

John Beargrease Sled Dog Marathon Route

with estimated times and checkpoint directions

Leg 1 - Start to Billy's

6.4 miles

The race starts in the stadium at Ordean School, loops around the fields (the corner right after the start will be much more gentle this year), crosses Superior Street to climb approximately 350 vertical feet in the next mile as it crosses through Northland County Club, before hooking up with snowmobile trails at the edge of town just off Martin Road. There are nine road crossings in this shortest section of trail. The fastest times for this leg will be just over 50 minutes (8 mph), while the median time will typically be just under 1 hour for a speed of 6.5 mph.

Checkpoint 1 - Billy's Bar

This checkpoint is at the intersection of Tischer Rd and Jean Duluth, 3 miles north of Glenwood. The vast majority of mushers go straight through Billy's and only stop here if they need to fix something.

Leg 2- Billy's to Highway 2

35.3 miles

The route from Billy's to Highway 2 follows the North Shore State Snowmobile Trail (The State Trail). After a handful of road crossings in the first several miles, this leg quickly develops the wilderness feel that will dominate for the remainder of the race.

The fastest time upbound for this leg last race was 3:06, while the median was 3:38, for speeds of 11.0 mph and 9.4 mph respectively. 2006 saw times about 5 minutes slower.

Since most mushers treat the run to Highway 2 as a single 42 mile leg, we'll also look at these times. The fastest time in 2008 was 3:58 (10.5 mph), and the median was 4:38 (9.0 mph).

Checkpoint 2 - Highway 2 (Two Harbors)

The first checkpoint a significant number of teams will stop at is located in a Gravel Pit 8 miles north on Highway 2 from Highway 61 in Two Harbors. This checkpoint gets quite busy, as the teams have yet to spread out as they will later in the race, and it serves as a stopping point for the 50 teams of the Mid Distance race as well as the 30 in the Marathon. The trucks for the Marathon Teams will be spread out over the lower part of the pit, while the Mid Distance teams will be corralled and at a distance from their trucks.

The first Marathon teams can be expected to arrive a bit before 7:00 pm. Most everyone should be in by 9:15 or so. A few teams can be expected to leave very quickly after checking in - stopping just long enough for a quick snack and a bootie check, and most everyone will be gone by 1:00 - 2:00 am.

Leg 3 - Highway 2 to Beaver Bay

34.4 miles

The route continues to follow the State Trail to the northeast, then turns down the Red Dot trail, and ultimately onto the margins of Highway 4, for the 9 mile side trip into Beaver Bay, dropping dropping 700 vertical feet to the checkpoint.

We did not run this exact route in recent years, but if we assume mushers will run the same speed they did last year from Highway 2 to Finland, the fastest time for this leg should be a little over 3 hours, with the median around 3:30-3:45.

Checkpoint 3 - Beaver Bay

The checkpoint is located in a large lot at the intersection of Highway 4 (Lax Lake Rd) and Town Road, a few hundred yards up Highway 4 from Highway 61. This checkpoint has special significance to our race, as it is immediately adjacent to the grave site of John Beargrease, who is buried in the Chippewa cemetery just a short walk through the woods from the checkpoint. Mushers will pay their respects to the race's namesake at a brief ceremony by the grave marker while stopped at the checkpoint.

The first few First Marathon teams (those that don't rest long at Highway 2) should arrive at Beaver Bay around 10:00 pm. Roughly half the teams should be in by 3:00 am, with the last showing up by 6:00 am. The first teams out will leave around 3:00 am, roughly half will be gone by 7:00 am, and we are likely to have teams there till 9 or 10am.

Leg 4 - Beaver Bay to Sawbill

51.2 miles

The route climbs out of Beaver Bay, retracing the route in for 9 miles, before it rejoins the State Trail. The route passes by the Finland Checkpoint, where the Mid Distance teams will stop, and where the Marathon will stop on the down bound leg. The State Trail continues on and joins up with the unplowed six hundred road, up the notorious Heartbreak Hill before crossing a large bridge over the Temperance River just before you arrive at the Sawbill Checkpoint.

Again, we did not run down into Beaver Bay in recent years, but using historic average speeds, we would expect the fastest teams to run the leg in about 5 hours, with the median close to 6 hours.

Checkpoint 4 - Sawbill Checkpoint

This is a wilderness checkpoint. There are no handlers or trucks allowed at Sawbill on the up bound leg of the race - the mushers need to take care of their dogs by themselves. The teams will be spread out in the woods near where the State Trail crosses the Sawbill Trail 5.5 miles from Highway 61 in Tofte. (The Sawbill trail leaves Highway 61 across from the Coho Cafe at Bluefin Bay.)

First teams in will arrive around 9:00 am, with the last in by mid to late afternoon. Teams are required to rest here for 4 hours plus their start differential (up to an additional hour). The first teams will leave early afternoon, and some are likely to still be here well into the evening.

Leg 5 - Sawbill to Trail Center

51.4 miles

The route follows the State Trail for about 25 miles, before heading inland on the Expressway Trail (the X-Trail). Teams will mush generally north on the X-Trail and the Lima Grade, before turning onto Little Ollie and then down on to Poplar Lake for the last 3/4 mile into the checkpoint.

In 2008, the fastest team ran just over 5:30, while the median was just over 6:00.

Freezing rain slowed teams, with the fastest team down to 9.1 mph, and the median 8.4 mph. In the prior race in 2006, the fastest time for this leg was just under 5:00 (9.9 mph), and the median was 5:45 (9.0 mph).

Checkpoint 5 - Trail Center

The checkpoint is at the Trail Center Lodge on the shore of Poplar Lake. Teams will bed down in the parking lot adjacent to the Lodge. Sarah and crew always take good care of the Beargrease. Trail Center is approximately 30 miles up the Gunflint Trail from Highway 61 in Grand Marais, on the left hand side of the road.

The first teams should arrive around 8:00 or 9:00 pm Monday, with the later teams arriving in the early hours of Tuesday. First departures will likely be sometime around midnight, with other teams lingering until near dawn.

Leg 6 - Trail Center to Devil's Track

63.5 miles

Again, the route has changed for 2009. While the checkpoints are the same, we have more than doubled the length of this leg compared to prior years. Teams will leave Trail Center Lodge and travel northwest the length of Poplar Lake and then up the trail to the vicinity of the Gunflint Lodge, out on to Gunflint lake before heading crossing over to Loon Lake. After running the length of Loon Lake, teams will rejoin the route they came up, taking the X-Trail to the campground on the west end of Devil's Track Lake. Then it is about 5 miles across the frozen lake to the checkpoint down to Devil's Track. At 63 miles, this is the longest leg of the race, with 5 lake runs totaling close to 20 miles. Past speeds in this vicinity would predict fastest times for this leg of about 6 hours, while the median will likely be in the 6:30 to 7:00 range.

Checkpoint 6 - Devil's Track

Teams will come off the lake and head to the left side of the Devil's Track Lodge to the checkpoint. Teams will bed down on the parking area on the old runway approach. The Lodge offers a restaurant. To rache the checkpoint by road, take the Gunflint Trail approximately 3.5 miles up from Grand Marais, and turn left on to Devil's Track Rd (Cook CR 8), and then go approximately 4 miles to Devil's Track Resort.

The first arrivals to Devil's Track will likely be in the pre-dawn hours Tuesday. First departures will be mid-morning, with other teams arriving and departing throughout much of the day.

Leg 7 - Devil's Track to Sawbill

34.2 miles

The route travels west across the length of Devil's Track Lake, meets up with the X-Trail, then 4 miles down the X-Trail back to where it meets up with the State Trail, and back to the Sawbill checkpoint.

In 2008, horrendous weather (freezing rain) had cut the field in half before this point and slowed teams down. The fastest team ran this leg in 3:45, and the median was over 4:00. In more normal conditions, we would expect fast teams to run this leg roughly 30 minutes faster. The 2006 race bypassed Devil's track as the route turned around at Trail Center and simply ran straight back the way it had come from Sawbill.

Checkpoint 7 - Sawbill

The first teams to return to Sawbill will likely arrive near mid day Tuesday, with the rest stretching over the remainder of the day and into evening. Some teams may go straight through to Finland. Others may rest here for a longer period in anticipation of a run all the way back to Highway 2, as 2008 winner Jason Barron did last year, surprising many watchers of the race. Down bound, Musers may have the assistance of their handlers.

Leg 8 - Sawbill to Finland

30.2 miles

The route follows the State Trail for the 30 mile run to the Finland Checkpoint.

Teams will take a short side trail to the place where they will check in and out before crossing CR-7 to bed down.

In 2008, the fastest team ran this leg in 3:15 (9.3 mph), while the median was 3:37 (8.4 mph). 2006 saw the fastest results down bound about 10 minutes faster.

Checkpoint 8 - Finland.

The town of Finland can be reached from up the shore by traveling 7 miles up Lake County Road 6 from where it leaves Highway 61 in Little Marais, or from the south by traveling 6.2 miles north on Minnesota Highway 1. The checkpoint is approximately 1 mile east of town on CR-7 in the parking area on the south side of the road.

The early teams will arrive late Tuesday afternoon or early evening, and the first to depart likely getting on the trail somewhere between 9:00 and 11:00 pm that night.

The last teams out will likely depart around dawn Wednesday.

Leg 9 - Finland to Highway 2

37.7 miles

The trail retraces the up bound route along the state trail back into the Pit outside Two Harbors.

In 2008, the fastest team ran this leg in 4:15 (9.0 mph), while the median was just over 5:00 (7.6 mph). 2006 results for this leg were almost identical.

Checkpoint 9 - Highway 2

With only the Marathon teams that have made it this far, (and spread out of many hours at that) rather than the full 80 teams from both races that were here up bound, the checkpoint won't feel like the same place it did Sunday night.

Our best guess puts the first arriving teams between 1:00 and 3:00 am, with the trailing teams up to 8-10 hours behind. Teams are required to rest a minimum of 6 hours at this checkpoint, so the first teams will likely depart sometime between 7:00 and 9:00 am, with the final teams not leaving till late afternoon or early evening.

Leg 10 - Highway 2 to Finish

35.8 miles.

Again, the route retraces the up bound, following the State Trail back to the Finish at Billy's Bar.

In 2008, the fastest team posted a 3:51, averaging 8.9 mph for this leg, while the

median was over 4:20 with a 7.8mph average. In 2006, the fastest run was 4:22, while the median was 5:00. It is interesting to note that after 300+ miles, the teams have slowed down between 45 minutes to over an hour compared to the time they covered this same leg earlier in the race.

Finish – Billy’s Bar

In 2008, the winner averaged 9.3 mph over the roughly 324 miles of the 2008 race (true mileage as opposed to the 373 advertised, see below.) The median finisher averaged just under 8.7 mph. It is worth noting that while a much larger percentage than normal scratched from the 2008 race, we had less than 5 hours separating the slowest time from the fastest, less than half the differential more typically seen. 2006, which was a more “normal” race, saw the last finishers come in 12 hours behind the leader. With 2009’s race more than 50 miles longer than the prior years, and somewhat less minimum rest (28 hours), we also would expect overall average speeds to be a little slower. Our best guess is that the winner will post somewhere in the neighborhood of 40-41 hours total time on trail for 2009.

Since the Marathon teams will start after the Mid Distance in 2009, this puts the likely finish time of the winner within an hour either side of noon Wednesday morning, the median team in by late afternoon/early evening, and the final teams across the line sometime before midnight.

A word about mileage.

It seems that over time, various sled dog races have used a rather loose interpretation of the mile. Advertised mileages are frequently 15-20% greater than actual. The Iditarod bills itself as an 1150 mile race. The gps tracking devices on the sleds logged the actual distance as 908 miles. (See race.ionearth.com/iditarod_replay/.) The Beargrease has been no exception. Last year’s race was actually very close to 324 miles rather than the “official” length of 375, or 400 in round numbers. We found this all quite confusing as we would try to calculate when mushers could be expected to be at certain road crossings or in to checkpoints. What mileage should the calculations be based on? It was all so confusing trying to keep track of “official” mileage versus “real” mileage. So for 2009 on, the Beargrease is describing the trail as accurately as we can measure it. In our case, that means we have run the trail with a GPS and taken an exact measurement.