

# Proof of woolly mammoth presence on refuge land lacking

by Jim Hall

Managing any national wildlife refuge has its ups and downs, as does managing any land (even your own two acres). Sometimes, everything you want to accomplish goes exactly as planned, but sometimes it does not.

Occasionally, weird things happen that disrupt your normal rhythm, and then excitement is added to your life! Imagine finding the large bones of an extinct animal on your property. What would you do? Who would you ask? Can you get into trouble if you dig them up? (If it's on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, then yes, you can definitely get into trouble. Removal of articles of this nature would be punishable under 16 USC, 50 CFR.) Would you be destroying something if you did dig it up? Is this something "bigger" than anything ever discovered here before? What if those bones were a woolly mammoth?

I moved to the Kenai Peninsula in August of last year. Since that time, I have heard at least three times of mammoth parts being seen or found here on the peninsula. The problem with this information is that there has never been a documented find of a mammoth skeleton on the Kenai.

Teeth can be carried from point A to point B. Tusks can be moved the same way. Until a mammoth is excavated by a "card-carrying" paleontologist, there will never be any mammoths on the Kenai. That is the truth of science. If you doubt my word, then fly to Miami, visit the store "Art by God," buy a mammoth tusk, carry it back to the Kenai, bury it in your backyard, dig it up in front of friends, and say you found it here. Wow! Were mammoths really here? We don't know.

I am a wildlife manager by training, and I have managed seven national wildlife refuges in four states over the last 12 years. I am not a paleontologist. I am not an expert on things such as extinct woolly mammoths, but folks seem to think I DO know about these things because they keep telling me about them. I overhear conversations at dinner of skeletons being seen in ravines, tusks on display in front of the bank, folks in planes seeing tusks, and skeletons washed out to view by the ocean.

What am I to think of these things? Years from

now, will my co-workers call me "Mammoth Hall" because of these "fables?" Or, will someone come forward with a real story of a mammoth?

If someone were to come forward with a verified report of a mammoth on the Kenai refuge, then what would happen? Well, first of all, the appropriate museums would be notified, so that qualified personnel could be brought forward to professionally evaluate and excavate the skeleton. Then it would be properly preserved and displayed for the benefit of all Alaskans and other Americans, not just for one private collector. The value of a find of this nature to science would be tremendous, for mammoths (if found here) could even be a separate sub-species from those found in other parts of the world.

These creatures once roamed the northern half of the Earth, including Alaska, grazing the tundra in large herds during the Pleistocene ice age. Sometime around 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, something happened to erase them from the face of the earth. There are many different ideas on how this occurred, including one that puts human hunters at fault.

This is evidenced by skeletons of mammoths with stone points embedded in the ribs. I doubt those points got there by accident. In fact, I would bet that our forefathers harvested these animals for food. We know that mammoths were abundant up in the Interior, along with bison, horses, and saber-tooth tigers, because their bones are often washed out by hydraulic gold mining operations. Indeed, frozen mammoth carcasses, complete with tissue, skin and hair have been found in many places in Siberia.

Did these animals ever wander down through the Chugach Mountains (which were probably covered by glaciers at that time) and onto the Kenai Peninsula? According to the Pratt Museum in Homer, single mammoth teeth have been found on two occasions. One tooth was found in a glacial deposit near Homer, and the other was found loose on the beach of the Homer Spit.

This indicates that mammoths were found here, or at least parts of them were carried here during the past. I'm sure that even the early human inhabitants of the Kenai would have found a mammoth tooth "cool," and

could have possibly carried them here as a keepsake. Until someone comes forward and says “There’s one!”, then it is just possible that folks are seeing moose skeletons, not the bones and tusks of a woolly mammoth.

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*National Wildlife Refuge. One of his hobbies is flint-knapping to make arrowheads and other stone tools. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*