

Iceworms are real, not just poetry

Although Robert Service's famous poem "The Ballad of the Iceworm Cocktail" led many to believe that iceworms are fictitious creatures, in 1887 scientists on Alaska's Muir Glacier discovered the real McCoy.

According to an article published in the March 1978 issue of Pacific Search Magazine, iceworms are annelids, segmented worms related to earthworms and some freshwater worms. they measure 1 to 3 centimeters in length, except when they appear in annual Iceworm Festival Grand Parade in Cordova, (set for 1 p.m. February 8) where they assume gigantic proportions.

The scientific name for the many-footed beasts is Mesenchytraeus. They make their homes in a variety of habitats including permanent ice, seasonal snow, meltwater streams and the snow bordering or lying under moss or litter.

According to the article, most

iceworms are nocturnal. They feed on a crop of algae that is produced on all glaciers and is nourished by minerals in airborne dust. They also occasionally ingest airborne pollen grains and fern spores.

Constant glacier melt washes the ever-present algae into drainage furrows where the iceworms tend to cluster.

Iceworms apparently thrive at a temperature of 32 degrees Fahrenheit, which is the temperature of glaciers covered with 20 to 30 ft. of snow since the snow insulates the ice in winter.

Iceworms have been observed to move around in the ice at depths near 6 feet. Even in the Alaska Range, the glacier ice at that depth can remain near freezing and therefore provide a marginal iceworm habitat.

The worms rise to the surface at dusk sometimes swarming on the snow in groups of as many as 100 per square meter, says Pacific Search Magazine.

But life is not easy for the iceworm. Perhaps it's as Robert Service said: "And as no nourishment they find, to keep themselves alive, They masticate each other's tails, till just the Tough survive."