

Day one - Casco to Rockwood, 256 miles!

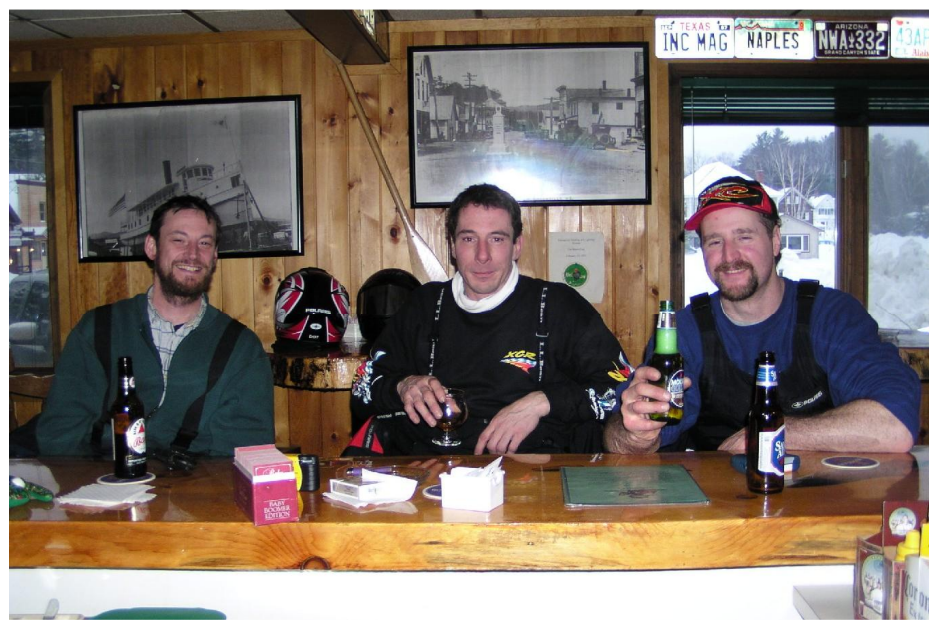
I finally realized why it's so hard to start stories like these. There's so much to convey. There's such a wide spectrum of feelings and emotions, you just know you won't do it justice. You just have to start writing anything you can think of, and take it out later when or if something better comes to mind.

So, here we go – 6:45AM Friday February 7, 2003. Three guys on a mission. I'm sure John and Pete were thinking along the same lines. This was the big one. We attempted to claim our throne last year by traveling the farthest by sled from Casco (1200 miles round trip). But we were denied by the Larry/Craig dynasty, because they had traveled the farthest in one day. So, that was the stage – Farthest from Casco IN ONE DAY. Not Casco to Greenville, Casco to Rockwood in one day – 256 miles total! It was actually easier than we thought. We knew the trail – made all the mistakes last year. I had even already scouted out one particular trouble portion of the route a few weeks back.

The hardest part was getting the stomach untied from weeks of worrying over the trip. But, the weather was great, and we were a well-oiled machine. By 9:45AM we were well beyond the point where we had been lost and had lunch last year. We ate an early lunch before 11AM and pressed on.

The trail passes right next to a daycare playground. The kids all hurried to get to the fence as close as they could get and tried to high-five us. Some actually made the reach. To add to the coolness of it was a reminder that it's a weekday and we ain't at work.

By 1PM we had reached last year's stopping point after the first day - Bingham, Me. Not this year! At this point we knew that barring any complications we would easily make Greenville before dark. The knots in the stomach are now gone, and we're approaching MY favorite playaround.



Our enjoyment factor increases at least 10 fold or more. 3:45PM and we're pulling into The Black Frog restaurant. For the last 2 hours all I could think of was chowing down a nice big ol prime rib. No need for utensils, I'll just woof it whole like my dog does.

After food n drink and the ceremonial call into the fallen Nadeau dynasty, to demand that our thrones be prepared, we were off to The Birches, Rockwood. The 30 miles or so of ITS 86 North out of Greenville to Rockwood has got to be about the sorriest excuse for a trail I have ever seen, especially for Greenville. No cool valleys and hills, and long stretches. Just a makeshift chop through level ground – going down the shoulder of the road at times, across ROAD BRIDGES. Yuck. At least you get to do the last few miles on the lake.



By now it's dark, and Moosehead Lake on a Friday night is one heck of a zoo. Sleds zipping here and there at high rates of speed with no real road system - going up Mt. Kineo - coming down Kineo - just everywhere. Not my cup of tea. We make The Birches. I'm a tired boy. I retire to the cabin where I write in my journal for the one and only time during the whole trip. The Birches is nice - right on the lake. Woodstove makes it as warm as you want it. But, It's just a pain to get there from Greenville if you have to go direct. You need to have 2-3 hours left at that point. Then you could take my most favorite trail (ITS85 - and Route 66 west) or just stay at the Black Frog.



About 20\$2.95 tracks going every which way. How does that saying go Matt? It's Mainespeak.

Day Two – Rockwood to Shin Pond – 156 miles

Saturday, February 8, 2003. From here out was to be a piece of cake, we thought. Easy, less than 200-mile days. But, to start the day we were delivered a plate full of fate that would add a few miles and time here and again. The key lesson learned here is to always warm up your sled, especially when it's sub-zero. You see rubber doesn't want to change shape too readily under certain temperatures, and belts and tracks have to change shape a lot when you're moving. Ol Pete learns this lesson the hard way. We get out on Moosehead up to speed and bam, bam. Pete and John devour their belts simultaneously. John did warm up his sled – we later learned that John's sled will rip up a belt at about 100 mph. We figure it's an engine torque issue. So, within an hours time we'd eaten up all three of our spare belts.

After that fiasco we headed up to check out the view from Kineo, where I felt the need to match my comrade's blunders. Well, almost. It was a good lesson. At the top of Kineo there's this little trail that goes nowhere. It just loops around this shelter thing about 50 feet up. So...(Set excuse mode on) my new gloves were still pretty stiff. As I came around the shelter it was a pretty steep slope (set excuse mode off), and I had to choose to go to the right or left around this poor 3" thick tree. I ended up doing the classic throttle when you need to brake goof. I goosed her good and my sled proceeded to climb the tree in short order. SORRY!!! Fortunately, about when it felt like I was at 90 degrees to the ground, the tree bent over. And I ran it over.

Now I know exactly how this happens. I did brake...and pretty hard. The braking caught me off balance and I fell forward into the handlebars AND THE THROTTLE. My throttle lever was so high that when I lunged forward I got pushed right into it. Now, my throttle is rotated down much further so that won't happen again. That's a big lesson to teach beginners.

We head across Route 66 and are treated to more nice trail conditions. I guess my stupid pill hadn't quite worn off yet and I had to pull my ONETIME for the trip getting stuck.



On top of Mt. Kineo looking towards Greenville.

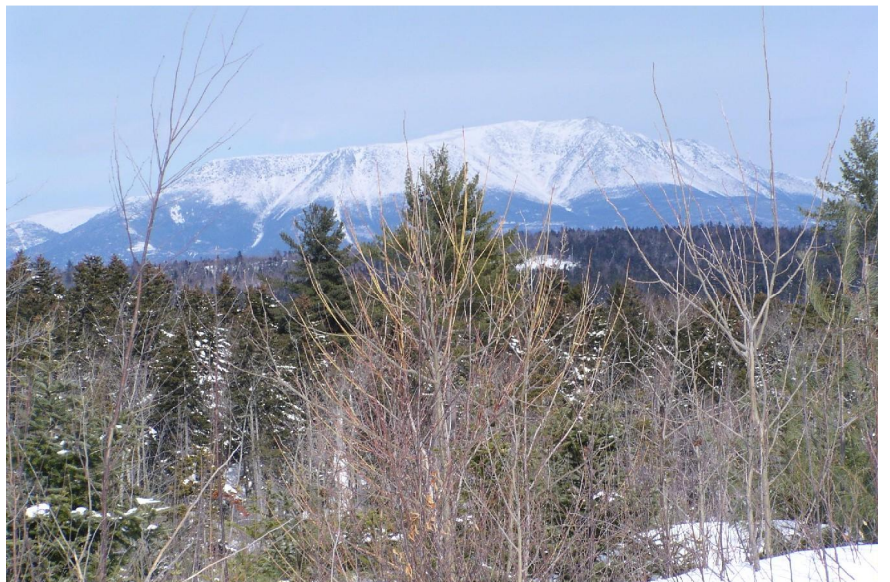
Those boys were babying their new belts so bad I was waaaay out front. I get the bright idea to head up a side trail and hide on them. Denied! I get stuck and have to wait for the music. We reach Kokadjo too early to stop for lunch. John gets one belt, but it turns out to be the wrong one. Oh yeah, he hadn't burned his second yet. It went shortly after that and we discovered the one he bought was wrong. But my spare belt seemed to work so we were still moving. Into Millinocket we go in search of belts. The particular trail we took was kind of lucky, because we ended up at Downtown Diner. We just lucked into it. I had been to this place before and had no idea it was so close to the main trail. They make a hamburg macaroni soup that can't be beat on days like these.



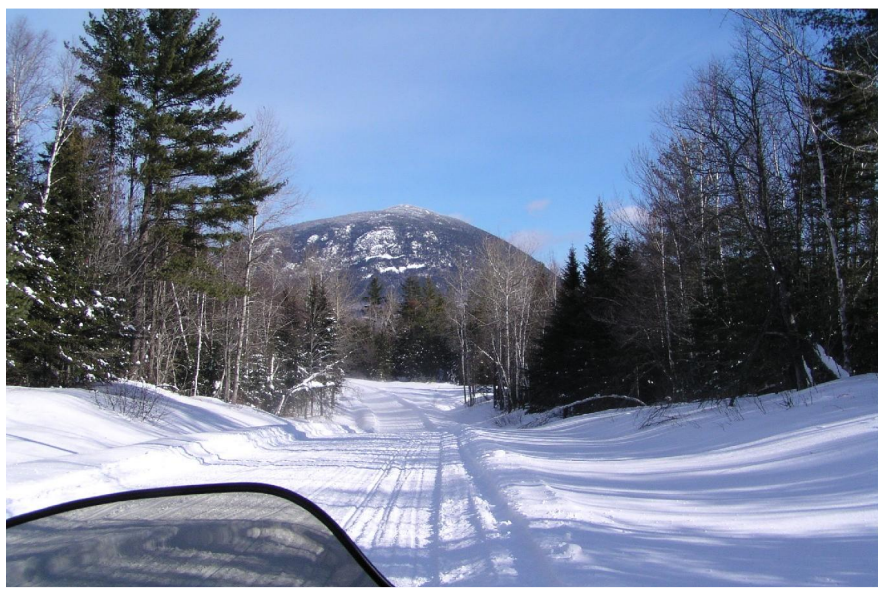
Millinocket is a town of Downeasters (I mean REAL downeasters) and snowmobilers (during season). You ain't a new-comer and not get noticed!

Well a guy sitting on a brand new machine talking on the cell - right off main St. does cause one heck of a rubberneck effect. I had some CLASSIC photo ops, and never thought to grab the dang camera! HATE when that happens. Anyway, one parts place was nearby and I sat by the machines while John and Pete walked down to it. But the dude was out. Seems that there's some sort of siesta ritual around 2PM on Saturday's. So, there's a parts store down the street, but no trail. The streets were semi-snowy and you could see snowmobile tracks, so I headed down the street leaving the guys to wait for the dude. Cop pulls me over. "You're not from around here are ya?", he says. I had some colorful replies for that, but I just said no. and explained the situation. I guess he was as helpful as he could be, but not very. Basically just told me we were SOL.

The heck with it, with a 2+ hour ride to home for the night we were late for dinner by now. Off to Mount Chase lodge where Rick and Sarah had our dinner waiting for us. Ham, macNcheese, beans. Oh yeah! The three of us had a fairly small bedroom, but the beans weren't a problem. Our 2-stroke perfume WAY out powered anything else many times over.



Mount Kahtahdin



Day Three – Shin Pond to Madawaska, Baby – 205 miles

Due to our belt situation we decided to head strait for Presque Isle where there is a huge Polaris dealer. About an hour of riding gets us to the bottom of the county around Oxbow, where the trails change from goat paths to Super Frigging Highways. Part of the route is ITS 88 – mostly power lines over some pretty big hills. Those places where you get a clear view of the next mile or so of traffic – which happened to be el zilcho in most cases. Uh oh, there goes that thumb ceasing up again. Say no more.

We made it to Chandler Farms, the Polaris dealer in Presque Isle by about 1PM to find they close at noon on Sunday's. Whoops, out of touch with reality – didn't even think about it being Sunday! Onward!

We got on this rail bed and I remember looking to the left and seeing what to me resembled one of those tornado jobbies they get down south Texas way. But, I knew this version was going to be white. It slammed us pretty good. Now I know what it's like in a white out. I came to a stop and looked back to make sure I wasn't going to get rear-ended. Nothing, but total white. You look at your handle bars and say OK, I'm upright. But then you wonder if your handlebars are upright! It didn't last long and we were back on in no time. There were a few times after that where I experienced total white out for a second or so from snow dust. Snow dust was a big factor the entire trip.

We press on to Madawaska, which correct me if I'm wrong, IS pretty dang near as far north as you can get in the lower 48. Pretty easy ride up there. We weren't too sure about directions at the end, but the easy fix was to just hit Long Lake for the last 20 miles or so.

So, as I recall it, the Sportsman Pride website said something about snowmobiling in the Madawaska area and all, and had a Madawaska address. So, I figure we ride into the area and we'll see signs directing us to our destination. Well, we get to those big huge signs they have on the trail with all the hotels, motels, restaraunts, etc in the area, but no sign of our place. OK, no big deal, we have an address – Gagnon Road. We get out the topo and the GPS and find our way to Gagnon road. STILL no sign or clue as to where this place is. Along comes the groomer. Great we'll ask him. He's never heard of the place! Now when the groomer ain't never heard about the place you're looken for; you're in a world of trouble.



The County



The other thing about the county is those humongous spud fields. Why here comes a spud picker now. Same to you buddy (to give you an idea of exactly what his greeting gesture was).

Ah, but he knows Keith and Wendy who own the place. He calls for us, but gets a recording. But he says they live right up the street. Up the street we go. Turned out that the address was the owners home not the cabins, and thank god they had just got home. He gives us directions to the place, which is about 10 miles or so east in Grand isle. Wendy frantically tries to dig us up something that we could cook at the cabin for supper, but we really didn't have room. Beef jerky and beer will hold us over. It wasn't too hard getting there and it was real nice. Keith was waiting there for us to make sure everything was OK. John was burning fumes, so Keith actually went to his uncle's place and got gas for us. That's what MOST of them Folks are like up there. But, I think a small portion of them are there to get away from foreigners so you have those types too. Like them not too smart spud pickers. No, that's not fair either. I just wonder what the story is, about the guy that just flipped us off like that for no apparent reason. That ain't no way to act.

Day Four – Madawaska to Presque Isle – 150 miles

Well, now we've made it the farthest in one day and the farthest north you can go. Time to turn and head for home. The good news is we've still got 600+ miles to cover to get there. So, south we go. I'd say things started getting real confusing around Caribou. The trails just are not marked well. We were constantly losing the ITS and back tracking. It was a pain.

Finally, we get into Presque Isle and head to Chandler Farms Polaris for belts and Now we have spare belts again! Since we were dropping a fair amount of cash I decided to ask if someone could make a quick adjustment and get my reverse working, and maybe figure out how to get my chaincase dipstick out, which was broken inside. No problem. This ain't Nashua! Now, what I needed done was no big deal, yes. 15 minutes labor tops! But there's lot's of places that wouldn't see the customer sat value in it and just say no, we're too busy.

So, away we go. All we have to do now is find the cabin. Now, I knew this one was going to be a challenge to find. I just under estimated it by a few dozen factors. Thinking back it really was kind of easy and we only made a few wrong turns. But the dark snuck up on us, and like I said, man those trails aren't marked. But hot dam, we made it. We were greeted by Carl, a cross between Grizzly Adams and Santa Claus. Real friendly guy. We sure didn't want to get caught up in those trails again, so we asked him to give us a ride into town for dinner, which he was happy to do. Catch a cab back.

There's that fine balance that makes the trip. If it's too easy, it's boring. Too messed up, and you argue too much. I remember well thinking when we were there, I never want to come up to that area again. Not the case now! I'd love to find my way up to Carl's again!



Canada!



Is that sign supposed to make sense?



Chandler's

Day five – Presque Isle to Bowlin Camps – 159 miles

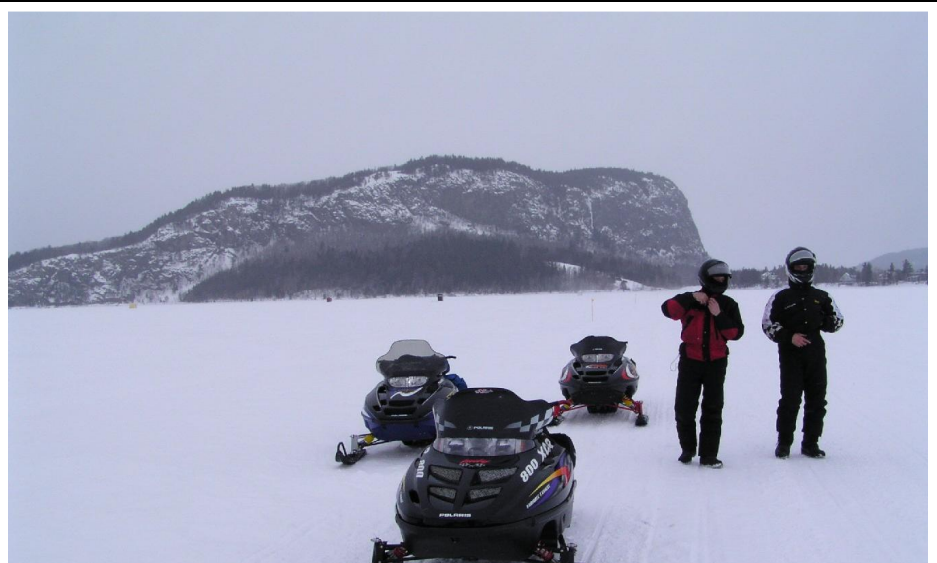
I don't really remember much about this day. Not much happened. Like I said, too easy, it's boring. We got into Bowlin well before dark. Stopped for gas at Ox Bow Lodge as we did on the way up. These pics were actually taken on the way up, but they fit better here. Can you hear that deer groan? I can.

At Bowlin Camps we shared the compound with a friendly couple. Lots of wisdom of the North Country was shared with us. We somehow got on the subject of Greenville, and they mentioned they had a camp there. We said we knew people who had a camp on Lower Wilson Pond. "Really!?! Who?", he said. We told them Nadeau, and he tells us their place is 2 camps down from them. I said, "Ah yes, we just toppled his son's dynasty this trip". Hea hea. Small world.

The camps are great. Nice wood stove and we were supplied with a buddy shown here with Pete. The dog showed a special affection for my machine for some reason, if you know what I mean.



A tad cold? No, my sled is not running.



Day Six – Bowlin Camps to Bingham – 206 miles

About this time, one thing that was really beginning to suck about this trip was it was almost over. There was also a serious navigational error made on my part, but I'm getting ahead.

By now we had been hit head on by the cold front and our morning starting temp was -18. Ray, who runs Bowlin Camps said it had been down to -28 which of course was the temps our sleds slept in. We had plenty of clothing, but waking the sleds up was a different story. John flat spotted his belt getting going. Took me 14 pulls on my big block to get it going. I could only get about one stroke per pull for the first five.

Today was a big ride, but not huge. Oh yeah, the error. I totally spaced the right trail out of Kokadjo and put us on Route 66, which means WE HAVE TO TAKE THAT STUPID WORTHLESS TRAIL, ITS 86 on the west side of Moosehead. UGGGHHHHH! Not only that, if my memory serves me right, the other alternative, ITS 85 which goes down on the east side of Moosehead is my most favorite of all stretch of trail!! OK, my fault, deep breaths, you can't win em all.

Black Frog in Greenville has become a mandatory stopping place and it somehow always works out that we're riding past during a feeding window. Newt would be proud. You really have to try the lobster stew, complimented with some sort of sandwich.

Now, let me make it perfectly clear that there were lots of little blunders performed by my comrades that I've neglected to mention. Just seems that I don't remember them until after I'm on to the next day. I do pride in myself that I did not go off into the deep snow once. Missed a few turns, yes, but only stuck once. Anyway, we somehow left Greenville without gassing up. It was clear throughout the trip that I was getting the best gas mileage, so as the reality that we were in trouble got clearer, we figured I would be the one to save the day. I figured I had plenty and maintained a pretty heavy thumb. What can I say? Those bumps going down Moxie Lake Road just deserve the appropriate speed. Before I knew it I too was on "E" with 20 miles yet to go! 6 miles out, my fate was handed to me. I was the one to run out!! John gave me the, "We'll come back!" And off he went. I enjoyed a spectacular sunset



The Crying picture. Only one more day.

and listened to the trees creak while John and Pete faithfully ventured out and managed to find the Moscow groomer garage, who saved the day for us.

We find the Bingham Motel parking lot completely empty except for a hurten Ski Doo and a pile of metal and plastic that vaguely resembles an Artic Cat. A short time later a couple of guys from Long Island show up yucking up the whole story. We smiled, but didn't laugh. We let the boy know that judging by how the tree tore his ski and both upper and lower A frames clean off, that he's a lucky boy. I'd say if impact was about 4" to the left the result might have involved a rescue chopper. Up here trees are more dangerous than guns are down there.



May we suggest a good safety course?

Day Seven – Bingham to Casco – 159 miles

Well, the boys were calling this get home-in-one-piece day. Blatt to that. It was one last chance to have fuuuun day for me. Y'all might recall last year our little lost hiatus through Farmington. As hard as I tried, I lost the ITS AGAIN this year. Still have no clue where. It must be somewhere going up it deadends so you can't miss it, but coming back you have to turn. I really didn't want to do this again, because last year it was REAL rough! Well, this year it was an absolute pleasure. Trails were real nice and well marked. Just no way you can go wrong. Given that, and since it's quite a few miles shorter than the ITS, we probably made time.

There must be some old guys that have nothing better to do, than make up signs for the snow traffic. They had "watch out for rock" signs and "Be careful of fence" signs. And my favorite "Trailer bumper sticks out a bit too far here".

Well, all good things must come to an end. Who the hell ever made that one up anyway? Oh well. Until next year, this is the ever elusive weas'ale signing out.

