

Bicycling the Dalton Highway



Photo by Dennis R. Green

Central Yukon Field Office, Alaska

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The Brooks Range from Galbraith Lake, milepost 275

Get ready for the ride of your life! The Dalton Highway provides unique challenges and adventures for bicyclists. You will encounter dynamic weather, seemingly endless stretches of rough gravel, and few services as the highway leads you across a vast wilderness. However, the reward is great for those who plan carefully, train properly in advance, keep realistic expectations, and adapt quickly to changing conditions. Completing a ride to or from the edge of the Arctic Ocean is a life-time achievement that will give you many tales to tell.

Planning your trip

We recommend that you first visit the Bureau of Land Management's Dalton Highway website at www.blm.gov/ak/dalton. The BLM also provides a free, 24-page *Dalton Highway Visitor Guide* that is updated annually. It can be downloaded from the website or obtained from the BLM office or the Alaska Public Lands Information Center in Fairbanks (contact information at end).

Know before you go

On the Dalton Highway you'll find:

- No public access to the Arctic Ocean (You must be on an authorized tour to visit the ocean.)
- No medical facilities
- No grocery stores, banks, ATM machines, or bicycle or camping supply stores
- Cell phone coverage only near Fairbanks and Deadhorse

Distances

From Fairbanks to Deadhorse, cyclists travel a total of 500 miles (800 km): 11 miles (18 km) on the Steese Highway (Alaska Route 6), then 73 miles (117 km) on the Elliott Highway (Alaska Route 2) and 414 miles (662 km) on the Dalton Highway (Alaska Route 11). Bicyclists traveling north can return to Fairbanks by air or ground transport. For commercial transporters in Fairbanks offering drop-off and pick-up, check with the Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-800-327-5774 or www.explorefairbanks.com.





How much time should I allow for the trip?

Trip length ranges from 7 to 15 days. An average of 40–50 miles (64–80 km) per day is reasonable, although some endurance cyclists can do 70–100 miles (113–161 km) per day. Your daily progress will vary depending on road conditions, weather, fitness, personal preferences, and the amount of gear you carry. You may want to arrange with friends for a support vehicle: the support team carries food and equipment, sets up camp, and helps prepare meals.

Elevation gains/losses

The elevation at Fairbanks is 436 feet (132 m), while Deadhorse is near sea level. The highest point along the highway is Atigun Pass (MP 244) at 4,739 feet (1,444 m). There are numerous steep, winding hills with grades of 10% to 12%. Some truck drivers say the uphill grades are steeper traveling south from Deadhorse than north from Fairbanks.

Route description from Fairbanks north

“MP” refers to milepost numbers, which are posted on small, green signs on the right side of the highway. The Dalton begins at its junction with the Elliott Highway, about 80 miles (129 km) north of Fairbanks.

- **Fox to the Arctic Circle: Elliott MP 0 to Dalton MP 115 — 188 miles (301 km)**



The Elliott Highway is paved to its junction with the Dalton Highway. The first 90 miles (144 km) of the Dalton Highway are mostly gravel except for a paved stretch from MP 37 to 49. The highway first winds through the boreal forest of the Yukon-Tanana Uplands. Summer winds may be strong on higher hills above treeline. Between Fox and the Yukon River (MP 56) there are numerous steep hills and sharp curves with limited line of sight.

North of the Yukon River watch for several short but very steep grades, including Sand Hill (MP 73.5), Roller Coaster (MP 75.8), Mackey Hill (MP 87.2), and Beaver Slide (MP 109). Coarse pavement (“chip seal”) begins again at MP 90 and continues to Coldfoot.

- **Arctic Circle to Coldfoot (MP 175) — 60 miles (96 km)**

The road is still hilly, but the grades are less severe and numerous. Following a long climb to Gobblers Knob (MP 132), the road descends steeply to the Koyukuk River valley and Coldfoot.

Coldfoot supports a modest hotel, gas pumps, café/restaurant, bar, air-taxi service, public airstrip, and post office. The café/office is open 24 hours a day all year. The Arctic Interagency Visitor Center is open daily from late May to early September and offers information, exhibits, walking trails, films, and interpretive presentations.



Arctic Interagency Visitor Center in Coldfoot.



Wiseman, a small, historic village 15 miles (24 km) north of Coldfoot, has a store/gift shop, lodge, bed-and-breakfast, and privately-owned museum. To get to Wiseman, turn west at MP 188.5 and follow the signs on a flat, gravel road for 3 miles (5 km) along the Koyukuk River.

• **Coldfoot to Chandalar Shelf (MP 235) — 60 miles (301 km)**

The road continues through the broad, relatively flat Koyukuk River valley. The surface is mostly rough gravel between Coldfoot and Deadhorse.

• **Chandalar Shelf to Atigun Gorge (MP 271) — 36 miles (57 km)**

Just beyond the “Farthest North Spruce Tree” at MP 235, the road climbs at a 10% grade for about 2 miles (3.2 km) from 2,500 feet (762 m) in elevation to 3,200 feet (975 m) at Chandalar Shelf. The road flattens out across Chandalar Shelf before the final climb (12% grade) over Atigun Pass (MP 244) and the Continental Divide at 4,739 feet (1,444 m). The highway then descends steeply to Atigun Valley.



Climbing to Atigun Pass in late May

• **Atigun Gorge to the Coastal Plain Overlook (MP 356) — 86 miles (138 km)**

The highway travels across the rolling, tundra-covered hills of the North Slope. Winds out of the south may be strong as far north as Sagwon (MP 348). The surface is coarsely paved with “chip-seal” from Happy Valley (MP 335) to Last Chance Wayside (MP 355).

Toolik Field Station (MP 284), operated by the University of Alaska Fairbanks, has no public services: only authorized persons may enter. The station is located in a federally-designated Research Natural Area, and camping is prohibited in the area between MP 278 and 293.

• **Coastal Plain Overlook to Deadhorse (MP 414) — 58 miles (93 km)**



Security gate at the Arctic Ocean access road.

Crossing the Coastal Plain, the highway is mostly flat. This area, especially the last 20 miles (32 km) before reaching Deadhorse and the end of the highway, frequently has strong winds out of the north or northeast. Dense fog often blankets the area, and temperatures may be quite cool.

Deadhorse is about 8 miles (13 km) from the Arctic Ocean. The roads through the Prudhoe Bay oil field to the Arctic Ocean are guarded by security checkpoints. Permits for independent travelers are not available. However, guided tours are provided for a fee through the Arctic Caribou Inn (1-877-659-2368).



Road surface

- The sections of the Steese and Elliott highways leading to the Dalton Highway are paved.
- The Dalton Highway is 24 feet (7.3 m) wide. Most sections have soft shoulders and steep embankments.
- There are numerous steep grades (up to 12%) and long sections of rough gravel.
- Gravel sections are treated with calcium chloride to reduce dust.
- Road surface conditions vary greatly and depend on weather and maintenance schedules. In dry weather, passing vehicles stir up blinding dust that obscures both bicyclists and oncoming vehicles. Rain or road maintenance (tankers saturate the road to prepare for grading) turn the surface to slick mud or to the consistency of wet cement. Some areas have sharp, grapefruit-sized rocks or gravel so deep that even riding downhill requires pedaling, while other areas are hard and smooth. You will encounter all of these conditions.



Current road conditions

The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT) maintains the road and works on different sections every day. Major road improvements may be underway in some areas, causing traffic delays. To find out about construction areas and road closures, call the DOT in Fairbanks at 907-456-7623 or visit the DOT website at 511.alaska.gov.

Services

Plan to be fully self-sufficient. Livengood has no services. Yukon Crossing and Coldfoot offer basic services but are not towns in the conventional sense, while Deadhorse is an industrial camp that supports the Prudhoe Bay oil field. Neither the DOT maintenance stations nor the Trans-Alaska Pipeline pump stations provide any public services. There are no medical facilities.

You can mail supplies ahead of time to Coldfoot and Deadhorse. Contact the Postmaster at the following post offices to set up an agreement before sending supplies:

- Write to Postmaster, Coldfoot, Alaska 99701 or call (907) 678-5204. This post office is open only on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons.
- Write to Postmaster, Deadhorse, Alaska 99734 or call (907) 659-2412.

Some commercial services are available at the following locations, although some may be closed in winter or offer reduced services.¹ Make sure they are open when you need them.

¹ Any listing of non-federal businesses, organizations, or individuals is done as an aid to travelers for trip-planning purposes. It is not a comprehensive list, and inclusion in this publication does not constitute an endorsement by the Bureau of Land Management



Elliott Highway

MP 5.5 Hilltop Truckstop (907-389-7600), open all year

MP 49 Arctic Circle Trading Post (907-474-4565), summer only

Dalton Highway

MP 56 Yukon River Camp (907-655-9001), May–October.

MP 60 Hot Spot Café and hotel, May–September.

MP 175 Coldfoot Camp (907-678-3500), open all year

MP 189 Wiseman

- Arctic Getaway Bed & Breakfast (907-678-4456)

- Boreal Lodging (907-678-4566)

MP 414 Deadhorse (businesses are open all year)

- Arctic Caribou Inn (907-659-2368 or 659-2840)(authorized Arctic Ocean tours)

- Arctic Oilfield Hotel (907-659-2614)

- Prudhoe Bay Hotel (907-659-2449)

- Prudhoe Bay General Store (907-670-5160)

Camping

Elliott Highway: Watch for private property. There is an informal campground at MP 10 (Lower Chatanika River). The BLM rents the Fred Blixt public-use cabin at MP 62; for reservations contact the BLM in Fairbanks (1-800-437-7021 or 907-474-2251).

Dalton Highway: Undeveloped campgrounds are located at MP 60 (Five Mile), on the hill above the Arctic Circle Wayside at MP 115 (no camping in the picnic area by the Arctic Circle sign), and at Galbraith Lake via a 4-mile (6.4-km) access road starting at MP 275. The BLM maintains a developed campground at Marion Creek (MP 180), 5 miles (8 km) north of Coldfoot. Public lands along the highway from the Yukon River to MP 300 are managed by the BLM, which allows camping for up to 14 days in one site. Travelers may camp in large pullouts and inactive gravel pits, but it is advisable to get far from the road to avoid dust and rocks from passing vehicles. Camping on pipeline access roads is not recommended.

North of Slope Mountain (MP 300) the land is managed by the Alaska Department of Natural Resources; there are few restrictions on camping. On the Coastal Plain (MP 356 to Deadhorse) the road traverses vast wetlands and there are few pullouts. Deadhorse has no public tent camping areas. Camping is discouraged in Deadhorse because roaming bears may be encountered anywhere.

Please practice *Leave No Trace* camping! Bury human waste at least 6 inches (15 cm) deep and 200 feet (61 m) away from water. You can dispose of trash in the bear-resistant trash containers at the BLM waysides and campgrounds.

Water sources

There are numerous streams and creeks crossing both the Elliott and Dalton highways. All stream water should be treated by boiling, filtering, or using purifiers such as bleach. Streams are often muddy during spring runoff and after heavy rains. Potable water is available at the following locations:

Elliott Highway MP 0.4, Fox Spring

Dalton Highway MP 60, Five Mile artesian well (look for the hose hanging from a pole at the north entrance), and MP 180, Marion Creek Campground



Water from Livengood Creek (Elliott Highway MP 70) is unsuitable for drinking. Active mining operations also occur upstream of the highway on many of the streams between Prospect Creek and Bridge #3 on the Middle Fork-Koyukuk River (but not Jim River or Rosie Creek).

Equipment

Stove: Consider bringing a stove that can use a variety of fuels, including unleaded gasoline. If you fly to or from Deadhorse, you cannot take fuel on the plane. The Prudhoe Bay General Store in Deadhorse sometimes has Coleman fuel (white gas), which is most commonly used for camp stoves: check with them first.

Spare Bike Parts: One of the biggest problems encountered by bicyclists is mechanical mishaps. Allow extra time for delays. The auto parts store in Deadhorse may have some parts you can use. There are bike shops in Fairbanks, and parts can be delivered to Coldfoot and Deadhorse, but this is expensive and time-consuming. Carry plenty of extra chain oil to clean mud and dust from your chain frequently.

Tent: Make sure your tent has a good rain fly and bug netting that will stop the tiny, biting gnats called “no-see-ums.”

Hazards

Traffic: Although the highway is not busy by Lower 48 standards, the narrow road, industrial traffic, steep grades, high embankments, rough surface and lack of hard shoulders all make vehicles more dangerous to bicyclists. Vehicles kick up dust and rocks, so use extreme caution. Brightly colored clothing and reflectors are highly recommended.

Big trucks have the right of way! The Dalton Highway is the primary route for hauling supplies and equipment to the North Slope oil fields. The number of trucks varies from day to day. Bicyclists are of special concern to truckers because (1) they may be hidden by dust clouds and (2) they aren't visible in side mirrors. Wear reflective clothing and if possible, stop, dismount, and wave or make eye contact with the driver. Truck drivers face challenging road conditions in addition to tight deadlines, so they appreciate anything you can do to make their trip safer. Many will return the favor by slowing down so they don't shower you with dust or rocks. However, they can't always slow down in time and often need to speed up before climbing steep hills.



In dry conditions, passing trucks may kick up blinding dust.

Always follow instructions from pilot car drivers and flaggers. Make sure equipment operators see you before you pass.

Wild Animals: Alaska is bear country and a bicyclist is more vulnerable than someone in a vehicle. Both grizzly and black bears may be encountered: grizzlies occur all the way to the Arctic coast. All



bears are potentially dangerous. Stop by the Alaska Public Lands Information Center in Fairbanks to learn how to handle bear encounters and pick up the free brochure *Bear Facts*. Good information is available from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game website: www.wildlife.alaska.gov/aawildlife/bearfax.cfm.



A shedding arctic fox looks for a handout.

Many foxes around Deadhorse are food-conditioned and may approach. Wolves, red foxes, and arctic foxes north of the Brooks Range may carry rabies, so avoid any physical contact (although healthy wolves and foxes may look thin and ragged when shedding their winter coats).

Wolves have approached and occasionally attacked people along the Dalton Highway, most recently in 2006. Some of these incidents appear to have involved food-conditioned wolves. If approached by a wolf, wave your arms, yell, and throw rocks.

It is against State law to feed wildlife or leave food out where they can get it.

Insects: Biting insects can be overwhelming – carry mosquito repellent! (Those containing DEET are most effective.) We also recommend a head net and mosquito coils, an incense-like product that you can use while in camp. Mosquito coils may be purchased in Fairbanks at any camping supply or grocery store. Mosquitoes peak in late June and July, but biting flies (“whitesox”) and gnats (“no-see-ums”) are equally ferocious in August and early September.

Weather: Weather can vary within a single day as well as along the length of the road. Snow can occur in any month of the year, especially from the Brooks Range north. Fog and wind are common on the North Slope. Temperatures can reach 90° F (32° C) south of the Brooks Range, and warm weather is often accompanied by thunderstorms. In general, June and July are drier than August, but expect frequent rainy days. Travelers in late May and early September should prepare for snow and below-freezing temperatures north of the Arctic Circle!

Seasons: From late May until early August the Arctic experiences 24-hour daylight. Spring, summer, and fall are compressed into these three months. Even in early June you may find extensive snow cover, ice on the rivers, and below-freezing temperatures. Plants begin to green up in early June south of the Brooks Range and in mid-June on the North Slope. Autumn colors – and weather – arrive in mid-August and snow flies by mid-September.



Flash floods: Heavy or prolonged rain can cause local flash floods anytime during the summer. Culverts and bridges may get washed out, and sections of road may get flooded. Do not attempt to cross flooded areas – the currents may be swift and strong. In 2001 an entire tractor-trailer was swept away when the road failed at Lost Creek (MP 4).



Wildfires: Wildfires may burn out of control and cross the highway. Smoke may cause serious health problems. Do not attempt to ride through areas of dense smoke and active fire – you may get trapped by swiftly changing conditions and be unable to reach safety.

More Information

The MilePost (Morris Communications Corp., Augusta, GA) is a road guide with extensive Dalton Highway listings updated annually.

The following BLM brochures are available at the offices listed below:

Alaska Recreation Guide

Dalton Highway Visitor Guide

Panning for Gold along the Dalton Highway

Steese and Elliott Highway Travel Guide

The Search for Gold along the Koyukuk River: Adventures in the Past, No. 4

Trail Map & Guide: Arctic Interagency Visitor Center

Bureau of Land Management

Central Yukon Field Office

1150 University Ave.

Fairbanks, AK 99709

Phone 907-474-2200 or toll-free 1-800-437-7021

Email: AK_CYFO_GeneralDelivery@blm.gov

www.blm.gov/ak

Alaska Public Lands Information Center

101 Dunkel St. # 110 (Morris Thompson Cultural Center)

Fairbanks, AK 99701

Phone 907-459-3730

Email: fair_interpretation.gov

www.alaskacenters.gov/fairbanks.cfm