

## Most wildfires on the Refuge caused by campfires

by Doug Newbould

Americans love to camp out. It's one of our all-time favorite summer activities. Camping is as American as the Beach Boys, baseball, and Mom's apple pie. And what camping experience is complete without a crackling campfire and a marshmallow on a stick, or a steaming pot of camp coffee? Campfires can even mean the difference between life and death in the Alaskan wilderness.

But there is an unfortunate downside to campfires, especially here in south-central Alaska—they cause a lot of wildfires. In fact, over the past 60 years (about as long as we have kept fire records), escaped or abandoned campfires are by far the number one cause of wildfire on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and other public lands on the Peninsula.

Some of the more notable Refuge fires in the past 60 years that are known or suspected to be caused by campfires include the 1947 fire (burned over 310,000 acres), the 1969 Swanson River fire (over 90,000 acres), the 1974 Chickaloon fire (17,000+ acres), the 1991 Pothole Lake fire (7,000+ acres), and the 1994 Windy Point fire (1,000+ acres).

Since I came to the Refuge fire management program in December 1997, every reported wildfire has been the result of an abandoned campfire. Every one of those campfires was in a remote, undeveloped campsite. Fortunately, we were able to locate and put out those fires before they became large, destructive wildfires. At least two fires had the potential to get big: a fire on the south shore of Hidden Lake in 1998, which burned about a half acre; and last summer, there was an abandoned campfire at the outlet of Skilak Lake that burned about 200 square feet of the forest floor.

Looking at these fires collectively, we see some common characteristics: the fires were built in primitive campsites without established fire rings or pits; the campfires were abandoned by the people who lit them (we were unable to locate the responsible parties, which means the taxpayer picks up the tab for suppression costs); the fires escaped by burning roots or organic material (duff) below the surface; and the fires were discovered/reported by other campers or recreationists many hours or days after the fires were abandoned.

Having personally inspected many of these sites, it was obvious to me that in most cases the campers made some attempt to extinguish their fires before leaving. My guess is that either the campers were unaware that fire was burning (creeping) in the duff or they did not have the tools necessary to put the fires out. This assumption leaves out those who are just lazy, no-good bums who don't care about the environment, people, or their natural heritage. The other, and perhaps most important characteristic of these fires is that they were ALL PREVENTABLE!

To ensure that you do not become one of these unfortunate statistics—or even worse, have to pay for the cost of your escaped campfire, here are some simple “CAMPFIRE” safety rules to follow when you build the next campfire: Choose a safe location for your campfire—away from overhanging branches, steep slopes, rotten stumps or logs, dry grass, leaves or brush. Always keep a shovel and water nearby—in case the fire escapes, or to help put the fire out cold when you are done with it. Make sure you know the rules of the land you are using—open campfires are illegal in some areas and at certain times of the year. Prepare the area around your fire before you light it - remove flammable materials within five feet of your fire ring or pit. Fires should never be started with flashy flammable liquids like gasoline or white gas—carry safe firestarters with you or use dry leaves, grass, feathermoss, lichen, or bark. Impact the surrounding environment as little as possible—don't butcher live trees by breaking branches; collect deadwood from the ground or dead-standing trees. If it is not an “established” primitive campsite, obliterate your firepit after the fire is out cold. Make sure your fire is dead out before you leave (drown it with water, stir and mix with dirt, carefully feel all materials with bare hand to make sure they're cool, and make sure no roots or duff are burning at the edges of your fire). Economize—keep your fire small; a good bed of coals or a small fire surrounded by rocks gives plenty of heat, and small fires are easier to put out.

Above all, remember not to light a fire when drought or extremely dry conditions persist, especially if the wind is blowing. The warmth and satisfaction of

a little campfire is not worth the suffering you would endure if it got away from you and burned up thousands of acres of forest, wildlife, someone's home, or worse.

Be a happy camper—be smart with campfires. You owe it to the rest of us!

*Doug Newbould is the fire management officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, stop by Headquarters at the top of Ski Hill Road on Soldotna, call (907)262-7021 or visit our web site at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*