

What happened to my campground?

by Bill Kent

This is the time of year when the acts of a very few visitors to Kenai Refuge come into sharper focus for me. Perhaps the spring weather makes my aging eyes a little sharper, or maybe its just because I am outside more... who knows? What becomes more evident as the snow berms melt is the destruction of, and total disregard for the facilities and resources (public and private) of the entire Kenai Peninsula practiced by a small but active segment of the population. They seem to think the campgrounds, signs, toilets, trails, sheds, mailboxes, fences, and other structures are erected with the intended purpose of being shot, burned, torn apart, stolen, or generally defaced.

Please understand, I was born and raised in Georgia where, as in most of the South, destructive vandalism is a way of life learned at an early age by many. So, this behavior is not unfamiliar to me. Nor is it limited to the South; I have seen similar situations in every part of the country where I have worked and lived. But, those examples pale in comparison to the magnitude of the havoc wreaked throughout Alaska, not only on the Kenai Peninsula. Do I notice the vandalism more because I live here? Of course I do; my family made a decision to make Alaska our home, and a thoughtless few it seems are trying to tear it apart or burn it down, and I don't like it.

As a test, consider any single mile of the Sterling Highway (outside the limits of Soldotna, Cooper Landing, or Sterling) where signs have been punctured or defaced with various caliber bullets, shotgun pellets, or spray paint; or where trash (sometimes entire bags) is strewn along the roadside.

I would like for you to understand the monetary cost of this destruction. Many of our signs are made of wood, with routed lettering. If you've done any construction work around the house, you know that lumber and paint are expensive. Our carpenter who makes these signs is paid a fair hourly wage for his skills. The total cost of a 3ft by 4ft sign is about \$400. Repairing gunshot wooden signs is time consuming and not inexpensive. We also use aluminum signs which, depending on the size and lettering, may cost anywhere from \$10 to \$500, or more. Replacing these signs after they are shot or otherwise vandalized is a serious

drain on our budget each year, and many signs cannot be repaired.

Besides the time and tax dollars spent replacing signs, there is a real image problem portrayed to the visitor. And even more important, sign shooting is done with total disregard for public safety. When you shoot along a road, it is only a matter of time before some motorist, bicyclist or pedestrian gets injured or killed.

Occasionally someone thinks burning wooden outhouses and picnic tables is great fun, or takes a picnic table out to the middle of a lake during ice-fishing season. This is why we have been replacing our wooden outhouses and picnic tables with ones made of concrete. Every once in awhile there may be a little justice: a couple of years ago someone shot up the inside of one of our new concrete outhouses. I can't imagine that this person had too much fun immediately after pulling the trigger from inside four concrete walls.

"Well," you might say, "Why don't you catch them?" That is a desire of everyone on our staff, no doubt. The biggest barrier to catching someone vandalizing a campground or shooting a sign is being in the right place at the right time. Our best help comes from people who witness something happening and provide information about vehicles or descriptions of the vandals. We cannot be everywhere at once, and are grateful when someone concerned about their Refuge provides information which we can use to bring charges against those who destroy facilities that belong to all of us.

If you would like more information about the vandalism problem or would like to provide us with information about vandalism that you have witnessed, give me a call at Refuge Headquarters (262-7021). People can also phone in anonymous tips to Crime Stoppers in Kenai at 283-8477, or to Wildlife Safeguard at 800-478-3347.

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