

Iditarod Trail missing under deep snow

WEATHER: Parts of the route buried with more in the forecast.

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As Anchorage began gearing up for Saturday's ceremonial start of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, a hunt was under way to the north to find the track that will guide mushers 1,000 miles to Nome.

Deep snows across the south slope of the Alaska Range and on into the Interior have buried the trail in many places.

Mushers asking Iditarod Trail race manager Mark Nordman about what conditions to expect when the race starts were being answered with another question:

"When's the last time you used your snowshoes?"

Snowshoes are required gear for the 67 competitors who will start the race this year. And for the first time in a long time, mushers might get a chance to use them.

Not only is there a lot of snow along the trail, Nordman said, more is forecast.

Kathi Merchant with the Iditarod Trail Invitational reported heavy snow falling in McGrath on the north side of the Alaska Range late Wednesday afternoon. Merchant was reached by telephone as she waited to greet mountain bikers, skiers and runners coming north on the historic Iditarod route from Knik. She was starting to get a little worried.

Biker Jeff Oatley from Fairbanks, the leader of the Invitational, left Puntilla on the south side of Alaska Range for Rohn, a checkpoint on the north side, at 3 a.m. Tuesday. As of 8 p.m. Wednesday, he still hadn't made his way through windswept Rainy Pass.

The distance between the two checkpoints is about 50 miles. With good trail, top bikers can make the run in 6 to 8 hours.

Out with Oatley somewhere along the trail was Merchant's husband, Bill, an Iditarod trailbreaker. He went ahead of the Invitational on a snowmobile trying to pack out a route in fresh, waist-deep snow.

Steve Perrin, owner of the Rainy Pass Lodge at Puntilla, said on Monday that Merchant's new, 120-horsepower Yamaha Viking Professional -- a snowmobile designed to go through deep snow -- ended up so bogged down that two of Perrin's sons had to help Merchant dig it out.

Before the latest snow fell, Kathi said, Bill had managed to ride the machine up through Rainy Pass to Ptarmigan Pass, the slot through the mountains the Tesoro Iron Dog snowmobile racers use to cross the range. But she told him by satellite phone not to go that way.

Early trailbreakers who did ended up with snowmachines sunk in open water along the South Fork Kuskokwim River in a place called Hell's Gate. Eventually, however, that group reached Rohn and was teaming up with others already there to pack a trail back through the Dalzell Gorge to Rainy

Pass.

Nordman said longtime Iditarod volunteer Terry Boyle, a mainstay of the Rohn checkpoint, reported by satellite phone late Wednesday that the group was getting close to the top.

The going is never easy. The Iditarod through the Dalzell exists only as short openings cut through the brush on whichever side of the Gorge offers a patch of ground, as opposed to a cliff. To connect the segments, the trailbreakers build bridges out of whatever materials they can find -- ice blocks, brush buried under piles of hand-shoveled snow or, where available, trees.

"They didn't get very far (Tuesday)," Kathi Merchant said. "They had only put in a couple bridges."

She took it as good news that Nordman heard from Boyle, and that Boyle was reporting progress in moving toward the pass.

"I wonder where Bill might possibly be at this point," she added. "I don't know how deep the snow is, and we've got more coming down. It's coming down in Puntilla, too.

"I wonder if our race will stall out for the first time?"

Mountain bikers, skiers and runners have for 13 years been racing 350-miles to McGrath, and like the mushers in the Iditarod, they have never let weather stop them. But the weather is proving more challenging this year than in many a winter.

Earlier in the week, the Norman Vaughan Serum Run '25 quit at Tanana on the Yukon River because of deep snow. The event named for the late, great Col. Norman Vaughan is a commemoration of the valiant 1925 effort Alaska dog teams and their drivers put forth in order to rush life-saving diphtheria serum from Nenana to Nome.

The serum run mushers, however, didn't have to deal with heavy snow. Nordman said it is at near-record levels across much of the Interior.

Still, he was optimistic that come Iditarod race day, there will be a trail. He had snowmobile crews at work across the Interior and all were reporting progress.

All of which might mean nothing, added Diana Moroney, a former Iditarod musher who now volunteers as a pilot for the all-volunteer Iditarod Air Force.

The Iditarod Trail, she noted, can be fine today and gone tomorrow.

There was, for instance, a well-packed trail through parts of Rainy Pass after the Iron Dog race in February, but Moroney flew through there earlier this week and saw hardly a hint of trail visible beneath all the new snow.

Any trail put in over the course of the days ahead, she said, could just as easily disappear if the winds pick up and start moving snow around.

And then, there's always the possibility the Mount Redoubt volcano could explode. It remains on watch status.

Moroney was in the 1992 Iditarod when Mount Spurr exploded and showered mushers with three to four inches of ash.

It was a reminder that Mother Nature still dictates in Alaska -- even if 21st century technology has evolved to the point where, as former Iditarod Trail manager Jack Niggemyer put it, almost anyone can now get on a snowmachine "and drive to the North Pole without even having to change a belt."

Given, of course, that there's some sort of trail to follow.

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