

A Kenai experience

by James Hall

Few words can express the feelings that accompany fulfilling one's life dream. Standing on the boardwalk overlooking the Kenai River, watching moose browse alders, seeing eagles feed in the trees overhead brought me to the realization that I had indeed met one of my life goals—coming to Alaska! When I was four years old, my parents spoke of moving from Georgia to Alaska to homestead. They never did, but I wish they had, for coming here is a bit like coming home for me.

My name is Jim Hall, and I am the new Assistant Manager for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. I just moved my family 4,998 miles from Natchez, Mississippi where I was the Refuge Manager for the St. Catherine Creek NWR.

Many people ask how I ended up working for the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Well, the story goes like this: When I was 12 growing up in the north Georgia mountains, white-tailed deer were a scarce commodity. My Father routinely sacrificed his weekends in the fall to drive my brother and myself 32 hours south to hunt on the Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge. One day, while on a bow hunt at Piedmont, a Federal warden stopped and checked our permits and license. For me, growing up where squirrels, quail, and rabbits were the only game, the people who protected our few deer did a very special job. (Deer were re-introduced to Georgia in the 1950's). After the warden drove off, I asked my Dad, "Does he get paid to do that?" After an affirmative reply from my Father, my mind was set on my future career!

A decision that affects an entire family rarely suits all members of the family, especially when it involves a move. My eldest daughter Danya (age 16) cried for weeks after being made aware of the move. She suffered most by losing her friends, her car, her dog, and her cats. The car was given to friends who did not have one, the dog and cats to other friends. Thirteen days on the road, and we've been here three weeks now. This past weekend she spent the night with her new friend Fiona on Friday night and with another new friend Haylee on Saturday night! Ahh! The resilience of youth!

My wife Elaine seems to love it here so far, as does

my youngest daughter Kit (age 13). My wife, being both a naturalist and a poet, expressed it this way:

There is a razor-sharp beauty to Alaska: it flays self-illusions and pierces the soul with absolute wonder and primal fear. 'Survival of the fittest' is no trite phrase here. Alaska will cradle you in one moment and kill you in the next. I love the honesty of it; each and every creature is treated as an equal. Man does not reign supreme in this land, yet neither is he an inferior, he simply IS. What an elegant simplicity!

I am in awe of this land. I am intoxicated and infatuated. I am humbled by the majesty of the volcanic mountains covered in ice; cognate of the paradox. I am bewitched by the shifting colors of the Inlet waters. I am spellbound by the rapidity with which the chromatic fall foliage replaces the variegated greens of summer. I have entranced myself, for Alaska neither needs nor seeks my appreciation or approval. I like that too.

Rusted out vehicles are herded together in fields of fireweed. Tar-papered and plywood-patched cabins peek out from behind pristine stands of aspen and spruce. Streets weave a drunken line through towns that end as abruptly as they begin. This is Alaska as well. People talk less, listen more, and learn much. The ones that choose to stay are survivors of a different sort, private and personable; independent and generous; loud with laughter and quiet in spirit, tempered by an environment that does not tolerate fools. I have found Valhalla.

Should I do nothing more for the rest of my life but stare out my window at the view before me, I would never be bored, for peaceful urgency ripples the air. The sea alternately caresses and beats the rocks on the beach, giving birth to a

coarse-grained black sand that bespeaks of ancient molten-formed parents. The constantly shifting plates here remind one of how young this land really is like a teenager unsure of her identity. Alaska is slipping and sliding towards adulthood. Earthquakes are common, though rarely noticeable. Glaciers flirt with the land, seductively gliding forward to touch the base of the mountains, then shyly retreating back to the safety of their ice-fields. Centuries-old conifers masquerade as youngsters, their slender girths and tapering crowns disguising their immense age.

Alaskan life is precarious and precarious, the fertile summer months are short and intense; the brutal winters are long and unforgiving. The motto here should be 'Carpe Diem,' or perhaps even more appropriately, 'Eat, Drink, and be Merry,' for there will be a tomorrow in which you will surely die. Delusions and illusions do not survive the untarnished truth of Alaskan life. My spirit rejoices in this straightforwardness.

Understand, we have not yet experienced an Alaska winter! However, I doubt our feelings will change much since we like cold weather, and we're glad to escape the 90° to 107° summers in Mississippi!

Since arriving, I have come to realize that just about everything that I have ever heard about the Kenai is true. And I have also come to appreciate the Refuge as a complex institution and ecosystem. The issues range from fisheries, to subsistence, to brown bears, to oil & gas exploration and development. The glory of flying over the Kenai mountains, watching

sheep and goats scale near vertical slopes with ease, seeing a half dozen bald eagles in a brief boat trip down the river, all of these experiences combine to bring about a sense of awe. My fifteen years of federal service has been well spent, for it got me the job that brought me to the Kenai.

Since I have been in the State, I have noticed several things unique to Alaska. First, people precede their comments with, "Hi, my name is ___, and I've lived in Alaska ___ years." This qualifying statement, which gives the speaker credence to those assembled, is interesting. I wonder how it got its origin? So, here goes! "Hi, my name is Jim Hall, and I've lived in Alaska almost one month." Before you judge, understand that I know I'm new, and I don't understand the issues yet, but I'm learning, and hopefully I can bring along a different perspective.

Another thing I've learned about this area is that the people here are just 'nice folks.' My family and I are still living in a hotel waiting to close on our new house. We chose the Clam Gulch Lodge as our 'home,' and I have been very pleased with the reception my family and I have received so far. The people there have gone out of their way to help us, and have just been super. This helpful nature has been reflected by the folks in Soldotna, Sterling, Kenai, Kasilof, and Ninilchik as well—all 'Nice Folks.'

The Kenai NWR stretches almost from one end of the Peninsula to the other, with almost two million acres. Approximately 500,000 people per year use the Refuge for hunting, fishing, hiking, and wildlife observation. I know I am glad to be here, and I look forward to serving the Kenai Refuge, the Kenai Peninsula, and the people of Alaska.

Jim Hall is the new Assistant Manager for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.