Alaska's Enduring Trail

The Iditarod National Historic Trail celebrates a 2,400-mile system of winter routes that first connected ancient Native villages and later opened Alaska to the last great American gold rush.

When explorers and prospectors arrived in the north, they quickly learned from Alaska Natives that sled dog teams were the only way to reliably move goods and people across the frozen landscape. The Seward to Nome Trail, as the Iditarod was also called, was scouted in 1908 by a three-person Alaska Road Commission crew supported by dog teams and led by Superintendent W.L. Goodwin.

"...having two basket sleds and 18 sets dog harness made...at Seward we spent five days 'trying out dogs' and repacking the outfit ready for the trip..."

– W.L. Goodwin, 1908

Nine months later, two prospectors made a Christmas Day strike in the Iditarod Mining District. To keep ahead of the ensuing gold rush in 1910-1911, Goodwin and his Road Commission crew worked through mid-winter temperatures of 50 below zero to open the entire route before March travelers arrived. By 1912, ten thousand gold-seekers hiked or mushed the Government Trail to the Iditarod gold fields, where they worked $30 million of gold from the ground.

"...in the month of March I left for the north. That was many years ago when there were only two modes of travel, mush dogs or just mush."

– Reminiscences of the Iditarod Trail, Charles Lee Cadwallader

Roadhouses and Dog Barns

During the rush, roadhouses and dog barns sprang up along the trail at a convenient day's journey apart – about 20 miles – to shelter and feed trail users. Freight shippers, mail haulers and well-to-do passengers relied on dogsleds. Less-wealthy foot-travelers used snowshoes, skis and the occasional bicycle.

"Meals were two dollars each, and blankets spread over wild hay on a pole bunk cost another two dollars. High prices for those days, but a cabin in the shadows of Mt. McKinley is a long way from civilization."
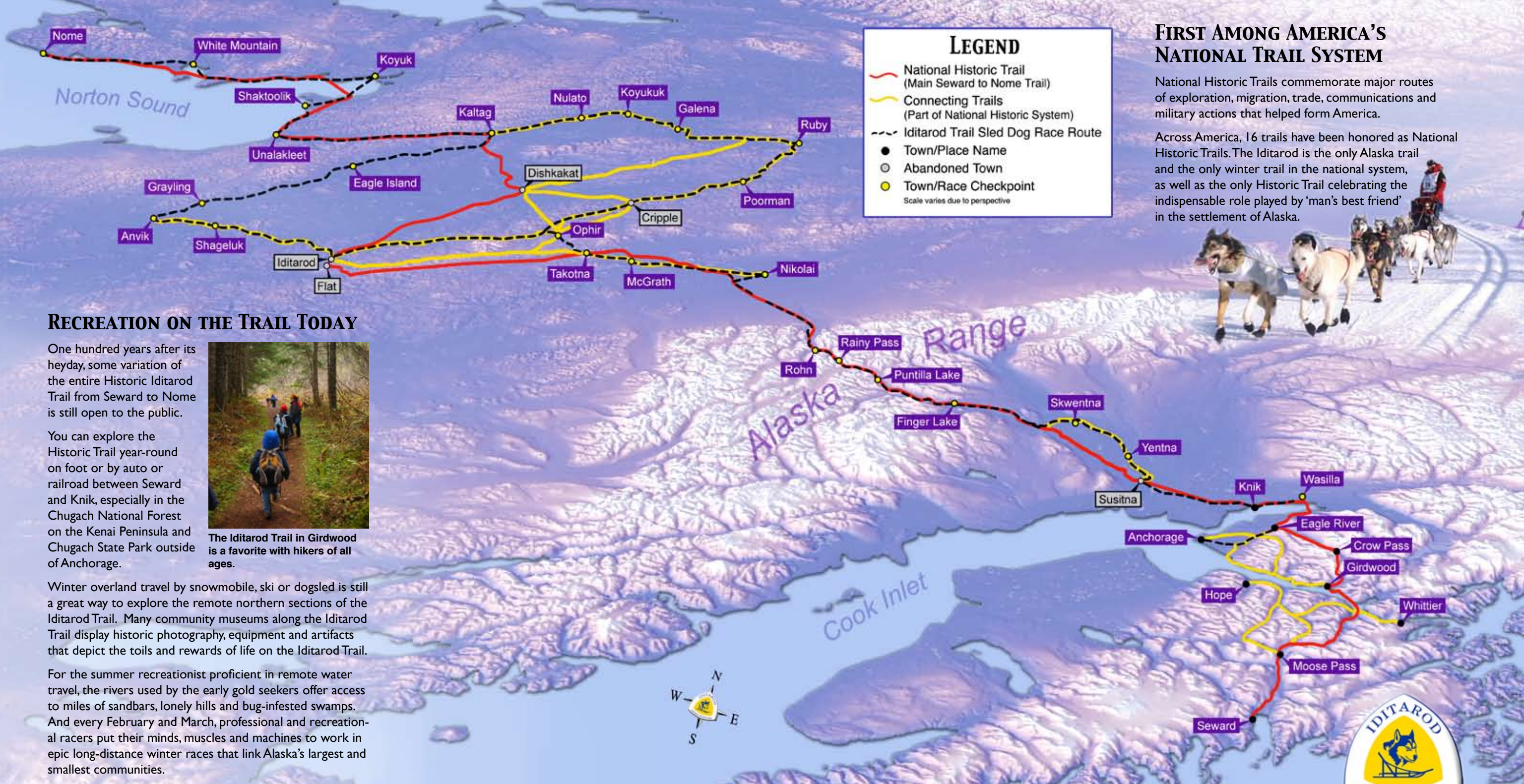
– Nuggets and Beans, Harold Penkenpaugh

By 1918 the stampede reversed itself. New winter mail contracts bypassed the fading town of Iditarod in favor of more direct routes to Nome, and World War I drew young miners and workers away from the gold fields.

Leonhard Seppala and dog team.

Nome Serum Run Marks the Beginning of the End

In the winter of 1925, a deadly outbreak of diphtheria struck fear in the hearts of Nome residents. There was not enough serum to inoculate everyone and winter ice had closed the port city from the outside world. Serum from Anchorage was rushed by train to Nenana. Twenty of Alaska's best mushers and their sled dog teams relayed the serum 674 miles from Nenana to Nome in less than five and one-half days!

The serum run became one of the final great feats of dog sledding in the early 20th century. By the 1930s, air transport replaced the dog team for mail shipping. With downturns in gold mining most of the roadhouses closed, boom towns emptied, and the Iditarod Trail fell into disuse.

Togo, the famous lead dog for Leonhard Seppala's dog team on the Serum Run, with trophies awarded for saving Nome, Alaska.

A Partnership Re-opens the Iditarod Historic Trail

Forest and tundra reclaimed the Iditarod Trail for almost 50 years until Alaskans, led by Joe Redington Sr. and Dorothy Paige, reopened the trail in the early 1970s. To draw attention to the role dogs played in Alaska's history, Joe and his friends created an epic sled dog race from Anchorage to Nome following the route of the historic Iditarod Trail. The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race ultimately revived dog mushing in Alaska and around the world. After years of dogged effort by Joe and the Alaska Congressional delegation, the Iditarod was designated as a National Historic Trail in 1978.

"Trail work is never done."
- Joe Redington Sr., "father of the Iditarod"

Management of the Historic Trail

Most of the historic Iditarod Trail is located on public lands managed by the State of Alaska or federal agencies (although some segments pass over private lands). No one entity manages the entire historic trail — management is guided by a cooperative plan adopted by state and federal agencies in the mid-1980s. The federal Bureau of Land Management coordinates cooperative management of the trail and is the primary point of contact for matters involving the entire trail.

Volunteer working on the trail outside of Knik, Alaska.

Every year local groups, community clubs and individuals contribute their personal time and money to maintain and improve the Iditarod Trail. The statewide, nonprofit Iditarod National Historic Trail, Inc., helps protect and improve the trail and keeps the "lore of the trail" alive. Your support of these efforts, like the hard work of past Iditarod trail breakers, will ultimately keep the route open for another century!

For more information

Trail Recreation
Alaska Public Lands Information Center – Anchorage
www.nps.gov/aplic

Trail Stewardship and History
Iditarod National Historic Trail, Inc.
www.iditarodnationalhistorictrail.org

Alaska Museums with Historic Iditarod Trail Exhibits
Museums Alaska
www.museumsalaska.org

Long-Distance Trail Events
Tesoro Iron Dog
www.irondog.org

Norman Vaughn Serum Run 25
www.serumrun.org

Iditarod Invitational Marathon
www.alaskaultrasport.com

Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race
www.iditarod.com

Trail Management
Iditarod National Historic Trail Administrator:
Bureau of Land Management
Anchorage Field Office
(907) 267-1246
www.blm.gov/ak

State of Alaska
Dept. of Natural Resources Public Information Center
www.dnr.state.ak.us/pic

Chugach National Forest
www.fs.fed.us/r10/chugach/

Innoko National Wildlife Refuge
alaska.fws.gov/nwr/innoko/iditarod.htm

(cover) Dog team at Seward, Alaska, ca. 1910.

BLM/AK/GI-06/013+8353+042 Rev 07

Iditarod National Historic Trail

100 Years of America's Last Great Gold Rush Trail
Seward to Nome 1910-2010

LEGEND

—— National Historic Trail
(Main Seward to Nome Trail)

—— Connecting Trails
(Part of National Historic System)

---- Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race Route

● Town/Place Name

○ Abandoned Town

● Town/Race Checkpoint

Scale varies due to perspective

Map labels: Nome, White Mountain, Koyuk, Shaktoolik, Nulato, Koyukuk, Galena, Kaltag, Ruby, Unalakleet, Eagle Island, Dishkakat, Poorman, Grayling, Cripple, Ophir, Anvik, Shageluk, Iditarod, Flat, Takotna, McGrath, Nikolai, Rainy Pass, Rohn, Puntilla Lake, Finger Lake, Skwentna, Yentna, Susitna, Knik, Wasilla, Anchorage, Eagle River, Crow Pass, Girdwood, Hope, Whittier, Moose Pass, Seward, Norton Sound, Alaska Range, Cook Inlet

FIRST AMONG AMERICA'S NATIONAL TRAIL SYSTEM

National Historic Trails commemorate major routes of exploration, migration, trade, communications and military actions that helped form America.

Across America, 16 trails have been honored as National Historic Trails. The Iditarod is the only Alaska trail and the only winter trail in the national system, as well as the only Historic Trail celebrating the indispensable role played by 'man's best friend' in the settlement of Alaska.

RECREATION ON THE TRAIL TODAY

One hundred years after its heyday, some variation of the entire Historic Iditarod Trail from Seward to Nome is still open to the public.

You can explore the Historic Trail year-round on foot or by auto or railroad between Seward and Knik, especially in the Chugach National Forest on the Kenai Peninsula and Chugach State Park outside of Anchorage.

The Iditarod Trail in Girdwood is a favorite with hikers of all ages.

Winter overland travel by snowmobile, ski or dogsled is still a great way to explore the remote northern sections of the Iditarod Trail. Many community museums along the Iditarod Trail display historic photography, equipment and artifacts that depict the toils and rewards of life on the Iditarod Trail.

For the summer recreationist proficient in remote water travel, the rivers used by the early gold seekers offer access to miles of sandbars, lonely hills and bug-infested swamps. And every February and March, professional and recreational racers put their minds, muscles and machines to work in epic long-distance winter races that link Alaska's largest and smallest communities.

IDITAROD NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL

*Seward to Nome
1910-2010*

IDITAROD NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL