

Snow, fallen trees obscure some Kenai National Wildlife Refuge hiking trails

by Dave Kenagy

The long days of spring are here, and it's time to head out on the trail system of the Kenai National Wildlife refuge. The refuge offers and maintains more than 200 miles of hiking, canoeing and portage trails. Trails range in difficulty from relatively easy family day trails to strenuous mountain routes. There is a trail type and hiking opportunity for just about every interest.

The refuge backcountry crew has been assessing the condition of road-accessible trails and has found most trails to be in good condition. Only a few need significant maintenance. Trail maintenance is accomplished by refuge employees, youth work programs, Student Conservation Association Volunteers and community volunteers.

These various groups will be dealing with extensive windfall from several fall and winter windstorms, which left many trails blocked. Additionally, the spruce bark beetle infestation and resulting dead trees have made clearing affected trails an annual event.

Both the upper and lower portions of the Kenai River Trail were especially hard hit by winds. There are more than 100 blowdowns, mostly small diameter trees, along the upper section. The lower section has fewer blowdowns but does have several tangles of very large trees where the trail parallels the Kenai River. Detours around those areas, though numerous, are short and relatively easy. Clearing the Kenai River Trail will be a top priority for backcountry crews.

Despite favorable spring weather, heavy snows and a late breakup combined to leave most trails wet and muddy later than usual. A few trails have sections still covered by soft snow. Trails with extensive wet or muddy sections include the Kenai River (upper), Skilak Lookout, Fuller Lakes, Seven Lakes, and the Drake/Skookum Lakes Trail. Trails with snow at higher elevations include Skilak Lookout, Fuller Lakes, Bear Mountain and Skyline Trail. Snowshoes could be

handy on these trails.

Now for some "good news." Old man winter was mostly kind to the Swan Lake and Swanson River Canoe trails. The canoe system trails are both designated National Recreation trails within the Dave Spencer Unit of the Kenai Wilderness and have been upgraded over the past several years.

Canoeists can expect to find them in good condition, though some muddy and wet conditions will be encountered on portages. As always, rubber knee-high boots are recommended. And a fishing pole might be a wise addition for an early season trip.

If you have questions regarding a specific trail or backcountry area, call or stop by refuge headquarters. We have begun a new "backcountry report," which provides information on current conditions and activities along trails, lakes, rivers, and remote backcountry areas.

It is updated twice a month, after backcountry crews complete patrols and maintenance.

Whether you're hiking road-accessible trails or traveling in remote backcountry, be prepared for all conditions. In addition to your normal gear, always carry spare food, water, warm clothing, rain gear, map, compass/GPS, and signaling devices, and let someone know of your plans.

Also, be sure to practice "Leave No Trace" and backcountry bear safety techniques.

Have a good adventure, and remember to provide refuge staff with information about your trip that would be useful to other backcountry users.

Dave Kenagy is a recent addition to the [Kenai National Wildlife Refuge](#) staff. He is a former Kenai Peninsula Alaska State Parks ranger and refuge backcountry ranger. He rejoins the refuge staff after several years of working in the private sector and for other land management agencies.