

Tails from Denali

Words and images by Colleen Miniuk-Sperry



Almost 3,000 pounds of unsorted building materials rested on the dirty packed snow in front of the historic Denali National Park and Preserve kennel building.

Over one hundred slats of wood, twenty eight pieces of rectangular foam insulation sheets, rolls of canvas, an odd-shaped aluminum chimney, buckets of log oil, screws, nails, and paint rollers needed to be organized into manageable loads for 18 brawny Denali sled dogs to haul into the Upper Windy Creek and Riley Creek cabins to support the cabin restoration project this summer.

As six park staff members from three different divisions prepared for the most ambitious and logistically challenging winter patrol the Denali Kennels have ever carried out, one might have thought, “wouldn’t a single helicopter be easier and faster?” Helicopters are Not Man’s Best Friend Sled dogs – not helicopters - have proven to be man’s best friend in the park since 1922, when then-Park Superintendent Harry Karstens first introduced the hard-working companions to the newly formed Mount McKinley National Park. Known as the “Seven Brothers,” these pioneering canines led rangers on winter patrols aimed at preventing the illegal poaching of Dall sheep, caribou, and moose. Starting in the early 1930’s, log cabins popped up across the vast tundra, replacing bulky canvas tents and allowing dog-powered teams to embark on

longer patrols with lighter sleds. Over the next 58 years, the park’s sled dog population peaked at 50 and then tumbled to zero as technological advances squashed the use of traditional non-motorized transportation methods. Then, in 1980, the passage of the Alaska National Interests Land Conservation Act changed the park name from Mount McKinley National Park to the “Denali National Park and Preserve” and the park instantly tripled in size. The legislation also declared the park’s original two-million acres as wilderness area, prohibiting the use of mechanized equipment and vehicles within the newly defined boundary. Unsurprisingly, the park showed renewed interest in using the traditional ways of transporting materials into the heart of Denali, so sled dogs returned to support occasional winter park patrols. Simultaneously, despite the designation, the National Park Service sporadically used seemingly more efficient helicopters to move freight within the park but at a great expense. “In the course of my 11-some years on the special projects crew, we have had four different helicopter loads accidentally release,” Jean Balay, a Denali Special Projects staff member, explained. “These accidents have resulted in the complete destruction of a lot of very expensive tools and personal items. Following the accidents, a lot of time and money is spent on accident remediation, purchasing new tools, and then we have to start the whole transport project over from the beginning.” More reliable and cheaper than a helicopter, the 33 well-trained Alaskan huskies calling Denali



their home have become the preferred resource for flawlessly supporting the park's special projects in winter. "By maintaining and continuing to use our sled dogs in the traditional ways, we are keeping an important part of our heritage alive and truly preserving and protecting all aspects of the wilderness character of Denali," suggested Jen Raffaeli, the Denali Kennels Manager, the only position of its kind in the United States National Park Service. Pulling the Team Together As her long chunky braid waved from side to side, J. Raffaeli enthusiastically strolled into a hushed dog yard. Piercing the silence, Chinook threw his head back and bayed a smoky welcoming howl. From the head of the yard, the bear-like Alaskan husky keenly watched J. Raffaeli disappear inside the kennel building. After the morning sun broke the horizon, the Windy Creek-Riley patrol team started to gather inside the warm office. Though not going on the imminent journey, Chinook charmed his way into the old building. And as Jason Reppert, a Winter Kennels Staff Member, and Michael Raffaeli, a Winter Kennels Volunteer, led a final coordination meeting among the patrol team, Chinook roamed from person to person, tilting his stout head to the side and flashing his irresistible brown eyes to earn blissful ear scratches and belly rubs from all in attendance. Once the short discussion ended, M. Raffaeli swiped a piece of paper from the desk, walked outside, and ceremoniously tacked the list of the eighteen lucky names selected the day before to the back of the dog truck. The "BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!" shrill of the

vehicle backing up instantly woke the rest of the sled dogs from their serene slumber, and the most euphoric pandemonium one can only experience in a dog yard erupted. Above the jubilant roar, M. Raffaeli started shouting names from the top of the green, artificial turf-covered truck ramp, "Give me Loon! Then Lava!" Backcountry Law Enforcement Rangers Sharon Olson and Jennifer Yeager-Fish unleashed four-year-old Loon and three-year-old Lava respectively, who both darted down the kennel aisle unassisted to their wooden dog box with as much showy confidence as movie stars walking down the red carpet in front of taunting paparazzi. One by one, enthusiastic mutts like Aliqsi, Skeeter, Tuya, Esker, and Cassin filled the remaining spots in the truck. As M. Raffaeli loaded the final canine team members, the chorus of animated barking reduced to an occasional yip from those left behind. As quickly as the mayhem started, silence returned to the Denali Kennels. "My favorite moment is driving the team out of the kennel," J. Raffaeli revealed. "At that point there are no more logistics or preparations to stress about, no more phone calls or emails or meetings." As the entourage traveled to the trailhead in Cantwell 30 minutes south of the Denali park entrance, she compared planning for her first winter season to preparing for multiple YukonQuests – a race she finished in 2010 with a team of 2-year-olds from Ken Anderson's Windy Creek Kennel – all at one time. Last September, Denali Kennels staff painstakingly reviewed lists over six feet long to ensure they adequately stocked each



backcountry cabin to support anticipated winter outings. Then, in October, the sled dogs began countless training runs along Stampede Road and the Denali Highway, pulling all-terrain vehicles alongside other recreational and professional mushers. As snow fell, the four-legged phenoms logged over 3,000 patrol miles transporting sound monitoring equipment to the Stampede airstrip, hauling mattresses to and from Savage Cabin, and breaking trails for outdoor recreationists. When the caravan arrived in Cantwell, all the hardships of meticulous preparations for this winter patrol disappeared as quickly as the kennel building vanished in the rear view mirror. “The Multiplicative Power of the Dogs and Human Collaboration” At the trailhead, well-rested team strained to lift the two black cargo sleds and then the two red Park Ranger dog sleds, cautiously guiding them one by one from the trailers to the flat, snowy street. Under a cobalt blue sky kissed with swirling high clouds, Rangers Olson and Yaeger-Fish hooked the bulky black cargo sleds to their snow machines, which would help provide much needed extra hauling capacity to the wilderness boundary three and a half miles away. As the growling snow machines zipped onto the easement trail to start their journey, M. Raffaeli and Reppert extended two separate ganglines and piled harnesses in front of their dog sleds. After firmly planting the snow hook, the two mushers unloaded and separated the 18 barking sled dogs into their individual teams of nine huskies each. The deafening racket hushed the moment Reppert released the snow hook. In double lead, Fin and Muddy aggressively lunged forward, successfully persuading their seven teammates to follow. With tongues spastically flapping, Reppert’s team rounded the first turn over slick overflow ice with ease. Coho and Pyro steered M. Raffaeli’s team around the same tricky corner seconds later. J. Raffaeli and Balay followed on cross-country skis to provide extra man-power needed later on the patrol, leaving two slender orange “search and rescue” sleds and a truck bed full of unpacked supplies behind for the snow machines to haul on ensuing roundtrips. In synchronized steps, the sled dogs confidently pulled the equivalent of 50 pounds apiece up the twisting trail. After cresting the sparkling white plateau, dizzying views of snowcapped peaks in every direction rewarded their initial efforts. Admiring the scenery from her “office,” J. Raffaeli expressed, “Sometimes, the only way I know I’m working is this,” pointing to the crackling black radio strapped to her chest. The booming manly voice on the speaker advised the patrol team to keep their eyes and ears open for snowmobiles Denali park rangers suspected had recently and illegally entered the wilderness area, reminding them of their other

responsibilities during this outing. Unimpeded atop the mostly flat highland, the canines’ pace quickened on the well-defined trail until Reppert hollered a sudden “Gee!” followed by a gleeful, “That-a-way, Tephra! Good job, Mixtus! Keep it up, Spur!” The two teams turned sharply into a steep side drainage, where a natural obstacle course constantly threatened to spill the snow machines laden with bulky supplies. Though the treacherous terrain caused J. Raffaeli and Balay to remove their cross-country skis, long-legged and sure-pawed Tonzona, Timber, and Kokanee followed their leaders over exposed branches, across overflow ice, and steadfastly through deep snow. Their almost graceful navigation enabled the sled dog teams to pass the snow machines as the track swerved onto Windy Creek. The teams continued finding their way through tangles of willows and over undulating snow banks along the meandering stream, crossing numerous precarious ice bridges melting in the spring-like temperatures and passing growing patches of open water. Though not a race, the dog teams triumphantly reached the Upper Windy Creek Cabin first. Shortly thereafter, Rangers Olson and Yaeger-Fish dumped their initial loads at the wilderness boundary as planned, and then powered the snow machines back to Cantwell to pick up additional supplies. In the meantime, the sled dog teams began shuttling the equipment piled at the wilderness boundary to the historic log structure a half mile away. Rangers Olson and Yaeger-Fish returned with a second awkward shipment and a handful of reasonable concerns. Mindful of the immense amount of materials still at the trailhead and the threatening clouds rolling in, the patrol members determined the mechanized machines alone would likely not be able to transport the remaining equipment into the backcountry before the day’s end. To prepare for the sled dogs’ second visit to Cantwell, M. Raffaeli and Reppert shuffled dogs into different positions, taking advantage of the versatility they had developed during previous winter experiences. Using parent-like instincts, M. Raffaeli decided to rest 8-month-old Sitken rather than wear the husky puppy out on the first day of a lengthy, arduous campaign. Despite M. Raffaeli giving blue-eyed Sitken loving rubs behind his ears, he whimpered miserably on the picket line at the Upper Windy Creek Cabin. As soon as his 17 kennel-mates disappeared into the forest en route to the trailhead, Sitken collapsed into a ball to enjoy a well-deserved nap. Two hours later, the radios crackled again. Reppert’s voice warned that the final ice bridge before the wilderness boundary had just collapsed after his team safely crossed, leaving only a two-foot wide shelf the snow machines would no longer be able to cross. Rangers Olson and Yeager-

Fish were now required to stop 400 yards shy of the wilderness boundary to deliver their remaining loads. With casually falling snowflakes turning into whirling snow flurries, J. Raffaeli and Balay began pushing and pulling back-breaking loads of wood and pink foam stacked on sleds across the deteriorating bridge. The painful “human hauling” of multiple loads into the most spacious spot in the tight ravine helped the mushers load their sleds and safely turn their teams around without plunging into the adjacent icy creek. Rangers Olson and Yeager-Fish joined the hauling efforts immediately after transporting the final supplies from the trailhead. Before daylight dimmed beneath dark clouds, sled dogs and humans diligently worked together to deliver the 3,000 pounds of restoration supplies to the Upper Windy Creek Cabin, covering a cumulative 28 patrol miles in less than nine hours. The tail-wagging sled dogs each received a celebratory belly rub and a dog cookie from their human teammates while the patrol staff received affectionate licks on their cold noses from their frosty-faced furry friends. On the following morning, a howling serenade from 18 refreshed Alaskan huskies served as the patrol team’s alarm clock. After breakfast, the canines patiently observed their human teammates decide what equipment would be shuttled first over perilous Windy Pass to the secluded Riley Creek Cabin a distant 16 miles away. Half of the supplies remained at the Upper Windy Creek Cabin, while the teams hauled the other half to Riley Creek Cabin in three laborious roundtrips over the next seven days using strictly dog and human power. Though ruthless conditions continued to test the team, together they persevered through an abundance of wet overflow and glare ice, avalanche-prone territory, and near whiteout conditions over the high pass in the rugged Alaska Range. After eight days and 260 collective sled miles, the team returned to the Cantwell trailhead with nearly empty sleds, completing the grueling patrol. Relieved and ecstatic, Michael summed up the experience, “This trip was not only about maintaining the historic cabins. It had a lot to do with maintaining the history of how things used to be done here in the park, using the multiplicative power of the dogs and human collaboration.” “That was the furthest distance and some of the most challenging terrain the dogs have ever hauled loads of that size,” J. Raffaeli boasted afterwards. “This project also showcased what makes the park dogs so different from racing dogs and so special – their ability to haul these huge loads in very challenging terrain over and over again.” No Summer Vacation With the snow dissipating under warmer bluebird sky days, the furry stewards of the land receive a well-deserved breather, one J. Raffaeli equates to “a marathon runner taking a break.” However, the Denali sled dogs continue to put their paw prints on the future of the national park and the entire mushing community during the dog days of summer. In between long siestas on top of their wooden houses, these friendly canine sensations will cuddle with picture-taking visitors from every corner of the world and take turns pulling a historic dog sled around a gravel track during the interpretive demonstrations starting in mid-May. J. Raffaeli sees these displays as a way to not only promote the legendary contributions of the Denali Kennels, but also as a way to further the public’s knowledge and interest in dog sledding in general. “We have a phenomenal avenue for outreach and education about the tradition and sport of mushing with over 46,000 visitors coming to see the Denali Kennels in the summertime,” Jen says of the park’s most popular visitor activity. To help further this vision of serving as ambassadors for the broader dog sledding community, the Kennels staff volunteered at the recent



YukonQuest and Iditarod races. “I want the Kennels staff to experience racing firsthand and form their own impressions of it so they can answer questions from personal experience rather than hearsay when our visitors ask what racing sled dogs is all about,” J. Raffaeli explains. “I also want the Denali Kennels to support the larger mushing community and build a strong working relationship with them.” She continues, “There are so many opportunities for learning and sharing ideas and best practices between us and other kennels that I really want to foster those connections wherever I can.” After all, as Balay suggests, “...working with the [Denali] Kennels is much more fun than working with the helicopter.” •

Residing in Chandler, Arizona, Colleen Miniuk-Sperry is an award winning and internationally published outdoor photographer and writer. Besides contributing articles and photography to editorial outlets such as National Geographic calendars, Arizona Highways, AAA Highroads, Experience AZ, and Smith-Southwestern calendars, she is currently working on three books and enjoys teaching photography workshops. When Denali Kennels Manager Jen Raffaeli and Colleen roomed together at Stanford University 18 years ago, no one in their right mind would have guessed Colleen would be a writer/photographer working on a story about Jen mushing sled dogs in Alaska. See more of Colleen’s work at <http://www.cms-photo.com>.