

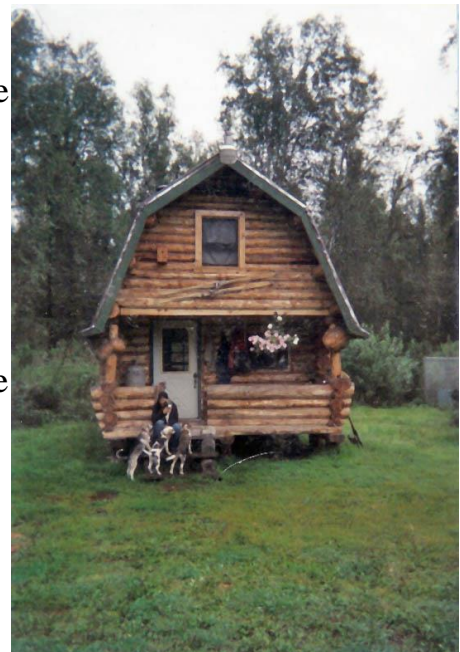
Trapper Creek

A Day in the Life of a Dog Handler

Handler

This is a story about Karin's first months as a dog handler in Alaska.

I live out at the end of a long dirt road - or mud, depending on the season. We're about 1 1/2 hours drive to the nearest real town (one with a grocery store). My log cabin is snug and comfortable, with a loft upstairs to sleep in. There is no electricity, indoor bathroom, or running water. But I do have gas lanterns, a propane stove and refrigerator, and a woodstove that keeps things warm - with a little work. I keep water in a barrel next to the door, and fill it every week or so. The outhouse is out back, and has a lovely view into the forest. I don't have a tub or shower, but I do have a wood-fired sauna that eases the aches and pains as it gets the worst of the grime.



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My alarm goes off. It is 6:00 a.m. and dark outside. Fall is just getting underway, and the days are getting shorter. The alarm sounds again. It's cozy under the covers, but I have work to do. So I creep out of my warm bed and into the cold cabin air. I shrug into my clothes in the dark, and climb down the ladder from the loft where I sleep.

First things first - I shove my feet into my boots and head outside for the outhouse. The dogs hear my door, and set up a group chorus of howls. They are happy to hear me stirring, and ready to start the day.

Back inside, I strike a match to light the lantern, and get busy building a fire in the woodstove. It's chilly in the cabin, maybe 45 degrees. I glance at the thermometer outside - about 20 degrees. Not too cold, but enough that I'll want a warm cabin to come back to.

I fill the kettle with water from the barrel next to the door, and place it on the stove. Next I put a tea bag in a mug, and set it on the counter. I leave the dirty dishes from last night in the sink. When I come back inside my hands will be covered in filth. Once I've washed the dishes, my hands will be clean enough to make breakfast and eat. It's the little things, like planning ahead, that make a difference living out here like this.

With everything prepared, I slip into my coveralls, and head out the door. I open up the tool shed, uncover the generator from the blankets we use to insulate it at night, and start the generator up. After a moment, I flip the switch, and the lights come on in the dog yard and buildings. The dogs are all looking at me in anticipation.



In the cook shack, I give the vat of fish, beef chunks, commercial kibble, and pureed liver a good stir to break up lumps. Then I dump in a large pot of rice that I cooked up last night. I dish the food out into 5-gallon buckets, and add enough water from the big tank to top each bucket off.

I lug the buckets outside and give each dog their share. The yard gradually gets quieter as I work my way down the rows. Barks of anticipation are replaced with slurps and the soft rattling of food pans.

With breakfast served, it's time to get dinner going. I haul 50 pound blocks of meat from the freezer and break them up with an axe. I dump the meat chunks into the barrel in the cook shack and cover it with water so it will thaw by evening.

By now the sun is bringing light to the dog lot, so I turn off the yard lights and kill the generator, tucking it back under its blankets until tomorrow. Using a bucket and hoe, I begin to clean up the dog lot. By the time I am done picking up after 85 dogs, the sun is up and starting to erase the frost from the grass.

I head back to the cabin so that I can eat too. First I shed my coveralls, filthy with mud and slopped fish. By now the cabin is warming up a bit. I start the kettle to boil, and feed the fire. The kettle is soon whistling, and I top off the dishpan with cold water from the water barrel, then get busy cleaning up. Dishes and hands now clean, I

make a quick peanut butter sandwich and cup of tea. I sit briefly to eat, then start bundling up to go back outside. It's time to run some dogs.

Since there isn't any snow yet, we can't use dog sleds. Instead, we use four-wheelers to train and condition the dogs. Out here where we have few neighbors, it is fun to let them "free run" and chase the four-wheeler for a few miles. The dogs get to goof around and have fun, but they are also learning agility and balance as they jump over obstacles and play while running. And running a few miles each day will really help with fitness when we start training in earnest.

I get the four-wheeler uncovered and warmed up. Then I start getting the first group of eight dogs out. I unhook them from their tethers, and place them all in a small holding pen. When everybody is ready, I flip up the latch. The dogs are off like a shot with me gunning the four-wheeler to try to stay with the group.

We roar down the road through stands of silver birch, frosty breath clouding the morning. On the left the full moon is going down behind the trees. The red sunrise lights up the mist on my right. Two white swans fly overhead, a sign that winter is coming and sensible folks are heading south.

We go out about 2 1/2 miles, then turn around and come roaring back, the dogs running in a pack all around me. Back in the dog yard I make sure everyone is accounted for and hook them back up to their tethers. I run four more groups this way.

Free running is a joy, but also nerve wracking at times. I have to keep an eagle eye on the dogs to make sure everyone stays with the group and no one goes chasing off after the scent of critters. Sometimes there are moose on the road, and despite my efforts to run them off by charging towards them with the four-wheeler, they don't always cooperate. There is real potential that dogs could be hurt by a



pissed off moose. Even a slow bird that gets caught by the pack can cause mayhem, and fights are common with this group of dogs. It can also be a real mud bath out there, not to mention very chilly. It doesn't seem to matter what gloves I wear, my right thumb, which runs the throttle, is always stiff with cold.

Now back at the yard and runs complete, I fire up the generator once more so I can pump water. I quickly fill the water barrel in the cabin, then mop out the muddy cook shack while the large tank fills. Once that is complete, I check and refuel the four-wheelers and generator from the 55 gallon barrels we have stored.

I am in the process of digging a new hole for the outhouse. The old one is filling up, and it is time to move to a new location. Digging a hole this big by hand can really wear you out, so I am trying to do just one hour per day. Today I am especially hampered because the pups keep falling in the hole with me and I am too lazy to go pen them up again.

Next I work on firewood for an hour or so. I use the chainsaw to cut up long spruce and birch logs, then split the big rounds. There are several cords already put up, but I'm not sure how late into winter we will stay out here at this remote site. I sure don't want to have to start rationing firewood when it's twenty below!

By now my back is a little tired and it is just about time to feed. I remember that I forgot to stop for lunch again. The day is almost over, but I need something to keep me going until I'm done. I lean into the cabin (leaving my muddy self outside) and snag a granola bar. That should hold me for another few hours.

I head out to feed, but first take a detour to the sauna shed to light the woodstove. By the time I'm done feeding, the little cedar room should be toasty, and the water on top of the stove hot. Just like leaving the dishes until I need to wash hands too, it pays to plan ahead. If I wait to crank up the sauna until I'm done for the day, I'm sure to fall asleep while waiting for it to heat. While the dogs don't care what I smell like, and there is no one else around to offend, I like to clean up every couple of days.

Over at the cook shack, I again plan ahead. Before feeding I start the rice cooking for breakfast. If I time it right, it will be boiling just about the time I finish feeding, and I won't have to waste time waiting for a watched pot to boil. I mix up and dish out, chop and haul more meat to thaw, turn off the rice for morning, and say goodnight to the dogs.

The light is fading and I'm glad to be almost done for the day. I stop off at the cabin to grab towel, soap, and clean, warm clothes. Then I strip off my filthy gear and enter the warm, steamy sauna. With a washcloth and pitchers of hot water from the pot on top of the stove, it's almost as good as a shower (as long as I remember to skim the dead flies from the water before I dump it on my head). The heat makes me sleepy, so I dry

off, dress, and head back to the cabin. Even though it's only 50 feet away, the evening is already chilly, and I hurry over to start a fire and my dinner.

I've been out here mostly on my own for several weeks. The musher is off in the states, and most of the neighbors (there are a few) are not around either. Consequently, it's been awhile since I've had a chance to pick up groceries. It looks like peanut butter for dinner, too.

The lack of television, internet, and other entertainment is hardly noticed out here. By the time I've finished all my chores I am ready to fall into bed. I bank the fire for the night, and climb up to the loft. I fall asleep while thinking about the list of chores I need to complete - repair and paint dog houses, change the oil in four-wheelers and generator, set up a larger puppy pen, haul some gravel to the low spots in the road, and as always, feed dogs, run dogs, split wood, chop meat....

Photos by Martha Ethridge