

Kenai National Wildlife Refuge wears many hats, but none with plumes

by Dave Kenagy

It all started with ladies' hats and pens. We're not talking about ordinary bonnets, mind you, but frilly, feathery, fancy kinds of hats. I know you've seen pictures of these hats with long plumes of feathers. Some of the feathers came from pelicans.

The pens were the kind you write with, or should I say, wrote with. There was a time before ballpoint pens when people wrote with feather quill pens, and some of the "feathers of choice" came from pelicans.

Obviously, we are not talking about yesterday. We are talking about the beginning of the 20th century, a time when market hunting for waterfowl, upland game birds and birds such as pelicans was a part of everyday life. This market hunting, however, was decimating populations of birds and other animals all across the country, and many people were becoming concerned.

One of those concerned was a German immigrant name Paul Kroegel, who lived on the Indian River Lagoon in Florida. Kroegel was saddened by the huge impact that feather hunters were having on the brown pelicans on a small island near his home, and he personally petitioned President Theodore Roosevelt to set aside the island as a wildlife refuge.

President Roosevelt thought Kroegel's idea was a good one and created the Pelican Island Refuge on March 14, 1903. Pelican Island became the country's first national wildlife refuge, and Paul Kroegel became the country's first national wildlife refuge "manager."

Kroegel was also the first volunteer to work for what later became the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. You see, at first Kroegel was not paid by the government, although he did receive the tidy sum of \$1 per month from the National Audubon Society. He furnished his own boat and gun to patrol the refuge.

The national wildlife refuge system has come a long way since the days of Paul Kroegel, and there are now more than 530 refuges across the country. And, although refuges now have many paid employees, they also have many volunteers. These volunteers are people like Paul Kroegel; people who want to donate their time, energy, and expertise to protect

wildlife and make refuges good places to visit.

Lets's jump forward a century to the summer of 2002 to see what refuge volunteers are doing at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Did you know that the Kenai Refuge trail system is maintained by volunteers, under the supervision of a backcountry ranger? This year three Student Conservation Association volunteers will be clearing blow-downs, removing brush and putting up signs on trails. They'll also clean and rehabilitate remote campsites and talk with backcountry travelers.

If you're hiking a trail or paddling on the canoe system, stop and talk with these volunteers and thank them for the good work they do. And remember, it isn't just this year that volunteers are maintaining trails; they've been doing it for more than 20 years.

Our campground hosts also are volunteers; these folks are dedicated to making sure that campgrounds are clean, safe and fun places to visit. You'll find them at Hidden Lake Campground and Upper Skilak Campground. As you drive through the campgrounds, you'll see a "Campground Host" sign in front of their trailers.

Stop by and talk with them, even if you're not camping. They are there to help and to give you the latest information on camping, fishing, hiking, and wildlife watching.

If you stop by refuge headquarters or the visitor contact station near Jim's Landing with a question about camping, hiking, hunting, fishing, refuge regulations or any one of a hundred other topics, you'll probably talk with a volunteer. If you go to a campfire program at Hidden Lake or go on a natural history hike, there's a good chance a volunteer will be giving the program or hike.

That's because this summer the refuge has three SCA volunteer interpreters who are here to answer your questions and educate you about the incredible wildlife, plants, geology and history of the refuge.

This isn't new, either. We depend on SCA volunteer interpreters every year. Stop by and ask a question; they'll be happy to provide an answer.

Volunteers also will work with the biologists this

summer. We are always amazed at how hard these biology volunteers work. This year they'll be working on a frog study. Frogs, it seems, are very sensitive to contaminants and depend on clean water. Maintaining water quality is one of the priorities of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. These volunteers will be providing vital data to help assure high water quality, with the help of the frogs.

In the past several years we have added two new trails to our trail system. The work has been done by a crew of high school SCA volunteers. The work they do is truly impressive, and it is all done with hand tools. They completed Hideout Trail in 1999 and will complete the new trail at Upper Skilak Campground this year. Without the hard work of these volunteers, neither of the new trails would have been built.

Perhaps you have seen the historical Andrew Berg cabin at refuge headquarters on Ski Hill Road. Most of the furnishings in it were found or made by two refuge volunteers—Bud Crawford and Bill Nelson. These two fellows have shown a keen interest in restoring the cabin and giving it the look and feel it would have had when it was built in the 1930s.

If you haven't seen the cabin, stop by headquarters for a look back in time. There's a good chance you might bump into Bud or Bill; they can frequently be

found working on the cabin. Stop and talk with them; they have stories to tell. And, give them a big "thank you" for a job well done.

This year we have already had Boy Scout groups helping with projects, with more groups wanting to join in. The ways local groups or individuals can volunteer are almost endless. If you or your group would like to volunteer, give me a call to explore the possibilities at 260-6163.

Last year volunteers gave over 12,000 hours of their time to the refuge. Isn't that fantastic? We got 12,000 hours of things done that we wouldn't have without volunteers.

Well, hats off (no plumes, of course) to all of our refuge volunteers. If you run into one of them during the summer, give them a big "thank you." Many will be wearing a blue SCA uniform, with a volunteer patch on the sleeve.

So, that's the story of ladies hats, quill pens, the refuge system, Paul Kroegel and volunteers. Actually, the story isn't over yet; maybe you can write some of it yourself.

Dave Kenagy is the refuge volunteer coordinator. He also supervises volunteer trail crews working on special projects. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.