



Iditarod National Historic Trail

Iditarod

Historic Trail



VISITOR GUIDE



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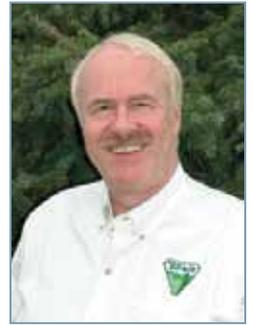
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Welcome

to Alaska’s National Historic Trail!

National Historic Trails, as part of America’s National Historic Trail system, commemorate major routes of exploration, migration, trade, and military actions. Across America only 18 trails have been honored as National Historic Trails. The Iditarod is the only National Historic Trail in Alaska, and the only winter trail in the entire National Historic Trail system. What’s more, the Iditarod is the only Historic Trail celebrating the indispensable role played by ‘man’s best friend’—the dog—in the settlement of Alaska.



Given the broad swath of geography the 2,400-mile Iditarod Trail system crosses, it’s only natural that a lot of different landowners are involved. Most of the historic Iditarod Trail is located on public lands or easements managed by the State of Alaska or federal agencies (although a few segments pass over private lands).

No one entity manages the entire Historic Trail—management is guided by a cooperative plan adopted by federal and state agencies in the mid-1980s. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management was appointed in the National Trails Act to coordinate the efforts of public land managers and volunteers on behalf of the trail.

As we have celebrated the 100th anniversary of the opening of the Iditarod Trail, we have launched some exciting new efforts to help you enjoy the spirit and place of America’s Last Great Gold Rush Trail. We hope you can enjoy the fruits of some of these efforts, and will help steward the trail through the twenty-first century. See you on the trail!

Iditarod Historic Trail

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Produced and Designed by



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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary Reimer".

Gary Reimer
BLM Anchorage District Manager

You Want to Hit the Trail and you have...

...an hour

- ☪ Check out the paved bike path section along Resurrection Bay in Seward.
- ☪ Take in some exhibits on Beluga whales, and stroll on the trail at Bird Point along the Seward Highway.
- ☪ Visit the historic Iditarod Trail exhibit at the Alaska State Fair in Palmer.
- ☪ Visit the Eagle River Nature Center in Chugach State Park and in-season see spawning salmon.
- ☪ Check out the Knik Museum / Dog Musers Hall of Fame and hike the trail out through the woods.

...a half-day

- ☪ Hike the Trail in Girdwood, stopping at Crow Creek Mine to pan for gold.
- ☪ Ride the Alaska Railroad into the Kenai Mountains and whistle stops in Chugach National Forest.
- ☪ Visit the Anchorage Museum of History and Art and take in the Alaska Gallery.
- ☪ View waterfowl and the Knik River crossing of the historic trail at Reflection Lake, and then take a summer dogsled ride at the Iditarod Sled Dog Race headquarters in Wasilla.
- ☪ Drive out from Nome on the Council Highway to the Safety Sound Bridge, and walk the beach in the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge.

...three days

- ☪ Backpack over the Crow Pass segment from Girdwood to the Eagle River Nature Center.
- ☪ Fly to McGrath, charter a small plane for a visit to the ghost town of Iditarod.
- ☪ Fly mountain bikes to Takotna and ride the state highways to the Ophir goldfields.
- ☪ Fish for silver salmon on the Unalakleet River on the Kaltag Portage.

...a week or more

- ☪ Fly into the BLM Rohn Shelter Cabin and backpack 40 miles over Rainy Pass for a floatplane pick up near Puntilla Lake.
- ☪ Snowmachine, skijor, or dog mush from village to village, stopping at public safety cabins along the way.

Why You Don't Want to Walk to Nome (in the Summer)

Five hundred miles of swamp and ankle-busting tussocks. Clouds of mosquitoes. Enough creek and river crossings to make you want to grow webbed feet.

Much of the country crossed by the historic Iditarod Trail is flat, boggy basins lined with permafrost and punctuated with black spruce. There's a reason the old-timers rode the steamers up and down the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers in the summer. There are good stretches of high country that will give you a taste of the trail (some listed on this page), but if you want to seek out the flats, know before you go!



Alaska's Enduring Trail

At the turn of the twentieth century in Alaska, transportation between boomtowns like Nome, Fairbanks, and Valdez relied on river and ocean steamers in summer and sled dog teams in the winter. In 1908, the Alaska Road Commission (ARC) sought a shorter winter overland route to Nome than the 1,300-mile route from Valdez through Fairbanks. The ARC dispatched Colonel Walter Goodwin and a crew of three, provisioned with dog teams, to scout a winter trail from Seward over the Alaska Range to Nome.

Although the Seward to Nome route was found to be 400 miles shorter, Goodwin concluded that the lack of population and low demand for mail service made development unnecessary. But then a gold strike on Christmas Day 1908 changed all this.

In fall 1908, prospector's Johnny Beaton and Bill Dikeman had driven a small steamboat up the Haiditarod River, built a tiny cabin, and began melting and then hand-digging small exploratory shafts on likely streambeds. Beaton and Dikeman dug 26 shafts without any luck until on Christmas Day, at a depth of 12 feet, they hit pay dirt.

The Iditarod goldfields became the fourth most productive district in all of Alaska. The Iditarod rush was the last in an era of American gold rushes stretching back to California in 1849. Over 65 tons of gold, or \$1.77 billion dollars at today's value, was taken out of the Iditarod district—most of it was taken out by dogsled!



Goodwin expedition measuring the Seward to Nome route with cyclometer attached to a dogsled.

Boomtowns, Gold Trains and Roadhouses

Even by Alaska standards, the Iditarod goldfields were so remote that it wasn't until summer 1910 that stam-peders arrived. But within three months, gold-seekers built two towns populated with 2,000 citizens each. By winter 1911, "gold-train" sleddog teams packed with a half-ton of gold made the three-week run from Iditarod on their way to Seward. Tons of gold came out, and tons of freight, food, and mail went in.

Roadhouses and trail-marking 'tripods' lined the 520-mile route to Seward from Iditarod. Located a day's journey by foot or dogteam—about 20 miles—the roadhouses allowed travel without the need for overnight camping or carrying of three weeks of provisions. Thousands of fortune seekers, many on foot or snowshoe, traveled across Alaska on this trail system unmatched even today.

Pre-Russo-Euro Contact

NATIVE PEOPLE FROM SEWARD PENINSULA TO PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND MAKE TRAILS LATER USED AS THE IDITAROD TRAIL

Average team is three dogs although a better off man may have up to five.

1843

KALTAG PORTAGE DISCOVERED BY RUSSIANS

Lieutenant Zagoskin of the Russian American Co. discovers long-hidden Native trade route and shortcut between the Bering Sea and the Yukon River of Interior Alaska.

1867

ALASKA PURCHASED BY UNITED STATES

American fur trading companies take over Russian trading posts and continue to use the Kaltag Portage.

1900

NOME BECOMES INSTANT CITY

Word of gold discoveries in the beach sands cause one of Alaska's greatest gold rushes. By the summer of 1900, between 20,000 and 30,000 people arrive, many via Kaltag Portage.

1903

SEWARD FORMED AS START OF NEW RAILROAD LINKING COAST TO INTERIOR

1908

SEWARD TO NOME ROUTE EXPLORED

Alaska Road Commission scouts an 800-mile winter trail from Seward to Nome starting January 31 and finishing April 5.

1908

CHRISTMAS DAY STRIKE ON OTTER CREEK, A TRIBUTARY OF THE HAIDITAROD (IDITAROD) RIVER BY BEATON AND DIKEMAN

1910-11

AK ROAD COMMISSION SPENDS \$10,000 TO CONSTRUCT SEWARD TO NOME TRAIL WITH A BRANCH TO THE IDITAROD GOLDFIELDS

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 goldfields.

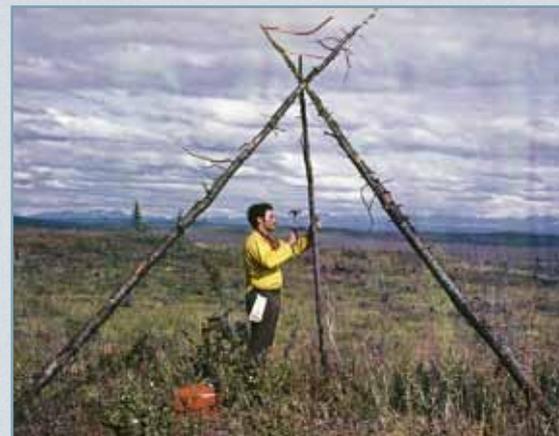
Nome Serum Run Marks the Beginning of the End

In the winter of 1925, a deadly outbreak of diphtheria struck fear in the hearts of Nome residents. Winter ice had closed the port city from the outside world without enough serum to inoculate its residents. Serum from Anchorage was rushed by train to Nenana and picked up by a sled dog relay. Twenty of Alaska's best mushers and their teams carried the serum 674 miles from Nenana to Nome in less than five-and-a-half days!

This was to be one of the final great feats by sled dogs. Within a decade, air transport replaced the sled dog team as the preferred way to ship mail. With downturns in gold mining, most of the roadhouses closed, boomtowns emptied, and the Iditarod Trail fell into disuse.

A Partnership Effort Reopens the Iditarod Trail

Forest and tundra reclaimed the Iditarod Trail for almost half a century until Alaskans, led by Joe Redington, Sr., reopened the routes. 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. And after years of dogged effort by Joe and the Alaska Congressional delegation, the Iditarod was designated as a National Historic Trail in 1978.



Alaska Fire Service crew member puts the finishing touches on a tripod in the Farewell Burn, 1981.

Tripods Lead to Safety

For the past century, wooden tripods have been placed at close intervals along treeless sections of the Iditarod Trail to guide travelers safely through blizzards. A 1912 article titled "Trail Making in Alaska" described how Colonel Goodwin, leader of the Alaska Road Commission expedition to mark the trail from Seward to Nome, constructed the tripods:

"...tripods...consisted of three sticks of timber each, two of which were eight feet long and the third ten or eleven feet long. They are so fastened together that the longest of the tree sticks projects two or three feet over the others and directly above the trail."

The same design is still in use today, with volunteer groups and public land managers working to provide these safety markers over hundreds of miles of the trail.

1910-12

TEN THOUSAND STAMPEDEES RUSH TO MINING CAMPS BETWEEN IDITAROD AND RUBY

1912

ALASKA BECOMES A TERRITORY

1914

U.S. MAIL CARRIED THE LENGTH OF THE 'IDITAROD TRAIL'

Wells Fargo dog teams carry over 1,000 pounds of gold from Iditarod to Seward in 37 days.

1914

U.S. GOVERNMENT TAKES OVER CONSTRUCTION OF ALASKA RAILROAD; LOCATES HEADQUARTERS ON COOK INLET

1918

THE STAMPEDE IS OVER

New mail contract bypasses Iditarod. Wells Fargo dogsled "gold trains" make their last trek to Seward. World War I draws young miners and workers away from goldfields.

1925

DIPHTHERIA EPIDEMIC THREATENS NOME

Twenty dog mushers relay the lifesaving serum 674 miles from Nenana to Nome over the Iditarod Trail in a little more than five days.

1973

THE FIRST IDITAROD SLED DOG RACE IS RUN TO NOME

Twenty-two mushers successfully complete the first Anchorage to Nome Sled Dog Race, with the winner traveling the 1,000-mile distance in just over 20 days.

1978

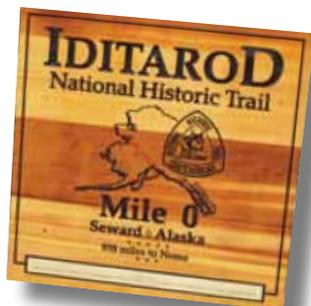
IDITAROD NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL ESTABLISHED BY CONGRESS

The Iditarod Trail and three other American pioneering routes are designated as the first national historic trails.

Kenai Mountains

Seward (Mile 0)

Look for the tripod and historic Iditarod Trail monument located along the shoreline of Resurrection Bay next to the Alaska SeaLife Center. This is the southernmost terminus for the historic Iditarod Trail. Thousands of people set off from here trying to realize their dreams of fortune. A paved segment of the historic trail follows the bay for one mile to the small boat harbor.



Resurrection Bay Historical Society Museum

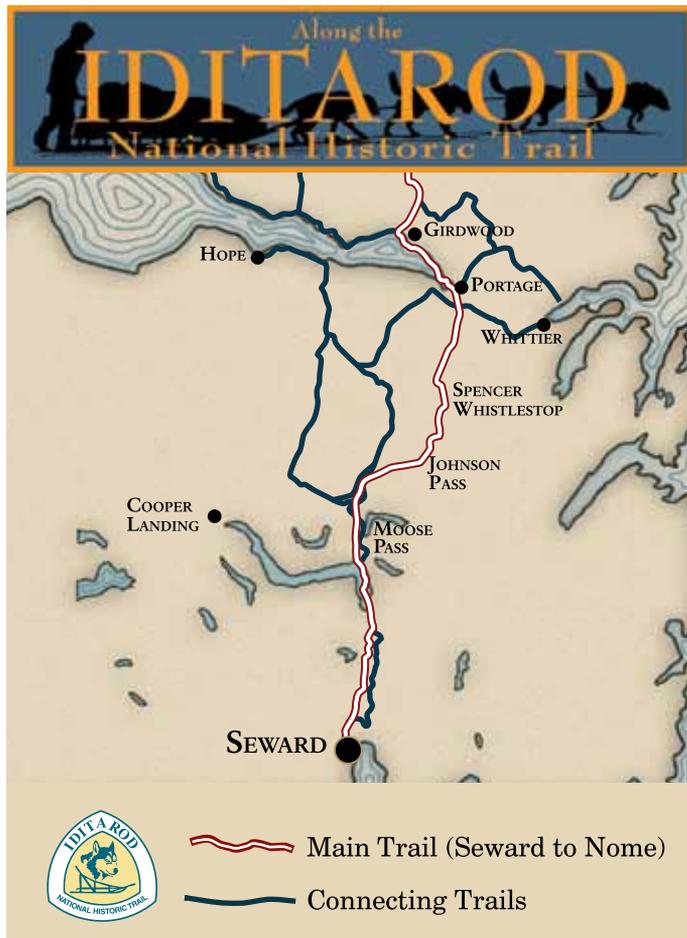
Photographs, artifacts, and documents tell the history of the area and the Iditarod at this quaint little museum in downtown Seward. If you visit during the summer, be sure to catch one of their evening programs on the history of the Iditarod Trail.

Johnson Pass Trail & Trailheads

This 23-mile trail is part of the historic Iditarod Trail. Popular with mountain bikers and hikers, this trail offers spectacular scenery with hemlock forests, wildflowers, and sweeping vistas. This is an excellent trail for longer family outings. Wildlife viewing, hunting, and fishing opportunities also exist.

Alaska Railroad & Spencer Whistle Stop

Hop on board the Alaska Railroad and follow the main route of the historic Iditarod Trail deep into the inaccessible, roadless backcountry of the Chugach National Forest. The Spencer Whistle Stop is the first in a series of whistle stops that offers hiking, glacier viewing, and amazing scenery. Trips can be arranged through the Alaska Railroad at www.akrr.com.



Portage Valley–Trail of Blue Ice

A newly constructed segment of the historic Iditarod Trail system in the glacially carved Portage Valley. Starting at the west end of the valley at the Moose Flats Day Use Site, this wide and well-surfaced trail runs five miles to the Begich, Boggs Visitor Center. All sections are accessible and great fun for a family outing.

Begich, Boggs Visitor Center

Built on the terminal moraine left behind by Portage Glacier, the visitor center offers interactive displays, videos, and educational programs to tell the story of the Chugach National Forest. The visitor center is open seven days a week during the summer.

Seward Highway All-American Road

When following the Seward Highway, you are actually following much of the historic Iditarod Trail. Today, the Seward Highway is considered one of the “best of the best” scenic byways in the United States.

Hope Historic District

The small, quiet communities of Hope and nearby Sunrise were once booming gold rush cities in the late 1890s. Many of the old buildings and charm of the gold rush days still remain. In fact, the downtown store opened in 1896 and is still serving customers today. Be sure to check out the Hope-Sunrise Historical and Mining Museum.



Seward of Yesteryear

“Seward Route to the Iditarod the Only Way”

HEADLINE FROM SEWARD WEEKLY GATEWAY PAPER, NOV. 1909

Although officially founded in 1903, the town of Seward bustled with prospectors for at least a decade prior to its incorporation. The year-round ice-free waters of Resurrection Bay made Seward an ideal port and supply point for booming Interior Alaska mining communities.

The first wave of commerce came to Seward in the late 1890s with the discovery of gold on the other side of the Kenai Peninsula at Hope and Sunrise. Then in 1908, community boosters made sure that Seward stayed on the map as they pressed for the development of a government trail leading to the new Iditarod goldfields in the Upper Innoko Basin.

Newspapers breathlessly repeated the advantages of the Seward route over the Richardson Trail from Valdez to Fairbanks. And in 1910 they were rewarded when the Alaska Road Commission decided to spend \$10,000 to construct a trail connecting Seward to Nome.



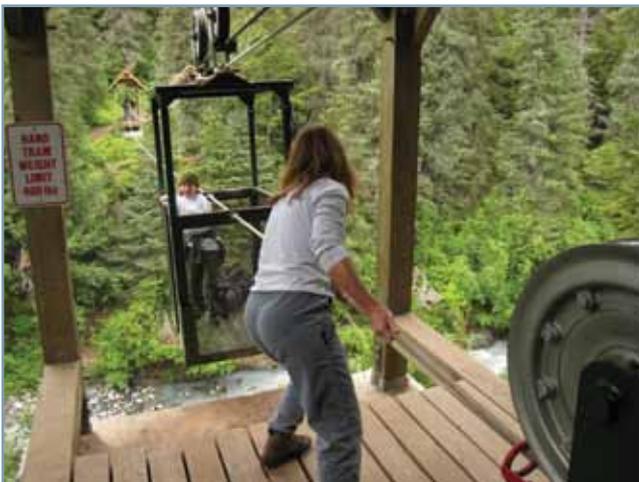
Anchorage Area

Girdwood

Established in 1906 as a place to rest and reprovision before crossing the Iditarod Trail over the Chugach Mountains, Girdwood today hosts some of the most easily-accessed and historically intact segments of the historic route. Wide, paved bike paths parallel Alyeska Highway in the lower valley, while moss-shrouded rainforest sections start at trailheads from Mile 1.6 of Crow Creek Road. For more information, visit the U.S. Forest Service Glacier Ranger District office on Alyeska Highway, or look for maps at nearby trailheads.

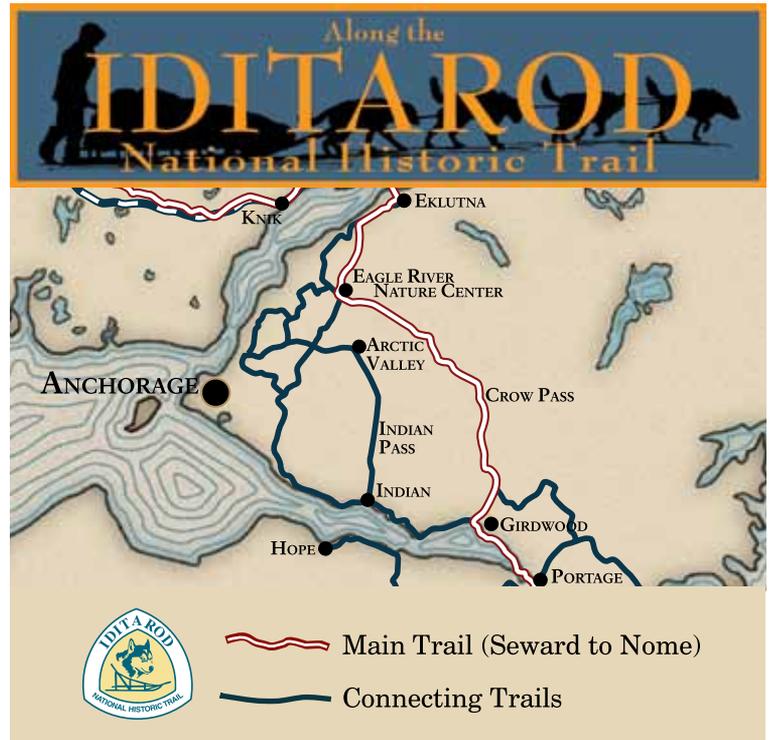
Roundhouse Museum at Alyeska Resort

The Roundhouse Museum, a historic lift terminal high above the Girdwood valley, lets visitors glimpse the life of area miners who used the Iditarod Trail, along with Alaska pioneers in skiing. Accessed via the Alyeska Resort tram, the museum provides a grand view of the Iditarod route across the Chugach Mountains. Open summer and winter.



Winner Creek/Berry Pass Trails

Long a favorite with local residents, the Winner Creek segment of the historic Iditarod Trail provides access to the spectacular Four Corners Gorge and an exciting hand-operated tram over the chasm. The Winner Creek Trail is accessible from both Crow Creek Road and the Alyeska Hotel. The Berry Pass Trail (also known as Upper Winner Creek) provides an improved seven-mile route to a spectacular alpine pass.



Crow Creek Mine–National Historic Place

Visitors can pan for gold, camp, and get a feel for life in the gold camps at this largest intact historic mine in Southcentral Alaska (summer only). During the early 1900s, Crow Creek Mine was the most productive placer mining camp in the Turnagain-Knik region, and a heavy user of the Iditarod Trail to Seward.

Crow Pass–Eagle River Segment

At the end of Crow Creek Road, a 3.5-mile segment of the historic route leads to Crow Pass, the highest point on the entire Seward to Nome trail and one of the most scenic hikes in all of Southcentral Alaska. Backpackers can continue over the pass on a 24-mile traverse of Chugach State Park, finishing at the Eagle River Nature Center.

The Forest Service rents a public use cabin in the Crow Pass area. Summer use only is recommended due to avalanche hazards.



Girdwood to Indian Pathway

First cut by trail builders in 1908 seeking to avoid the avalanche prone Crow Pass Trail, today's route is a wide, 13-mile, bike-friendly asphalt trail. Frequent turnouts, numerous information displays, and great opportunities for wildlife viewing.

Indian Pass–Ship Creek Segment

A largely unimproved, 20-mile traverse through rainforest, alpine and sub-boreal forest, best done on skis in winter. Improved segments at either end provide enjoyable 'out-and-back' day trips. Access year-round on the Ship Creek side is via scenic Arctic Valley Road just north of Anchorage, off the Glenn Highway at Arctic Valley exit.



Anchorage of Yesteryear

Anchorage was a blank spot on the map when the Seward to Iditarod government trail opened in 1910. All of this changed in 1915, when the federal government established the townsite of Anchorage as the headquarters of the soon-to-be-built Alaska Railroad. The main route of the Iditarod Trail soon included the new boomtown, and dog teams loaded with hundreds of thousands of dollars of Iditarod gold became a regular sight on Anchorage's main streets.

Every winter until 1919, when the railroad was finished to the ice-free port of Seward, Anchorage received its winter mail and supplies by dog teams traveling the Indian Pass-Ship Creek Trail. The main hotel in town even included dog kennels in the basement for visiting mushers.



Knik of Yesteryear

During the Iditarod gold rush, Knik was the last major outfitting center before stampedeers struck out for mines 375 miles to the northwest. Stampedeers would travel to Knik either by trail over the Chugach Mountains or by steamship up Cook Inlet from Seward. At its peak, Knik was home to 1,500 people, a variety of businesses, and was the hub for a number of trails to goldfields and coalfields. The founding of Anchorage and the Alaska Railroad's bypassing of Knik caused the town's rapid decline—by 1920 it's population had moved on.

“NORMALLY A SMALL AND QUIET VILLAGE, KNIK WAS IN THE THROES OF A BOOM. THE HOTEL WAS A NEW, TWO-STORY FRAME BUILDING, BUT CONSTRUCTION-WISE A MERE SHELL. FROM THE SMALL DOWNSTAIRS LOBBY ONE COULD HEAR A MAN CHANGE HIS MIND IN THE FARTHEST ROOM UPSTAIRS.”—Harold Peckenpaugh, 1912, from *Nuggets and Beans*

Iditarod Sled Dog Race Ceremonial Start

On the first Saturday of every March, dozens of mushers and dog teams start their journey to Nome with a warm-up trip over the trails of Anchorage. From Fourth Avenue teams fly down the Cordova Street hill to the paved Chester Creek bike path, and head east to the trails in Far North Bicentennial Park. Good opportunities for wildlife viewing can be had on these trails year-round.



Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center

Full-scale and miniature dioramas in the 15,000-square-foot Alaska Gallery, along with over 1,000 historic artifacts provide a broad overview of the history of Alaska. Open year-round.

Alaska Public Lands Information Center

Interagency visitor center on Fourth Avenue that can provide details on Iditarod Trail-related recreation described in this guide, as well as other opportunities throughout Alaska. Open year-round.

Eagle River Nature Center

Located in the upper Eagle River Valley, which was once described a century ago by trail scouts on the Iditarod as a “miniature Yosemite.” Open year-round (weekends only in winter), the nonprofit Nature Center provides nature studies for adults and children, nine miles of hiking trails—including the historic Iditarod Trail—and over-night camping at a public use cabin and two yurts. Located at Mile 10 on Eagle River Road.



Eklutna Historic Park

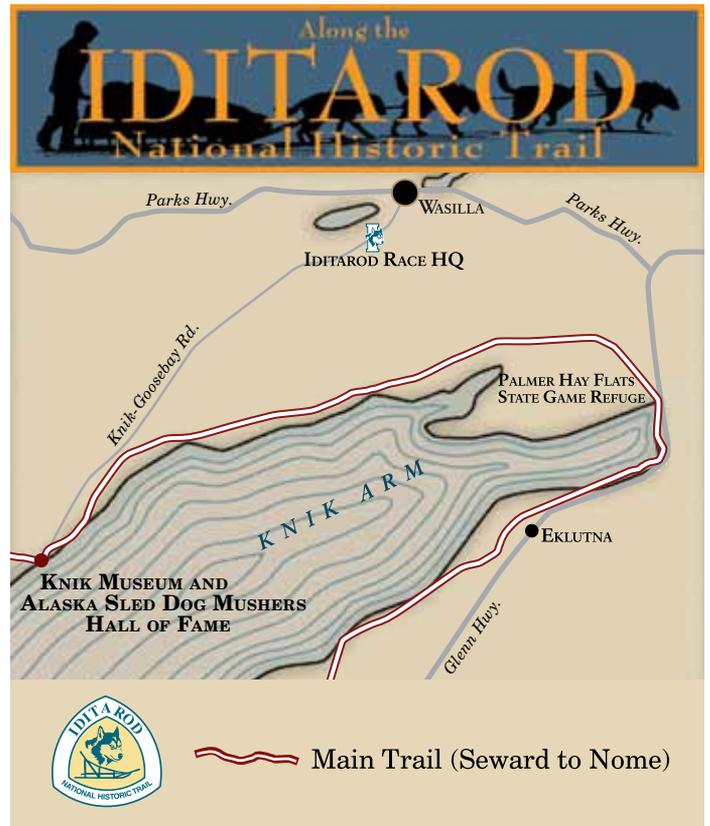
Dena'ina Athabaskan village site inhabited since 1650 was the winter river-crossing site for the historic Iditarod Trail. A museum, historic Russian Orthodox church from the 1840s, and colorfully decorated graveyard ‘spirit houses’ provide a window into the past.

Wasilla Area

Reflection Lake and Palmer Hay Flats State Game Refuge



Excellent waterfowl viewing and stunning Chugach mountain scenery at the over-the-Knik River ice crossing site of the old Iditarod Trail. A flat gravel trail winds around the lake and offers hidden views into this unique intertidal wetland. Access at the Reflection Lake exit on the Glenn Highway.



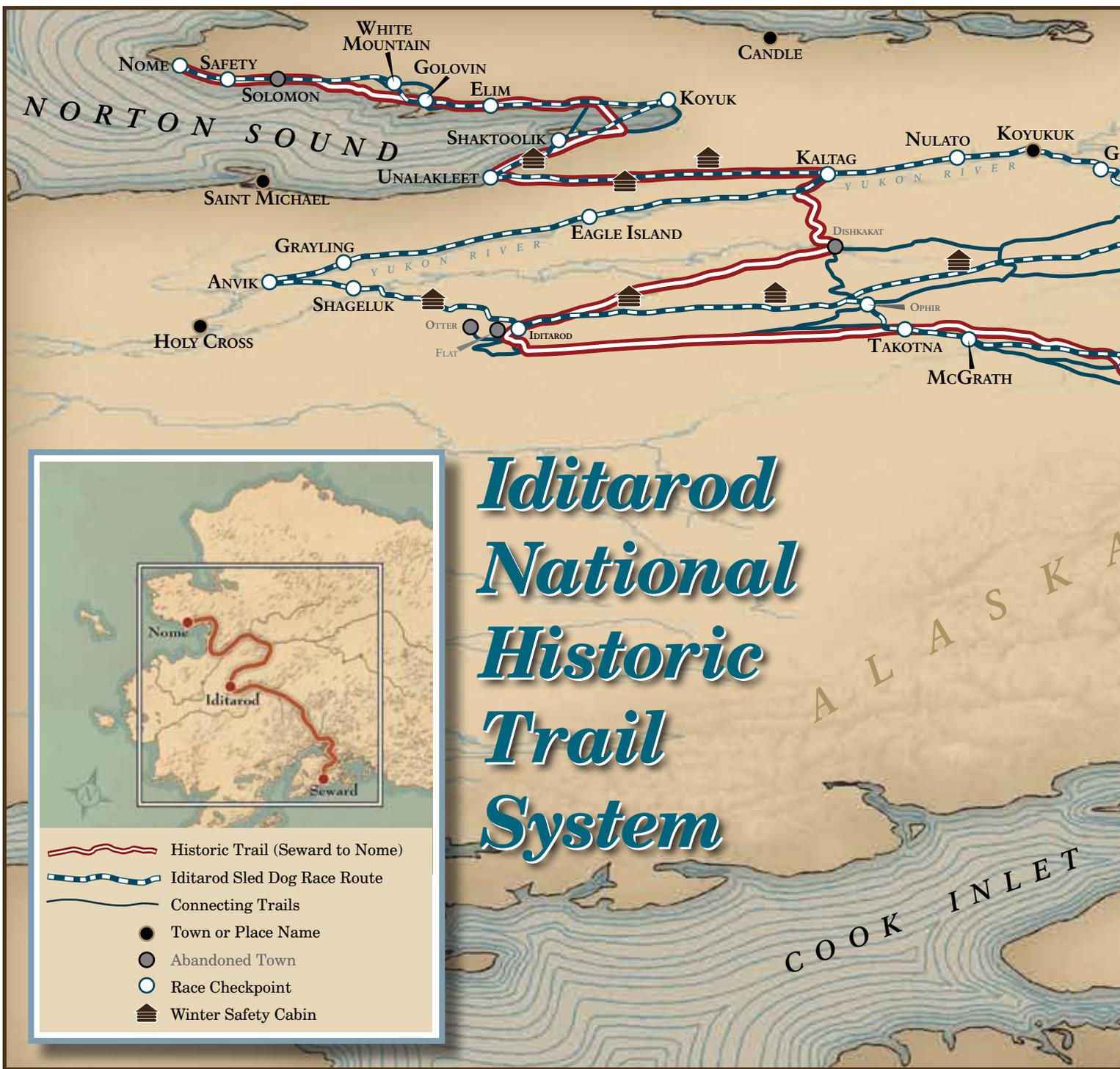
Iditarod Sled Dog Race Headquarters

A large log building houses a museum with memorabilia, displays, and photographs dating back to the first runs of the Iditarod Sled Dog Race in 1973. Dogsled rides May to September. Mile 2.2 Knik-Goosebay Road.

Knik Museum—Alaska Sled Dog Musher's Hall of Fame

Located directly on the main route of the historic Iditarod Trail where it passed through the gold rush era town of Knik. The museum building was previously used as a pool hall and roadhouse. The first floor contains artifacts and photographs from historic Knik, and the second floor the Sled Dog Musher's Hall of Fame. Visitors can take short walks on the historic trail from the museum. Mile 13.9 Knik-Goosebay Road.





What's In a Name? Place Names Along the

Seward

For Secretary of State William Seward, who arranged the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867 for \$7.2 million, or around 1.9 cents per acre.

Portage

Named for a bay on the Prince William Sound side of a mountain pass covered by a glacier of the same name.

Girdwood

For Colonel James Girdwood, who found and formed a number of mines in Glacier Creek valley.

Anchorage

First known as Ship Creek, the waters off the creek were charted as "Knik Anchorage." The U.S. Post Office later shortened the name to Anchorage.

Wasilla

Named for a respected local Dena'ina Athabaskan chief.