish called back. "I think I have lost the trail," I responded, hearing the frustration creep into my voice. She described the little hill where the sled tracks dropped down into the gorge just after a nice straight away with a small spruce tree on the right. Looking around, I saw no less than five trails that matched the description. "Wonderful," I thought aloud. "Copy that," I replied over the radio, "I'm just gonna turn my team around and head back to where I think the trail might be." This is no easy task, making six psyched up sled dogs go the opposite direction they are relentlessly lunging towards. It was easier than expected though, at least this time; no major tangles, no fights, and the snow hook I drove into the ground even stayed anchored. "Good dogs," I told them, "good dogs." As I pulled the hook out of the packed snow, I noticed another musher heading my direction on the trail. "Cool," I thought, "another musher!" Turns out, it was David bringing up the rear and telling me to turn my team BACK around. The nice little trail Trish described was merely a few hundreds yards from where I turned around the first time. Bitter sweet news, but I was happy to be going the right way.

All four teams made it safely to the cabin on that Friday the 13th beneath a full moon. Once at our destination, the dog teams were picketed out, and each pup took a minute to dig down into the snow and make a nice bed for the night. Balling up and laying their tails over their noses kept them nice and warm while we tended to the ever-present chores. Water was drawn from a hole in the nearby creek, hauled back to the cabin, and heated over the cast iron wood-burning stove in the far corner. The dried, split wood stacked opposite the stove quickly dwindled as log after log was tossed into the inferno. While conducting research on Ovenbirds in the mosquito-infested swamps of Mississippi, Trish and I ran across a fellow camping nearby who said he didn't know how to make a small fire; these are words my dad and I also live by! It was cold though, and it seemed like no matter how much wood I threw in, the cabin never really warmed up. However, the dog water was heating nicely, and once it was warm enough, we all scrambled back out to feed the teams. In their three-quart, shiny metal food bowls they get 1.5 quarts of warm water mixed with about a quart of dry kibble. Each dog also gets a chunk of dark yellow poultry fat for extra calories. Hmm, yum. Luckily, we had a little more tempting dinner of pasta with mushroom sauce waiting to be made. David whipped up a batch of homemade biscuits on the woodstove for us to mop up all that sauce from our bowls! That evening, we swapped stories from the mush in. It's funny how we all went the same route (eventually!) but each noticed such different things: the cute and quirky actions of the dogs, the absolutely stunning landscape, the full moon, the 3 foot ice shelf drop-off we all went over, the snowmobile tracks which zoomed past the "no snowmobiles" sign. With the final light of the glowing lantern being extinguished, we all zipped up tight in our bags. One of David's leaders, Carlo, and one of our dogs, Aspen, were also treated with a dry cabin to sleep in. Not warm, mind you, but dry. "Why do you think they call it Windy Creek, Brad?" David asked from the floor as the moon cast a faint light on him. "Probably 'cause it's so warm and sunny," I said with



a smile masked by darkness. Then the snoring started.



David was kind enough to get water started for the dogs' breakfast the next morning. After feeding the dogs, having our own breakfast, cleaning up, and preparing our sleds, all four teams set out for Riley Cabin on what would be one of our most memorable days thus far. David's team led the pack, breaking trail and finding the best route possible. My team was bringing up the rear, and doing so fairly slowly. The eight bull moose we saw slowed us for a bit as I watched in awe. Fang Mountain bathed in sunlight took the breath right out of my lungs. We all agreed later that we could have stopped for the day in the shadow of this mighty and ominous monster. I had to keep moving though, and finally my team caught up with the others. Our next task lay just ahead of us; climb and cross Windy Pass. It was slow going as we crept up the pass, taking a lot of short breaks, both for the dogs to rest and for us to rest. It's tough work out there, but it's worth every drop of sweat and blood (yes, it is possible to sweat at 30 below); it's worth the chipped tooth, the dog bite I got while breaking up a fight, and the bruised leg from a sharp steel snow hook that tried ever so hard to impale me. Going slow over passes gives you time to reflect on such things. But the summit did not elude us for much longer - it was a steep but relatively short climb. David waited on top of the pass until we had all gone by, then he turned his team around and headed home. It was interesting to watch him disappear over the edge of the snowy mountain pass behind a string of dogs...can't wait till next time David!

The next turn on the backside of the pass yielded a sobering image. Resting just atop the wind sculpted snow a mere hundred yards apart were the skulls of a dall sheep and caribou. They looked pretty young to me, but the bleaching and bite marks from rodents suggested they had been there a while, several years perhaps. There is no way to know the story of how they made it to their final resting place, but a lesson is learned. One mistake and.....well, the arctic can be cruel and unforgiving. "Ready guys, let's go," I merely whispered as the team jolted back to work. There were many more miles to travel and no time to waste. Darkness would soon devour us.

The snow was deep, maybe two feet in some areas. My leaders were having a tough time on the trail, constantly sinking up to their bellies in the snow. Being the last team in the order, I slowed my guys quite a bit to allow room for Trish and Carmen to work ahead of me. I thought I had it made too - just sit back, pet the dogs, and let the girls do all the hard work. But a two hour wait on the middle of a frozen creek at 20 below gets COLD! My team did the instinctual thing and bedded down, making their little holes in the snow to stay protected and warm. And here I was on the back of my sled doing all kinds of dance moves to try and stay warm. But my crazy buddy and director of the Klamath Bird Observatory, John Alexander, has the best helicopter arm spinning move that he uses to keep hands warm. Just trust me, it works.

"2-5-2...come on ahead, but be careful because there are several open water crossings," Trish called to me over the radio. I felt bad asking my team to uncurl themselves to get back to work, but they were eager to please and ready to pull. I had Orca and Shadow as leaders, and I knew these guys were not afraid of any stinking water. Luckily I was right, but Trish and Carms didn't have it quite so easy. After begging and pleading proved ineffective, they had to get off their sleds and pull their teams across the creeks. Leading by example works great for dogs, too! Proper gear kept us all warm and dry, even after the creek crossings, so we continued on. Trish and her team took the lead for the last (and longest!) mile. Our sleds were heavy with ice after going through so much water, which made for slow travel and a lot of hard work. Despite our 10 weary hours on the trail so far, it was hard to ignore the beauty surrounding us. The moonlight was so bright that the spruce trees cast shadows on the snow, and the night sky was breathtaking.

Up front, Trish was spending less time appreciating nature's beauty. One of her leaders wasn't cooperating, she and her team were tired, and the constant dodging of holes and open water was beginning to take its toll. But the thought that weighed more heavily on her mind was the fact that none of us had ever been to this cabin before (translation: none of us knew where it was). Through the use of a GPS unit, she knew when we were getting close and began looking for signs of a trail into the woods. Finally, after crashing through some thick willows, her team stopped on her and laid down. After suppressing the urge to scream, she went up and began petting the dogs and looking around. She noticed a small opening, and there were reflective markers on two trees...this had to be it! The dogs that she was so frustrated with just moments ago became heroes worthy of adoration and endless treats. While Trish and I stayed with the dogs, Carmen took the GPS and began looking for the cabin. Although the unit told her she was within 500 feet, darkness smothered the light from her headlamp, making it difficult to distinguish a dark cabin in the shadows of the forest. After nearly 30 minutes of waiting, our radios finally crackled and stirred all the dogs, it even made me jump a little as the utter silence engulfing us was so rudely broken. "I found the cabin guys," Carmen said sounding relieved. I think we all were. I know we all were. Perhaps the interruption wasn't so rude after all. Chores were done at 6 AM, and a bed never felt so good.

The hissing of water atop the wood stove brought an end to my early morning reflections, snapping me back to reality and the duties at hand. After our twelve hour epic journey to reach Riley Cabin, we had spent two days there, and now it was time to go home. By now those 26 dogs outside were howling in perfect harmony (to them at least). I huddled next to the woodstove that was slowly warming up. It had been a tough trip, both physically and mentally. As I rubbed the back of my right leg where the snow hook got in a cheap shot the day before, I thought of everything we faced on this adventure. We munched under a full moon, we

conquered the pass, we bowed in honor of the mighty Fang Mountain, we finally crossed all that water, and we found the cabin. But we owed every accomplishment to our amazing dogs. The 12 hour mush into Riley Cabin was thankfully only a 4-1/2 hour mush back, thanks to the good trail and incredible dogs that pulled us all the way home.

Editor's note - to learn more about Brad and Tricia and their editorial contributions to NPN, read our [Nature Photographers Network Sponsors Conservationists](#) article.

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