

The winter of '89 is a very long one

by Doug Neal

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KOTZEBUE — Knowledgeable Eskimos in the Northwest Arctic predicted last spring that the winter of '89 was going to be a long one.

OPINION

I didn't really know what they meant. After all, winters along the windswept Arctic coast always begin by late October, when we start running dogs, and end sometime in May, when we stop running dogs.

It's *always* relatively cold here, so I thought a few extra weeks of cold, more or less, wouldn't make much difference.

At any rate, the winter began for me over the Christmas holidays, when snow and blowing snow kept us recreational dog mushers pinned inside. For instance, between Dec. 23 and Jan. 7, on just three days did the wind *not* blow at least 40 miles per hour. In fact, the highest recorded gusts for that period were 68 mph.

"It felt as if someone with a powerful firehose was trying to sandblast my face with creme pie filling," said a friend, describing those biting gusts.

After three weeks of scouring winds, Kotzebue finally did grow calm sometime in January. I ran into Kate, a friend from the Noatak Fish Hatchery, located about 40 miles north of Kotzebue. She'd been trapped by the weather like the rest of us and had had her first dog run in three weeks only the previous evening.

"I felt as if I'd been let out of prison," she said of the still air.

This was only January, and I was already weary of the winter of '89.

Then it got cold. Not just a little cold. But 40 below cold.

For the first week, watching the hand of the big round thermometer on my shop wall stuck on 40 below was kind of exciting. After all, the sky remained clear, and best of all, the wind wasn't blowing.

Then, like a bad plot for some made-for-television movie, the wind did pick up, defying the stillness that usually joins those deep-freeze temperatures. Around that time, I saw a bulletin of the local U.S. Weather Service that read: "Expect wind chills of 120 below zero." Indeed, Kotzebue no longer felt connected to earth.

Even sled dogs, who feel their best when it's 20 below, were balking.

"My sled dogs will only eat their breakfasts and dinners in their houses," said one musher friend.

But even without the wind blowing, it's hard to remain enthusiastic about 40 below for long, mostly because people and equipment simply don't function at those temperatures.

For example, I wanted to see if my three-wheeler would start, so I gave the cord a good tug. That's where it stopped. The crankcase oil had turned to ice cream. The entire length of pull cord lay frozen and hard as a chunk of wood, and it remained that way for the entire cold snap.

Sometime during the coldest weather, I asked my friend, John Creed, how the cold was treating him.

"Alright," he said. "Except for my bike."

"What's wrong with your bike?" I asked.

"In the morning, I drive my warm bike out of the house and start peddling to work. A couple of minutes out

the door, and the oil starts freezing up around the bearings. It gets harder to peddle. Finally, the wheels freeze up and I have to push the damn thing."

January disappeared into an ice fog of 49 below, alternating with wind chills to 120 below. Everyone shuddered about what the year's traditionally coldest month, February, had in store.

Much to our relieved amazement, February temperatures stayed between -5 and 10 for the first couple weeks. Then an angry storm from the south engulfed Kotzebue, bringing blowing snow, pouring rain (that's right, rain), zero visibility and zero ceiling.

The morning after the worst of the storm subsided, Susan Georgette, a local musher, walked to the end of her street in Kotzebue to examine the dog trail that leads out of town, across the lagoon and into the hills.

"Those can't be white caps out there," she thought to herself as she looked toward the hills. "That has to be blowing snow."

Then she scanned in all directions. To her amazement, Kotzebue had become a frozen island of pack ice and was almost completely surrounded by

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grinding ice and white-capped waves. Despite record low temperatures in January, February was surrounding this Arctic settlement with open water.

It was like spring breakup. In fact, with the balmy temperatures, I don't think many people would have flinched if a gaggle of geese went honking by.

Of course, shortly thereafter, Kotzebue became engulfed in more winter storms — which anywhere else would be characterized as "cyclone" or "tornado-force."

Now we'll have enough drifted

snow in town to kayak to work come "real" breakup.

I am beginning to understand what the Eskimos meant when they said it was going to be a long winter.

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