

The Soul of a Sled Dog

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*The earth split in two, and the men and beasts were separated
by a profound abyss. In the great chaos of creation,
birds, insects, and four-legged creatures
sought to save themselves in flight-
All but the dog.
He alone stood at the edge of the abyss – barking, howling, pleading.
The man, moved by compassion, cried, "Come!"
And the dog hurled himself across the chasm to join them.
Two front paws caught the far edge. The dog would certainly have been lost
forever had man not caught him and saved his life.
-Inuit myth*

As a scientist, it's easy to become blinded by statistics, models, and lengthy explanations with a lot of big, unpronounceable words. I admit that I get immense satisfaction from these facts and figures, from learning *why* nature works in a certain way and how things came to work the way they do. Overall, knowledge tends to heighten my enjoyment and appreciation of nature. For example, last week I was skiing along a frozen creek and saw four Willow Ptarmigan nearby. As I watched them, a feeling of profound awe filled me. There I was, bundled up in all sorts of layers and technical gear to stay warm, snacks and water in my pack, and skis that kept me from sinking too deep in the fresh snow. The birds, on the other hand, needed nothing beyond what nature has provided them. They replace their feathers in order to remain camouflaged year-round: snowy white feathers in the winter, browns and reds of the tundra in the summer. Their digestive system has adapted to the lack of food in winter through the presence of a specialized bacteria found in the gut. This bacteria helps break down woody fibers so the bird can ingest twigs and buds for nutritional value. Willow Ptarmigan even grow special feathers on their feet in the wintertime that keep them afloat on top of the snow – snowshoes designed by Mother Nature herself! During this encounter, the small bits of information I knew about Alaska's state bird allowed me to see much more than just a bird – I had the chance to observe a gorgeous wild animal that is perfectly adapted for survival in one of the world's harshest climates.

As much as knowledge can enhance an outdoor experience, there are times when I put the scientist to sleep and let the mysteries of nature overwhelm me. It's during these moments that nature fills me with pure joy, simply for the beauty of it. Recently I watched a display of the aurora borealis that took my breath away; a bright green arc filled the night sky, silently dancing among the tree tops, as patches of pink and white slid along the bottom of the arc, vanishing and reappearing over and over again. The sight was far too beautiful to get caught up trying to remember which colors have the highest intensity of light, or how far the solar particles traveled before reaching our atmosphere. I simply wanted to absorb every second of the experience, to let it be magical. So I erased all knowledge of the aurora from my head, and instead thought about the different descriptions people gave it long ago, before there was a scientific explanation. The Swedish believed the lights were merry dancers who were dancing polkas – this one makes me smile! The Finnish described the lights as foxes with sparkling fur running over the mountains of the Arctic Circle. And native interior Alaskans, the Athabaskans, thought the lights were spirits of the dead who were watching over them and sending them messages. These wonderful stories provided an explanation for these people, while still retaining the aspects of mystery, intrigue, and magic.



In the same vein, I love the Inuit myth describing how man and dog came to be such close companions. It is simple, beautiful, and complete – there is no need for questions at the end! However, the scientist in me never stays asleep long; there is always a drive to learn the science and history behind the myth.

In the case of sled dogs, there is much research and quite a bit of speculation, particularly surrounding the domestication of dogs.

But in general, most anthropologists believe that 10,000-15,000 years ago northern dwelling hunter-gatherers domesticated various subspecies of wolves. This was not an event that occurred over a period of a few days or a few weeks; it might have taken hundreds or thousands of years. Scientists are unsure of exactly *how* it all happened. Some believe village children rescued and raised orphaned wolf cubs, while others believe that hunters befriended the wild animals in order to gain their assistance in hunting wild game. Regardless, most anthropologists agree that humans quickly developed strong bonds of affection for these animals, which seemed to be neither beast nor human. Although native Alaskans may have felt fondness for their new friends, the dogs were working companions; by 1000 AD, dogs were being used to pull sleds. This provided an advantage to hunters, who could now travel farther in search of food. The dog team and sled also provided an easier way to haul food long distances back to the village. For hundreds of years, dogs and humans worked together, helped each other, and provided companionship for one another.

In the 1800s, explorers, hunters, and trappers began to arrive in Alaska. They soon discovered from the natives that a dogsled was the best way to travel in an icy, cold landscape. By the end of the century, the popularity of traveling by dogsled was unquestionable – it was the most common mode of transportation used in Alaska! Dog teams were used to run traplines, transport people, and



carry mail to the increasing number of villages, settlements, and gold mining towns. In 1908, a new step was taken in the dog sledding world; the Nome Kennel Club hosted the first organized sled-dog race, called the All-Alaska Sweepstakes. Leonhard Seppala, a successful gold miner from Norway, won this 400 mile event three years in a row. Seppala also played a vital role in the world's most famous sled-dog feat. In 1925, many children in Nome were stricken with diphtheria and in desperate need of the antitoxin, which was far away in Anchorage. Doctors sent the serum by railroad from Anchorage to Nenana, 60 miles north of the entrance to Denali National Park. Because there were no roads leading to Nome, and it was too cold for airplanes to fly, dog mushers were called upon to relay the package of antitoxin from Nenana to Nome – a distance of nearly 700 miles. Twenty individual dog teams made the trip in just six days. Seppala, with his lead dog Togo, traveled 340 miles with the serum, while no other team made it

more than 53 miles. The Serum Run, or Race for Life, saved many lives in Nome and called the world's attention to the value and heroics of dog teams.

The last hundred years have seen a decline in the use of sled-dogs for travel, with the last mail run by dog team completed in 1963. The automobile, airplane, and snow machine have replaced dogs as a much faster mode of transportation. However, Alaskan sled-dogs have survived through the age of machinery and continue to pull thousands of miles each winter. Their uses are quite diverse, yet there are still common threads that connect all sled dogs. Most importantly, they all love to pull! Just as a Labrador loves to retrieve a ball or a Frisbee, sled dogs live to pull. Also, sled-dogs are all extremely athletic. They possess incredible strength and stamina; you will never see a successful sled-dog that is very fat, and they eat a high-protein diet to maximize their performance and meet their dietary needs. Next, while some mushers prefer purebred Siberian huskies or Alaskan malamutes, most mushers breed, train, and run Alaskan huskies. Dogs of this breed have a wide variety of appearances. There are coats of many different colors, ears that point straight up and others that flop down, and eyes that may be brown, blue, one of each, or mottled brown and blue together. Such assortment is due to the fact that Alaskan huskies are bred for performance rather than uniformity of appearance; therefore, they have no AKC registration papers. Yep, these dogs are mutts! But neither the mushers nor the dogs seem to notice or care. Each kennel has its own breeding program so they can breed for characteristics that fit their goals and lifestyles, and here is where the differences begin.

Many dogs are racing dogs. Since the inception of the All-Alaska Sweepstakes, the popularity of sled-dog racing has grown so much that it is the official sport of the state of Alaska. There are three main categories of sled-dog racing: long distance (1000+ miles), mid-distance (300-500 miles), and sprint (10-25 miles). Dogs that compete in long distance races like the Iditarod and Yukon Quest are bred for speed, endurance, and a thicker coat that will allow them to sleep outside comfortably while on the trail. These dogs tend to weigh 40-65 lbs. On the other hand, dogs that compete in sprint races are smaller (30-55 lbs) and often have shorter coats which allow them to dissipate heat more readily. In addition, many sprint racers introduce other breeds into their kennels, such as hounds or Irish setters, which increases their speed. At a recent sprint race, I saw quite a few dogs that looked like whippets and labs!

These dogs, along with all other racing dogs, typically run on a groomed trail and strive to be the fastest team. Working dogs, on the other hand, have no need for speed and are accustomed to running where there is no trail (called "breaking trail"). Far away from the roads, these dogs are still used for transportation, hunting, and trapping. Here at the Denali National Park Kennels, we breed working dogs that break trail for visitors, haul heavy loads, and carry rangers on winter patrols. In addition, the dogs provide a main attraction for summer visitors. Based on these tasks, we breed for friendly temperament, good work ethic, larger size (60-90 lbs), and very thick coats. We also breed for long legs and durable feet that can break trail through deep, soft powder or thin, icy snow.

These attributes allow the sled-dogs of Denali to successfully do their job throughout the entire year.

While the dogs have a variety of jobs year-round, the month of March is when Denali's sled dogs get to show off the skills they have been gaining all winter. We will be traveling through the heart of the wilderness out to Wonder Lake, where we will remain for three to four weeks. While at Wonder Lake, we will accomplish a number of different tasks, from visiting patrol cabins to collecting measurements for a satellite receiver. As important as these duties are, I am most excited to spend this time out on the trail with my team of dogs. Over the course of the winter, they have shown me strength, toughness, and durability, and they have given me more love than I feel I could ever deserve. So when I go out with the dogs I let go of everything scientific. I listen and learn from them, and I remember the Inuit myth – forever thankful to the dog that made such a great leap.

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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