

## Ch..Ch...Ch...Changes

by Brenda Wise

When I was tasked to write an article for the Refuge Notebook Series, I had something specific in mind. Like things normally happen, something comes up to change the 'best laid plans of mice and men.' Fortunately, you learn to go with the flow and the many changes it brings. This article was originally going to be about some of the refuge staff that has been around for many years, but it too has changed.

After talking with a few of the 'old geezers,' anyone that has been here over 17 years, I discovered they are a wealth of information and have witnessed many changes over the past 17 to 31 years. The one obvious change was the refuge's name. The Kenai Moose Range, established in 1941, became the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in 1980, but many residents of the Peninsula still refer to it as the Moose Range.

In the 'old days,' the Refuge Headquarters was located on five acres of land in downtown Kenai. Today, it is located on 160 acres on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna. The permanent staff has gone from 10 to 39. During the summer season, the staff grows to almost 80 and includes temporary employees, volunteers, Youth Conservation Corps enrollees, and student interns. The number of visitors has certainly changed too, from a few thousand, to over half a million each year. Our fleet of vehicles has grown from 10 to 150, including heavy equipment, dump trucks, flatbeds, fork lifts, snow machines, and boats. The maintenance area grew from a two door mechanic stall to one with four doors, a wood shop, and storage buildings to house all the equipment. There are also now approximately seven miles of trails at the current headquarters area for cross country skiing and nature walks.

Life was simpler then as well. Technologically speaking, the office had an old Xerox machine that literally 'burned' copies. There were no fax machines,

no computers, and no reliable two-way radio communications.

Campground and road maintenance was all handled out of the shop and crews went out daily to collect trash from the garbage cans located at the pull outs and campsites. The outhouses were placed over excavated pits and when the pit was full a new pit was dug and the outhouse was moved. Now we have contracts with local businesses to pick up the dumpsters and pump the outhouses in the campgrounds. During winter, it would take two very long days in the road grader with an overnight stay, to maintain Swanson River and Swan Lake Roads compared to current seven hours in a dump truck with a plow.

Over the past 25 years, glaciers have retreated up to ½ mile and the retreat of Skilak Glacier has given birth to a large lake at the front of the glacier. The contracting and melting of the Harding Ice Field has exposed barren rock and mountain tops that used to be snow-covered during summer but are now free of snow. Seasonal water levels are lower, small ponds have dried up, lake shorelines have shrunk and new islands have been formed as water levels lowered. The effects of logging activities, wildfires, and bark beetles have also impacted trees and other vegetation.

This summer will begin a time of change as some of our 'old timers' leave the Refuge to enjoy the rewards that retirement will bring. We will miss them and their dedication to the Refuge that they have given throughout their many years of public service. New names and faces will join the staff over the next year and bring about a new era of change.

*Brenda Wise has been employed at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge as a Refuge Clerk for the past 12 years. 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/>.*