
CHAPTER 5 — REGIONAL TRAILS

There are three regional trails in the Anchorage area: the Coastal Trail, the Iditarod Trail and a trail from the Matanuska-Susitna border to the Kenai Peninsula border using the Glenn and Seward Highways. The Coastal Trail and the Seward and Glenn Highways multi-use trail are only partially constructed and the Iditarod Trail is only partly reconstructed.

I. IDITAROD TRAIL

The Iditarod Trail was once one of Alaska's most famous gold rush trails. It is now the site of the nationally famous Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race that commemorates dog mushers' historic race to deliver diphtheria serum to Nome in 1925 (see Figure 5.1). However, the original trail was much more than the Anchorage-to-Nome route. The Iditarod was actually a series of routes that have been described under a number of related names, including the Nome-Seward Trail, the Iditarod-Seward Trail, the "Winter Mail Trail," and the "Seward Trail."

The Iditarod Trail entered what is now the Municipality of Anchorage by way of Turnagain Pass. The trail skirted the end of Turnagain Arm and continued onward toward Girdwood. This trail split at Girdwood with one branch traveling over Crow Pass, down through Eagle River, and on to Knik and Nome. In times of good weather, this route was preferred because it was more direct, though steeper, than the others.

Another branch of the Iditarod Trail followed Turnagain Arm from Girdwood to Indian and over Indian Pass to Ship Creek where it followed Knik Arm until it joined the main trail near Eagle River. The Indian-Eagle River branch was used when stormy weather made travel in Crow Pass dangerous or impossible.

From Portage and Girdwood to Indian, the Trail followed the flat areas along Turnagain Arm in an area now largely covered by the Seward Highway. Reconstruction of the trail through this area should be accomplished. This portion of the trail would provide the link needed to connect with the statewide trail system, Chugach National Forest trails, and Kenai National Moose Range trails. It would also connect with general State land trails that connect Homer and Seward with Anchorage and points along the Iditarod Trail north of Anchorage.

The Territorial government cleared and maintained the Iditarod Trail around 1910, however, there are few distinct remnants of the trail remaining today.

In 1978, Congress established the Iditarod National Historic Trail System (INHTS). The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has been designated as the federal agency responsible for coordination of trail administration and management. BLM will manage the INHTS consistent with the Memorandum of Agreement between the State of Alaska and BLM. The State Office of History and Archaeology is consulted for permits and leases along the INHTS.

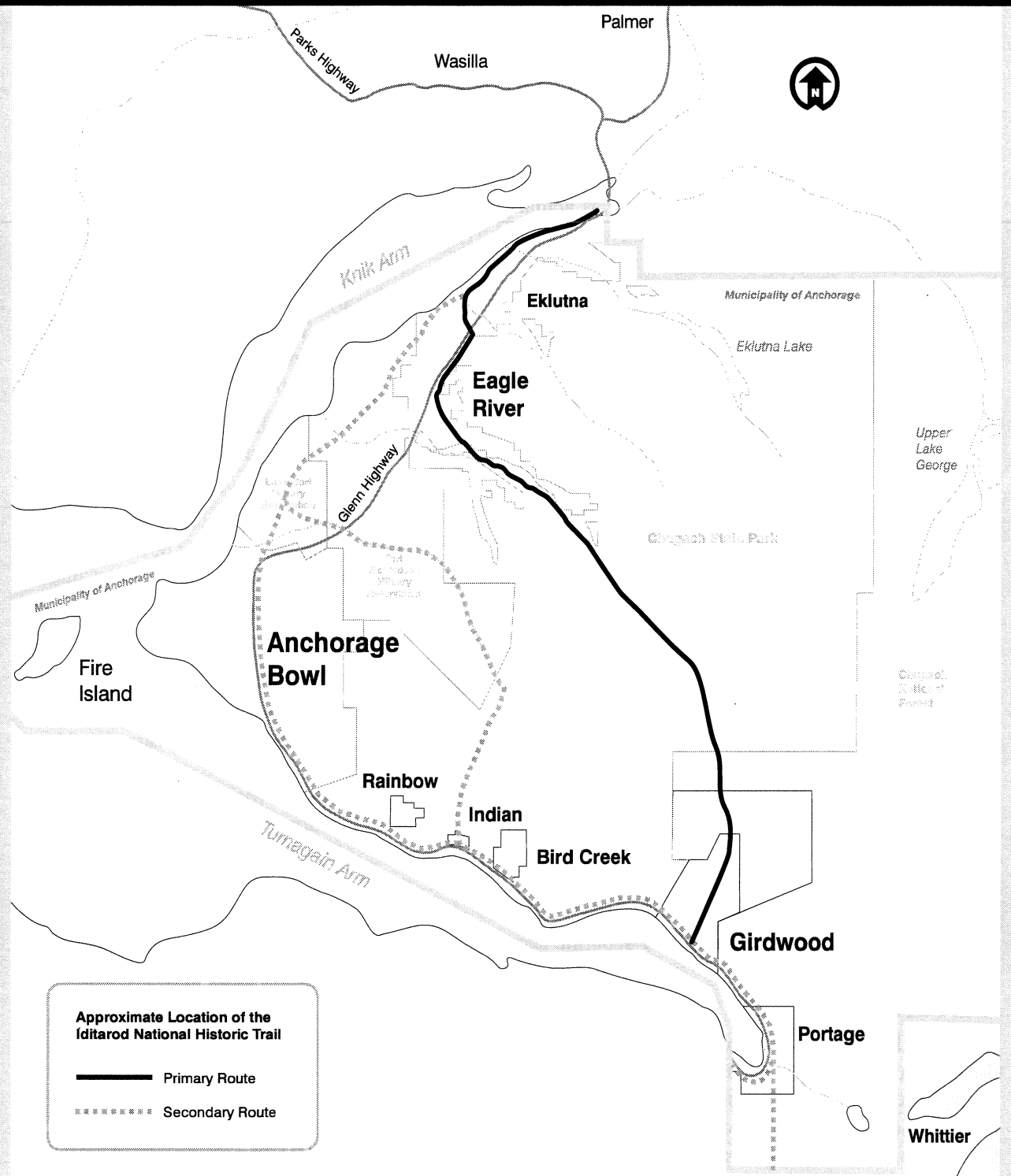
A. IDITAROD TRAILS DESCRIPTION

The trail can be described in terms of separate segments lying within the Municipality of Anchorage as follows:

1. Crow Pass Trail

The Crow Pass Trail went from the Kenai Boundary, through Girdwood Valley, and over Crow Pass. From there it traveled along Raven Glacier and Eagle Glacier down the Eagle River and then on to Knik and Nome. The use of Crow Pass as an Iditarod branch was brief, lasting only a season or two because of avalanche danger. The most clearly visible segments of the trail are in the vicinity of Monarch Mine near Crow Pass. Recent field work has identified some portions in the Girdwood Valley.

Iditarod National Historic Trail



Map not to scale - Illustrative only

Figure 5.1

2. Indian Creek Trail

Whereas the Crow Creek route skipped north from Girdwood, the alignment of the Indian Creek Trail dictated that the traveler continue along Turnagain Arm from Girdwood, past Bird Creek, to Indian Creek. There the trail meandered up Indian Creek Valley to Indian Creek Pass and beyond to the headwaters of Ship Creek.

3. Upper Ship Creek Trail

The Ship Creek trail or route is a continuation of the Indian Creek Trail. Once over the Indian Creek Pass, Iditarod travelers would continue down out of the mountains, heading northeast to travel around Knik Arm. After 1915, many more travelers journeyed down Ship Creek to Anchorage. This route winds out of the present Arctic Valley area, runs through the military reservation, and emerges in the lower Ship Creek basin. When the Ship Creek greenbelt becomes a reality, the majority of the Indian Creek-Ship Creek route will be intact.

4. Turnagain Arm/Old Johnson Trail

Another branch of the Iditarod Trail, known as the Turnagain Arm Trail and commonly referred to as the “Old Johnson Trail,” was cut into the mountainside along Turnagain Arm between Indian and Potter. The Alaska Engineering Commission built the Old Johnson Trail for the railroad in 1916. In addition to being called the Old Johnson Trail, this trail has been referred to as the Great Northern Trail, the Turnagain Trail and the Telegraph Trail. Alaska State Parks has used the name of the Turnagain Arm Trail/Old Johnson Trail in more recent years.

Chugach State Park staff and volunteers maintain 7.5 miles of the Turnagain Arm Trail/Old Johnson Trail between Potter and Rainbow. Chugach State Park personnel estimate that 8,000 visitors per year use portions of this trail.

Between Rainbow and Indian, there is approximately 4.5 miles of unmaintained trail, although visitors have access to portions of the trail at Falls Creek. The trailhead is in generally good condition, although a major brushing project is needed along most of the route.

Between Indian and Girdwood, the original trail followed the flatter areas along Turnagain Arm. The Seward Highway overlays most of this old route. Several state and municipal management plans for Turnagain have recommended reconstruction of the Old Johnson Trail.

Many old cabin remains are visible along the trail. Some of these were roadhouses associated with travel along this branch of the Iditarod Trail, while others were cabins occupied by woodsmen and prospectors. The remains of several cabins have been found near the trail between Potter and Indian. At one time, the largest hospital in Southcentral Alaska was at the present site of McHugh Creek Picnic area. Use of the trail continued until about 1915-1917 when the completion of major portions of the Alaska Railroad caused use of the trail to nearly cease.

5. Potter Creek Trail

The Potter Trail, also known as the Potter Creek Trail, traveled from Potter and followed what was to become the Alaska Railroad for a length of about 4 miles. The trail crossed the Hillside area of the Anchorage Bowl in a northeasterly direction, across what are now Far North Bicentennial Park and Fort Richardson, extending to Ship Creek where it rejoined the Indian-Ship Creek Trail. Musers with heavily weighted freight sleds preferred this route when there was adequate snow along Turnagain Arm because it features more gentle grades and is less subject to whiteouts and storm conditions, which frequently occur in the mountain passes.

6. Eagle River-Eklutna

The primary Iditarod Trail entered Eagle River from Crow Pass, traveling down along the north bank of Eagle River, cutting away from the river, and heading north crossing Meadow Creek, the Old Glenn Highway and the New Glenn Highway. The trail then paralleled the coast of Knik Arm to a point just northeast of the Eklutna River where it crosses the Knik River slough. From there, it wound around Knik Arm and headed toward Nome.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Municipality, in cooperation with other federal, state, local, and private agencies, should pursue the development of the Ship Creek Greenbelt in order to preserve part of the Indian Creek-Ship Creek Trail.
2. The Municipality, in cooperation with other federal and state agencies, should pursue additional research into the general alignment of all segments of the Iditarod Trail that are known to have passed through Anchorage. The Municipality should acquire easements to enable the reconstruction of the trail.
3. Where the Iditarod Trail has been identified, signs should be posted indicating its location and historical significance.

II. COASTAL TRAIL

Much as the Iditarod Trail runs from the Kenai boundary to the Matanuska-Susitna boundary, though inland and in the mountains, a Coastal Trail has been planned that would run along the coast from the Kenai boundary to the Matanuska-Susitna boundary. A comprehensive study should be done to determine what existing undeveloped land is essential to maintaining an aesthetically pleasing Coastal Trail. A portion of the Coastal Trail has been constructed in the Anchorage Bowl from Second Avenue to Kincaid Park and has been named the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail.

A. COASTAL TRAIL DESCRIPTION

Like the Iditarod Trail, the Coastal Trail can be described in separate segments lying within the Municipality of Anchorage as follows:

1. Tony Knowles Coastal Trail - Second Avenue to Kincaid Park

The Tony Knowles portion of the Coastal Trail, which has won a national award, has proved to be very popular, far more popular than was ever envisioned. However, the very popularity of this trail has led to increasing conflicts between users. This is partly due to the numbers of people using the trail, but also to changing technologies in sporting equipment and the fact that various user groups have differing needs.

As users have increased, so too has the demand for space. Whereas an eight foot trail was sufficient before, the trail is now too narrow in places to simultaneously accommodate the various types of users. There is also a need for different types of surfaces to serve the various users. Runners and walkers and mountain bikers can be off the pavement, while use of roller blades and regular bicycles requires pavement.

As technologies of sporting goods have changed, a number of new user groups, including roller bladers and roller skiers, are using Anchorage trails. Roller bladers are a new user group that is increasing in size. Many trail users are using ski poles as a part of their training regimen, which increases trail hazards and requires considerably more room.

It has been suggested that the Coastal Trail system would be improved if it were divided into two separate lanes, each supporting one-way traffic, rather than just widening the existing lane. A wide single lane, developed to accommodate the various users, would create an unsightly swath of asphalt more akin to a roadway than a trail. It has also been suggested that a dirt trail separated from, but essentially parallel to, the paved trail be created. This could support two-way traffic in winter, or be divided among different user groups so as not to damage the groomed ski trail, which currently happens.

2. Kincaid Park to Potter Marsh

A trail is planned from Kincaid Park south to Potter Marsh. This part of the Coastal Trail would improve the travel options in presently under-served south Anchorage. A portion of this section would go through the Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge (ACWR). The ACWR Management Plan states that:

“Coastal Trail access may be allowed within the refuge where disturbance to fish and wildlife populations and their habitat is avoided; where safety considerations and conflicts to existing refuge uses including waterfowl hunting and rifle range use allow; and where compatible with management of refuge public access points and the goals of this management plan.”

The siting, design, and construction of a trail within the ACWR will require a Special Area Permit from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G).

3. Potter Marsh to the Kenai Borough

The Municipality of Anchorage District Coastal Management Program designates the Seward Highway from the coastal bluff above Potter Marsh to the Kenai Peninsula Borough as an “Area Meriting Special Attention.” This designation is based on the natural values of the corridor. The Seward Highway has been designated a scenic corridor. This portion of the Coastal Trail may be coincident with many portions of the Iditarod Trail.

4. Second Avenue to the Matanuska - Susitna Boundary

The section of the Coastal Trail from Second Avenue north to Eklutna has been studied as a part of the Ship Creek Land Use Plan and the Coastal Trail Plan: Ship Creek to Eklutna. The Coastal Trail Plan envisions the trail in two components. The first component, from Ship Creek to the Eagle River area, would run across public land managed by the Alaska Railroad, Elmendorf Air Force Base, and Fort Richardson. The second component, from Eagle River to Eklutna, would cross municipal park land and tracts of private land. From the coast at Eklutna, the trail would skirt land owned by the National Bank of Alaska and travel from there to the planned trail along the New Glenn Highway to the Matanuska-Susitna boundary.

As a shorter term priority, a gravel trail could be constructed from a trailhead to be established in the mouth of Peters Creek Park to run northward along the coast to the north side of the Eklutna River. This trail should be designed to connect with the state land along the Knik River, with the possibility of someday connecting to a Glenn Highway trail. As a gravel trail, similar to the state park trail along Eklutna Lake, the design would help reduce maintenance costs to the local service area.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Tony Knowles Coastal Trail from Second Avenue to Kincaid Park should have a paved width of ten feet and three feet wide unpaved shoulders on each side. This would provide a place for runners and walkers on the unpaved shoulders and bicyclists and roller bladers on the pavement.
2. The trail segment from Kincaid Park to Potter Marsh should receive a high priority for funding as it would serve south Anchorage, which is presently under-served in terms of constructed trails. Because of the many problems associated with a trail running below the bluff, plans for a trail south of DeArmour Road should consider alternatives on top of the bluff.
3. To implement the Potter Marsh to the Kenai Borough segment of the Coastal Trail, provisions for a continuous trail corridor should be a part of any plans for upgrading the Seward Highway. The Municipality, in cooperation with the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, should establish by ordinance a Seward Highway Scenic Corridor with the incorporation of a coastal trail.

4. The first section of the trail segment from Second Avenue to the Matanuska-Susitna Boundary should be constructed from the mouth of Peters Creek Park to the north side of the Eklutna River.

III. MULTI-USE TRAIL FROM MAT-SU TO KENAI

This regional trail would utilize the Glenn and Seward Highways to traverse the area from the Matanuska-Susitna boundary to the Kenai Peninsula boundary. Portions of this trail have already been constructed, such as along the Glenn Highway from Muldoon to Peters Creek and separated trails and bike lanes along the Seward Highway. The remaining sections should be constructed utilizing frontage roads, separated bicycle trails, or bicycle lanes. This trail should be connected to the trails in the Statewide Transportation Plan, trails section.