

Girl *takes on the trail!*

story & photos Jennifer Smith Nelson

Camping at temperatures below -30°C may not seem like an experience one would rush into. But the modern mushing experience leaves such a deep imprint, adventure-seekers of all types keep coming back for more—just dress for it.





❖ Winter camping with sled dogs means creating shelter from the elements. Jennifer Smith Nelson found nestling into snowy lodgings surprisingly comfortable.



There are many ways to explore the wilderness in and around Prince Albert National Park but dogsledding is certainly one of the more traditional methods.

Dog naming is one of my favourite parts of mushing,” says Brad Muir, owner of Sundogs Excursions in Waskesiu, speaking slowly and philosophically while describing his naming ritual for new litters of potential future sled dogs.

There is Biscotti, Allegro, Pesto and co-lead, La Dolce Vita. Well-known Italian fare and adage it would seem, served as direct inspiration for one particular batch of fuzzy-headed Alaskan husky pups, all born four years ago on New Year’s Day.

The naming ceremony, a thoughtful process for Muir, takes part on the first full moon after a new litter is welcomed. “I love to lie in bed, moon in the window, drawing together my experiences in mushing.” Muir asserts he never names a dog after a person. Instead, what most often inspires him is the environment around and above him. Naming ceremonies often centre on a theme.

Nine years ago, celestial phenomena served as inspiration for another themed litter: Arcturus, Étoile, Eclipse, and Equinox. Arcturus, named for the brightest star of the northern celestial hemisphere’s Boötes constellation, would live up to his name, I would learn.

Arcturus is Muir’s strong, focused, and disciplined lead dog. With co-lead La Dolce Vita at his side and four other sled dogs following suit, he would lead us deep into Prince Albert National Park’s boreal forest.

It’s a frigid February when we meet up with Muir near Anglin Lake on the southern edge of the great northern forest. Since 1997, Muir’s been running dogsledding and winter camping expeditions for those he says “are seeking adventure, and a basic primal connection with a wild heritage.”

Muir, a park naturalist since 1981, is a gentle spirit, eager to share his thoughtful philosophies and panoptic knowledge of the park and its ecosystems.

His goal, in fact, for those who take in a winter adventure, is for the experience “to leave an imprint on your heart, mind, and outlook.”

“I hope it will leave people with a better understanding of local ecosystems and encourage them to live more simply and be aware, and grateful for everything we have.” These, he says, are the grandest takeaways from such an experience.

It was precisely for these reasons I came back for a second installment of winter enjoyment. Last year’s excursions of dogsledding and wildlife

trekking had imprinted on me—big time. In fact, though a longtime resident of the province, my perception of winter in Saskatchewan, and how to celebrate its solace, beauty, and adventure, shifted.

This year's experience however, would be much more extreme as we would be camping outside. After months of severe cold weather, February had arrived and its typical weather followed suit.

It was the kind of Saskatchewan day that would fool most in a photo—a dreamy landscape complete with a bright blue sky, beaming sun and sparkling, crisp, white snow—the kind of day that leaves you snow blind.

Those from this part of the country know days like this are usually some of the coldest. And in this case, they would be right. The morning started out at -29° Celsius.

After downing a second cup of Muir's freshly brewed coffee, we readied the two teams of dogs that would transport the four of us. We were headed on a 7-mile ride to Beaverdam Lake, where our back country camp at Great Heron Provincial Park awaited.

After a slightly bumpy but relaxing 45-minute

ride through the snow-canopied forest, we arrived. Chilly from sitting, I decided on a brief walk around camp to survey the surroundings and better acclimate to the extreme temperature.

I quickly discovered what a difference being properly dressed made. I mean, it sounds simple enough, but during the last excursion with Muir, I had made some errors in clothing choice: this time around it would seem I had chosen wisely. I was surprised at how easy it was to actually be outside in such extreme cold. And thankful.

Immediately, we immersed ourselves in winter camp survival 101. Our wise instructor taught us the ins and outs of winter camping—from chipping lake ice for melting on the fire to chopping wood for the tent's camp stove. We then sat down to rest and refuel with a pre-packed snack.

Recharged and raring to go, it was time for another walk, this time around camp trails. My husband and I checked out lakeside *quinzhees* (a shelter made by hollowing out a pile of settled snow) and marveled at their simplicity and ingenuity. They are unexpectedly cozy and



Sundogs Excursions operates out of Waskesiu in Prince Albert National Park. top right: The fur on Alaskan husky dogs is double coated enabling them to sleep cozily in a small bed of hay in sub-zero temperatures. bottom right: Tents are rustic, but keep everyone amply warm with a wood stove.



Travelling by sled dog opens up a whole world of wildlife experiences that would be chased away by motorized transport, like this hand-feeding of a gray jay.

I pondered for a second if wild animals bedded down in there at night, because, I mean they are actually extraordinarily warm.

As we walked on, we noted a variety of animal tracks and took stock of the many bent and broken birches and undisturbed snow-laden pines that surrounded us, as light streamed in through their branches. Peaceful and content, we only noticed the sounds that came from frosty breaths and snow crunching beneath our feet as we walked a circular trail. We landed back at camp just in time for a mushing lesson.

Mushing was, surprisingly, more relaxing than exhilarating. I enjoyed taking the helm and leading the dogs down the quiet trails. Just before heading back to camp, we spotted a bobcat in the distance. Luckily we saw it before the dogs and it seemed the perfect time to call it a day.

Before settling in for the night, it was time to feed and bed the dogs. Brad provided them each with little hay mounds and they promptly went to town creating little nests for themselves. I worried about how they fare in the cold outside all night. But as he does so well, Brad calmed my concerns by explaining how the natural traits of Alaskan huskies enable them to withstand the cold. “The dogs’ coats are double coated with dense under fur,” he says, “That, paired with their high metabolism, makes them very winter hearty.”

As we chatted cozily in the well-heated tent munching on brie, crackers, and cocktail shrimp appetizers, the layers of clothing started coming off. By the time the main course was served, the tent was toasty warm thanks to the small corner

stove. A main course of pasta, complete with a glass of red wine topped off the most outstanding camp supper I have ever consumed.

Naturally, being from Saskatchewan we talked about the weather. It had been an extremely cold year and when a massive snowfall hit, the annual start up happened in February rather than the usual December. Fallen trees, blocked pathways, and insane amounts of snow put scheduled excursions behind by months.

“It was hard on business,” said Muir. “With the heightened profile of dogsledding over the past years—thanks to Hollywood movies and big profile dog races like the Yukon Quest—demand for winter excursions is on the rise, and that includes camping.”

Winter camping he explained is just the next logical step from playing outdoors in the wintertime. “People can get outside their comfort zones while taking on a new adventure.”

I was outside my comfort zone sleeping in -39° Celsius that evening, but I survived and so did the pups. Dressing quickly, I ran out first thing in the morning to find all of the dogs covered by a frosty dusting, snoozing away comfortably in their little nests, noses tucked deeply under hind legs.

As I reflected on another enriching winter experience mushing back to where it all began the day before, I couldn’t help but think that people arrive at Sundogs for the winter experiences, yes, but return again for the good company. 

Sundog Sled Excursions can be reached at (306) 960-1654 or see their website at www.sundogs.sk.ca

