

What do you do at the Kenai Refuge, and how do I get your job

by Bill Kent

“How do I get a job like yours?” “Was a college degree a requirement for your job?” “How do I get a summer job at the Refuge?” These and similar questions are directed to the staff at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge throughout the year.

I want to provide some background information as to how we did get these jobs. If you are reading this article, you probably have an interest in your “backyard neighbor,” the Kenai Refuge, and you may well have an interest in wildlife and natural history. Those readers not seeking a career change can file this information away in the “that’s interesting” part of their brain.

But, for younger readers, and for those considering a “life change,” perhaps this article can be the catalyst which encourages you to take that first step toward a career of working on a National Wildlife Refuge. Let’s take a look at the type of tasks performed on a Refuge on any given day, and how the Refuge staff is structured to get those jobs accomplished.

National Wildlife Refuges are managed for wildlife and for the habitats that critters need to survive...that is our primary mission. We make decisions regarding how many acres are needed for moose, or how to meet the “large undisturbed areas” requirements of brown bears. Consequently, many, if not most, of the jobs on a Refuge are filled by people with college degrees in wildlife biology or wildlife management, or closely related biological fields. Refuge Managers, Biologists, and Fire Management Officers are only a few of the positions included in this category. These positions require, at a minimum, a Bachelor’s degree in one of those fields. In recent years, because of the intricate concepts required to manage wildlife in an increasingly complex world, more of these positions now require post-graduate degree. The Kenai Refuge, for example, has two employees with Ph.D.’s and three with Masters degrees on the staff. Wildlife Refuges nationwide need employees with expertise in forestry, fisheries, range management, ecology, hydrology, and botany, as well as traditional wildlife biology.

Any Refuge Manager who has directed a Refuge for a few years will quickly tell you that the back-

bone of the Refuge staff is the administrative employees. These are the folks who you meet first, if you call or write our office. The administrative staff at Kenai Refuge handles a myriad of tasks, from making payments to businesses, answering and responding to phone calls and electronic mail, organizing and maintaining files, insuring the Refuge computer system is functioning properly, and (perhaps their largest task) making sure that the managers and other staff do what they should to keep the endless government paperwork flowing smoothly. Although a degree is not generally required for these positions, most of our administrative staff have taken college-level courses to improve their skills.

The Kenai Refuge has campgrounds, roads, trails, office buildings, heavy equipment, trucks, boats and other equipment and facilities. Have you ever wondered who keeps these things functioning and repaired? Our maintenance staff consists of mechanics, equipment operators, carpenters, welders, and other skilled professionals. Most of these people have multiple skills which are utilized on a daily basis. It is not uncommon to operate a road-grader in the morning, then perform vehicle repairs or work on a project in the wood shop in the afternoon. Many of us feel that the maintenance staff has the most interesting work on the Refuge because they get to do a variety of jobs in the course of a week. Like our administrative positions, these positions do not require a college degree; however, the skills needed for successfully performing these jobs require extensive training and a wide variety of experience.

The last group of employees at the Kenai Refuge are those I am most familiar with: the Public Use staff. We are responsible for managing all the human activities on the Refuge. These activities include operation of the Visitor Center, environmental education and interpretive programs, campground operations, Refuge brochures and other publications, law enforcement, commercial-use permits, and administration of the contract for the Russian River Ferry area. Many of these positions require a degree in park ad-

ministration, recreation, or in environmental education; for example, I have a B.S. Ed. degree in Park Management/Outdoor Recreation from the University of Georgia.

Most of our law enforcement officers have a college degree, in a variety of disciplines, including Park Management, Criminal Justice, and Wildlife Biology. We sometimes have summer seasonal positions in the Public Use program, and many recent college graduates with a major in one of the areas listed above gain valuable work experience at this or other Refuges.

“Well, that is all very interesting,” you say, “but I want to know how to get one of those jobs.” “How do I prepare myself, and how do I apply?” If you are a high-school student, or are in the first two years of college, and you think being a wildlife biologist or refuge manager is a career choice for you, then you should take as many natural sciences courses as possible. Once in college, the biology department faculty can steer you into the best major courses for the area in which you want to concentrate. The Personnel Officers at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s regional offices have publications available which provide current information on colleges and universities which offer majors in wildlife biology and/or management. The same offices can also help direct you to schools offering majors in park management or outdoor recreation.

Those interested in the maintenance arena should consider getting as much experience as possible in the operation and maintenance of motor vehicles, heavy equipment, and watercraft. Experience in welding, carpentry or other skilled trades is also valuable.

All positions on the Kenai Refuge are filled through a competitive process, with clear procedures established for applying through the US Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Personnel Office in Anchorage, which can be reached at (907) 786-3301. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) also assists with recruitment for a wide variety of Federal positions through their website, where you can search for positions by job title or by agency (<https://www.usajobs.gov/>).

For high school students the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) is an excellent introduction to working on a Wildlife Refuge. We hire ten high school YCC students every summer for eight weeks, and applications are due at our office by April 15, 2000. We also recruit about eight college-age students as volunteers through the Student Conservation Association (SCA) program. This is a national program, with information available at (603) 543-1700. We pay SCA volunteers \$90 per week subsistence, as well as free housing and airfare costs. We also have summer positions in vegetation surveying and fire management. These positions require college-level training in these subjects, and Federal job applications (Form 171 or equivalent) must be postmarked to our Regional Office in Anchorage by January 3, 2000. Applications can be picked up at Refuge headquarters on Ski Hill Road.

Bill Kent is the Supervisory Park Ranger for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He has lived in Soldotna with his wife Lisa, and daughter Riley since 1991. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.