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SAM CHARLEY SLOUGH — Winter travelers on the Tanana River can save a mile by taking the shortcut through this serpentine channel rather than following a lazy bend of the big river, but experienced dog mushers and snowmachiners avoid Sam Charley Slough. After driving here with a fleet of six snowmachines, we can see why.

Black, open leads yawn throughout the slough, and the gurgle of water holes sounds eerie in late winter. This bad ice has today drawn a team of ice-savvy travelers, scientists, and videographers. They are trying to find out why some river ice breaks beneath people and machines while other ice stays firm.

Sam Charley Slough is like other puzzling sections of the Tanana River that have patches of open water despite the kiss of sub-zero air all winter long. From his experiences out here dog mushing and snowmachining, Knut Kielland knows the slough well enough to point out the spot where wolves make a portage trail over a lobe of forest pinched by the slough. He mentions something strange he's observed after the slough freezes hard each November.



"It's fine until around New Year's, and then it becomes unsafe," Kielland says to Matthew Sturm and Chas Jones, two scientists who have joined him on the trip about 20 miles downriver from Fairbanks. "The ice goes to pot even as the temperature drops from minus 20 to minus 50 (degrees Fahrenheit). It continues to deteriorate despite colder air temperatures."

Kielland is an ecologist at the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Institute of Arctic Biology. He is teaming with Bill Schneider, curator of oral history for the Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, to map and document dangerous ice conditions throughout Interior Alaska with scientists and people who have traveled the river for years. Schneider and his colleague Karen Brewster are capturing on video the observations of experienced river travelers. With funding from the National Science Foundation, they plan to examine how local river travelers respond to changing ice conditions and how these conditions affect subsistence activities ranging from woodcutting to trapping. They also hope to bring together locals and scientists to learn more about the frozen platform used by so many winter travelers in Alaska...[\(more\)](#)

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