

Share the Refuge with a child; it will open up a brand new world

by *Richard Johnston*

Having worked on, played in and explored the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for nearly twenty years, there are few Refuge experiences I haven't at least sampled or places on the Refuge I haven't explored. As a pilot, I think I've seen the Kenai mountains in about every shade of beautiful that there is. It is easy to be humbled by the overall beauty and wildness of the Kenai Refuge, especially at 3,000 feet on a gin clear October morning with a V of sandhill cranes silhouetted against the eastern mountains. I recall certain wildlife sightings and hunts that some might say were once-in-a-life time, but when friends and Refuge visitors ask me about my favorite Refuge experiences, I smile and reply, "Anywhere on the Refuge and sharing just about any activity with a child."

Kids have a very simple and powerful way of observing and experiencing the many wonders of nature. We often hear adult conversations about past trips or planned outings on the Refuge. These knowledgeable conversations might concern harvesting an elusive 60 inch moose, catching that once-in-a-lifetime trout, getting that perfect bear photograph, summiting a difficult peak or a twenty mile off trail traverse. But listen to the conversations of two children on the Refuge and you may really come closer to the heart of what the Kenai Refuge is really all about...and what any of us can experience on any day in the presence of a child.

The kids may be talking excitedly about a small squirrel they saw, or about a passing cloud reflection on the Kenai River and how it looked like a buffalo. Two very small cowboys may be astride horse-like aspen branches temporarily serving them as trusty steeds, with all this adventure in a small greenbelt between two campsites in a roadside campground. As far as they're concerned, they are Lewis and Clark and the sights, sounds and smells of their little exploration forest are on the edge of nowhere and the year is 1850. No doubt children love to see a large bull moose or to catch a big fish as much an adult, but I believe they are natural appreciators of the simple and ethereal, and are particularly expert at seeing and experiencing the

more subtle side of the Refuge.

I recollect leading a school fieldtrip many years ago where I was distressed that we hadn't seen any of the normal wildlife that day. I kept coming up with explanations that would have shamed the best you-should-have-been-here-yesterday tales of a Kenai River fishing guide on a slow day. One of the kids started asking questions about this small fungus growth on a downed log. Pretty soon the focus of the entire fieldtrip switched from seeing moose to The Great Conk Hunt of the Kenai, 1983. It was then that I wished I'd paid more attention to the small stuff; I realized that I didn't need an obliging moose to make these kids' day. A small amount of "interpretive knowledge" on my part could really enhance their modest adventure. They were simply glad to take the day and the outdoor adventures as they might come. The naturalist interpreters on our Refuge staff have learned from such experiences to direct more attention to the small and subtle aspects of the trailside, such as insect effects, fungi, edible plants, wild smells, and bird calls. When they do this, every small trip can be a big adventure for the kids.

Young residents of Kenai Peninsula and their families are particularly fortunate to live with such an abundance of wildland and wildlife opportunities. Whether it's taking a child hunting, fishing or hiking, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge has a place and season that is made to order for you. For example, the many short day trails within the Skilak Recreation Area and along Swanson River road are perfect for an outing and the exploration pace of kids. Small children like my four-year-old love to stop often and are much less concerned with the final destination than the "journey" and the infinite adventures that a mile of trail provides.

Skilak Lookout, Skyline, Bear Mountain, Hidden Creek, Kenai River are just a few of the Refuge trails that by virtue of length, degree of difficulty and natural features (e.g., things to climb on) are made to order for kids. Hidden Lake Campground is a very popular destination; children of all ages find enough adventure

in this campground to fill several days.

A kid-size trail called Bernie's Trail, named after a late Refuge biologist, is a great place to spend the afternoon. And nearby, the Refuge has a new trail called Hideout Trail that will be formally opened to the public next spring. It was recently completed after two seasons of volunteer labor by high school Student Conservation Association volunteers. It is a great trail for kids and if you can believe my four year old, it is destined to be one of the Refuge's most popular family day trails. On a recent September trip I accompanied three other adults and four kids ages four to thirteen to the top of Hideout Trail. There were berries, scenery and adventure for everyone, especially with the fall colors and smells.

One of the best kept secrets of the Kenai is the excellent trout fishing on many roadside lakes and other lakes within a mile of the road. It has been my experience that kids much prefer catching a stringer of frisky trout to less predictable king salmon safaris. And my kids just can't get the concept of stowing away their poles after Dad has helped them catch a Kenai king.

Small game hunting on the Refuge is a great way to introduce children to the responsibilities, skill acquisition and rewards associated with hunting. These clear cold October mornings are superb for spending one-on-one hunting time with a future woodsman. I'll wager that you may rediscover why you started hunting in the first place, and it probably wasn't to fill the freezer.

Bringing children afield should be taken very seriously, especially when hunting. There are many safety

considerations for being out on land and water, particularly as temperatures drop and days grow shorter. A compass, warm clothes and a hunter education certificate addressing safety and hunter ethics are very good starting points.

There are many trust issues that an adult should fully consider while mentoring a young hunter or fisherman. Adults should be skilled and willing to share their land and hunting ethics with their young charges. As a Refuge Officer I find few experiences more rewarding than checking the bag of a successful young hunter who has done everything by "the book" and who is accompanied by a proud and thoughtful adult. Conversely, there are few experiences more disheartening for me than citing or arresting an adult who has encouraged a young hunter or fisherman to break game laws or has done so himself in a youngster's presence.

If you are thinking of taking a child on the Refuge this month, be well prepared: pack your smile, compass, sack lunch, warm clothes, and water. Don't be in too big a hurry, leave a trip plan behind, and keep an open mind. You just may find adventure where you least expect it and a lot closer to the road than that 50 miler you did with your neighbor last year.

For more information on great family hikes and other adventures on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, contact Rick Johnston or other Refuge staff at Refuge Headquarters (262-7021). Rick Johnston is a Ranger/Pilot for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.