

To Wonder Lake and Back: A Dogsledding Adventure

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Wonder Lake – it is one of the most recognizable landmarks in Denali National Park. According to the legend, it was named by a miner in the early 1900s when he first gazed upon the 3-mile long lake and said, “I wonder why we didn’t notice this lake before?” Those that have come since that time can’t help but notice this beautiful lake. During the summer and fall months, thousands of visitors endure a grueling five hour, 85 mile bus ride simply for a glimpse of Wonder Lake. Others spend several days camping at the south tip of the lake, or canoe its length with fishing pole in hand. Many photographers spend countless hours along its edge, waiting to capture the classic shot of a moose grazing in the lake with Denali towering in the background. But in the winter months, no buses venture into the park, and there are very few people who get to see Wonder Lake frozen and covered in a blanket of snow. Unlike most visitors, though, we at the Denali National Park Kennels do not require the use of any sort of mechanized vehicle for travel. Our mode of transportation is a ten foot long sled pulled by nine strong and excited Alaskan huskies, and our destination was Wonder Lake. Our plan was to take three dog teams from headquarters to the Wonder Lake Ranger Station, a distance of nearly 90 miles, on a patrol trip that would last over three weeks. This is the story of our journey.

Day 1: Headquarters to Sanctuary Cabin

And we’re off! It was 10°F when we pulled out of the kennels with our dog teams. This first leg of the trip was a familiar trail for us all, and we arrived at the cabin in less than four hours.

Day 2: Sanctuary Cabin to East Fork Cabin

After mushing up a pass and down the snowy tundra, we arrived on the Teklanika River. On previous trips, we were faced with many challenges on this north-flowing river, including glare ice (extremely slick, flat ice which makes steering difficult and braking impossible!), open water, and the dreaded overflow (water that is forced up over the surface of the river ice and can be even be slush several inches deep). On this day, however, the four miles of trail on the river were a piece of cake! There was six inches of fresh snow on the river, no overflow to freeze and weigh the sleds down, and no open holes to worry about.

Day 3: East Fork Cabin to Toklat Ranger Cabin

Today began with the sighting of a Gyrfalcon – the largest species of falcon in the world! As we mushed up Polychrome Pass, a Golden Eagle soared overhead in the blue sky. Then it was down through “I Scream” gulch, an icy descent to the Toklat River, notorious for high speed, careening sled rides and squealing mushers! However, a light dusting of snow kept things from getting too crazy, and we made it down with dogs, mushers, and sleds in one piece. After a few more miles of strong winds and hole-dodging on the Toklat, we arrived at the cabin. As we waited for snow to melt for the dogs’ dinner, a movement out on the river caught our eye. We ran for our binoculars and quickly had the object in focus – a black wolf! Closer examination revealed five more wolves lounging in the trail we had just traveled on. After a short ten minutes, we watched as they stood, stretched, and trotted down the river and out of sight...but not out of earshot. Later in the evening, their howling triggered our dogs to howl in response; beautiful, plaintive songs of communication and togetherness in the wilderness of Denali. The sound reminded us that we humans are not above nature out here, but simply a small part of it.

Day 4: Toklat Ranger Cabin to Thorofare Cabin

Today’s trail posed some big challenges for us and the dogs. It was about an 18 mile mush, and the trail included climbing 3 mountain passes, an icy descent down Gorge Creek, overflow on the Thorofare River, and large rocks and boulders hidden by snow in Thorofare Canyon that constantly threatened to throw us off our sleds. But no one should ever doubt the strength and endurance of a sled dog! They once again proved their amazing capabilities today; after eight grueling hours



on the trail, their faces were happy, their feet still trotting along easily, and tails were held high and wagging as we pulled up to the cabin.

Day 5: Thorofare Cabin to Wonder Lake Ranger Station

Today proved to be one of the season's best runs! After mushing through the remainder of Thorofare Canyon, we emptied out onto the vast McKinley River bar. On a clear day, Denali and the Alaska range would loom high above us to the south, but on this day we were lucky to see half a mile ahead of us. We were enveloped in a soft, misty cloud as we mushed to the west. The fog was truly magical! Then the trail turned to the north and cut through a tract of spruce forest known as Big Timber. Here the trail took many sharp turns around trees, and the dogs were flying along, making for a very exciting ride! Then we came out of the forest and up a small rise, and there below us was Wonder Lake. What an amazing moment! The trail dropped down to the lake, and we mushed nearly its entire length before reaching the ranger station. For many of the dogs, the journey was familiar and they were eager to arrive at their "winter vacation home". For the three puppies with us, it was their first trip deep into the heart of Denali, and they were excited by so many new sights and smells. As for us, we were a bit tired from five long days on the trail, but at the same time we felt elated, proud, and extremely privileged to have arrived at such an amazing location. And to have gotten there with our incredible dogs – well, it was simply indescribable.

Day 9: Wonder Lake Ranger Station to Turtle Hill

After giving the dogs a couple days of well-deserved rest, everyone was rarin' to run again! Denali, Mt. Brooks, and the other majestic peaks of the Alaska Range had finally emerged from the mist and they beckoned to us in the early morning light. We felt the need to be closer to them on such a clear, beautiful day, so we got everyone harnessed up and headed south over the lake, through Big Timber, and all the way across the McKinley River bar. From there, the land began steadily rising. At the top of Turtle Hill, the scenery was breathtakingly stunning. The McKinley River snaked away to the west, Wonder Lake was a skinny white line to the north, and the mountains directly in front of us glittered with ice and snow. We were close enough to see texture of the ice that spilled from the peaks, and we got our closest look at the Wickersham Wall on Denali (a 14,000 ft. vertical wall on the north face of the mountain – one of the largest in the world). Clear blue skies and temperatures around 8°F made for a perfect day.

Day 10: Wonder Lake Ranger Station

We awoke this morning to clear skies and winds gusting over 50 mph! The air temperature was about 5°F, but taking into account the wind chill factor, the temperature was colder than -30°F! We decided not to run the dogs in these conditions, and instead spent the day working on projects indoors.

Day 11: Wonder Lake Ranger Station to Parker Cabin

Today we broke trail and carried supplies to stock Parker Cabin, a roundtrip of about 14 miles. The snow was deep, mostly knee-high but nearly to the hip in spots! Parker Cabin is unique among the patrol cabins we have visited so far. The cabin was built in the late 60s by a man who was trying to avoid the draft during the Vietnam War – and he succeeded! In the 80s, when the park expanded from 2 million to 6 million acres, his cabin was on land that was now owned by the park service and so he moved out, leaving a beautiful cabin for backcountry rangers to use. There is also a large food cache and a sauna in need of repair. We returned to the ranger station for the night, but we will go back to Parker Cabin tomorrow and remain there for 2 days in order to clean the cabin, repair the sauna, chop wood, and "squirrel-proof" some holes in the roof.

Day 14: Parker Cabin to Moose Creek Cabin

It's been two weeks since we left headquarters, and we are still ecstatic to be out here! Without any running water, we have been unable to take showers and expected that we would smell pretty ripe by now, but it's really not that bad! Of course, anyone who is actually clean might disagree, but we'll worry about that later. Right now, it's all about being out here with the dogs, and thankfully they don't care how we smell! Today we mushed about five miles along Moose Creek to arrive at Moose Creek Cabin. Other than a few spots of deep snow, the trail was icy and fast and we were there in less than two hours.

Day 16: Moose Creek Cabin to Wonder Lake Ranger Station

After spending a day at Moose Creek Cabin cleaning and doing some exploring, we headed back to the ranger station. Along the way, we spotted two American Dippers, an extremely unique bird that is only found in pristine, clear-flowing streams. They have the cutest bobbing behavior as they walk, and they are very strong swimmers – a fun bird to see and observe! We also saw a red fox run across the trail and up onto the creek bank, then turn back with a curious look on its face before running out of sight.

Day 17: Wonder Lake Ranger Station to Wonder Lake Campground

We took one dog team down to the campground today to take measurements of the horizon for a satellite receiver today. There was deep snow at the campground, but the mountains are out and the view was amazing! To top off the day, we were treated to a beautiful display of the aurora borealis in the evening.

Day 19: Wonder Lake Ranger Station

Today was our last full day at the ranger station, so there were many chores to be done. In addition, we were awaiting the arrival of park superintendent Paul Anderson and park employee Carol Harding; they were flying in from Talkeetna and planned to ski from Wonder Lake to Headquarters as we mush back. We are excited to have them along, and we think it is wonderful that the superintendent is getting out into the park! Their plane landed in the afternoon, and after they were settled we snowshoed up Ranger Ridge, which is just behind the ranger station. It was the perfect way to spend our last afternoon at Wonder Lake.

Day 20: Wonder Lake Ranger Station to Thorofare Cabin

We are officially on our way home, but we definitely feel reluctant to get there. This trip has been more than we ever hoped for! Today our leaders showed off their skills, breaking new trail across a steep ice bridge and through open water on the McKinley River. Denali and the Alaska Range towered over us as we mushed to the east. As the sun set this evening, the mountains were bathed in alpenglow while twinkling stars appeared in the growing blanket of darkness.

Day 21: Thorofare Cabin to Toklat Ranger Cabin

Light fluffy snow began falling on us last night, and it continued throughout the day. The snowflakes are so big that we can see each individual design with the naked eye! After each of the three mountain passes we climbed today, we were treated to a fast and furious descent that left us with big smiles on our faces. This leg of the trip only took five hours this time, as opposed to the eight hours it took on the way out. A tough but rewarding day!

Day 22: Toklat Ranger Cabin to East Fork Cabin

It was 8°F and clear skies this morning when we left Toklat Cabin for East Fork – an absolutely perfect day! Going up “I Scream” gulch was a breeze, and we saw 4 Dall sheep near the Polychrome Rest Stop. We could actually feel warmth from the sun this afternoon as we sat on the porch at East Fork Cabin listening to the dogs eat their dinner.

Day 23: East Fork Cabin to Sanctuary Cabin

Today was warmer, about 20°F, with snow falling on us so lightly that it appeared to simply be floating. Even when the sun emerged in the afternoon, it continued to fall, looking like glitter as it reflected the sun’s light. The dogs conquered Sable Pass with no problem, and we saw 13 Dall sheep on Sable Mountain. Later, while mushing down the Teklanika River, a Golden Eagle soared overhead and a pack of six wolves crossed the river behind us. It was a magical day.

Day 24: Sanctuary Cabin to Headquarters

It was our last day of the trip, and we feel both happy and sad - happy to have gotten the opportunity to make such an amazing journey and sad that it had to come to an end. It was three and a half hours of bliss out on the trail, just us, the dogs, and Mother Nature. We each stopped our teams about a mile shy of the kennels so we could spend a precious few moments with our dogs before having to part with them. The bond that was created on this trip between us and the dogs felt almost tangible it was so strong. We had depended on them for so much over the past weeks, just as they had trusted us. They’d been the biggest part of our lives during that time, and while we knew they would be happy to go back to their little houses, it was hard to imagine going home to our own cabin without them right outside the window. So, after many hugs and promises of returning next winter and even a few tears, we stepped onto the runners and drove the team back home. It was the end of one of the best months of our lives, despite being without showers or any conveniences of home, and the greatest part of the trip was spending time with the dogs – the real heroes of the journey.

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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