

2009 Guide to the Yukon Quest Trail

Direction – from Whitehorse to Fairbanks

The Yukon Quest Trail follows the historic frontier travel routes of the Gold Rush Era. Dating back to the mid-1800's, these routes were first connected end-to-end with the inaugural running of the Yukon Quest in 1984.

The following detailed description of the Yukon Quest Trail is courtesy of 2-time Yukon Quest Champion and 18-time Finisher John Schandelmeier.

The Yukon Quest was founded on the premise that a dog driver and his team should be a self-sufficient unit; capable of challenging varied terrain and severe weather conditions. The race is a living memorial to those turn-of-the-century miners, trappers, and mail carriers who opened up the country without benefit of snowmobiles, airplanes, or roads. It was their strength and fortitude that blazed the Trail over which most of the Yukon Quest travels. Read the old authors and poets of the North and you'll learn of the Dawson Trail of Robert Service's day and the ascent of Eagle Summit by Archdeacon Hudson Stuck. Every bit of Stuck's book; *Ten Thousand Miles by Dogteam*, is as valid and poignant today as it was nearly 100 years ago. When you are out alone with your dogs, pitted against the elements, time ceases to be relevant.

The Yukon Quest honors the early pioneers but it is also a race. One of the basic prerequisites of any race is an established and maintained Trail. The Yukon Quest Trail has been well established over the years. Crews along the route start packing down the Trail months before race time and several snow machines precede the first teams by 6-12 hours. Reflective markers show the way. Airplanes and HAM radio operators monitor the progress of all teams and a good many cabins are made available by generous residents. Hospitality stops will vary from year to year, depending on who is trapping or living where, but you may be certain that residents will welcome you where-ever you find them. Treat them and the facilities they may offer with respect and they will welcome you and those who follow for years to come.

The Yukon Quest recognizes that not knowing the Trail is a distinct disadvantage for rookies. However, we also believe that the severity of this handicap can be reduced with a little common sense and some research. The Trail information given here will be helpful but it is only a general overview. Try to find a knowledgeable local at checkpoints or a race veteran who can give you detail information on the Trail ahead. Learn as much as you can in advance of the Race start. You may find it necessary to keep a notebook. Do not rely on one person's Trail description; quite often individuals have a different focus on the same section of Trail.

Know your own dog team; their abilities, attitude and individual strengths. Rely on your own good judgment. Check long-term weather reports before the race and at every checkpoint. They are available by phone thru the National Weather Service, or Aviation weather. Topographical maps of the Trail may be helpful, but it is sometimes difficult to recognize landmarks when running at night.

US topographic maps 1:250,000 scale for Fairbanks, Big Delta, Circle, Charley River, and Eagle available from University of Alaska Fairbanks - Geo-Data Center; 208 Elvey Drive, Fairbanks, AK 99775. 907-474-7487. Canadian topographic maps 1:250,000 scale for Whitehorse, Labarge, Carmacks, Stewart River, and Dawson available from Mac's Fireweed Books - Map Sales; 203 Main Street, Whitehorse, YT. Y1A 2B2. 867-668-2434. These trail maps are also available for viewing at both the Fairbanks and Whitehorse Yukon Quest offices. Use the known speed of your dog team to estimate distance; be conservative. Snowmobilers' estimates of distance are seldom accurate. Current GPS information on the trail is suspect.

The race organization will provide a fresh Trail ahead of the lead teams. Weather and snow conditions will determine how far ahead the machines get. Much of the route is rarely traveled other than by the race so you have to expect some soft, slow Trail. The Yukon Quest does not always have machines available to reopen the Trail should it blow in behind the lead group but does keep track of every team and tries to keep the Trail marked for everyone. In the event of snow/wind, it is best to try to stay close enough to other teams to benefit from their Trail.

You can set up a run/rest schedule of about 6 hours on/6 hours off if that works with your training routine. Err on the side of additional rest. Snack every 1-3 hours depending on weather and Trail conditions. 6 hour runs on the Yukon Quest Trail @ approx. 8mph will generally get you to some type of shelter - be it a checkpoint, open cabin or a good camp location. It is okay to stop a little early on a run so as not to bypass a sheltered location. Rarely is it advantageous to run longer unless you know you are near a checkpoint where you can rest on straw. Never run more than 3 hours without a snack stop.

Treat each run between rests as a long 1-day training routine at home: same feed schedules, same care. Remember; as go the feet, so goes the dog. The Yukon Quest Trail is not necessarily a tough Trail; but it is a long one. Don't look ahead 1,000 miles, just look at the run immediately ahead of you and your team. Take care of yourself so you can take the best possible care of your animals; they are your responsibility. Be prepared to camp at -50 (F or C!) without a fire or shelter. Do not rely on artificial heat sources; they can and do fail. Have good gear that you have personally tested for yourself and your dogs. Have the expertise and means to start a quick wood fire should it be necessary. When possible, camp in the trees.

THE YUKON QUEST TRAIL: Whitehorse to Fairbanks

Mileages and times given are based on dog team speeds. They are my own best estimates; I trust you will find them reasonably accurate. The Trail may vary slightly from year to year.

Whitehorse to Braeburn: (Long 100 miles)

You will be on the Yukon River for the first 12 miles of trail, then up the Takhini for approx. 18 miles. You climb the right-hand bank to intersect with the Old Dawson Overland Trail. You will be on this trail for about 70 miles. Good timber on a relatively easy section of trail. There are a couple of hills that can be challenging on the downhill. There are plenty of places to take a break; not many recognizable landmarks for the rookie. If you have questions; talk to Frank Turner. 5 miles from the Braeburn checkpoint you will encounter a very steep, short downhill on to Fox Lake. Cross the Lake and back onto the trail with a left turn.

The Braeburn checkpoint has good services and fair conditions for parking. It will be crowded.

Braeburn to Carmacks: (Approx. 70 miles)

This section of trail can be one of the most challenging on the entire race. You will be on narrow trails, creeks with overflow; some of it potentially deep. Low snow can make this section tough on sleds. Immediately upon leaving Braeburn, you cross the Klondike Highway; it is about 10 miles, give or take, to Cogland Lake. You will turn left onto Cogland and stay on the Lake for 7 miles. For the next 30 miles you will be on and off of various small lakes and ponds. There are many good camping spots with fair firewood. There is a good open creek about halfway to Carmacks where you can get water. A good landmark is Mandana Lake which is about 28 miles from the Carmacks Checkpoint. You will stay on this Lake for almost 5 miles. The remainder of the trail to Carmacks is mostly narrow, heavily timbered with some steep hills. You will go down onto the Yukon River for several short sections. Go under the Yukon River bridge and climb the right-hand bank; the checkpoint is within ¼ mile. The Checkpoint at Carmacks has been in several different locations over the years, so follow the markers..... Carmacks has good Checkpoint facilities but is not a great place for resting dogs. The holding area is usually plowed and teams will be parked closely. Yukon Quest and YQ300 teams will still be close at this point; if that is the case, you may seriously consider camping elsewhere.

Carmacks to Pelly Crossing: (Approx. 75-80 miles)

Follow markers closely out of this checkpoint; you are traveling thru town for a mile or so before turning right onto the Freegold road. You stay on this road for approximately 15 miles; it is usually very good, at times in the past it has been plowed, but always has had a good snow base. You will leave the road onto a firebreak trail---straight ahead off the right side of the road in a corner; almost impossible to miss. You will be on this type of trail; firebreaks and cat trails until just before you reach the Dog Drop at McCabe Creek. You will be on and off of the Yukon and see your first jumble ice. There are some sections of burn the closer you get to McCabe. Immediately prior to reaching McCabe; come down from a burned area and cross the Yukon, McCabe is up the far bank. McCabe has good parking for teams, fair facilities for drivers. Usually has hot water.

You leave McCabe up the driveway, cross the Klondike Highway under the Bridge or over the road, depending on how high the creek has overflowed. It is 32 miles to Pelly. Follow the side of the highway for 5, (endless) miles---almost always punchy and slow, before turning right up a relay site access road and on to the very good, fast trail to Pelly; you will be in a burn area first, with several short hills and a couple of overflowed creeks. The trail flattens and crosses several lakes just farther than half-way to the Pelly checkpoint. You will see the lights of town at the top of a pretty good downgrade; you are less than 5 miles out. The Pelly Checkpoint has been in various places over the year; always the parking and hospitality are very good.

Pelly Crossing to Dawson City: (Approx. 205-210 miles)

You will leave Pelly on to the river and under the bridge. At times, if the river has bad ice conditions, you may jump up onto a plowed road for a couple of miles---or 20---depending..... Usually you will stay on the Pelly River all of the way to Stepping Stone. The trail is usually fast down the River. A few miles prior to Stepping Stone you will pass Pelly Farms. Cows. More often than not the trail is on the opposite side of the River from the farm. Stepping Stone is a hospitality stop approximately 35 miles from Pelly Crossing. They have cold water and sleeping facilities; there is good parking. From Stepping Stone the trail crosses the River, runs by the farm and up a fairly long grade to get you out of the Pelly valley. It is 70 miles to the Dog Drop at Scroggie Creek on the Stewart River. The trail is thru good timber, up and down, with many small overflowed creeks. One recognizable landmark is Jane Creek Summit on the long side of halfway; it is not above timber, but it does get you up at the brush line. 11 miles prior to the Scroggie Creek Dog Drop, you will begin to parallel Scroggie Creek. The parking facilities at Scroggie can get crowded in a hurry, plus it is the coldest spot between Pelly and Dawson. As a rule; facilities for mushers are marginal to poor.

Leaving Scroggie, you drop onto the Stewart River, cross and head up into the timber; you will be in fair trees for 5-7 miles before entering a mining district with little cover. Good place to break in the timber and a bit warmer as you climb. The mining district has overflows that will be wet. 25 miles from the Stewart you will climb a series of switchbacks into the Blackhills. Anywhere from 9-13 switchbacks--- depending on how tired you are.....You will be in the Blackhills for 30 miles; up and down, overflow in spots but basically good trail on a road grade. Indian River bridge is approximately 55 miles from Scroggie and 50 from Dawson. Not much timber there and cold as it is in the valley. You will start your climb to the top of King Solomon Dome from here. It is a gradual climb; expect some overflows. There is a communications tower on top. Be sure you turn left at the intersection near the tower; it is always very well marked, but almost every year someone takes the wrong turn. You will still climb after the turn, but soon you will be on the 25 mile downgrade into Dawson. Again, this is road-grade; it will be plowed the last few miles into town. You will make a left turn near the Klondike Highway near town and cross a couple of parking lots before dropping onto the river trail for the last couple of miles to the checkpoint. Follow the markers closely; they are usually very good. The Checkpoint is off the River on the main street. Once checked in, your handler will direct you to the holding area which is a half mile away.

Dawson City to Eagle: (Approx. 150 miles)

The first 50 miles of your way from Dawson are on the Yukon River; the first 20 miles are usually fairly fast and smooth---likely to be overflow at the mouth of the 20 Mile drainage, 15 miles out. (It is recognizable as the only large drainage coming in on the N.E. side. {Right-hand side}) The trail crosses back and forth across the Yukon and may use several bush trails for short distances, depending on ice conditions. The 40-mile hospitality stop is a long 50 miles most years. This is a good place to stop; adequate parking. A few miles farther on is another hospitality stop at Clinton Creek---just up the 40 mile River by the highway bridge.

Leaving the old town of 40 Mile; you turn immediately onto the 40 mile river; you will be on the 40-Mile for 50 miles. It is a narrow, winding river that is most often cold because of the deep canyon with little sun. The trail usually is very good unless there has been a recent heavy snow---then expect overflow. You will be leaving the 40 Mile River at the Taylor Highway crossing, 50 miles up. You climb up the boat ramp on the left bank and cross the highway bridge. Immediately across the bridge there is a hospitality tent in the parking area. The tent has a floor and wood for and wood for 2009. You are at milepost 113 on the Taylor Highway---it is 49 miles to the checkpoint of Eagle at milepost 162. Highway running on good trail, with lots of ups and downs for this section. O'Brien Creek Lodge is about milepost 125; closed. Your first potentially windy summit of the trail is American Summit; you begin your climb just past milepost 135 and will get above timber a few miles further on; the summit is almost always side-hilled badly, markers can be frosted over, even in the wind. Expect hard, drifted snow. You are on top for about 3 miles before beginning your 20 mile descent to Eagle. The long gradual descent is mostly uneventful; you will encounter some potentially nasty overflows as you near the town of Eagle; the worst of them 4-8 miles out. The Checkpoint is the old schoolhouse on your right hand as you come toward the center of town. Well-marked. Good parking for dogs, good facilities for mushers.

Eagle to Circle City: (Approx. 160 miles)

The Yukon River ice can be rough. Prior to Race Start check on the ice conditions so you will be prepared. The Yukon River is flat running the entire way, though there may be some side hills, depending on River levels at freeze-up. Prevailing winds come down the Yukon River. You will be on the River the entire way to Circle with the exception of several short portages; whether the trail uses the portages or no, depends on ice conditions at freeze-up. All of the potential portages are prior to the Tantonduk River, (Sheep Creek) which is 28 miles downriver from Eagle. 43 miles downriver from Eagle you will reach a hospitality stop at Trout Creek (Mike Sager's). It is on a short cut-off from the main trail---there will be a sign. Good warm-up spot, parking for more than 6 teams will be tight.

Leaving Trout Creek you will angle to the North side of the Yukon to the mouth of the Nation River. Expect an icy section of trail with minimal snow for 5-6 miles; in the event of downed markers/windy conditions with poor visibility; generally stay toward the North bank. The trail returns to snow along this bank at the end of this section. Trout Creek to the mouth of the Kandik River is 37 miles—there is a warm-up cabin there also; good firewood available, easy to heat. 18 miles from the Kandik's, (Charley Creek) mouth is the Dog Drop at Slaven's. Good facilities for mushers, poor spot for dogs. You are 100 miles from Eagle and it is 60 miles to Circle. From here it is 16 miles to Richard Smith's cabin—on the north bank, and about 35 to Doug Dills cabin. (Southbank in the mouth of a slough) Both cabins will be marked. 25 miles to Circle from Dill's; count on rough ice for the last half of this trail to Circle. You will see the light from the airport beacon prior to reaching town. The checkpoint is on the main street in the middle of town. Fair parking for dogs, good facilities for mushers. Usually cold.

Circle City to Central: (75 miles)

Leaving Circle you are on the road for ¼ mile, then off on a trapline trail, (right side), for 8-10 miles to Birch Creek. Expect it to be 15 degrees colder on Birch Creek than in Circle. 15 miles of Birch Creek will bring you to Carl Cochran's place. Tight parking; good hospitality. Just out from Carl's you cross under the highway bridge, (Steese Highway); it is a short 50 miles to Central, you have another 30 plus miles on Birch Creek. Birch Creek is winding, endless almost always the coldest section of the Yukon Quest. Be prepared for minus 60. Expect overflow and beautiful Northern Lights.... Birch Creek will noticeably narrow and soon you leave the creek on the southwest bank for a 10 mile run to the Circle Hot Springs road; much of this run is through exposed swamps. Medicine Lake is just past half-way. You cross the Hot Springs airstrip and parallel the road on the power line to the Central checkpoint. Good parking for dogs, good facilities for mushers.

Central to Twin Bears: (approx. 115 miles)

You leave Central on the highway, make a small detour off the left side a mile out to avoid a blind corner, cross the road and run a 20 mile section thru swamps, firebreaks and mining areas. You again see the Steese Highway at the base of Eagle Summit; you will cross the road and again be in a mining district while gradually climbing toward the Summit. Eagle Summit is a several mile climb with the last ¼ mile being the steepest section of the trail. This is almost always very hard windblown snow. Remove booties for traction, some mushers carry ice cleats for their boots for here. The top of Eagle Summit is less than ¼ mile wide, windblown with tundra showing. Braking down the 101 side is fair, however, and it is not as steep. 5-6 miles to the Dog Drop at Mile 101, straight down the valley, overflow. You are 33 miles from Central. Fair facilities for dogs and mushers.

Leaving 101; you will follow along the road for 7 miles, in and out of the ditch or a parallel trail depending on overflow. Near 94 mile of the Steese, you leave the edge of the road and drop into the Birch Creek headwaters. There will be a few overflowed creeks over the next few miles as you travel up the valley on your way to Rosebud Summit. You cross Birch Creek one last time and begin the long ascent toward Rosebud; it is a 5 mile steady climb. Once near the top, Rosebud Summit consists of a series of short climbs and descents, it usually is pretty fair traveling, with fair braking on the downhill. The last descent drops you into the timber at the head of the N. Fork of the Chena River. A very steep descent through burned timber; watch for tree roots that catch your brake; avoid trees when possible..... 20 plus miles to the Angel Creek area, you will cross under the Chena Hot Springs road two times---the first crossing is 27 miles from the Two Rivers checkpoint. This section of trail is well-traveled and relatively fast; expect overflows at the creeks as everywhere.

Two Rivers to Fairbanks

This is a new checkpoint for the 2009 race held at the Twin Bears campground. You will have an 8-hour mandatory layover here. Use it wisely and remember that you are just over 40 miles,(approx. 44), from the Finish line. 6 miles from the checkpoint you will cross the Chena Hot Springs road. The trail runs parallel to the road past Two Rivers store and turns left to run down Pleasant Valley road. This is a subdivision road with occasional traffic; it is plowed and icy—tough to hook down. You will go straight off the road and then turn right on to a very well-maintained dog trail. A well-marked trail leads west until you near Nordale Road, then turns left to parallel the road for a short distance to the Little Chena River, then down the Little Chena to its confluence with the Chena River. You are then on the Chena River all of the way to the finish. You will cross under the Nordale Road Bridge about ½ mile after reaching the Chena---18 miles to downtown Fairbanks and the Banner.