

In Denali National Park, one dogsled outfit hauls supplies for climbers who want to ascend the mountain's historic northern route.



PULLING THROUGH

Deep in the Alaskan wilderness, one intrepid dogsled team battles the elements and harsh terrain to preserve a hundred-year-old mountaineering tradition—the long, technical ascent up Denali, North America's highest and nastiest summit. Meet the dogs who deliver the goods.

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Passing the torch: JJ Neville (left) and Brian Taylor have both worked on previous dog hauls, but this marks their first trip without a more experienced musher.



Once Mazy breaks loose, there is pandemonium on the gang line. The 45-pound Alaskan husky slips her collar and blasts down the furry gauntlet of the remaining 22 sled dogs barking, shrieking and lunging against their harnesses. As her paws slip beneath her on the hard-packed snow, Mazy belines straight for an open bag of Redpaw dog kibble and inhales several mouthfuls before JJ Neville, her grizzled musher with a thick red beard, bounds over in bunny boots to coax the 2-year-old pup back into line.

"I guess they've about had it with their rest day," says Brian Taylor, Neville's lanky, dry-humored co-musher on the trip. "They're getting excited. Some of the older dogs know what lies ahead."

After 19 straight days of clear weather and nonstop work, the two-sled team is gearing up for their final push. It's early March, and they've come about 100 miles from Healy, Alaska, a frontier town that serves as the gateway to Denali National Park. They now have to take their heavy freight 3,000 feet up Cache Creek to McGonagall Pass, which drops down to the Muldrow Glacier at the base of Denali, North America's highest and nastiest mountain. At McGonagall Pass, which sits at an elevation of 5,745 feet, the hired duo will cache 1,200 pounds of gear, food and fuel for two mountaineering teams—four months ahead of climbing seasons.

Each year, only a few climbing groups attempt this route on the north side of Denali, avoiding the now standard-but-crowded West Buttress route, which climbers ascend with the help of an airplane taxi that flies them up 7,200 feet to Denali's base camp on the Kahiltna Glacier. By contrast, the northern route up the treacherous Muldrow Glacier requires a 21-mile

approach from Wonder Lake—the last stop on the Denali shuttle bus route—just to get to the base of the climb. It's not only much longer but also a far more technical and logistically challenging route. Without the assistance of dogsleds, the northern route would require several gear shuttles on foot and be impractical to the point where almost no one would attempt it.

The northern route up the original Karstens Ridge is the true, authentic way to climb Denali," says Jon Nierenberg, the owner of Denali Dog Sled Expeditions and Neville and Taylor's boss. "You're ascending the whole mountain—it's very intimidating." Today, he holds the only commercial dogsledding permit in Denali National Park.

Since 1984, Nierenberg has been running a dog-hauling operation in the park. He's also taken dogsled teams 16,227 feet up nearby Mount Sanford, jumped crevasses and survived avalanches with his dog teams.

Before Nierenberg's outfit became the park's current dog-hauling provider, several other operators kept the northern-route tradition alive. For decades, Will and Linda Forsberg hauled up to 5,000 pounds in a season and stayed out with their dogs for months on end. And before that, in the 1970s, Dennis Kogal ran dogs up to 11,000 feet on the Muldrow Glacier.

For the purists who want to climb Denali the hard way, these dog haulers existed out of necessity: In 1964, the use of nonemergency motorized travel was outlawed across 2 million acres of the 6-million-acre park. Dogsleds remained the only way climbers could get their gear hauled and cached on the northern route. But the story of this journey and its unique supply chain begins long before the 1960s at the turn of the 20th century, when dogsleds became as much a part of Denali's mountaineering legacy as the mountaineers themselves.

In December of 1909, a group of four gold-mining frontiersmen, collectively known as the Sourdough Expedition, mushed two dogsled teams 175 miles from Fairbanks to Kantishna, a mining town 35 miles north of Denali. From there, they traveled over McGonagall Pass and sent two members of the party up to 19,470 feet at the north peak of Denali. They accomplished this with only wooden hatchets, coal shovels, waxed canvas clothing, homemade "creeper" crampons and little to no mountaineering experience. To this day, their route up the Sourdough Couloir has never been repeated.

Three years later, the Parker-Browne Expedition mushed nearly 500 miles from Seward, relaying supplies up the Muldrow, only to turn back within 125 feet of the south summit. And in 1913, the Hudson Stuck party used dogsleds to successfully climb Denali's 20,308-foot south summit via Karstens Ridge, named after a member of their party, Harry Karstens, and still used today. Stuck later wrote a book titled *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled: A Narrative of Winter Travel in Interior Alaska*.

Dogsled support remained essential to any mountaineering expedition in Alaska for decades to come, with mushers hauling thousands of pounds of supplies for months on end. Some teams would stay out so long that they would have to hunt caribou and Dall sheep to feed the whole party.

Even with advancements in aviation, the park continued to support the use of dogsleds. In July 1939, park superintendent Frank T. Been wrote in a memorandum: "As dog teams are giving way to airplanes, we hope that the McKinley Park huskies will always be retained as part of the historical interest of the park as well as of the Territory."

But despite the tradition and practicality, mushing in Denali would not always be safe from government bureaucracy. Just a few years after his memorandum, Been banned all dogs from the park, in part due to the work of wildlife biologist Adolph Murie, who believed that working dogs would interfere with the wolf population.

After several seasons of destructive horse-packing and mechanized travel that had a high impact on the topography and local ecosystem, in 1969 the park's chief ranger, Ivan Miller, declared that "dogsledding was a cultural, historic and prehistoric resource worth preserving," adding that "it provided a means of transportation compatible with the Alaskan wilderness that the park was set aside to protect."

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If the dogs can't haul the load over particularly technical terrain, the mushers must carry it by hand.





There's a tight bond between the dogs and the mushers, who don't do this job for the money—they do it because they love being with the animals.

As a result, National Park Service patrol dogs were reinstated in Denali, and a few years later, in 1973, Dennis Kogel's commercial operation began.

In the last century, almost every mountaineering expedition on the north side of Denali has relied on dogsleds to haul its gear. Without dogs, the route is too long for most people to handle in one trip with a full load. The dog haul doesn't just enable mountaineering on North America's nastiest summit—it's a constant reminder of its place in history and a way to preserve its legacy.

"It's really important to carry on the tradition," says Roger Robinson, a recently retired mountaineering ranger at Denali National Park. "I suspect there will always be a need for dogs to haul supplies, because when there is a demand, someone will come forth to provide the means. And we've seen that through the 40 years I've worked here. I think it will carry on in one form or another. I would be sad if there were no park dogs."

"There aren't many dogs in the world truly fulfilling their bred purpose—or humans for that matter," says Taylor. "Denali dog haulers are a rare breed and they're not easily replaced."

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On the morning of their big push to the pass, Neville gets word that 70 mph winds are in the forecast. The smell of boiled meat still lingers in the air at camp. The satiated dogs stand at attention and stare into the distance with piercing white-and-blue eyes. The weather is calm now, but as Neville gazes south toward the hulking mass of Denali—its face stealing all the sunlight from the surrounding frosty peaks—violent gusts of wind kick jagged plumes of snow off the summit and whip them along the shark-toothed ridgelines. At that moment, 23 snouts point to the sky and the pack releases a postbreakfast howl, incanting in unison for a solid minute.

Wearing noise-canceling earmuffs, Taylor stands nearby with a notebook and tallies up their load of teetering plywood boxes, which contain 100 pounds more than what they had planned for the journey. Both men have helped out on previous dog hauls, but neither has led one before without the guidance of a more experienced musher. This trip is the proverbial passing of the dog-hauling torch.

"It's really hard and definitely not a job that people are knocking down the door to do," Taylor says while calculating weight distribution with a stubby pencil. "But I wouldn't trade it for anything. I'm the luckiest person to be able to come out here and mess around with the dogs and call it a job. It's the pinnacle of dog-sledding jobs. This is as good as it gets."

"Any job where you can bring your dog to work is great," Neville adds.





It's clearly hard work, but it seems like the dogs are living out their greatest fantasy.

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But like many jobs, if they don't execute the task, they won't get paid.

Once the sleds are loaded up and the dogs, yelping and scuffling with angst, are hooked in, the two mushers lift their boat anchors out of the snow. With a sharp command ("Tike!"), they take off across the meadow and bank a slow left turn up Cache Creek and into the belly of the bear.

As they enter the winding canyon, the granite walks on either side shoot upward and obscure any view of the surrounding landscape, including much of the sky. Clouds rip overhead as the slope tips closer to 20 degrees. The dogs slam their chests into their harnesses as they drag the sleds through uneven ruts and lopsided embankments. Neville and Taylor repeatedly jump off their runners to push and run alongside their team. "Up, up, up, up, up, up!" they yell. "On by! Good dogs!"

Clawing at the snow, the dogs bear down under the load, their tongues fat, hot and hanging far out the sides of their mouths. It is clearly hard work, but every dog appears so engaged and seems destined to be here. It's like they're living out their greatest fantasy—the kind of thing dogs chase in their dreams.

After an hour or two, the team closes in on the top of McGonagall Pass—a narrow, rocky notch—as 40-to-50-mph winds gust over from the upvalley confluence of glaciers and blast their faces with snow and ice crystals.

At the top of the pass, the whole team looks happy but exhausted. "It's not just the dogs working," Neville says. The dogs cut their tails over their noses to nap, appearing completely warm and comfortable in the frigid windchill, while Neville and Taylor prepare to haul the boxes 300 yards by hand down a steep and icy slope that leads to a giant granite boulder covered in black crustacean lichen. It's a treacherous crossing that hardly looks worth their pay rate—just \$8 per pound for the both of them. Taylor curses the load and grumbles under his breath; Neville takes selfies in front of Muldrow Glacier with a proud, electric grin.

Even in modern times, when technology makes everything seem easier and simpler and more accessible, the grueling work of mushing thousands of pounds of freight across some of the least hospitable land on the continent is only going to get harder. Traditionally, March is the ideal month for the journey because there are more hours of daylight, reasonable temperatures (meaning above -40°F) and calm, clear weather. But any Alaskan will tell you that evidence of climate change is rampant across their state, with glaciers surging at unpredictable rates and alarming temperature highs yielding wildly unstable storm activity. Early melting snow and rapid river crossings alone are enough to threaten the feasibility of completing the cache.

In 2018, the year before Neville and Taylor took over the reins at Denali Dogged Expeditions, Chris Maher ran the hauling operation for owner Jon Nierenberg. A burly Minnesotan with limn sled dogs named after heavy metal bands, Maher is a seasoned musher who has taken dogsleds to the North Pole and guided ski trips to the South Pole. He's also an

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armchair historian who loves retracing the footsteps of the pioneers who came before him. And like many of his fellow mushers, he doesn't mind doing things the hard way.

But in 2018, Maher and his partner encountered such warm weather and heavy snowstorms that at times he couldn't see his lead dog. Every day, snow blew in the tracks and they had to repeatedly break trail with snowshoes and skis. Maher planned for 10 storm days but ended up needing more. Overall, he spent close to 60 days in the field, burning through dog food and fuel. In the end, he only took home about \$1,000 when he could have been working far more lucrative jobs doing local construction work. "I don't do the freight haul for the money," he says. "And there's nothing like a winter sunset over Big Timber," he adds, referring to the lodgepole pine forest that borders the open tundra. "But I can't buy dog food with pretty pictures of the McKinley Bar." The financial hit was Maher's main reason for bowing out of the dog haul the following year.

Economically, the freight haul is already a strain on the mushers, even when everything goes smoothly. "My guys could make the money they do dog hauling for three or four weeks in three or four days guiding private passenger trips," says Nierenberg. "From a business standpoint, it doesn't make sense for us, but it's living history and the National Park Service is interested in keeping it around." The permit also allows Nierenberg to run ski-supported trips with dogsleds, which makes the company financially viable but only if the dog haul doesn't take so long that it eats into his profit time.

"With all the vet bills and food costs, we might as well just walk up and feed these dogs 100-dollar bills," says Neville. Adding in extra delays for weather only shrinks their slim profit margins. But somebody has to do it.

Even though Nierenberg holds a 10-year permit for the dog-haul concession, NPS bureaucracy is always a lingering threat to the only working dog operation in the national parks system. And there's the climate change, the challenging economics and the struggle to find people crazy enough to take on this daunting task. In the end, the continuation of this long-standing mountain tradition is anything but secure.

The National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) has relied on the dog haul to run trips on the north side of Denali since 1972, and in recent years, they've seen an increase in client demand. "It's the hardest route on the mountain, and it takes all of your skills," says Ashley Wise, the Alaska Program Manager for NOLS. "There is pride in climbing the mountain the way that it was done before everyone just took a plane to base camp. How many human-powered trips of this magnitude are there in the world now, approaching from this low of an elevation? I can't think of any."

Jen Raffaelli, Denali National Park's kennel manager, shares an appreciation for the tradition. Raffaelli manages the dog teams that help patrol the north side of the park during the winter and spring and like Neville and Taylor, she's caching gear for the rangers using dogsleds. "I hope there will always be people looking for an adventure, a little extra challenge, and a sense of exploration and discovery that comes from choosing a less traveled path like the Muldrow," she says.

After shutting their load to the top of the pass, Neville and Taylor praise their dogs like parents congratulating their kids at a preschool graduation and massage their ligaments. Neville rolls in the snow, melting into a cuddle puddle with five pups who are licking his face and yelping with affection. "I'm always so impressed with what these dogs can do," Taylor says.

But the scariest part of the trip is still to come: a 3,000-foot descent down the rocky and snow-packed Cache Creek canyon with a bunch of riled-up sled dogs who are ready to bolt downhill with a non-empty sled. "It's essentially a less predictable roller coaster," Taylor says at the top of the pass. "If you tip over, you're dragging to the bottom without stopping." That is exactly what happened to him a few years ago. Luckily, he survived, but it was such an alarming experience that he now descends wearing a ski helmet.

Both mushers have a plan for this descent: Taylor will try to keep things as slow and steady as possible with all his dogs on the line, whereas Neville will cut about half of his dogs free to follow the sled down and reduce the horsepower. But before Taylor can hop on the sled, all hell breaks loose. The dogs are too excited for the homestretch and begin pulling Taylor's sled down the canyon without him. A few appear confused and start running backwards into the gang line, getting trampled by their fellow packmates.

Taylor isn't rattled. He vaults onto the sled and begins navigating the tricky terrain with the calm precision of someone who's visualized this descent for years. He flows through the turns and floats past skid-crushing rocks, ice patches and overhead snow drifts. Neville and his scattered pack follow behind from a safe distance.

Alaskans have a way of being understated and humble, but Taylor and Neville can hardly contain their elation when they reach the bottom. Their whoppers and hollers echo across the canyon walls. Neville takes a deep breath and surveys the magnificent scenery—2 million acres of pristine wilderness—and punches the air in a victorious fist pump. It's hard to tell who is happier in this moment—the mushers or the dogs. But it's clear that man and beast are both doing what they were born to do.



Nonemergency motorized travel is prohibited on 2 million acres of the park; dogsleds exist out of necessity.