

Sled Dogs of Denali

National Park Service

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Denali National Park and Preserve



A team of Alaskan Huskies helps a park ranger patrol Denali and accomplish tasks. The number of dogs pulling each sled depends on the weight in the sled. Each dog can pull about 100 pounds.

How many sled dogs would it take to pull your whole family?



Sled dogs, and winter travel by dog teams, are important to the history and traditions of Denali. When park rangers first started patrolling in 1921, they used sled dog teams to reach all corners of the park in order to prevent *poaching* (illegal hunting) of protected wildlife. Today the threat of poaching is low, but sled dogs remain significant and relevant to Denali.



Sled dogs help rangers:

- patrol the borders of the park
- educate visitors
- assist researchers with scientific studies
- break trails for skiing and snowshoeing
- haul materials and maintain historic cabins
- continue Alaskan traditions



Another reason for using sled dogs is that Denali is one of the last places in the world where people can experience a natural and intact ecosystem nearly unaltered by humans. Most of Denali National Park and Preserve is managed as “Wilderness”, which means that no motorized vehicles – cars, trucks, snow mobiles, or even chainsaws – are allowed. Work that is done in Wilderness must be accomplished in ways that do not harm the natural landscape. *What words or images come to mind when you hear the word wilderness?*



Imagine the sight of a team of dogs hooked up to a sled gliding silently through the wilderness. *Would you like to travel with a dog team?*

Can any dog be a sled dog?

Visitors are often surprised when they first set foot in our dog yard. The dogs certainly don't have the uniform appearance of sled dogs that we see in many movies or books. Their coats may be black, brown, white, or gray, or a combination of colors. They may have blue eyes, brown eyes, or one of each. Some have pointy ears, others have floppy ears. The dogs are Alaskan Huskies, with other breeds like Malamutes and Siberian Huskies sometimes mixed in. Appearance is not important for Alaskan Huskies, but they all have some things in common: they have the characteristics needed to be top-notch sled dogs.

What are winters like where you live? Denali's sled dogs operate in freezing temperatures! Alaskan Huskies are well adapted to cold temperatures; their ideal temperature is around -10 degrees Fahrenheit! To get a better idea of how cold Denali's temperatures are, think about what it feels like when you open your freezer and reach in to take something out. That first blast you feel from most freezers is around 0 degrees Fahrenheit. *Do you spend time outside in temperatures colder than a freezer?*

Sled Dog Adaptations



Large paws and compact toes help with balance and ensure that ice balls don't get stuck between toes while running.



Thick coats and a fluffy tail allow Huskies to withstand temperatures down to -40° F or colder. When curled up to rest, dogs cover their noses with their tails to trap warm air, just like you might do when you pull bed covers over your head!



Sturdy bodies: By weight, sled dogs are the strongest draft animals on the planet. Denali sled dogs weigh between 55 and 100 pounds. Their job is to break trail and pull heavily-loaded sleds over rough terrain.



Long legs: The ability to break trail and run in deep snow is a must in Alaska. On winter patrols, Denali sled dogs average 5-6 mph (imagine running a mile every 10 minutes!) and cover 20 miles a day. Under ideal conditions the dogs can run 60 miles a day!

Now that you know what qualities a sled dog needs, look at the dog breeds below and see how each breed differs from or is similar to an Alaskan Husky. For each dog decide: *Do they have enough fur? Are their feet big and compact enough? Are their legs long enough? Do they like pulling? Would they be happy to be part of Denali's sled dog kennel?*

