
CHAPTER 4 — TURNAGAIN ARM TRAILS

Trails in the Turnagain Arm area are widely used by residents of this portion of the Municipality. The general philosophy concerning trails in Girdwood at the present time is that most trails should be a part of greenbelt systems along the major creeks. This will provide more attractive settings for the trails and result in less traffic interference for trail users. The preference in Girdwood is that trails are unpaved initially, until such time as the community preference dictates that they should be paved (see Appendix 2 for a description of Girdwood trails.)

According to the State Department of Natural Resources, trails of regional or statewide significance that are located on state land will be protected by publicly owned corridors that have a minimum width of 100 feet. Corridor widths may be increased in order to: 1) minimize land use and ownership conflicts; 2) protect the privacy of adjacent landowners; 3) separate motorized from non-motorized uses; 4) allow future siting of public facilities; 5) allow flexibility for rerouting; or 6) adapt a trail to allow specific public uses or aesthetic or environmental concerns.

Each trail not associated with a roadway should be accommodated within a trail easement and should include a buffer area. The buffer area should be configured to protect the quality of the experience of the trail user and to minimize negative impacts from adjacent land uses. The dimensions of the buffer should be determined by the following factors:

- location and proposed use of the trail
- type and density of vegetation
- characteristics of terrain and other adjoining natural features
- patent notes and restrictions

Prior to the disposal of any public land containing a trail corridor identified in this Trails Plan, the location of the trail and buffer area should be located in the field, and recorded as an easement for such use. The easements should be noted on any subdivision plat made of the area.

I. PEDESTRIAN AND RELATED USERS

Communities in the Turnagain Arm developed primarily along roadways. Sidewalks do not generally exist as a means of pedestrian transportation, though a few trails running parallel to roadways have recently been constructed in some Turnagain Arm communities.

A. EXISTING TRAILS AND FACILITIES

Trails are important to the Girdwood community for transportation, but primarily for recreational purposes. Paved trails include one parallel to the Alyeska Highway that extends from the Seward Highway to the ski base facilities, one that provides access from Alyeska Road to Girdwood Elementary School, and one parallel to Arlberg Road that continues to the site of the Alyeska Prince Hotel.

Some of the unpaved trails include:

- Beaver Pond Trail
- Virgin Creek Trail
- Glacier Creek Trail
- Winner Creek Trail
- Tiny Creek Trails

A portion of the Iditarod Trail (see Chapter 5) runs through from the Kenai Boundary through the Girdwood Valley to Crow Pass. Another segment leaves Girdwood and travels through the communities of Bird and Indian, continuing to Ship Creek and to the Anchorage Bowl.

A paved trail on the south side of the Seward Highway connects the communities of Bird and Indian. This trail provides access to the shoreline and recreation areas in Bird. There are additional trails located throughout the communities of Bird and Indian. These trails provide access within the community and recreation opportunities along creeks and through the woodlands.

In Portage Valley there are several pedestrian, natural trails that are discussed below in the section on Natural Trails.

B. DEMAND ANALYSIS

Trails along Bird Creek and connections to the parking areas are very well used. Bird Creek is experiencing a significant increase in use as a fishing spot. Automobiles parked along the roadway often clog the highway. The Bird Creek campground is well used during fishing season and pedestrians often cross the road to fish the creek.

C. ISSUES

Residents of the Girdwood Valley are seeking to identify, designate and develop the Iditarod Trail as it travels through their area. Such a designated and developed trail would be an enhancement to the community and should prove to be a draw for visitors and residents alike. A complete description of the Iditarod Trail is found in Chapter 5.

The roadway-oriented nature of the Turnagain Arm communities places pedestrians at risk in some situations, necessitating safe trails for pedestrian use. Pedestrian facilities are needed along arterial and collector roads in Turnagain Arm, as well as in commercial areas. Also, a trail is needed on the north side of Seward Highway to provide access between Bird and Indian.

Important existing trails need a protective designation to ensure they are preserved in the development process. The Resort and the community are working to protect the integrity of the Winner Creek trail along those portions of the trail that are impacted by the ongoing development of Seibu-owned parcels. Similar attention and protection need to be provided for other existing trails throughout Turnagain Arm.

The Forest Service is planning a new system of trails in Portage Valley, including a six-mile trail that will be built parallel to the Portage Valley Highway from Alder Pond to the Visitor Center. In addition, another trail will be built to access Explorer Glacier and to travel round-trip from the Visitor Center to the Williwaw Campground.

New parking improvements and a pedestrian walkway to view Dall sheep are needed at Windy Corner, Mile 106.6, of the Seward Highway. These facilities are needed to provide new opportunities for the traveling public to see Dall sheep safely at close range.

A separated trail needs to be planned and built from Potter Marsh to Portage on the seaward side of the highway. This trail would connect with the parking areas along the Seward Highway north of Girdwood, the new pedestrian walkway at Windy Corner, the proposed Girdwood Coastal Interpretive Center, and the commercial development at Portage.

D. RECOMMENDATIONS

Priorities for pedestrian facilities include the following:

- development of the Iditarod Trail through the Girdwood Valley
- underpass/overpass near Indian Creek
- sidewalks along all commercial developments and along arterials and collectors
- underpass/overpass near Bird
- separated trails along all arterials and collectors in Turnagain Arm

- pedestrian walkway at Windy Corner
- a paved trail on the north side of the Seward Highway between Bird and Indian
- a separated trail along the Seward Highway

II. BICYCLE USERS

A majority of the trails in the Turnagain Arm area lie along primary roadways. The Seward Highway has become an important bike route for many Anchorage residents. The increase in ownership and use of mountain bikes has also resulted in significant travel on unpaved trails in Turnagain Arm communities.

A. EXISTING TRAILS AND FACILITIES

There are not extensive opportunities for bicycling in Turnagain Arm.

The Seward Highway provides a wide paved shoulder lane that offers opportunities for connections to the many recreation opportunities along Turnagain Arm. With completion of the last section of the highway upgrade project, bicyclists will eventually be able to bicycle from Potter Marsh to Turnagain Pass using a combination of roadway shoulder and trails. This availability is important to residents and to tourists, many of whom visit Alaska to bicycle.

The paved trails in Bird, Indian, and Girdwood offer opportunities for bicycling on surfaces that are separated from roadways. There is a paved trail along the Alyeska Highway extending from the Resort to the Seward Highway. A trail link is planned to connect the Girdwood area with the Seward Highway trail being built from Bird Point.

B. ISSUES

In the near term, the Seward Highway should be signed to indicate bicycle use along its entire length from Potter Marsh to the municipal southern boundary. In the longer term, a separated trail should be constructed along this roadway. Bicycle racks should be provided at scenic turnoffs and parks along the roadway.

Separated crossings are needed to connect the bike trail on the south side of the Seward Highway to Bird and Indian. The Bird crossing may be handled by a trail located under the Bird Creek Bridge.

After the road is moved to tidewater, at least eight feet of asphalt from the existing Seward Highway between Bird and Girdwood should be maintained to allow bicycle use.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Where possible, a separated trail should be provided from Potter Marsh to Portage to encourage use of the Seward Highway corridor by bicyclists.
2. Separated crossings at Bird and Indian should be provided.
3. A separated trail on the north side of the Seward Highway from Bird to Indian should be provided.
4. Any new roadways that are classified as a collector or greater should be designed to include a separated multi-use trail.
5. After the road is moved to tidewater, at least eight feet of asphalt from the existing Seward Highway between Bird and Girdwood should be maintained to allow bicycle use.

III. RUNNING/JOGGING/PHYSICAL FITNESS TRAIL USERS

A. EXISTING TRAILS AND FACILITIES

Paved trails provide some opportunities for running in Turnagain Arm communities. The predominant trail-associated physical fitness activity involves hiking on the number of natural trails that are available. Except for Girdwood, most of these trails are on State Park or national forestland. Many trails in Girdwood are located on land held by federal, state, or local government (Heritage Land Bank) and are not dedicated. Many runners and joggers also use Crow Creek Road.

B. ISSUES

Lack of an extensive trail system or pedestrian sidewalk system limits the availability of running trails in Turnagain Arm.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Residential connections should be provided to existing trails as Turnagain Arm grows.
2. Priorities for running/fitness trails include:
 - dedication of existing trails before or at the time private development occurs
 - maintenance of trails along major creeks

IV. INTERPRETIVE TRAILS

Turnagain Arm affords excellent opportunities for interpretive displays relating to a great variety of climates, from semi-arid to rainforest. Turnagain Arm also provides for a dramatic focus on nature through interpretive efforts.

A. EXISTING TRAILS AND FACILITIES

The State of Alaska has constructed most of the existing interpretive facilities, including those at Potter Marsh and Beluga Point. Two interpretive trails are located in the Portage Valley. The first, the Moraine Nature Trail, has a number of signs depicting the process of glacial advance and recession. The second, the Williwaw Nature Trail, helps the user understand the vegetation and natural features of the trail.

B. ISSUES

Excellent opportunities are present in the Girdwood coastal wetland area and the Portage area for providing interpretive displays. In particular, these areas, provide striking illustrations of the effects of the 1964 earthquake.

The Winner Creek Trail provides an excellent opportunity to interpret a rainforest environment within driving distance of Anchorage.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

Priorities for interpretive facilities include:

- Bird Ridge — early spring flora
- Portage — earthquake impacts
- Girdwood Beaver Pond — beaver pond
- Winner Creek — rain forest
- Girdwood Coastal Wetlands — tidal wetlands

V. SNOWMOBILE AND OTHER MOTORIZED USERS

There is snowmobile use at the Placer River, at Twenty-Mile River, at the Portage River, and in Bird Creek Regional Park. There is also off-road vehicle and all-terrain vehicle use in Bird Creek Regional Park.

A. EXISTING TRAILS AND FACILITIES

Bird Creek Valley contains several thousand acres of forest consisting primarily of large spruce and some Western and Mountain Hemlock. Over twenty miles of trails cut through the valley. Many additional miles of spurs emanate from these former logging roads, offering the potential for motorized use. Alaska State Parks and the Municipality, each of which own land in the valley, jointly administer this area.

Bird Creek Regional Park, located on property owned by the Municipality of Anchorage, provides an extensive snowmobile riding area in the Penguin and Bird Creek valleys. A cooperative agreement between the Municipality and the State provides for State management of Bird Creek Regional Park as a part of Chugach State Park. It would seem advisable to transfer Bird Creek Regional Park to Chugach State Park. The Placer River, Twenty-Mile River, and Portage River also offer opportunities for snowmobile use.

B. ISSUES

There is a need to improve access to Bird Creek Regional Park. Because the physical roadway is not located within the platted easement, this upgrade will require the acquisition of easements from affected landowners. Another access alternative to the park would be from Mile 100 of the Seward Highway. This would bypass the community entirely via a new park road around the periphery of the park extending to a future campground and trails that are planned for up-valley.

An improved trailhead is needed in Bird Creek Regional Park in the existing gravel pit north of the community. Restroom facilities, a concession stand for food, and off-loading facilities would be appropriate. The construction of these improvements should include volunteer efforts.

Currently the trails are difficult to ride, as they are thickly overgrown. Volunteer efforts for trail improvement and a maintenance program is needed.

Bird Creek is not currently in a Parks and Recreation Service Area, nor is the remainder of Turnagain Arm, except for Girdwood. Municipal tax dollars may not be spent in these areas until they are included in a Parks and Recreation Service Area. State dollars may be used, if the area is transferred to Chugach State Park.

Many residents of the Turnagain Arm area feel, at this point in time, that there is little conflict between motorized and non-motorized users and that they can co-exist. There is currently a low level of either type of use and both users extend courtesies to the other. Snowmobile use is actually prohibited by Municipal ordinance, but the ordinance is largely ignored. As development occurs in Turnagain Arm, especially in Girdwood, conflicts may arise between these users, as they have throughout the rest of the Municipality.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Girdwood Board of Supervisors should undertake discussion and development of a management plan for multiple use of Girdwood trails.
2. The Turnagain Arm Community Council, Portage Community Council, and Girdwood Board of Supervisors should investigate the creation of a Turnagain Arm Parks and Recreation Service Area.

VI. CROSS-COUNTRY SKI USERS

All cross-country skiing in the Turnagain Arm area occurs on ungroomed trails. There is no competitive skiing along Turnagain Arm.

A. EXISTING TRAILS AND FACILITIES

Girdwood offers a lengthy ungroomed trail system along almost of the valley. The largest level of use occurs in the Moose Meadows area, which is used extensively by mushers, skijors, skiers, and occasionally by snowmobilers.

Cross-country skiing occurs in Bird Creek Regional Park. Cross-country skiers also use the lower portion of the Powerline Pass Trail in Indian and travel from Indian, through Ship Creek Valley, to Arctic Valley.

Most other trails used for cross-country skiing along Turnagain Arm would be considered as “back country” trails. Trails are not prepared for use, other than that provided by snowmobiles. The main valleys offer excellent access to valleys and hillsides and are used extensively by skiers. All users must acknowledge avalanche hazard.

Guided cross-country ski tours are led through Crow Creek Pass and Winner Creek trails.

B. ISSUES

As the downhill ski resort facilities grow in the Girdwood and Winner Creek valleys, there may be an increasing demand for cross-country ski facilities. Large resorts, such as Sun Valley in Idaho, also have well developed, groomed, cross-country ski trail systems.

Moose Meadows, which contains cross-country skiing, is recommended for park dedication in the Girdwood Area Plan (1993).

Cross-country skiers have requested development of a designated cross-country ski trail area that would provide groomed trails that are also available for competitive events.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ski trails in the Moose Meadows should be protected as recommended in the Girdwood Area Plan.
2. An area should be provided in the Girdwood area for competitive cross-country skiing.
3. Groomed trails should be provided in Turnagain Arm.

VII. EQUESTRIAN USERS

There is a very small amount of equestrian use in the Turnagain Arm area as horses must be trailered to most locations. Equestrian uses will most like occur on multi-use unpaved trails which are available for other usage.

A. EXISTING TRAILS AND FACILITIES

There is some limited equestrian use of the Beaver Pond Trail and the California Creek Trail in Girdwood. There is equestrian use in Bird Creek Regional Park and on other trails in the Bird and Indian area.

The Johnson Trail is closed to equestrian use from Potter Marsh to Indian. The Winner Creek Gorge and Upper Winner Creek trails are entirely closed to equestrian use.

B. ISSUES

Existing trails easily accommodate current equestrian use, with the most suitable trails for equestrian use being located within Bird Creek Valley. Little conflict exists between any of the user groups in the Turnagain Arm area.

The wet conditions in much of Girdwood make equestrian use inappropriate and only limited riding opportunities are available.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Existing equestrian use in Turnagain Arm should be protected.
2. Equestrian use within Girdwood should be confined to those areas where soils and drainage allows.

VIII. SLED DOG MUSHING TRAIL USERS

Dog mushing is a recreational and commercial activity in Girdwood.

A. EXISTING TRAILS AND FACILITIES

The Moose Meadows Trails and their connections to other trails north of Girdwood are important to mushers and the survival of the small business operated by Chugach Express.

B. ISSUES

The Moose Meadow Trails should be kept available for dog mushing. This currently is not a problem because of the courtesies extended between the many users of the Moose Meadows.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Any management plan for Moose Meadows should provide for the protection of mushing.
2. As development proceeds, protection of sled dog trails should be incorporated into the planning process.

IX. SKIJORING USERS

Skijoring has enjoyed rapid growth in Girdwood. The Moose Meadows area provides a trail that suits the needs of skijors.

A. EXISTING TRAILS AND FACILITIES

Skijors use the Moose Meadows trails extensively because of the lack of significant hills and provision of ready access to the community of Girdwood.

Trails in Bird Creek Regional Park are used occasionally, though the presence of motorized vehicles is a conflict.

B. ISSUES

The potential threat of increased use of snowmobiles within the community of Girdwood is a concern to skijors. Local citizens who extend necessary courtesies generally accept existing snowmobile use. Increased use of Girdwood trails by snowmobilers may change the current level of acceptance of co-existing motorized and non-motorized uses and require designation of appropriate motorized riding areas. Potential use by riders from outside the Girdwood community could drastically change the current level of acceptance of motorized use.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

Priorities for skijoring include:

- Signing the Moose Meadows area to recognize the presence of skijors
- Develop a management plan for the Moose Meadows trail system to ensure that the interests of skijors are protected

X. NATURAL TRAILS

Natural trails are unpaved, unlighted, ungroomed, non-motorized, generally narrow, relatively lightly used trails in a natural setting that are enjoyed by non-competitive walkers and skiers, bird watchers, and outdoor educators.

A. EXISTING TRAILS AND FACILITIES

At the present time, there are three natural trails in the Portage Valley, including the Moraine Nature Trail, the Byron Glacier Trail, and the Williwaw National Recreation Trail. There is also a trail extending from the end of the Portage Pass viewpoint trail to an unnamed ledge overlooking Portage Glacier and Portage Lake. Chugach National Forest personnel are preparing to add 7 miles of recreational trails in the Portage Valley.

There are numerous natural trails in Chugach State Park and in Chugach National Forest. The Chugach State Park Master Plan calls for a new trailhead in the Girdwood area in the vicinity of California Creek.

All of the trails in the greenbelts and along the streams in Turnagain Arm are natural trails.

Guided llama pack trips are led along the Crow Pass Trail.

B. ISSUES

Maintenance of natural trails in the face of increasing usage will be a difficult issue.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. As Turnagain Arm develops, some trails should be designated to remain as natural trails, rather than being slated for upgrading and paving.
2. Natural trails should be left unimproved. Exceptions may be considered for clearing and brushing of downed timber, and to improve drainage that may be causing trail damage.

XI. WATER TRAILS

There are several rivers in the Turnagain Arm that are available for potential water trails.

A. EXISTING TRAILS AND FACILITIES

Watercrafts use both the Placer River and Twenty-Mile River at the present time. Additional creeks that might be used include Glacier Creek in Girdwood and Bird Creek from the falls to the mouth.

Guided whitewater river float trips are conducted on Portage Creek. The Knik Canoers and Kayakers use Glacier and Portage Creeks for classes.

B. ISSUES

Access and public put-in and take-out points are an issue that will need to be addressed as more and more of the land adjacent to waterways are developed. Water quality of the streams is also an important issue to be addressed as use continues and may increase.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Anchorage Waterways Council, in conjunction with the Turnagain Community Council and the Girdwood Board of Supervisors, should investigate the potential use of Glacier Creek and Bird Creek by water crafts.