

# FROZEN ENFORCEMENT

ALASKA STATE TROOPERS TRACK A FUGITIVE AT 40 BELOW

BY: MEGAN A. PETERS

Just as the sun was starting to light up the community of Kotzebue, Alaska around noon on January 4, 2012, four troopers were preparing their snowmachines for a trip out into the deathly cold backcountry. An arrest warrant stemming from a Kotzebue Police Department investigation required the apprehension of 40-year-old James Darin Monroe. Monroe allegedly sexually assaulted a 3-year-old child on Christmas Day then fled from the community.

Monroe's whereabouts were unknown until a search and rescue party located him at a cabin 22 miles up the Noatak River the day before. Monroe had a .357 magnum revolver with him and he refused to return to the village with the searchers. It was up to troopers to track him down and bring him in.

With the mercury buried at 30 below zero, the snowmachines were taking longer than usual to get up and running. One of the two state snowmachines refused to start because of the cold. The badged quartet opted to take three personal iron dogs and the remaining state sled on their expedition to capture Monroe.

"We usually don't go out on our machines when it gets past 20 below unless something big comes up," said Investigator Blanchette. "This was something big."

At about 1:00 in the afternoon, two and a half hours after beginning preparation and gathering up cold weather gear - to include personally handmade fur mittens - Alaska State Troopers Christopher Bitz, Ron Monigold, WAANT Investigator Kevin Blanchette and Alaska Wildlife Trooper Eric Lorring crossed the sound to the Noatak River, each with a 40-pound pack full of extra clothing and emergency provisions.



**Troopers Ron Monigold, Christopher Bitz, Alaska Wildlife Trooper Eric Lorring and Investigator Kevin Blanchette stand with their snowmachines outside of Kotzebue post. The badged quartet set out on snowmachines at 40 below to bring a fugitive to justice.**

Outside of Kotzebue the ambient temperature was 40 below, traveling at least 40 miles per hour on snowmachines put the windchill at approximately 86 below zero. A few separate times, the men had to stop and thaw the ice off their goggles by holding them close the snowmachines' engines. Also on their ride, the troopers came across a small herd of caribou using the river as a trail as well. The herd was kind enough to move to the side for troopers to continue on without trouble.

"Besides us, they were the only things crazy enough to be out in that cold," said Blanchette.

The search party told troopers that Monroe had broken into two cabins along the Noatak River. While in the cabins he ate the food stored inside and burned up caches

of firewood. When troopers got close to the cabin searchers reportedly found Monroe, they stopped in a small clearing to get out of their bulky gear.

“Because all of us trap in the area, we knew a strategic place we could dress down so we could have easy access to our firearms,” said Blanchette. “It was also close enough that we wouldn’t have to go too long without [the arctic gear].”

Two troopers stood back and provided cover as the others approached the cabin. They found the cabin empty. However, the deep snow left troopers a telling sign- a solitary and very visible trail of a person wearing stolen snowshoes and hauling a sled led away from the cabin.

Not much further upriver the trail led troopers to a cabin with smoke coming out of the chimney. When troopers arrived Monroe came out of the cabin. Troopers don’t think he realized who he was meeting outside. Monroe paused and after looking at the four armed troopers he was taken into custody without hassle and cooperated with the troopers’ instructions.

“He knew we were coming and he was ready to come in,” said Blanchette. “He was cold.”

Troopers searched Monroe to make sure he didn’t have a weapon on him. The revolver searchers warned troopers about was found inside the cabin after troopers took Monroe into custody.

After securing Monroe troopers had to make sure he was dressed in appropriate clothes for the cold ride back to Kotzebue. They layered Monroe up in his own gear plus some extra gear they brought with them in their packs.

“We brought some of our personal cold weather gear from home so we knew he’d be warm enough,” said Blanchette. “We gave him a better hat and gloves— gave him goggles and wrapped his face up.”

Blanchette added that they took extra precautions due to the handcuffs and the extreme cold. At 40 below exposed skin will freeze in minutes and the metal handcuffs could exasperate the problem.

“We had to put the cuffs over his jacket so he wouldn’t get frostbite from them. We also wrapped another layer of clothing around his hands to try to keep the cuffs from getting cold.” Even with the extra insulation, the metal cuffs frosted up a little by the time they made it back to Kotzebue.

Monroe is currently being held at Anvil Mountain Correctional Center in Nome on the warrant Kotzebue Police Department obtained. Troopers are conducting an investigation into what Monroe was doing while on the run.

Sergeant Duane Stone, supervisor of the Kotzebue Alaska State Trooper post, said the recovery of Monroe sent a strong message to criminals in the area.

“You don’t get to run away from the troopers when it is cold out by going out on snowshoes in the backcountry. We will go after you. It is what we do.”

