

Storm traps wilderness racers on Iditarod Trail

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Along the Iditarod Trail, a race was on today to reach mountain bikers, skiers and runners trapped by snows high in the Alaska Range as the notorious Rainy Pass winds began to blow.

Kathi Merchant with the Iditarod Trail Invitational -- a 350-mile, human-powered race through the wilds of Alaska from Knik to McGrath that began Sunday -- said none of the 20 or so people on the trail appeared to be in imminent danger, but they were all stuck. The invitational, in cooperation with the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, was trying to get to them to provide a trail over the pass and down to a one-room log cabin on the Tatina River at Rohn.

The accommodations there are spartan, but there is food, shelter and warmth.

Jeff Oatley from Fairbanks, a mountain biker who led the race to Rainy Pass Lodge on Puntilla Lake near the south end of the pass, left that checkpoint at 3 a.m. Tuesday. By this morning, he'd been on the trail more than 48 hours.

The 50-mile run from the lodge through a broad, windswept valley and then up and through the slot in the mountains that is Rainy Pass proper usually takes bikers only six to eight hours, and it is rare for anyone to carry more than 24 hours' worth of food. Merchant, though, said it was likely Oatley was now with a larger group of racers and race officials who would share food and, just as important, fuel for melting snow to make water.

Rich Crain -- a snowmachiner from Anchorage helping break trail for the invitational --- did manage to reach racers huddling in a roofless cabin at Rainy Pass Lake just below the pass on Wednesday, she said. She suspected Oatley was in that bunch with her husband, Bill, and other racers who left the lodge Wednesday.

Bill has a satellite phone with him, but it appears it is no longer working.

Racers who left the Puntilla checkpoint after Oatley were advised to pack extra food because of the conditions, and Bill Merchant is traveling well-equipped on a trail-packing snowmobile that, unfortunately, was reported to be stuck once again in deep, deep snow.

"He buried his machine," Denise Perrin said by radiophone from Perrin's Rainy Pass Lodge this morning.

She got a full report from Crain, who returned to the lodge's comfortable accommodations in the dark late Wednesday. He got a few hours' sleep, something to eat, gassed his snowmachine and was headed back out on the trail to help early today.

Meanwhile, Terry Boyle, a longtime Iditarod volunteer and skookum woodsman, was reportedly leading a pack of snowmobilers trying to open the trail from Rohn up the Dalzell Gorge and over Rainy Pass to where racers waited.

It appears, Perrin said, that of the 19 racers out of Puntilla, about half were holed up in what the Perrins call the Halfway Cabin, halfway between the lodge and the pass, and the rest were at the Rainy Pass Lake cabin. Only one racer had turned back to Putnilla.

The Rainy Lake cabin was newly built to replace a wall tent that had provided the only shelter there for years. The Perrins thought the cabin would provide better shelter in conditions like those now being encountered, but a fall windstorm ripped most of the roof off the structure.

It is now partially snow-filled but better than camping out in blowing snow.

Perrin said Crain told her most of the Iditarod Invitational competitors were waiting there for snowmobiles to pack a trail over the top of the pass, but three or four left to try to make the top on their own. If they can do that, there is an obvious route that is all downhill into Pass Creek and on to Dalzell Creek, where there is now trail.

The process of building the Iditarod Trail started south from Rohn days ago, but it has been slow going, Kathi Merchant said.

Dalzell Creek froze when flowing at high water. When the water dropped, all the ice that had formed collapsed into the creek. Trail builders were being forced to find ways to bridge broken ice to get up the creek.

The Dalzell runs through such a tight gorge that there are only narrow banks to the stream, and usually only on one side or the other. This forces trail makers to zigzag back and forth across the creek, an easy proposition when there is good ice but a difficult chore this year. The trail builders were being forced to haul snow up into the gorge to fill in holes where the creek ice had collapsed into the creek, Kathi said.

It was hard work slowing their progress toward the Pass, but Kathi said she was not yet worried about racers. The Invitational screens competitors for their survival skills. She was confident that the people on the trail were capable of taking care of themselves for days in the cold, snow and wind, which looks like it could get worse before it gets better.

Kathi was reached by telephone in McGrath on the north side of the Alaska Range where she said there was 8 to 9 inches of fresh snow with the wind starting to blow. Perrin reported 6 inches or so fresh on the south side of the range.

With that sort of accumulation on the ground, it is easy for the Rainy Pass winds to stir up a ground blizzard. The story is much the same on the desolate Farewell Bend between Rohn and McGrath.

"There's certainly going to be a record for this race for the longest time," Merchant said.

The race has never before taken the winner more than about 5 days. Anchorage cycling phenom Peter Basinger made it in 3 days, 5 hours and 40 minutes in 2007. By this morning, competitors had been on the trail for four days and were only about halfway to the finish line with nothing but miles and miles of bad trail or no trail ahead of them.

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