

FLATHEAD LIVING

Life at 48° North



the speed of dog

of



By Tim Tepas
Photos by Tim & Mary Tepas

dog sled tours in 1979 with dogs I had rescued from the local animal shelter. I saved many Huskies, giving them a job, a hot meal and a loving home," he says.

For 29 years, Jeff Ulsamer has offered the experience of a lifetime through his business, Dog Sled Adventures. Originally sledding the wilderness near Steamboat Springs, Colorado with a handful of rescued dogs, the operation was moved to the Flathead about 18 years ago. "I came to the Flathead after seeing it on the way to Alaska and noticed how gorgeous it was. I really liked how friendly the people were and knew I found a place to call home." His house hunting ended when he stumbled upon a log home on 20 acres bordering state forest land. After purchasing the property, he discovered "Dog Lake", "Dog Creek" and "Dog Mountain" were less than a mile and a half away. He was sure it was a sign from the man upstairs he was home.

Popular breeds of sled dogs are Alaska Malamutes, Siberian Huskies, Eskimo dogs and Samoyeds, but nearly any kind of dog can be a sled dog. The key is endurance and speed. Most mushers use Alaskan Huskies, which are the Heinz 57 of dog breeds. The dogs weigh roughly 45 pounds and have high energy and ambition to run for long periods. They can run like a thoroughbred, which is why they are an idyllic choice for mushers in the most famous dog sled race in the world, the Iditarod. Sled dogs live to pull sleds. To them, it's not a job, but fun. They are strong and fast and have no problem pulling a full sled, but getting them to stop can be tough. "The dogs are the real happy ones because they love to do this" Jeff says. "It's like throwing a ball to a Labrador. They never tire of it."

Dog Sled Adventures rescues many dogs from local animal shelters that would otherwise not be adopted.

On an unmarked road about twenty miles north of Whitefish

lives a man and his trusty companions. The man is Jeff Ulsamer, and he is as close to an authentic mountain man as they come. He is complete with bushy facial hair, fur hat and Bowie knife. His companions, around 100 of them, are of the canine variety and pull dog sleds every day. "I began mushing and giving

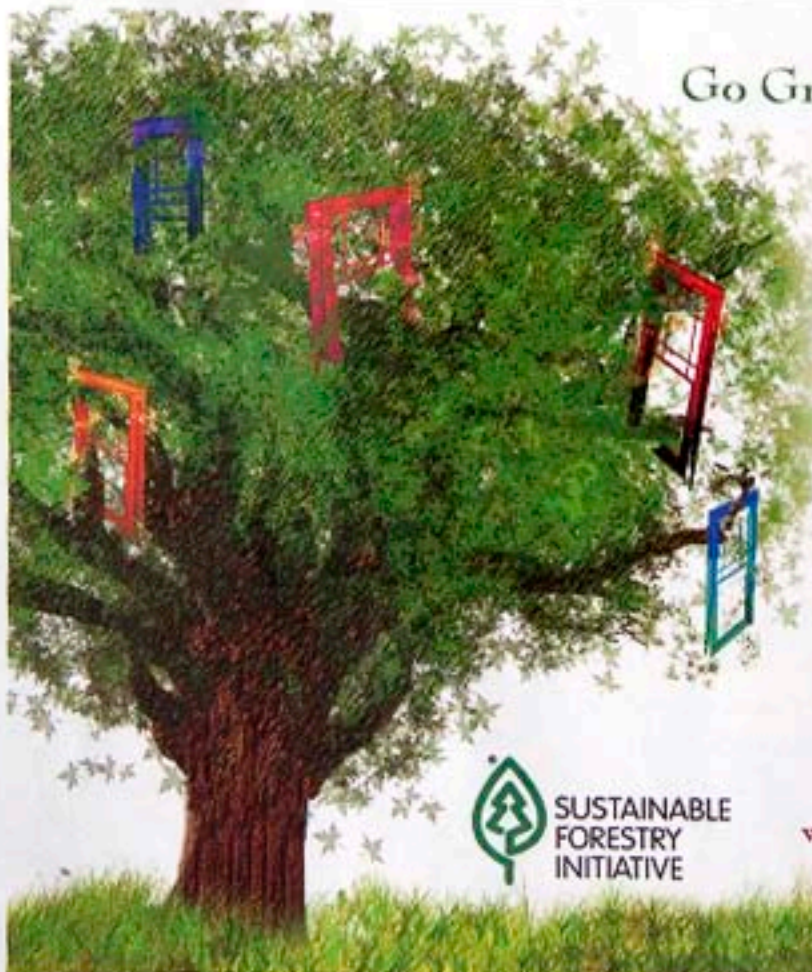


They currently have about 99 Alaskan Huskies and one hound dog. "I saw Bowser the hound dog at the Eureka shelter. He was in there a month and a half and wasn't going to be adopted so I took him in. He loves to pull sleds just like the Huskies." Clients are often inquisitive about Bowser, so they are told that his job is to find them if they get lost along the trail. "Go let him sniff you before we leave in case we need to find you later." Many people will let the dog sniff their hands until Jeff tells them that Bowser hasn't found anyone yet. Of course, that's because no one has ever been lost or even injured on one of his sled tours.

Upon arriving at Dog Sled Adventures, customers are greeted by happy, friendly dogs that capture their hearts. The dogs know that visitors



mean they are going to get to pull sleds. After a short introduction by Jeff and his two partner mushers, Adam and Mark, clients are encouraged to interact with the dogs as the toboggans are readied. Dog Sled Adventures commonly runs three sleds at a time and a large sled can take a family of five or three medium size adults. Depending on the number of people on the sled, teams of dogs can range from three for an empty sled to sixteen for a fully loaded commercial



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November to early April. All the dogs are rotated through and some of the younger dogs run once in the morning and once in the afternoon.

Sled dogs prefer cold, snowy days. They run faster and longer in the snow because the snow pads their feet and the weather keeps them from overheating in their thick fur coats. But no matter how cold the weather, riders are kept warm and dry bundled under elk skins in the toboggan. Dog Sled Adventures runs special trips on Big Mountain and on a trail north of Whitefish they affectionately call an Eskimo

rollercoaster. It runs for nearly 12 miles through the beautiful Stillwater State

Forest at the western flank of Glacier National Park. The trail is good for all ages and the mushers know the route so well, they can slow down and avoid the bumps for more sensitive riders or speed up and catch air for the more daring souls. The mushers stop periodically on the ride to let the animals catch their breath. But the

Running a dog sled business is a real labor of love. The work begins at 4 a.m. every day and proper care is never ending.

stops last only about a minute before the dogs are pulling on their lines to get moving again.

"Good dogs!" Ulsamer yells to his

run. Dogs are chosen to join the teams, harnessed up and connected to the sled's gangline. During this schoolyard pick, the barking intensifies as if each animal is screaming, "Pick me! Pick me!" No one wants to be left at home when the fun is running the trail. The company estimates they average between 600 and 700 sled tours each winter season, which typically lasts from the end of

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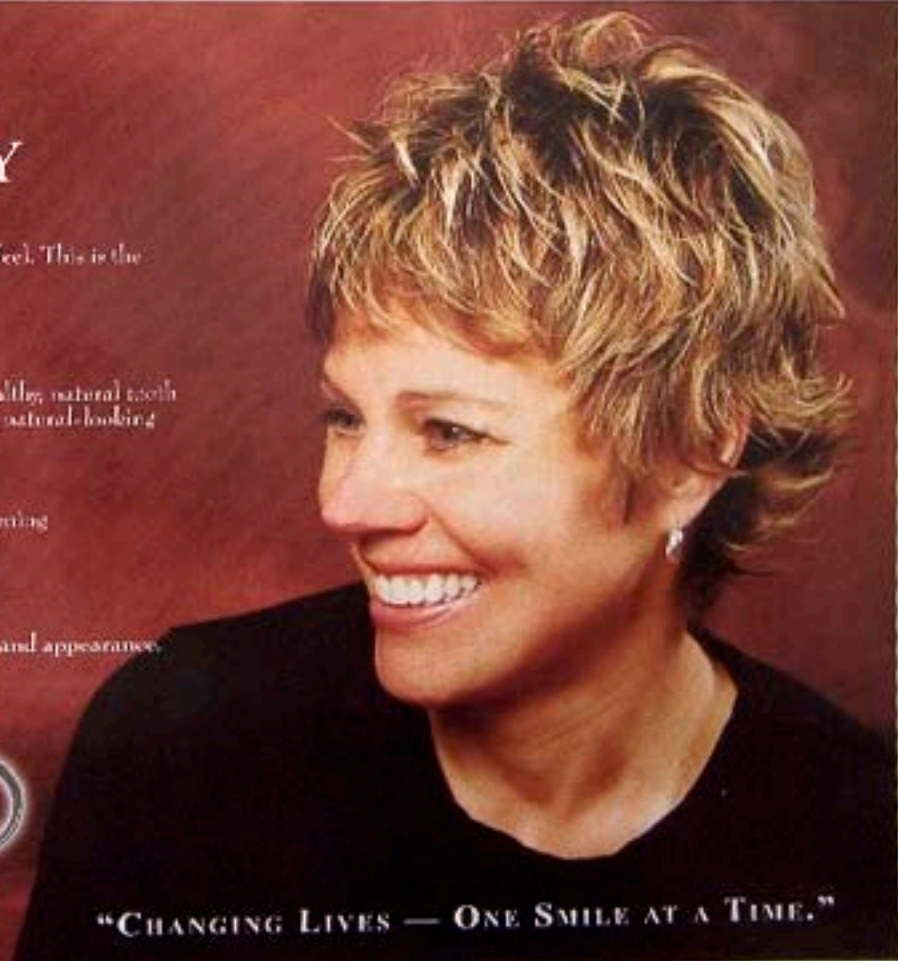
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"CHANGING LIVES — ONE SMILE AT A TIME."

team. The musher is the leader of the pack and must be strong, commanding and decisive. Contrary to popular belief, mushers don't use the word "mush" to get the dogs moving because it sounds soft. Jeff prefers to run the dogs on compliments because they respond better to positive reinforcement. "Haw!" he calls out to lead dogs Throttle and Hop-along to take a trail to the left. Lead dogs are trained to be attentive to voice commands and aren't distracted easily, even by the abundant wildlife that is seen along the trail. It's common for mushers to follow beside moose, elk, deer and smaller animals as they make their way through the forest.

Running a dog sled business is a real labor of love. The work begins at 4am every day and proper care is never ending. In the winter when the dogs are most active, they start their day with a morning broth that contains fish, rice and supplements. When the fun is over and the last toboggan stowed, the dogs are fed 300 pounds of chopped chicken and fish. This high fat and protein diet is offset by the 10,000 calories the dogs can burn in a day, which keeps them fit and trim. They



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also receive regular house calls from a local veterinarian to stay current with vaccinations and medical attention. There is even a retirement program for the senior dogs that become unable to pull a sled. They comfortably live out their lives being loved and cared for, often reaching the age of twenty.

The twelve-mile looping trip lasts about an hour and fifteen minutes and culminates back at the lodge for hot chocolate, fresh baked cookies and fun sledding stories. Everyone turns into a big kid on the ride and fall in love with the dogs. Most come away with a favorite and call them by name. The trip is so pleasurable that Dog Sled Adventures is renown for the amount of their out of state return clients, who often call to schedule a ride even before making hotel reservations in Whitefish.

Experiencing nature's beauty in a dog sled is a wonderfully safe, fun and enjoyable time. People of all ages have enjoyed mushing through Flathead powder with Jeff and his team, including a 98 year old man and dozens of Make a Wish recipients and Special Olympians. It seems that the special feeling of traveling at the speed of dog touches everyone's hearts.

Dog Sled Adventures Montana

Minutes North of Whitefish

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