

Mushers' Guide to the Yukon Quest Trail

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 two-time Yukon Quest Champion and 17-time Finisher John Schandelmeier. It has been updated by Mike Reitz for 2017.

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 Dog Team"*, 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. Crews along the route start brushing and packing down the trail a month or two before race time and several snow machines precede the first teams by 6-12 hours. Reflective markers show the way. The race organization monitors the progress of all teams and a good many privately-owned 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 wherever you find them. If you treat them and the facilities they offer with respect, 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. Learn as much as you can in advance of the race start, you may find it necessary to keep a notebook. During the race try to find a knowledgeable local at checkpoints or a race veteran who can give you detailed information on what lies ahead. 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.
- 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.
- Current GPS information on the trail is suspect.
- The race organization will provide a fresh trail only ahead of the lead team. 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 broken trail.
- You can set up a run/rest schedule of about six hours on/six hours off if that works with your training routine. Error on the side of additional rest. Snack every one to three hours depending on weather and trail conditions. Six hour runs on the Yukon Quest Trail at 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 three hours without a snack stop.
- Treat each run between rests as a long one 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 -50F or -46C 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.