NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Iditarod National Historic Trail

Bureau of Land Management Public Shelter Cabins



About the Public Shelter Cabins

The Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) five public shelter cabins along the Iditarod National Historic Trail (INHT)—Rohn, Bear Creek, Tripod Flat, Old Woman, and Foothills—provide essential shelter for travelers in the most remote reaches of western Alaska, including those going between villages, participating in races, and hunting on nearby lands. This guide explains the history of cabins along the INHT, the rules for using them, what to know before you go, and what you will find at each cabin.

Congress designated the Iditarod National Historic Trail in 1978 to commemorate the Alaska Gold Rush Era. The INHT system includes approximately 2,400 miles of routes between Seward, on Resurrection Bay, and Nome, on the Seward Peninsula. The BLM's public shelter cabins are part of a larger network of cabins and shelter structures along the INHT in use today. Additionally, there are several historic structures that travelers may come across on their journey. Back in the early 20th century, those traveling to Nome, Iditarod and elsewhere on what is known today as the INHT used trailside shelters as they navigated Alaska's wilderness, often in search of a mineral fortune. Though people's motivations for traversing the trail have changed over time, travelers continue to rely on trailside shelters to provide protection along their journey.

A Long Tradition of Shelter on the Trail

Routes Through Millennia

Long before the gold rush, Native Alaskan peoples traveled the routes that would become the Iditarod Trail. Athabascan peoples, including the Dena'ina in the Cook Inlet region and Koyukon, Deg Hit'an, Holikachuk and Upper Kuskokwim peoples in the interior, followed rivers, mountain passes and game trails between villages, hunting grounds and trading sites. Coastal Inupiaq people traveled the 80-mile Kaltag Portage between Unalakleet on Norton Sound and Kaltag on the Yukon River to trade. Today, the Tripod Flat and Old Woman public shelter cabins sit along this same portage.

Gold Rush Trail

Gold discoveries at Nome in 1898 and in the Innoko and Iditarod districts in 1906–1908 drew thousands of people to western Alaska. In the winter of 1908, an Alaska Road Commission (ARC) survey party led by Walter L. Goodwin traveled from Seward to Nome to locate a winter overland route, crossing the Alaska Range at Rainy Pass and descending the Tatina River, past the site of today's Rohn cabin, to the South Fork Kuskokwim River. ARC crews blazed the trail in 1910–1911, marking open stretches with tripods where needed. For roughly the next decade it was the principal winter route linking the ice-free port at Seward with the mining camps of the interior and Nome, used heavily by mail carriers and freighters.

Roadhouses were built about a day's travel apart. At the height of trail use there were about 85 roadhouses between Knik and Kaltag and at least 16 more between Kaltag and Nome. Where there were no roadhouses, travelers, especially mail carriers, made their own camps.

The Original Shelter Cabin Program

As mining declined after 1912, and during World War I, many roadhouses closed. In 1917 the Alaska Territorial Legislature responded by creating a shelter cabin program, administered by the ARC, which repaired abandoned roadhouses and built new shelter cabins along the Rainy Pass trail and in the Kuskokwim District. By 1935–1936 there were 25 shelter cabins in the upper Kuskokwim–Yukon basin. These were small, one-story log or frame cabins with no operators and few amenities—bunks, a stove, benches and a table—and travelers were asked to leave each cabin in the condition they found it and to replenish the woodpile. That same courtesy is asked of everyone who uses the public shelter cabins today.

From Dog Teams to Airplanes and Snowmachines

In January 1925, a diphtheria epidemic broke out in Nome. In order for the lifesaving serum to make it from Nenana to Nome, 20 mushers and their dog teams relayed the serum, handing it off at roadhouses and cabins along the route, where drivers could warm themselves, their dogs and the precious cargo before the next leg. Over 674 miles were crossed in whiteout snowstorm conditions with teams experiencing temperatures of -85 degrees Fahrenheit, yet not a single vial was cracked. The serum arrived in Nome February 2, 1925, stopping the epidemic and saving the citizens of Nome. It is known today as the Serum Run or the Great Race of Mercy. This amazing feat drew national attention.

That same year the first commercial airplane flight reached Nome, and air travel soon replaced the dog team for mail and passengers. By the late 1930s, territorial funds for shelter cabins went to cabins at remote airfields instead, such as the one built at Rohn in 1939. The Territory ended the shelter cabin program in 1941, and the 1942 wartime closure of most gold mines effectively ended the Iditarod Trail as a long-distance route.

Dog teams remained the main way to travel between many villages in winter until the 1960s, when snowmachines, nicknamed the “iron dog,” spread rapidly across rural Alaska and largely replaced them. Snowmachines made winter trips faster, but winter storms, a breakdown, or an empty fuel tank far from a village can leave travelers stranded, so shelter along the trail remains as important as ever.

The Cabins Today

Interest in the trail returned with the first Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in 1973 and the trail’s designation as a National Historic Trail in 1978. Today the public shelter cabins serve mushers, Iron Dog snowmachine racers, human-powered ultramarathon racers, residents traveling between villages, hunters and trappers, and recreational visitors. Logistics permitting, the BLM checks each of its cabins at least once a year, makes repairs, and clears brush around the cabins to reduce wildfire risk. Beginning in the late 1980s, the BLM set out to restore shelter along the trail. The agency began preserving the historic Rohn cabin in 1988, built the Tripod Flat Public Shelter Cabin with local volunteers in 1989 and the Bear Creek Public Shelter Cabin in 1992, and in 2010 partnered with the State of Alaska to build five new shelter cabins, including Foothills. Much of this work was led by former INHT Trail Administrator, Kevin Keeler, whose years of effort shaped the public shelter cabins travelers rely on today.

Iditarod Trail Public Shelter Cabin Etiquette

Please follow these guidelines so that the public shelter cabins stay clean and available for everyone who needs them.

1. You cannot reserve or bar admittance to these cabins.

2. To prevent issues with rodents and other animals, remove all trash and food.

3. Always leave dry firewood inside the cabin for the next user. When collecting firewood from the surrounding area, only use already dead trees; do not cut live, green trees.

4. Before leaving, close the cabin windows, shutters, outhouse door, and cabin door when leaving to ensure bears and other animals do not enter.

5. Report any damage or broken items to BLM.

Planning Your Trip

The INHT is primarily a winter trail. Much of it crosses frozen rivers, wetlands and tundra that are nearly impassable when the ground thaws. The public shelter cabins are generally reached by snowmachine, dog team, ski or fat bike in winter and early spring. In summer, most cabins are reachable only by helicopter, except the Rohn cabin which can be reached by fixed wing aircraft year-round. Trail and ice conditions change from year to year and even day to day. Below is a non-exhaustive list of things to keep in mind while you are planning your trip. You are responsible for your safety.

- **Expect extreme cold and wind.** Between Rainy Pass and Kaltag, winter temperatures typically range from about -11°F to 20°F, with extremes recorded as low as -61°F. Between Kaltag and Nome, winter lows can reach -60°F. Wind is a constant hazard on the western half of the Kaltag Portage and along the Norton Sound coast, where storms can arrive quickly.
- **Be self-sufficient.** The cabins are not stocked, and you should not count on finding supplies left by others. Carry a sleeping bag rated for the conditions, a stove and fuel, food, and the means to melt snow for water. Be prepared to stay longer if you need to wait out a storm. Know your route of travel to ensure you have enough supplies, like fuel, to get you to your destination and back.
- **Plan for communication.** Cell service is limited or absent between communities. Carry a satellite communicator or personal locator beacon and leave a detailed trip plan with someone at home.
- **Be alert for carbon monoxide.** Keep stovepipes clear, never leave a wood stove unattended, and never run a camp stove or lantern in a closed cabin without ventilation.
- **Know whose land you are on.** Only a small share of the trail crosses federal land; most of it crosses State of Alaska land, and some segments cross Alaska Native corporation land. Please respect local communities as you travel to and from cabin sites and ensure you know the rules of different land managers and landowners.

Cabin Descriptions and Locations

NOTE: Photos included in this section may show personal gear and equipment belonging to previous travelers. These items should not be assumed to be part of the supplies intentionally stored at the cabins for public use. Travelers should plan accordingly and bring their own necessary gear and equipment.

Rohn Public Shelter Cabin



Figure 1: Rohn Public Shelter Cabin during restoration work in 2022. The cabin was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1939. Photo by Stolf Short, BLM.



Figure 2: Interior image of the Rohn Public Shelter Cabin during a cabin inspection. Photo by BLM.

Location: 62° 17' 40.578" N, 153° 22' 24.9888" W (62.294605, -153.373608).

Nestled at the confluence of the Tatina River (formerly the Rohn River) and the South Fork Kuskokwim River, the Rohn Public Shelter Cabin provides shelter in the Alaska Range west of Rainy Pass. The nearest BLM public shelter cabin, Bear Creek, is about 37 miles to the northwest as the crow flies and farther by trail. Rohn has served as a checkpoint for the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race since the race began in 1973, and the cabin and airstrip remain popular with pilots, hunters, and other visitors to the western Alaska Range.

Travelers have been sheltered at this spot for more than a century. In the early 1900s, John O. "Big John" Strand ran a roadhouse here that welcomed gold rush travelers and dog teams coming off Rainy Pass. After airmail service reached McGrath in 1924, foot and dog team traffic dwindled, and Big John's roadhouse burned down that same year. A trapper's cabin stood here in the late 1920s and early 1930s; trapper Einar Carlsen, who kept a journal at Rohn from 1929 to 1932, noted the growing number of airplanes overhead.

Those airplanes followed the same route through Rainy Pass as the old trail, and the mountain weather claimed many aviators. In 1939, after pilot Glenn Day disappeared and rescuers needed a place to land, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built an emergency airstrip and, that November, the log cabin that still stands today, for stranded pilots and rescue teams. That same year, the ARC officially marked this stretch of the Iditarod Trail as abandoned. The Department of the Interior took over the cabin and airstrip in 1955, and the BLM has managed them since.

The 14-by-25-foot single-room cabin is built of square-notched logs secured with wooden pegs. Its roof is shingled with flattened historic Blazo fuel cans, and tool marks from the 1939 construction are still visible on the logs. The BLM has worked to preserve the cabin since 1988, with major rehabilitation projects in 1999 and 2022; in 2022 a National Park Service historic preservation crew replaced the sill logs and floor joists and improved drainage beneath the cabin. In 2026 the Rohn CCC Cabin and Tatina Aviation Field Reserve was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The gravel airstrip lies about 400 feet south of the cabin, and an FAA weather station near the airstrip provides wind data and webcam images for pilots.

Water: In winter, plan to melt snow for drinking water. In summer, water is available from nearby streams and ponds; treat or boil it before drinking.

Amenities: Four bunks, wood stove, countertops, table with benches, outhouse, firewood and tool shed, and airstrip.

Tools: Visitor logbook and writing implement, bow saw, ax, broom and dustpan, fire extinguisher.

Bear Creek Public Shelter Cabin



Figure 3: Bear Creek Public Shelter Cabin near Nikolai on the Iditarod National Historic Trail, September 2025. Photo by Stolf Short, BLM.



Figure 4: Interior image of the Bear Creek Public Shelter Cabin near Nikolai on the Iditarod National Historic Trail, September 2025. Photo by Stolf Short, BLM.

Location: 62°43'23.9" N, 154°04'36.1" W (62.72331, -154.07669).

Built in 1992, the Bear Creek Public Shelter Cabin sits in the Farewell Burn area between Nikolai and the Alaska Range, near the South Fork Kuskokwim River. The Farewell Burn takes its name from one of the largest wildfires in Alaska's recorded history, which swept the area in the late 1970s. Deadfall, tussocks and wind-scoured snow have long made it one of the more challenging stretches of the trail, especially in low-snow years, so the cabin offers a welcome refuge. Like the other public shelter cabins on the INHT, Bear Creek is a small, one-room cabin.

Outhouse status: As of January 2026, the outhouse had been destroyed by animals, and the BLM has made plans to rebuild in summer 2027. Until a new outhouse is in place, dispose of human waste well away from the cabin, the trail and water sources.

Water: In winter, plan to melt snow for drinking water. In summer, water is available from nearby streams and ponds; treat or boil it before drinking.

Amenities: Four bunks, loft, wood stove, and table and benches.

Tools: Visitor logbook and writing implement, bow saw, ax, broom and dustpan, fire extinguisher.

Tripod Flat Public Shelter Cabin



Figure 5: Tripod Flat Public Shelter Cabin near Kaltag on the Iditarod National Historic Trail, September 2026. Photo by Stolf Short, BLM.



Figure 6: Interior image of the Tripod Flat Public Shelter Cabin near Kaltag on the Iditarod National Historic Trail, September 2026. Photo by Stolf Short, BLM.

Location: 64°08'03.3" N, 159°24'52.0" W (64.13426, -159.41444).

The Tripod Flat Public Shelter Cabin (sometimes called Tripod Flats) is located along the Unalakleet River on the Kaltag Portage, the historic overland route between Kaltag on the Yukon River and Unalakleet on Norton Sound. The cabin sits a short distance off the main trail; look for the BLM sign and tripod marking the turnoff. The cabin was built in 1989 by BLM staff and local volunteers using dead spruce from a nearby burn area. It is a 12-by-14-foot, one-room structure.

The portage has carried travelers for centuries: Alaska Native traders, the U.S. Army telegraph line that linked Unalakleet with the Yukon River in the early 1900s, gold rush mail carriers, and the 1925 serum relay teams all passed this way. Lightning-caused wildfires have threatened both Tripod Flat and Old Woman cabins in recent years, and wildland fire crews have responded to protect them.

Water: In winter, plan to melt snow for drinking water. In summer, water is available from nearby streams and ponds; treat or boil it before drinking.

Amenities: Three bunks, table and benches, wood stove and outhouse.

Tools: Visitor logbook and writing implement, bow saw, ax, broom and dustpan, fire extinguisher.

Old Woman Public Shelter Cabin



Figure 7: Old Woman Public Shelter Cabin near Unalakleet on the Iditarod National Historic Trail during the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. Many Iditarod racers say this is their favorite spot on the trail. Photo by Bob Wick, BLM.



Figure 8: Interior image of the Old Woman Public Shelter Cabin near Unalakleet on the Iditarod National Historic Trail. Photo by Bob Wick, BLM.

Location: 64° 0' 51.3756" N, 159° 49' 30.1044" W (64.014271, -159.825029)

The Old Woman Public Shelter Cabin is named for nearby Old Woman Mountain, whose distinctive flat top is a landmark for travelers crossing the western half of the Kaltag Portage. This stretch of trail is exposed to strong winds, and storms can build quickly, making the cabin an important refuge. Many Iditarod racers call Old Woman their favorite stop on the trail. According to trail lore, travelers once left a small offering at the base of the mountain for the Old Woman, so that her spirit wouldn't follow them to Nome with bad luck. Today, you can honor the tradition with a nod or a kind word as you pass rather than leaving food which attracts wildlife.

Water: In winter, plan to melt snow for drinking water. In summer, water is available from nearby streams and ponds; treat or boil it before drinking.

Amenities: Two bunks, loft, wood stove, outhouse, table and benches, and helicopter landing zone.

Tools: Visitor logbook and writing implement, bow saw, ax, broom and dustpan, fire extinguisher.

Foothills Public Shelter Cabin



Figure 9: Foothills Public Shelter Cabin near Shaktoolik on the Iditarod National Historic Trail, September 2025. Photo by Stolf Short, BLM.



Figure 10: Interior image of the Foothills Public Shelter Cabin near Shaktoolik on the Iditarod National Historic Trail, September 2026. Photo by Stolf Short, BLM.

Location: 64°09'42.6" N, 160°55'54.8" W (64.16183, -160.93189)

Built in 2010, the Foothills cabin is the newest public shelter cabin that the BLM manages along the INHT. It sits between Unalakleet and Shaktoolik near the Norton Sound coast, a stretch known for strong winds blowing across the sea ice. The cabin was one of five shelter cabins (Don's, Moose Creek, North Fork, Tolstoi Headwaters and Foothills) built in the summer of 2010 through a partnership between the BLM and the State of Alaska. Crews from the Kenai-based Youth Restoration Corps and Alaska Job Corps carpentry trainees, along with workers hired from local communities including Nome and Unalakleet, built the spruce log cabin after materials were flown in by plane and helicopter.

Water: There is no readily available water near the Foothills cabin. In winter, plan to melt snow; in summer, bring enough water for your stay.

Amenities: Five bunks, wood stove, outhouse, table with benches, and helicopter landing zone.

Tools: Visitor logbook and writing implement, bow saw, ax, broom and dustpan, fire extinguisher.

For More Information

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