

Navigation menu

Navigation

- [Main page](#)
- [Current events](#)
- [Contents](#)
- [Random article](#)
- [About Wikipedia](#)
- [Contact page](#)
- [Donate to Wikipedia](#)
- [Wikipedia store](#)

[Switch to old look](#)

Interaction

- [Help](#)
- [Community portal](#)
- [Recent changes](#)
- [Upload file](#)

Tools

- [What links here](#)
- [Related changes](#)
- [Upload file](#)
- [Special pages](#)
- [Permanent link](#)
- [Page information](#)
- [Cite this page](#)
- [Add to the New Pages Feed](#)

Print/export

- [Download as PDF](#)
- [Download as TXT](#)
- [Printable version](#)

Namespaces

- [Article](#)
- [Discussion](#)



Variants

Views

- Read
- Edit source
- View history
- Watch



More

- Delete
- Move
- Protect

Sled dog

This article is about the variety of dog. For the sport where dogs pull sleds over a distance, see Dog sled racing.

Sled dogs (also **sledge dogs**^[1] and **sleigh dogs**^[2]) are a group of dog breeds and mongrels that, historically, were bred for the purpose of pulling a dog sled. These dog sleds were important for transportation in arctic areas, hauling supplies in areas that were inaccessible by other methods. They were used with varying success in the explorations of both poles, as well as during the Alaskan gold rush. Until snowmobiles became reliable, sled dog teams delivered mail to rural communities in Alaska and northern Canada.



A sled dog team at work.

Sled dogs today are still used by some rural communities, especially in areas of Alaska and Canada and throughout Greenland. They are also used for recreational purposes, and are raced in events known as dog sled races such as the Iditarod and the Yukon Quest. Numerous sled dog breeds are also kept as pets or raised as show dogs.

<h2>Contents</h2> <hr/> <h3>History</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>North America</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Nome, Alaska and the Iditarod</u> <u>Elsewhere</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Arctic expeditions</u>
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Arctic expedition

Antarctic expedition

Sled dog breeds

Breeds

Alaskan Husky

Alaskan Malamute

Canadian Eskimo Dog

Chinook

Greenland Dog

Samoyed

Siberian Husky

Other Breeds

Famous Sled Dogs

Togo

Balto

Chinook

Granite

Other Dogs

Sled Dogs in popular culture

Literature

See also

References

External links

History

Sled dogs probably evolved in Mongolia between 35,000 and 30,000 years ago.^[3] Scientists believe that humans migrated north of the Arctic Circle with their dogs 25,000 years ago, and began using them to pull sleds 3,000 years ago, when hunting and fishing communities were forced north to Siberia by pastoralists.^{[3][4]} Sled dogs have been used in Canada, Lapland, Greenland, Siberia, Chukotka, Norway, Finland, and Alaska.^[5]

North America

Historical references of the dogs and dog harnesses that were used by Native American cultures date back to before European contact.^[6] The use of dogs as draft animals was widespread in North America.^[6] There were two main kinds of sled dogs; one kind is kept by coastal cultures, and the other kind is kept by interior cultures such as the Athabaskan Indians.^[6] These interior dogs formed the basis of



Sled dogs white huskies hiking in Inuvik, Canada.

the Alaskan Husky.^[6] Russian traders following the Yukon River inland in the mid-1800s acquired sled dogs from the interior villages along the river.^[6] The dogs of this area were reputed to be stronger and better at hauling heavy loads than the native Russian sled dogs.^[6]

The Alaskan Gold Rush brought renewed interest in the use of sled dogs as transportation.^[6] Most gold camps were accessible only by dogsled in the winter.^[7] "Everything that moved during the frozen season moved by dog team; prospectors, trappers, doctors, mail, commerce, trade, freighting of supplies ... if it needed to move in winter, it was moved by sled dogs."^[6] This, along with the dogs' use in the exploration of the poles, led to the late 1800s and early 1900s being nicknamed the "Era of the Sled Dog".^[8]

Sled dogs were used to deliver the mail in Alaska during the late 1800s and early 1900s.^[9] Malamutes were the favored breed, with teams averaging eight to ten dogs.^[9] Dogs were capable of delivering mail in conditions that would stop boats, trains, and horses.^[9] Each team hauled between 230 and 320 kilograms (500 and 700 lb) of mail.^[9] The mail was stored in waterproofed bags to protect it from the snow.^[9] By 1901, dog trails had been established along the entirety of the Yukon River.^[9] Mail delivery by dog sled came to an end in 1963 when the last mail carrier to use a dog sled, Chester Noongwook of Savoonga, retired.^[9] He was honored by the US Postal Service in a ceremony on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea.^[9]

Airplanes took over Alaskan mail delivery in the 1920s and 1930s.^[6] In 1924, Carl Ben Eielson flew the first Alaskan airmail delivery.^[10] Dogsleds were used to patrol western Alaska during World War II.^[10] Highways and trucking in the 40s and 50s, and the snowmobile in the 50s and 60s, contributed to the decline of the working sled dog.^[6]

Recreational mushing came into place to maintain the tradition of dog mushing.^[6] The desire for larger, stronger, load-pulling dogs changed to one for faster dogs with high endurance used in racing, which caused the dogs to become lighter than they were historically.^{[6][11]} Americans then began to import Siberian Huskies to increase the speed of their own dogs, presenting "a direct contrast to the idea that Russian traders sought heavier draft-type sled dogs from the Interior regions of Alaska and the Yukon less than a century earlier to increase the hauling capacity of their lighter sled dogs."^[6]

Outside of Alaska, dog-drawn carts were used to haul peddler's wares in cities like New York.^[1]

Nome, Alaska and the Iditarod

Main articles: 1925 serum run to Nome and Iditarod

In 1925, there was a diphtheria outbreak in Nome, Alaska. There was not enough serum in Nome to treat the number of people infected by the disease.^[10] There was serum in Nenana, but the town was 1,100 kilometres (700 miles) away, and inaccessible except by dog sled.^[10] A dog sled relay was set up by the villages between Nenana and Nome, and 20 teams worked together to relay the serum to Nome.^[10] The serum reached Nome in six days.^[10]

The Iditarod Trail was established on the path between these two towns.^[10] It was known as the Iditarod Trail because, at the time, Iditarod was the largest town on the trail.^[10] During the 1940s, the trail fell into disuse.^[10] However, in 1967, Dorothy Page, who was conducting Alaska's centennial celebration, ordered 14 kilometres (9 miles) of the trail to be cleared for a dog sled race.^[10] In 1972, the US Army performed a survey of the trail, and in 1973 the Iditarod was established by Joe Redington, Sr.^{[10][12]} The race was won by Dick Wilmarth, who took three weeks to complete the

race.^[10]

The modern Iditarod is a 1,800-kilometre-long (1,100 mi) endurance sled dog race.^[12] It usually lasts for ten to eleven days, weather permitting.^[12] It begins with a ceremonial start in Anchorage, Alaska on the morning of the first Saturday in March, with mushers running 32 kilometres (20 miles) to Eagle River along the Alaskan Highway, giving spectators a chance to see the dogs and the mushers.^[13] The teams are then loaded onto trucks and driven 48 kilometres (30 miles) to Wasilla for the official race start in the afternoon.^[13] The race ends when the last musher either drops out of the race or crosses the finish line in Nome.^[12] The winner of the race receives a prize of US\$50,000.^[12] It has been billed as the "World Series of mushing events"^[14] and "The Last Great Race on Earth".^[15]

Elsewhere

Arctic expedition

The first Arctic explorers were men with sled dogs.^[3]

Antarctic expedition

Due to the success of using sled dogs in the Arctic, it was thought they would be helpful in the Antarctic exploration as well, and many explorers made attempts to use them.^[3] Sled dogs were used until 1992, when they were banned from Antarctica by the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty.^[3]

Carsten Borchgrevink used sled dogs in Antarctica in 1898, but it was much colder than expected at Cape Adare.^[3] The dogs were used to working on snow, not on ice, in much milder temperatures.^[3] The dogs were also inadequately fed, and eventually all of the dogs died.^[3]

Erich von Dryhalski used sled dogs in his expedition in his 1901–1903 expedition, and fared much better because his dogs were used to the cold and he hired an experienced dog handler.^[3] His dogs were allowed to breed freely and many had to be shot because there was no room on the ship to take them home.^[3] Many that were not shot were left behind on the Kerguelen Islands.^[3]

Otto Nordenskjold intended to use sled dogs in his 1901–1904 expedition, but all but four of his dogs died on the journey south.^[3] He picked up more dogs in the Falklands, but these were all killed upon his arrival by Ole Jonassen's huskies, as Ole had not bothered to tether his dogs.^[3] These huskies were later able to pull 265 kilograms (584 pounds) over 29 kilometres (18 miles) in three and a half hours.^[3]

Robert Falcon Scott bought twenty Samoyeds with him.^[3] The dogs struggled under the conditions Scott placed them in, with four dogs pulling heavily loaded sleds through 45-centimetre-deep (18 in) snow with bleeding feet.^[3] Scott blamed their failure on rotten dried fish.^[3]



Roald Amundsen's Antarctic expedition.



Roald Amundsen, whose Antarctic expedition was planned around ninety-seven sled dogs.

Roald Amundsen's expedition was planned around ninety-seven sled dogs.^[3] On his first try, two of his dogs froze to death in the $-56\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ ($-69\text{ }^{\circ}\text{F}$) temperatures.^[3] He tried a second time and was successful.^[3] Amundsen was covering 27 kilometres (17 miles) a day, with stops every 4.8 kilometres (3 miles) to build a cairn to mark the trail.^[3] He had fifty five dogs with him, which he culled until he had 14 left when he returned from the pole.^[3] On the return trip, a man skied ahead of the dogs and hid meat in the cairns to encourage them to run.^[3]

Sled dog breeds

The original sled dogs were chosen for size, strength and stamina, but modern dogs are bred for speed and endurance ^{[6][11]} Most sled dogs weigh around 25 kilograms (55 lb),^[16] but they can weigh as little as 16 kilograms (35 lb), and can exceed 32 kilograms (71 lb).^[11] Sled dogs have a very efficient gait,^[16] and "mushers strive for a well balanced dog team that matches all dogs for both size (approximately the same) and gait (the walking, trotting or running speeds of the dogs as well as the 'transition speed' where a dog will switch from one gait to another) so that the entire dog team moves in similar a fashion which increases overall team efficiency."^[11] They can run up to 45 km/h (28 mph).^[4] Because of this, sled dogs have very tough, webbed feet with closely spaced toes.^[11] Their webbed feet act as snow shoes.^[3]

A dog's fur depends on its use. Freight dogs should have dense, warm coats to hold heat in,^[11] and sprint dogs have short coats that let heat out.^[5] Most sled dogs have a double coat, with the outer coat keeping snow away from the body, and a waterproof inner coat for insulation.^[4] In warm weather, dogs may have problems regulating their body temperature and may overheat.^[11] Their tails serve to protect their nose and feet from freezing when the dog is curled up to sleep.^[3] They also have a unique arrangement of blood vessels in their legs to help protect against frostbite.^[3]

Appetite is a big part of choosing sled dogs; picky dogs off trail may be pickier on the trail.^[11] They are fed high-fat diets, and on the trail may eat oily salmon or blubbery sea mammals.^[3] Sled dogs also must not be overly aggressive with other dogs.^[11]

Breeds



An Alaskan Husky

Alaskan Husky

Main article: Alaskan Husky

The most commonly used dog in dog sled racing,^[16] the Alaskan Husky is a mongrel^[6] bred specifically for its performance as a sled dog.^[5] They first came into existence in the late 1800s.^[6] Occasionally, Alaskan Huskies are referred to as *Indian Dogs*, because the best ones supposedly come from Native American villages in the Alaskan and Canadian interiors.^[5] They weigh between 18 and 34 kilograms (40 and 75 lb) and may have dense or sleek fur.^[5] Alaskan Huskies bear little resemblance to the typical husky breeds they originated from, or to each other.^[5]

There are two genetically distinct varieties of Alaskan Husky: A sprinting group and a long-distance group.^[8] Alaskan Malamutes and Siberian Huskies contributed the most genetically to the long-distance group, while Pointers and Salukis contributed the most to the sprinting group.^[8] Anatolian

Shepherd Dogs contributed a strong work ethic to both varieties.^[8] There are many Alaskan Huskies that are partially Greyhound, which improves their speed.^[5] Although some Alaskan Huskies are known to be part wolf, which increases their endurance,^[5] these wolfdogs are generally disliked since they have a reputation of being difficult to control.^[5]

Alaskan Malamute

Main article: Alaskan Malamute

Malamutes are large, strong freight-type dogs.^[5] They weigh between 36 and 54 kilograms (80 and 120 lb) and have round faces with soft features.^[5] Freight dogs are a class of dogs that includes both pedigree and non-pedigree dogs.^[5] Malamutes are thought to be one of the first domesticated breeds of dogs, originating in the Kotzebue Sound region of Alaska.^[17] These dogs are known for their broad chests, thick coats, and tough feet.^[5] Speed has little to no value for these dogs - instead, the emphasis is on pulling strength.^[5] They are used in expedition and long adventure trips, and for hauling heavy loads.^[5] Malamutes were the dog of choice for hauling and messenger work in World War II.^[17]



An Alaskan Malamute



A group of Canadian Eskimo Dogs.

Canadian Eskimo Dog

Main article: Canadian Eskimo Dog

Also known as the **Exquimaux Husky**, **Esquimaux Dog**, and **Qimmiq**, the Canadian Eskimo Dog has its origins in the aboriginal sled dogs used by the Thule people of Arctic Canada.^[18] The breed as it exists today was primarily developed through the work of the Canadian government.^[18] It is capable of pulling between 45 and 80 kilograms (99 and 176 lb) per dog for distances between 24 and 113 kilometres (15 and 70 mi).^[18] The Canadian

Eskimo Dog was also used as a hunting dog, helping Inuit hunters to catch seals, musk ox, and polar bears.^[18]

Chinook

Main article: Chinook (dog)

The Chinook is a drafting and sled dog developed in New Hampshire in the early 1900s, and is a blend of Mastiff, Greenland Husky, German Shepherd, and Belgian Shepherd.^[19] It is the state dog of New Hampshire and was recognized by the AKC as a Working breed in 2013.^[19] Its name means "warm winter winds" in Inuit.^[19] They are described as athletic and "hard bodied" with a "tireless gait".^[19]



A Chinook.

Greenland Dog

Main article: Greenland Dog

Eskimo dogs that originated in Greenland, Greenland Dogs are heavy dogs with high endurance but little speed.^[5] They are frequently used by people offering dog sled adventures and long expeditions.^[5] There are more than 30,000 Greenland Dogs living in Greenland.^[20] In the winter, they are a primary mode of transportation.^[20] Most hunters in Greenland favor dog sled teams over snowmobiles as the dog sled teams are more reliable.^[20]



A Greenland Dog.

Samoyed

Main article: [Samoyed \(dog\)](#)

The Samoyed was developed by the Samoyede people of Siberia, who used them to herd reindeer and hunt in addition to hauling sleds.^[21] These dogs were so prized, and the people who owned them so dependent upon them for survival, that the dogs were allowed to sleep in the tents with their owners.^[21]



A Samoyed.



Siberian Huskies in harness.

Siberian Husky

Main article: [Siberian Husky](#)

Smaller than the similar-appearing Malamute, the Siberian Husky pulls more, pound for pound, than a malamute, but cannot pull as long.^[5] They weigh between 18 and 27 kilograms (40 and 60 lb), and have been selectively bred for both appearance and pulling ability.^[5]

Other Breeds

Numerous non-sled dog breeds have been used as sled dogs. Poodles,^[22] Irish setters,^[5] German shorthaired pointers,^[5] Labrador retrievers,^[5] Newfoundlands,^[9] and St. Bernards^[9] have all been used to pull sleds in the past.

Famous Sled Dogs

Togo

Main article: [Togo_\(dog\)](#)

Togo was the lead sled dog of [Leonhard Seppala](#) and his dog sled team in the [1925 serum run to Nome](#) across central and northern Alaska.

Balto

Main article: [Balto](#)

Balto was the lead dog of the sled dog team that carried the diphtheria serum on the last leg of the relay to Nome during the [1925 diphtheria epidemic](#).^[23] He was driven by musher [Gunnar Kaasen](#), who worked for [Leonhard Seppala](#).^[23] Seppala had also bred Balto.^[23]

In 1925, ten months after Balto completed his run,^[24] a bronze statue was erected in his honour in [Central Park](#) near the [Tisch Children's Zoo](#).^[25] The statue was sculpted by [Frederick George Richard Roth](#).^[25] Children frequently climb the statue to pretend to ride on the dog.^[25] The plaque at the base of the statue reads "Endurance · Fidelity · Intelligence".^[25] Balto's body was stuffed following his death in 1933, and is on display at the [Cleveland Museum of Natural History](#).^[23]

In 1995, a [Universal Pictures](#) movie based on his life, *Balto*, was released.^[23] [Roger Ebert](#) gave it three of four stars.^[26]



[Gunnar Kaasen](#) with [Balto](#).

Chinook

Granite

Other Dogs

Anna was a small sled dog who ran on [Pam Flower's](#) team during her expedition to become the first woman to cross the Arctic alone.^[27] She was noted for being the smallest dog to run on the team, and a picture book was created about her journey in the Arctic.^[27]

There are numerous stories of blind sled dogs that continue to run, either on their own or with assistance from other dogs on the team.^{[4][28]} In the Antarctic Continent is famous the PERRO POLAR ARGENTINO, created by professionals of the army for work in the especials lands in the south polar area.

Sled Dogs in popular culture

Literature

Sled dogs have been written about extensively by numerous authors.

- [Gary Paulsen](#) wrote extensively about his experiences living with sled dogs in [Minnesota](#) and twice participated in the [Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race](#), until an [angina](#) attack forced him to stop mushing.^[29]
- [Egerton Ryerson Young's](#) *My Dogs In The Northland* (1902) focuses on Egerton's adventures with a team of twelve sled dogs.^[10]

- Jack London's book *The Call of the Wild* (1903), a famous work of fiction about sled dogs and their lives in the gold rush era, used Young's book as a source.

See also

- 1925 serum run to Nome
- Balto
- Dog sled racing
- List of sled dog races
- Sled dog race at the 1932 Winter Olympics

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External links

Template:Sled Dogs



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