

New additions, improvements make refuge more user friendly

by Bill Kent

Changes. Sorry, this will not be a discussion of the David Bowie song from his glitter rock days, so put your platform heel boots back in the closet. Instead, I was recently reflecting about the changes to facilities (for your enjoyment of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge) I have seen since I transferred here in the spring of 1991. Some of these changes are quite apparent to you, our most frequent users; a few occurred at new locations and have not been noticeable yet. Some were initiated by the refuge staff, and not a few result from suggestions made by you, the users of the refuge.

Easily, most changes have been along the Skilak Loop Road because that is where a majority of our visitors choose to visit. Hidden Lake and Upper Skilak campgrounds were enlarged and the roads paved, campsites were clearly defined with gravel pads and have picnic tables and fire rings. Upper Skilak also has a “walk-in” area for those campers who prefer some separation from RV campers.

Both facilities have campground hosts during the summer who provide valuable information to campers and can assist with emergencies which might arise. A new fee program allows a large percentage of the fees charged at both sites to be returned to us; we use the funds to provide dumpsters and pay for toilet pumping. This was a significant change for the better, as previously these services came from our base operating budget.

Lower Skilak campground benefited when the entrance road was widened and resurfaced and the boat launch parking area was enlarged. Additional parking areas were established to reduce the parking congestion which resulted when the second sockeye salmon run provided excellent opportunities for harvesting these fish in the Kenai River below Skilak Lake.

Two new toilets were also constructed here. Construction at Jim’s Landing eliminated campsites on the banks of the Kenai River that were causing the banks to slough off. Steps to stabilize and protect the riverbank were employed. At this time, the riverbank is responding well and the re-established vegetation is

providing shelter for juvenile fish.

New traffic flow patterns were established and new toilets were also constructed. New and larger parking areas (with more new toilets) at the Visitor Contact Station across the Sterling Highway connect to Jim’s Landing with a new footpath.

Along the Skilak Loop Road, trail head parking areas were enlarged and resurfaced. A new RV dump station was constructed, and new toilets were placed at Lower Ohmer and Engineer Lake. Three new trails have been constructed:

- The Hideout Trail, which goes up the east facing hill at approximately the two-mile point when entering the Skilak Loop from the east, provides spectacular views of the Kenai River valley toward Cooper Landing;
- A yet to be named trail is nearing completion at Upper Skilak campground and will take you to a high point above Skilak Lake;
- Burney’s Trail begins in the Skyview Loop at Hidden Lake Campground and is an excellent trail for families.

New interpretive panels were installed, too, at various sites along the Skilak Loop Road. The panels relate a range of information on the refuge’s wildlife and fish, natural resource management activities, wildlife research, human history and the importance of the Kenai River. We hope to continue this educational effort at more sites in the Skilak Loop as funds become available.

The Outdoor Education Center located on Swan Lake Road was the beneficiary of a cooperative agreement with the Church of Latter Day Saints. Refuge staff removed an old, dark meeting cabin and a crew from the church replaced it with a larger, brighter structure. The education groups using the facility have made many positive comments about this change, as well as about a new toilet structure erected by the crew.

New toilets replaced old, dark structures at Dolly Varden, Rainbow Lake and Swanson River Landing, in the area of the refuge north of the Sterling Highway.

Hopefully some of you took the opportunity to use the new fishing platforms at Moose Range Meadows when water levels in the Kenai River were lower this past summer. The platforms were installed in an effort to provide fishing access after we were forced to close a public-use easement due to the impact of foot traffic along the riverbank in this area.

The project came about from the shared efforts of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustees Council, The Salamatof Native Association, Kenai River Sportfishing Association and Sen. Ted Stevens. Even if you choose not to fish here, the views of the Kenai River, interpretive panels along the walkways, and a chance to observe the wildlife using the river corridor are worth a visit.

Last, a new contractor at the Russian River Ferry

has come on board, and I receive numerous positive comments from visitors when I am there for inspections or other business. The contractor is Alaska Recreation Management, and its staff is dedicated to providing high quality visitor services.

I am sure I have left out other changes that have occurred, but from my vantage point as the person with the overall responsibility for the visitor services program on the refuge, I think these changes have been very positive for our visitors.

I hope you have had the chance to use these facilities and agree. I also encourage you to contact me or my staff if you have suggestions on what changes you think would benefit refuge visitors.

Bill Kent is the supervisory park ranger at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He and his family live in Sterling. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.