

Dog-Sledding And Winter Camping Aren't For Everyone, But 'Hardships' Are Rewarded With Sparkling Stars, Wildlife, Stillness Of North Woods

# Run Silent, Run Cold

BY STEVE GRANT | COURANT STAFF WRITER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOB MACDONNELL | THE HARTFORD COURANT

ERROL, N.H. — We caught a comparatively mild, calm Saturday. The temperature may have reached as high as the teens during early afternoon. That was good. It was January in the mountains on the Maine and New Hampshire border. It could have been colder.

It could have been the day before. When we arrived in the New England north country for a weekend of dog-sledding and winter camping in the woods, the wind and cold were so nasty that the walk from the car to our heated cabin was almost painful.

But here we were in the sun, comfortable, mushing across Lake Umbagog, an amoeba-shaped, shallow lake in New Hampshire and Maine that is more than 10 miles long with more than 50 miles of shoreline.

We would mush nearly 7 miles up the lake to a campsite, make supper, sleep in tents, and mush our way back to creature comforts the next day, all in an area with abundant wildlife, including moose and bear.

Think dog-sledding, and the image that comes to mind is Alaska or the Yukon Territory, the Iditarod race, and cold, rugged conditions.

Well, there is dog-sledding in New England. It may be a tiny piece of the region's winter recreation pie, but it is well established. It's cold and rugged here, too.

To those unfamiliar with an overnight dog-sledding trip in winter, it almost certainly is more fun than you think it is to mush across frozen lakes and then sleep in a floorless tent on hemlock or spruce boughs laid right on the snow. It is not everybody's idea of fun, of course, but fortunately, it appears that only those who find the idea appealing actually shell out the money for the thrill.

**Shush**

We arranged our trip with Mahoosuc Guide Service, one of several dog-sledding guide services in northern

PLEASE SEE A DOG-SLEDDING, PAGE F4  
New England. Our adventure began Friday night with an orientation that included tea and sweets.

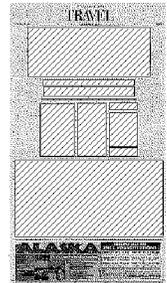
There was a brief lecture on the basics of dog-sledding; what we should expect over the course of the weekend, some history of dog-sledding, that kind of thing. If your gear isn't up to the challenge, Mahoosuc has extra parkas, boots and gloves available to borrow for the weekend. Orientation over, into our heated rooms we went for the night.

Mahoosuc Guide Service in Newry, Maine, is the creation of Polly Mahoney and her partner, Kevin Slater, both of whom have considerable experience in wilderness travel. Polly would lead this trip. Kevin made the dog sleds. There were seven of us customers, plus Polly and her apprentice, Tom Rosenberg, on three sleds.

I had never been on a dog sled before and didn't quite know what to expect, other than what I had seen in photographs or film.

After a big breakfast, amid clearing skies, we were introduced to the dogs. There are 35 of them kept in a large enclosure behind the farmhouse and adjacent guest lodge. Gear and 15 dogs, enough for three sleds, were loaded onto a truck, and we all drove to the southern tip of Lake Umbagog to begin our journey. The dogs, Yukon huskies with bloodlines that go back to dogs from the Yukon Territory, sensed what was up and were highly excited, barking much of the while, anxious to get out and run.

Polly reminded us of the things we needed to know. How to stop the sleds; how to slow the sleds; what to do if a dog's foot got caught in a rope. To set the



dogs in motion, the command is "tighten up," then "let's go." Pretty simple.

With the dogs in harness, off we went. The dogs were all business now; no barking. They seemed happy to be running. We stood on runners at the rear of the sleds, whooshing over the snow-covered lake, silently taking in the views of the surrounding mountains. You don't talk while sledding, Polly had said.

What was striking was, in fact, the quiet, just the soothing, soft sound of the sleds shushing through the snow, the muffled patter of the dogs' feet, nothing else.

Sara Ott of Johnstown, Ohio, in one sled with her husband, Matt, thought the sounds of the sled runners a highlight of the trip. "Just that little bit of crunching, and otherwise it is completely silent," she said.

We arrived in camp in the afternoon with plenty of time before dinner to prepare for the night. Everybody pitched in to gather, saw up and split fallen tree limbs, used for wood stoves in the tents. We took turns with a heavy steel pick chopping a hole in the ice to gather water for cooking. The ice was at least a foot thick.

By late afternoon, with an hour of daylight left, we were settled in camp with time to play. The Otts went cross-country skiing. Austin Frank and Jack Wain, 12-year-old friends from Massachusetts, played with the dogs in camp. Austin's dad, Mike, went for a long walk. I went bird-watching, hoping to find a bird of the north woods that heretofore had eluded me, the black-backed woodpecker. This area, I had been told, was a good place to see one.

## Camp In Winter

We had expected by now to have seen a moose — they are plentiful in the area — but had not. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. A woodpecker for sure over in that dead spruce at the lake's edge, maybe 200 yards from camp. It was the black-backed woodpecker, an unmistakable bird, aptly named for its black back. Couldn't have been easier. I've easily seen a couple of hundred moose over the years; I hadn't seen a black-backed. I let out a whoop.

The woodpecker had plenty of company. No sooner had we arrived in camp than several gray jays swooped in. These

birds carry the nickname "camp robber," because they are brazen enough to snatch food right off a table. I had seen it myself; once while I camped in Maine a gray jay flew down from a low-hanging branch and snatched a piece of bacon from the middle of a picnic table at which four of us were seated.

So bold were the gray jays in trying to snatch food in camp that Jack and Austin tried to catch one with their hands, without, of course, any luck.

Supper was a heaping plateful of sausages, pasta with cheese, a sauté of mushrooms and onions, a side dish of corn, with dessert of cookies. After dinner, we tromped onto the ice and made a bonfire so big it illuminated us all. We huddled as close to the fire as we could comfortably get and, standing, talked among ourselves for upward of an hour. The boys toasted marshmallows.

But no matter how much fun the dog-sledding, or the distractions and pleasures of camp, or the warmth of the bonfire, there was still the matter of sleeping in a tent in winter. Almost from the moment we arrived in camp, the unspoken question was: Would we freeze our glutes off?

Unfortunately, because of the potential to set the tent afire, the wood stoves can't be used during the night. The stoves are lit shortly before bedtime to heat up the tent interior and keep things warm enough to change into nightclothes, plenty of them. Then the fire dies out and the temperature drops. You've stashed yourself deep in your sleeping bag by then, and you are reasonably comfortable. But what you really want is the fire back.

OK, how bad? It went to something like minus 8 that night. I can't say I was cold. Most of us slept, though not necessarily soundly through the night. Should nature call — several of us got that call — it is a very cold few minutes outdoors. It was snowing lightly when I stepped out of the tent at 3 a.m., reinforcing my long-stated opinion that the true satisfaction of winter camping is not so much doing it as getting to brag that you've done it.

## Peaceful Pleasure

There are some other pleasures. In a remote area far from the city and suburban lights, the stars are brilliant.

There is the pervasive quiet, the kind of quiet that is all but impossible to experience in a city or suburb. And there are no bugs.

Austin assessed the sleeping situation the next morning. "I was actually really cold even with my coat on and snow pants and two layers of socks," he said.

But, he added, "It's worth it." And he meant it. It was his second trip to Umbagog for a dog-sledding and camping winter weekend with his dad. They didn't have to come back for more. The Ott's said they were comfortable during the night and slept like logs.

We were slow to emerge from our sleeping bags Sunday morning, knowing that the moment we popped out we'd be enveloped in icy air until we could bundle up in parkas and boots again. The smell of bacon, pancakes and coffee finally provided the push we needed.

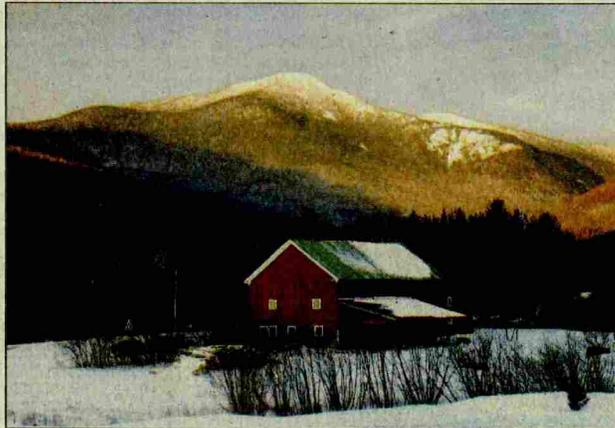
The nighttime snow showers didn't amount to much, just enough to freshen

the wintry view. We loaded our gear, cleaned up camp and munched off, taking a different route back, winding our way along the lake shore, listening to the shush of the sled runners, smiling.

Matt and Sara Ott already were talking about returning next winter.

Contact Steve Grant at [sgrant@courant.com](mailto:sgrant@courant.com).

Contact Mahoosuc Guide Service at [www.mahoosuc.com](http://www.mahoosuc.com) or 207-824-2073. The 2008 season begins in late December. Cost for a two-day trip with camping and meals is \$525 per person. Lodging at the outfitter's Mahoosuc Mountain Lodge in Newry, Maine, is \$35 per person per night for a bunk with shared bath and kitchen.



**BETWEEN EXTREMES** of hot and cold, campers stand close to a bonfire as they chat with guide Polly Mahoney, right, on the ice of Lake Umbagog in Maine. From left are Austin Frank, 12 of Wellesley, Mass.; Jack Wain, 12, of Milton, Mass.; and Sarah and Matt Ott of Johnstown, Ohio. At right, Mahoney's Mahoosuc Guide Service in Newry, Maine, sits in the shadow of Old Speck, Maine's third-highest mountain.



#### on the web

To view a multimedia slide show of dog-sledding in Maine, go to [www.courant.com/dogsled](http://www.courant.com/dogsled)



**DOGS PULL** against their traces as Kevin Slater, left, co-owner of Mahoosuc Guide Service, starts the team on a trip up Lake Umbagog. Tom Rosenberg, an apprentice guide, assists.



**A DOG TEAM** mushes along the shoreline of Lake Umbagog. Since sledgers remain silent, they often find the soft shushing — and absence of other sound — one of the highlights of their trip.



BOB MACDONNELL / THE HARTFORD COURANT

**POLLY MAHONEY'S** Yukon huskies are loaded into individual crates for a half-hour pickup ride from their home at Mahoney's Mahoosuc Guide Service in Newry, Maine, to Lake Umbagog, where they will take visitors up the ice for a night of camping.