

Alaska volcano booms online

April 14 2009, By Kyle Hopkins

The cameras watch her every move. Thousands of strangers want to be her friend, and thousands more follow her latest exploits hour by hour on their laptops and cell phones. She's Mount Redoubt, Internet star.

With her first eruption in 20 years, [Redoubt volcano](#) has reawakened just in time to ignite a new kind of media blitz -- an explosion of immediate, online information that was hard to imagine just a year or two ago.

Within weeks, pages about Redoubt on Twitter and Facebook became some of the most popular in Alaska. Even those who dismiss such social networking sites as silly can follow near hourly updates and scour photos of the eruption on the Alaska [Volcano](#) Observatory's own Web site, which saw traffic boom a hundred fold immediately after Redoubt roared to life in March.

And yes, Redoubt is a girl.

It says so on her irreverent, unauthorized Facebook page, where more than 1,500 people have befriended the volcano. They write messages encouraging her -- "I need a little more ash in my garden" -- and cursing her: "I hate you ... just stop."

Others swap photos they've taken of the eruption and plead with Redoubt to cool it as each new explosion threatens air travel across the state.

"Shhhhh ... ,' " implored Marianne Aplin, one of the volcano's Facebook friends in Homer. "Yes you're a big strong volcano, but why don't you take a little nap until my husband can get home?"

The [Alaska Volcano Observatory](#) has nothing to do with the slightly goofy Facebook page, which is written anonymously from the volcano's point of view and lists Redoubt as a Scientologist who is "in an open relationship" and watches the Discovery Channel.

Instead, the AVO Web masters climbed on board the Twitter train _ joining the army of people posting micro updates on their daily activities in 140 characters or less, readable on computers or cell phones.

Using their personal computers or iPhones because the state forbids employees to log in to [social networking sites](#), technicians launched the AVO Twitter page earlier this year as the volcano began flirting with another round of explosions.

On Friday, the Twitter feed had more than 6,700 followers -- including many who signed up just to read the latest volcano updates.

"They have the biggest following of anyone in Alaska that we can find," said Anchorage technology consultant and Twitter guru John Proffitt.

It started with an e-mail from a worried mom.

One day in late January, a woman from the Midwest wrote the Alaska Volcano Observatory. Redoubt hadn't blown its top yet, but it was simmering, and the woman wanted an easy way to make sure her son -- who lives in Anchorage -- was OK.

"She said it would be absolutely wonderful if you could post updates to Twitter," said Ken Woods, a member of the technology team that keeps

the volcano observatory's Web site online.

Woods lives in an 875-square-foot log cabin outside Fairbanks that he bought when he learned he could get high-speed Internet. He keeps an iPhone holstered in his carpenter jeans, and jumped into the Twitter universe last year. A cyclist, he used the site to post micro-updates about his training rides and to follow tweets by Lance Armstrong.

Twitter's focus on tiny, rapid-fire messages seemed like a natural fit for the volcano observatory's constant updates. Woods' co-worker, Seth Snedigar, set up the new AVO Twitter page to automatically post the latest observations written by the AVO's geophysicists and geologists.

Geophysicist Peter Cervelli, for example, likes to watch the sunrise during the midnight to 8 a.m. shift at the observatory. He keeps his updates short _ better for tweets _ and uses the hourly updates to remark on the first Webcam photos of the morning.

Woods writes the rest of the updates himself, linking to photos or trying to explain why it's not so easy to, say, clean off Web cameras in the neighborhood of an active volcano.

People sign up to Twitter to read the updates or have them sent to their phones. These followers are looking for early warnings of the volcano's next explosion _ an event that has the potential to freeze flights in one of the world's busiest cargo hubs, to strand travelers, and to send Alaskans running for their face masks when winds spread ash toward civilization.

(Alaska Airlines has been using its own Twitter feed to warn of canceled flights, while an information technology officer at the West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center says his agency wants to start Twittering too.)

Others, especially those outside Alaska, are just curious. Proffitt said technology and science go hand-in-hand -- meaning the kind of people checking Twitter every few minutes on their phones might also be the kind of people who like learning about volcanoes.

And maybe there's just something about Redoubt.

Mount St. Helens has a new Twitter page too. As of Friday, it had three followers.

If Twitter is the messenger and Facebook the playground, the AVO Web site is the faucet for new, authoritative Redoubt information.

Along with regular updates _ the same ones that the Twitter feed is based on _ the site constantly posts new images from three solar-powered webcams aimed at the mountain.

Some of the most spectacular shots come from a camera mounted to the side of a hut about 7{ miles north of the Redoubt's crater. Encased in the same kind of beige, boxy shell you might see on a security cam outside a bank, the camera can send photos back to the observatory as fast as every seven seconds, said geophysicist John Paskievitch.

"In that case, you can watch water gushing down the side of the volcano. ... You can see pyroclastic flows moving down the flanks. Ash plumes blossoming, growing."

First installed in November, the camera conked out within days, said Paskievitch, whose job includes maintaining the observatory's far-flung volcano-monitoring equipment.

"Rodents living under the hut chewed through the cables," he said.

The hut cam was back online by December, while another camera, on a Cook Inlet oil platform, was turned to face Redoubt. A third -- just northeast of the volcano -- began transmitting photos this month.

Back at the observatory's operations room on the Alaska Pacific University campus in Anchorage, scientists huddle around banks of monitors that display the near real-time photos whenever the eruption escalates.

Two of the cameras are only reasonably accessible by helicopter, Paskievitch said. That makes wiping away ice and ash a problem.

When the lens is covered in snow, the observatory sometimes turns a camera on for a couple of hours to warm it up, in hopes the ice sloughs away.

Using Twitter to post volcano updates helps take some of the burden off the volcano observatory site, which crashed for about an hour early one morning in January after the volcano's alert level switched from yellow to orange, said Snedigar, the analyst and programmer.

The Redoubt eruption brought about three times as much Web traffic as the Augustine eruption in 2006, he said.

Quantcast.com, which measures and compares a Web site's traffic over time, estimates more than 200,000 people visited the AVO site on peak days in February and March. That's a more than 500 percent increase compared to pre-eruption numbers, the site says.

When an explosion rocked Redoubt on March 26 sending an ash plume drifting toward Homer, Aplin found herself sent home from work, watching the horizon.

Maybe a dozen friends, scattered across town, did the same.

So they started Facebooking.

The messages popped up on Aplin's phone. "That's looks like an ash cloud." And: "Oh, I'm getting ash here."

"I think I was taking [iPhone](#) pictures out the door and saying, 'This is what it looks like here now,' " she said.

Meantime, whoever runs the anonymous Redoubt Facebook page -- the "volcano" didn't respond to an interview request -- had written a simple message that week of her own:

"Boom."

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ON THE WEB

The Alaska Volcano Observatory's Redoubt Web site:

www.avo.alaska.edu/activity/Redoubt.php

The observatory's [Twitter](#) page, which also posts regular updates: twitter.com/alaska_avo

Facebook.com:

www.facebook.com/people/Mount-Redoubt/1280503227 . (You need to sign up for [Facebook](#), then search for Mount Redoubt)

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