

Cutting that special Christmas tree

by Candace Ward

Each year Kenai National Wildlife Refuge opens refuge lands to individual household Christmas tree cutting from Thanksgiving to Christmas. Many local folks enjoy their annual holiday outing to find the perfect tree and consider the “tree hunt” to be one of their favorite holiday traditions. Others get into a hurried rush over finding their tree and find the experience a pressured ordeal. After fifteen years of answering visitor questions on the “how-to” of finding the perfect tree, here are a few insights to make the experience for your family smoother, more fun, and kinder to the natural world.

First plan on making the outing fun for the whole family. With the driving time from the central peninsula to a refuge location and time on the ground to find your tree, you will spend an average of four hours. So, bring snacks, juice, and a few well-chosen audio tapes for the car trip. Bring layered clothing to stay comfortable and warm inside and outside the car. Bring a few pillows to let the kids and your spouse nap on the trip home.

Tools for cutting the tree need to be prepared before loading the family into the car. A sharp ax or hand saw is a must. Rope to tie the tree securely to the vehicle for the trip back is also essential. A measuring tape is a great addition to the tool kit especially if you measure the area in the house you plan to put the tree in ahead of time. That way when you are ready to cut, you can double check the tree for size before you cut it. Depending on snow conditions be sure to take snowshoes and a sled if you are going out in deep snow. If icy, give us a call at the refuge visitor center so we can update you about hazardous road conditions.

Take only one tree per household. Cut in the right place. On refuge lands to cut a Christmas tree you must be 150 ft. from any road, trail, access area, or water body (lake, stream, river, pond, etc.). The reason for this requirement is to spread out the impact of taking trees. Cut the tree as near to the ground as possible. This measure reduces the safety hazard of sharp stumps sticking out of the ground.

A few other tips for tree cutting include walking around the tree and making sure it is the right shape. Often the tree doesn't have to be perfectly symmetri-

cal since one side usually faces a wall. If it's snowy, shake the tree so you see the true shape. Remember once you cut the tree it's yours. Discarding a tree to cut a “better” one is a “sure fire” way to get a ticket and you don't want your family outing to end in costly frustration.

Know where it's legal to take a tree in the refuge. The area around refuge headquarters in Soldotna is closed to taking of Christmas trees. The next closest refuge area to Soldotna for tree cutting is out Funny River Rd. Go past the airport and note the refuge entrance sign. The refuge borders the south side of Funny River Rd. for six miles and a tree can be cut in this area.

Traveling north from Sterling on Swanson River Rd., look for the refuge entrance sign just before Mosquito Lake. From this sign you are now in the refuge for the rest of Swanson River Rd. and also for Swan Lake Rd. Refuge oil field roads in this area are closed to vehicles, but you may enter on foot to cut a tree. Traveling east from Sterling look for the refuge entrance sign. The Sterling Highway corridor inside the refuge from this point to Russian River and Skilak Lake Rd. are legal areas to cut your tree. Remember that 150 ft. distance. That equals 50-70 adult walking strides.

Each year I ponder the cumulative impact of cutting thousands of young trees on the refuge. In Alaska with our short growing season many of the four to six ft. evergreen trees can be 20 to 50 years old depending on the species and the location. So even though it is perfectly legal to take a Christmas tree if you follow the previous guidelines, take a moment to think about ways to reduce your impact. Are you in an area where young trees are crowded? Thinning out a crowded tree can be beneficial to the entire stand. Is a tree injured or uprooted? Choosing an injured tree that won't make it over the long term will reduce the long term impact of Christmas tree cutting.

Christmas is a season where we celebrate our religious, cultural, and family heritages. We examine our relationships with family and friends and find ways to show our appreciation for them. When we reach out to others in the spirit of generosity, let's not forget

the natural world too. We depend on it for air, water, food, shelter, necessities, and recreation. Not only can we minimize impacts on the natural world in selecting and cutting a Christmas tree, but we can also give nature a gift by acting in ways that care for and protect our living planet year round.

For more information on Christmas tree cutting

and other refuge topics, call 262-7021 or visit the refuge web site at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.

Candace Ward has been a Park Ranger at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for over 15 years. She coordinates the refuge's information and education programs. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.