

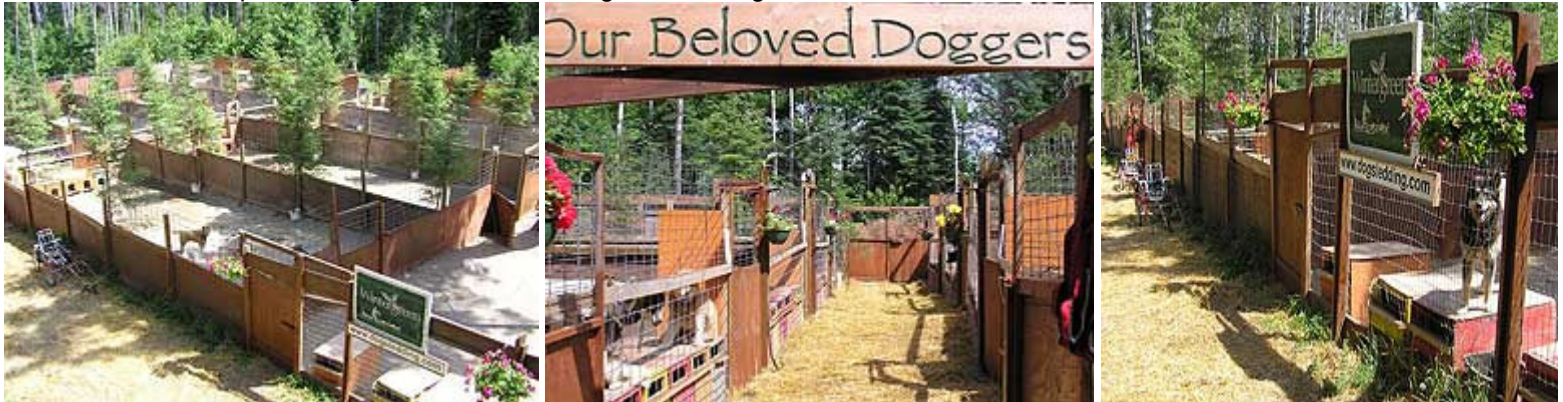
## Wintergreen Kennel Care During the Off-Season

At Wintergreen, we're extremely pleased and proud that systems we've developed over the past several years allow many of our 60 pure-bred Canadian Inuit sled dogs to spend the off-season (May to November) running free in open pens with their team mates. Here's how our partial open pen system came to be and how it works:

At most sled dogs kennels, the dogs are tethered to a 6 to 8 chain that swivels around a post, allowing each dog about 150 sq ft of space. For our first several years, we employed the same system here at Wintergreen. But then many years ago, a pack of timber wolves paid us a visit one spring and, sadly, helped themselves a litter of our pups that were running free around the kennel. The wolves stuck around and roamed the perimeter of kennel daily, hoping to find other loose dogs that might become a meal. We tried to scare them off, by posting flashing lights and blaring tapes of loud music around the kennel, but to no avail.

We realized that the only secure option was to fence the wolves out. We designed a system of eight 1000 ft sq pens (each 50x20 feet) that would accommodate 6 dogs each. For the first few years, the dogs were tethered year-round inside these pens. But then about 6 years ago, we tried an experiment. Little by little we began turning the dogs loose in these pens during the off-season, from May to November.

Given that our pure-bred Canadian Inuit dogs are famous for their survival-of-the-fittest instincts, we were skeptical this would work. And fights did result in some injuries during the first couple seasons. On the other hand, it was apparent that some dogs (not all) were quieter (no more boredom barking), happier and healthier in the open pens -- they were getting more exercise and far more socialization with their kennel mates. In fact, because they were now better able to sort out their pecking order during the off-season, we were experiencing fewer scuffles during the sledding season each winter.



As they got used to the open pens, dominance issues seemed to be increasingly resolved through posturing rather than fights. Nonetheless, fights would still result in an occasional puncture wound and we worried that more serious injuries might still occur. So ten years ago we adapted a technique employed by the Polar Inuit in Greenland with whom we've traveled. The Inuit remove their dogs' canine teeth when their dogs are quite young.

We found that we could simply dull down the tips of the dogs' canines, rather than removing them, and gain the same benefits. All of our adult dogs have now undergone that treatment. It's working --- serious injuries from dog fights are no longer a significant concern. Nor has the process resulted in any abscessed teeth or root infections among the dogs. We simply give them a mild anesthetic and then use a tiny abrasive wheel in a Dremel tool to dull their canines (just the tip, NOT below the root). It only takes a minute to do each dog. They show no apparent pain from the process and, of course, it only needs to be done once.

The Inuit remove the molars as well. This prevents the dogs from chewing their harnesses which, in Greenland, are custom fitted to each dog and left on them throughout their lives. But it also means the Inuit must take extra effort to feed only de-boned meat and blubber to their dogs, foods that don't require much chewing.

Our dogs still have their molars intact and can chew (we're careful to take their harnesses off when they're not pulling). But with their canines dulled they can no longer tear or puncture. They still snarl, posture and, occasionally, fight with each other when dominance issues are at stake. But they can't do any serious damage to each other (or to people who might get their hands in the wrong place while intervening during a fight).

Fights weren't the only issue we had to overcome in gaining confidence with our open pen system. The other was feeding: Sled dogs are notoriously impolite eaters so how do you feed 6 dogs in an open pen all once? Well, we tried using long feed troughs but the most dominant dogs would of course get most everything. Then we tried using 6 separate buckets in each open pen. That worked marginally well but the faster eaters would sometimes bump the slowest eaters out of their buckets.

So then we accustomed our dogs to being fed inside their houses: we cut a feed port in the back wall of each house through which we scoop their feed. That has worked very well. In fact, we employ that technique year-round now with all our dogs, whether they're tethered on chains or loose in open pens. In the security of their homes, the dogs eat less frantically (which probably means less chance of bloat or stomach twist). And many dogs now go in their houses as soon as they hear the feed shed door opening, which makes for a slightly quieter feeding time.

During the summer months when some dogs are loose in their pens (currently about half of our kennel), their houses are all lined up along the front fence line. At feeding time, we scoot along the front fence lines of these four pens and scoop feed from a bucket into each house. The dogs on tethers are also scoop fed through their house feed ports. That allows us to feed all 60 dogs in just a couple minutes, which significantly reduces feed time frenzy and noise.

Our plywood kennel walls provide ample shading options in each pen for hot days. But to enhance the shade, we put "Christmas trees" in each pen. We harvest 10-20 feet pine trees from nearby power line right-of-ways (that would otherwise be cut down by the power company) and pot them in water buckets throughout each pen. They provide shade (and a touch of aesthetic greenery) for several months before they go brown and we replace them with a new batch. We also have an industrial sprinkler system mounted on fence posts all around the kennel. During the few days each summer when the temps top 80 or so, we'll turn those on during the heat of the day to cool down the entire kennel. Each summer we also affix a pallet between the tops of each dog house and the kennel wall as a "bridge" that the dogs can either sit atop for sun and view, or sit beneath for shade.

To enhance summer socialization, we rotate a few dogs each week among the different pens. Most of our dogs get along with each other but we've identified about a half dozen "incompatible pairs," dogs that simply can't be kenneled together. We avoid mixing fertile males (nearly all of our males have been neutered) with females that may be coming into estrus, but otherwise we're able to mix genders without any problem.

Racing around in the open pens together ensures ample summer exercise. But on cooler days, we're also able to take them for a run with our "Sacco" carts, lightweight rigs with 4 bicycle tires, a bucket seat and a steering bar attached to yokes that two dogs are harnessed into. When the driver gives the commands for turning left or right and then turns the bar, the yokes turn the dogs. In that way, the carts serve as an "instant lead dog training machine." They're also great fun!



Here are some of our other kennel practices:

- Since our dogs are roaming the same sandy open pen areas month-after-month, we freshen the pens by roto-tilling the sand spring and fall. We also rake the pens free of any rocks and organic materials every few days and add clean sand as needed.
- Just for fun, we've painted all our dog houses in bright colors-- yellow, red and orange. While the dogs could probably care less, the color adds some cheer to the kennel and seasonal painting ensures that the houses will last for years.
- "Pooper scooping" is done regularly and the feces is placed in composting bins where it is dusted with lime and layered with straw to assist decomposition. Our kennel is virtually odor free.
- We keep our kennel free of parasites by dosing our dogs seasonally with Ivermec. And we keep our kennel free of those nasty biting flies that chew dogs ears by wiping their ear tips monthly with diluted Permethrin. It works great!
- Ample summer water is critical so each of our open pens has two 15-gallon galvanized tubs and each tethered dog shares two 5-gallon water buckets with its neighbor. Back-ups ensure against the dogs dehydrating if one container gets dumped or leaks.
- We use feeds that are specially formulated for Canadian Inuit dogs. Our dogs thrive on it and their stools are small and firm (a dog musher's dream!) During the pulling season, we supplement their dry feed with fat to ensure that they hold their weights.
- We'd like to convert the open pens in our kennel to a complete "open feed" system whereby each pen has a trough filled with food that dogs eat as they choose. But, as they say, it's truly hard to teach old dogs new tricks and most (but not all) our older dogs over-indulge when given the chance. However, we've found that dogs that grow up from pups with that system adjust well to it. They don't become ravenously attached to the sight of food and they eat only what they need, when they need it.

We don't claim to have all the answers regarding dog care and we're always open to new ideas and to experimenting and innovating. If you've got suggestions about how we can improve our care of the Wintergreen dogs, we'd love to hear them. Thanks!



*Wintergreen Guide Mark Schurke catching some surf with a sled...behind our powerboat. And you thought our sleds got a well deserved rest all summer!!*