

Have Snowmachines Replaced Dog Teams?

By Andy Moderow

When gold was first discovered in Alaska during the late 1800's, many of the transportation options available today hadn't even been invented, or weren't functional in the rugged state of Alaska. While the modern automobile was developed in 1880, a lack of roads in Alaska prevented miners from using cars during the first gold booms. Reliable airplanes weren't flying through mountain ranges in Alaska until the 1920's, and the train route from Seward to Fairbanks wasn't complete until 1923. Boat traffic on major waterways in the state, such as the Yukon River, wasn't possible once rivers became ice capped in the fall. As a result, the dog team reigned as Alaska's most efficient form of backcountry transportation during the long winter months.

Today, 100 years after gold was discovered, people utilize multiple forms of transportation when accessing Alaska; some portions of the state that were once remote are now accessible with regular cars. Yet most of the state still lacks roads. In areas without highways, a new vehicle has been developed in the past 80 years that has become the standard for traveling over snowy trails. The snowmachine, also referred to as a snowmobile, is a gas-powered vehicle that can travel efficiently over snow. Using two skis for steering and a spinning rubber track often several feet long and over a foot in width, snowmachines can float over deep snow. They are commonly used to travel both on and off trails, with higher performance models capable of reaching speeds in excess of 90 miles per hour. Heavy loads of several hundred pounds are easily hauled by snowmachines in the backcountry.

Because of fast speeds and ease of use, snowmachines quickly replaced dog teams in rural Alaska during the mid 1900's. Many people that had historically used dog teams to hunt during winter months realized that a snowmachine could be parked during the summer months, requiring no care. A dog team, on the other hand, required food and the attention of a musher.

While most people in rural Alaska have selected snowmachines for winter trail travel, the dog team still maintains several advantages over its technically advanced replacement. For one, a dog team travels silently down a trail, allowing the musher to hear what is occurring around them. In some severe weather, a dog team has been successful in traveling when snowmachines or airplanes couldn't. In 2005, frontrunners in the Iditarod beat race staff to the checkpoint of White Mountain when bad weather prevented travel by snowmachine and airplane. While occurrences like this are much more limited today than historically, it would be false to think that snowmachines are always more effective at traveling winter trails.

Yet the biggest difference between dog teams and snowmachines is obvious. Dogs power a dog team; gasoline powers a snowmachine. And while a dog team may not be as practical today as a form of transportation, many mushers wouldn't dream of replacing their animals for a gas engine. While the practical reasons to own a dog team have disappeared in the past 60 years, the draw of traveling through the wilderness behind a team of dogs still remains for many.