

# Net goes north to Alaska

By [CNET News.com Staff](#)

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Most of the tiny villages in Northern Alaska are only accessible by prop planes, snow mobiles, and maybe one public phone. That is, unless you have a Net connection.



Alaska still has a largely primitive telecommunications infrastructure due to its remote and rugged terrain, but wireless and modem Internet access is booming in the state, especially in the more isolated regions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the town of Nome and in the North Slope Borough, the northern-most community in the United States.

These rural areas are the last frontier in the creation of a truly global Internet, linking disparate cultures that might find no expression in no other communications medium.

And while the Net is arriving late to Northern Alaska, many users have more sophisticated access than denizens of many of the world's urban hubs. Using the Net, the region's school children have exchanged email with students in Australia, published a report on the depletion of caribou, and held videoconferences with villages that are 300 miles away.

Nome, which is only 161 miles from Russia and has a population of 3,900, set up Net access for its elementary and high schools two months ago using a wireless satellite network called "WavePOINT." Nome's children, who are mostly Alaska natives, now have a Net connection that is 70 times faster than a 28.8k modem, according to Peter Johnson, an English teacher who helped spearhead the effort.

"In places like rural Alaska the Internet is going to be the equalizer for a lot of these students," Johnson said. "They can now post a Web page just like the Library of Congress or communicate with different people from around the world." Nome Elementary now has six Macintosh computers with Net access and will connect 25 more systems by March.

Johnson had been trying to get the school connected to the Net for more than two years. After potential deals with wired Alaskan universities fell through, his plea was answered by another source--a computer salesman named Dan Toomey.

Toomey aimed to carve out a new market in rural Alaska as an account executive for [NCR](#), a company that sells automatic teller machines; electronic commerce technologies; and two wireless networking products, WavePOINT and WaveLAN. He offered Johnson

some discounted demo equipment for a trial and later sold it to the school for \$4,600--well below the market price.

"It's less expensive than a conventional Internet connection and faster," Johnson said. "The 56k-modem lines we were looking into would have cost \$24,000."

Before Nome set up its wireless connection, another Northern Alaska community was hard wiring its residents to the Net.

The North Slope Borough, an oil-rich region about the size of Minnesota, includes the town of Barrow with more than 3,000 residents and seven villages ranging in population from 120 to 800 people.

Borough has been working on its network for almost six years. Its push for Net access also began with the schools. The area's carrier, Alascom, had to first set up data communication systems. After that, the school district went to work.

The North Slope Borough school district now supplies each of its ten village schools, and three in Barrow, with a 448-kpbs connection to the Net. That's one-third as fast as a T1 line. The schools use the system for videoconferencing and emailing between schools. In addition, the county government employees, health clinics, and the local community college are connected through the network.

"We are now working on a project called AuroraNet, a community-based wide area network," said Craig Mollerstuen, network coordinator for the borough. "We will use the school district to hook up the remainder of the area."

As telecommunications services become more competitive throughout Alaska, more and more schools and villages will follow suit, said Johnson, the Nome school teacher.

Jerry Rawson, for one, is glad the Net has arrived in Alaska. He lived in Barrow 30 years ago as a 13-year-old boy when the town was still a village. Listening to the Beach Boys and playing Russian spy games was the way he stayed in touch with the outside world. Now he lives in Fairbanks, Alaska, where he cruises the Net.

"[Having] no television kept us out of touch with the real world," he said. "I would have loved to have had access to the Internet back then, because we were so far from any current information."

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