

Food and Drink on the Trail - the Dogs

Everyone always wants to know what we eat out on the trail. The quick answer (for dogs and humans) is lots of protein, lots of fat, and lots of variety.

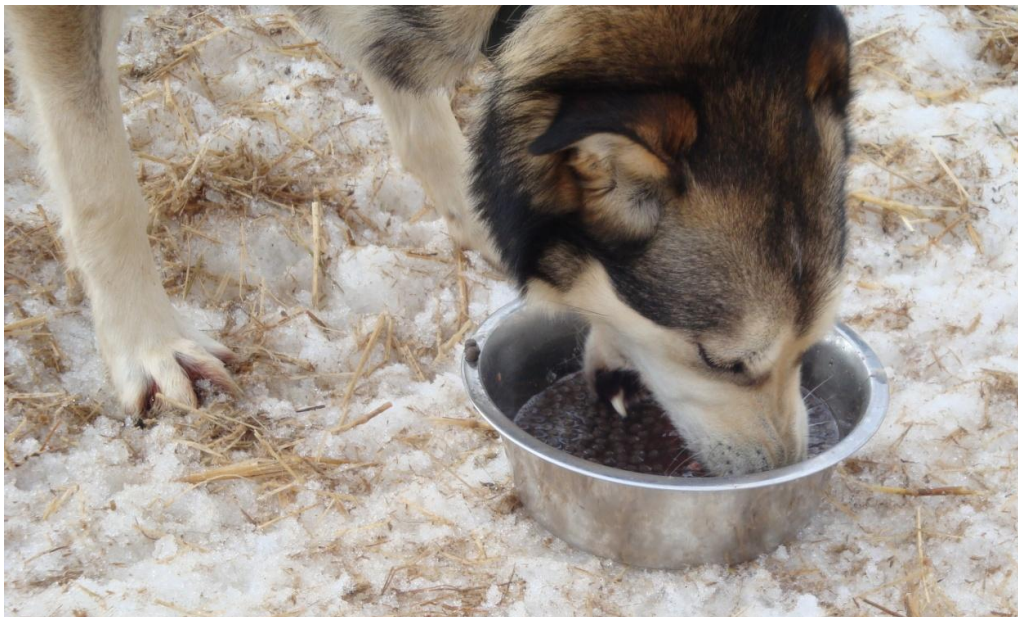
The dogs need about 12,000 calories per day when racing. Consider that the average adult human needs 2,000 calories a day, and that all this energy is going into a 50 pound canine, and you'll get some idea of the energy expenditure out on the trail! The severe cold takes a surprising amount of energy, and to top it all off we run something like 100 miles a day.

To get this many calories down, the dogs have to be bred and trained to inhale food. So preparing for feeding during a race actually begins before the dog is even born! Voracious eating is something we consider when we are deciding who to breed - I'll never want pups from a dog who isn't a great eater.

Even as babies, the dogs are never allowed to dawdle over their meals. As pups, they all share from the same pan. When your brothers and sisters are all competing with you for dinner, you learn to eat as fast as possible, as soon as the food hits the pan.

We encourage this ravenous eating throughout the dog's lives. If a dog messes around with their meal or doesn't dig right in, I take their meal away and give it to their neighbor. They almost always decide to pay attention and eat up at the next meal! Of course we make exceptions if a dog is sick, but in general each meal is followed by a trip around the dog lot to make sure every single one has done justice to their food.

All this preparation pays off when we hit the race trail. The dogs eat everything in sight, almost as a reflex - if there is food, it goes down. A dog who is tired after a long run might decide they'd rather nap first, and eat later. But a dog who is in the habit of eating every time they are offered food will automatically eat when food is in front of them.



Here's Razor, one of our best eaters. He is COMPLETELY focused on inhaling his meal!

During a race it can be a challenge to get enough calories into the dogs, especially if it is cold (-40 or -50) and the dogs are burning even more energy. To get enough energy, the dogs need high power, calorie-dense food, and lots of it! I make sure to provide lots of variety and delicious options to keep their interest high and encourage their appetite.

Each time we stop to rest the dogs get a large meal. If we stop for anything over 6 hours then they will get more than one meal. Dinner starts with top quality commercial kibble - 37% protein and 25% fat. Your average house dog would need only a couple tablespoons of this food to go all day! We call it rocket fuel. Added to the commercial food is about half a pound of fat and beef per dog.

Hydration is incredibly important when exercising. This is especially true at cold temperatures when everything is all frozen and the air is so dry it seems to suck the moisture right out of your lungs. To make sure the dogs get enough liquid, every meal is served as a soup. The meat, fat, and commercial are topped with hot water to thaw the meat out and make a nice sloppy stew.

Of course, water is not easy to come by in the middle of winter. One of the most important tasks when we stop to rest is to get the alcohol-fueled cooker going right away to melt enough snow to feed the entire team. Each dog needs at least one quart of water per meal, which adds up to at least four gallons of water per meal. Once the cooker is started and the snow is melting, I can take care of all the other chores.

Just eating during rest breaks is not enough to keep up. So the dogs also get trail snacks every two hours while we are running. These are small chunks of frozen meat, about a quarter pound each - small enough that the dogs can easily chew the hard-frozen meat up. Meat snacks might include salmon, halibut, beef, lamb, bacon, chicken skins, beef fat, tripe, or any other delicious meat I can get my hands on. This year someone gave me some freezer burned crab chunks and boy did the dogs love that! I might also soak some commercial kibble in water and give them a nice sloppy pile of wet food on the trail. "Popcorn balls" are also very popular - that's commercial food mixed with bacon grease, and rolled into a two-bite ball.

Preparation for feeding all these meals and snacks is a huge task! All of the snacks must be cut from 50 lb blocks of frozen meat, into 1/4 pound snacks. Snacks need to be thin enough that the dogs can easily crunch them up - if they have to gnaw and work at a big frozen lump they are less likely to get it all down during our short trail breaks. I send out close to 300 pounds of snacks during Iditarod, plus we need snacks for other races and all of our long training runs. This means hours and hours cutting meat on a band saw.

I plan for 40 or more meals during the ten days of Iditarod. Commercial kibble has to be measured out into separate bags for each meal so it can be shipped to the various checkpoints. Two-hundred pounds each of beef and fat for meals has to be cut into french-fry size bits so that it will thaw quickly and easily out on the race. More time on the band saw!

So there's your summary of how I feed a race dog. Let me know if you have any questions!