

So you want to be a refuge guide?

by Rick Johnston

As certain as the tourists' annual migration to the Kenai, my telephone will start ringing in a week or two with inquires about guiding on the Refuge. Several of the callers will no doubt be prospective guides from New York to Soldotna fantasizing about an adventurous and prosperous future as a Kenai National Wildlife Refuge guide. Some will wait until Memorial Day weekend to try and make their dream a reality, while others will have prepared detailed business and promotional strategies that would shame a Fortune 500 executive.

I try to steer hopeful guides in the right direction and discuss the various realities of becoming a guide. I ask pointed questions: Are you sure you want to get by on three hours of sleep a night from June 1 to October 1? Are you absolutely certain you want to turn your favorite personal recreation activity, such as fishing or boating into a modest paying job, smell like salmon eggs from June to September, live off business loans for your first two years, and live out of a suitcase at Motel 6 while drumming up business at Lower-48 sport and trade shows during the winter? Have you brushed up on your you-should-have-been-here-last-week fishing stories and tall tales? Just kidding of course; but in reality, the road to a successful guide business has many bends and can be a challenging and difficult endeavor. Prospective guides should ask themselves tough questions before making the leap.

Some persons who inquire are genuinely surprised that any official permits or oversight is required at all, on Refuge lands or anywhere else. In fact, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge has required a special-use permit for all commercial guiding since 1980, and well before that time for other services such as the Russian River Ferry, tent camps and big game guiding. Applications are required for all forms of commercial guiding, and the permit year generally begins on May 1 and extends until April 30 of the following year, unless the permit is issued for multiple years.

The Refuge is generally supportive of proposals which reflect a sensitivity to the wildlife and fisheries resources and which consider Refuge purposes. Guide services are an important part of our overall program because they can help visitors get the most out of their

experience on the Refuge. For this reason we value our guides highly and try to help them serve their clients in the best possible ways.

There are a wide variety of guide services offered to visitors at various locations on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. These services include big game guiding, hunter and game transporting, scenic white-water and flatwater float trips, sportfishing, campground services, boat drop offs, air taxi service, canoe rental and drop off service, wildlife sight-seeing, and guided horseback trips. While working with the Kenai Refuge's visitor services, I have seen just about every kind of guide proposal imaginable. By far the largest number of past permits have been for guided sportfishing. Guided sportfishing on the Kenai is far from a new idea, and it is easily the most competitive venue, and hence experiences the most first and second year business failures.

During 1999, we issued more than 125 permits, 90 of which included sportfishing and related support operations, especially on the Kenai River. Winter-time and non-harvest activities had the fewest permits. Like many areas in Alaska, the Refuge has few winter or non-peak season tourism and visitor service offerings, and there is lots of potential here for the creative vendor.

As the annual April 1 application deadline approaches, I never cease to be amazed at the innovation and hard work behind some of the new guide proposals. But likewise, I am seldom denied a silent chuckle at the naivete and unlikely hope in some of the proposals. A couple of years ago, I had an out-of-state applicant talk on and on about offering a much needed fishing guide service to a secret Refuge location where only the applicant's new whiz-bang fishing guide service had the method and knowledge to assist a fishless and guideless public. When pressed for the "secret location," he finally revealed that the trade secret location was in fact the Russian-Kenai River confluence. Oh, boy...what could I say...?

In recent years, both long-time and new guides have sought less crowded locations to offer their preferred visitor service, in most instances sportfishing. Good guides try to have a variety of settings and ac-

tivities that suit the various desires and needs of their clients. Many local guides report that their clients are increasingly disappointed with the social density and crowding at many Kenai Peninsula locations. This is especially true during slow fishing times. Kenai National Wildlife Refuge locations have been increasingly sought after as less crowded and wilder destinations for clients trying to experience the real Alaska. Seeing Alaska wildlife is a high priority for many visitors, even when fishing, hunting or boating is their primary activity. As Refuge destinations such as the Upper Kenai River have become more popular, we have placed limitations on guided use to maintain less crowded social conditions and to insure that the Refuge's wildlife populations and wildlife habitat are protected.

The Refuge has established certain permit conditions for various guided activities. Permit conditions seek to provide safety for guides and their clients, to protect Refuge resources and wildlife, and in some cases to limit congestion at Refuge locations. Depend-

ing upon the particular service a prospective guide wishes to provide, the State of Alaska and other federal agencies may have further requirements and regulations that are applicable. For example, big game guides, commercial air taxis, boat operators, and Kenai River guides must obtain additional licenses or permits from such agencies as ADF&G, Coast Guard, and FAA. Fees may be collected, based on actual client use-days and the type of activity.

If you are thinking of starting a guide business, don't forget to do your homework; talk to other guides and knowledgeable persons, and most importantly focus on your target clientele. If you have further questions regarding the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge visitor services, application deadlines, and permit requirements, contact us at Refuge Headquarters at 262-7021 for more information.

Rick Johnston has a Ranger/ Pilot for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1979. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.