

Biologists begin to explore hidden corner of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Ed Berg

Many Peninsula residents know the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge as the hunting and fishing grounds of the central and northern Kenai Peninsula. Only diehard map devotees know that there is a separate block of Refuge land south of Kachemak Bay.

This block of 147 square miles was added in 1980. It includes most of Grewingk Glacier, and the high mountain peaks and glaciers that fill the picture-window views across from Homer and East End Road. Ice worms are the probably the largest species of interest on much of this snow-covered terrain.

We call this block the “southern cube,” and few of the Refuge staff have ever been there on the ground. Last winter we decided that it was time to take a serious look at the area and inventory the resources, at least on the unglaciated part. So we began planning an expedition. On June 24 we bundled into an Otter piloted by Gary Porter of Bald Mountain Air and lifted off from Beluga Lake for two quick hops over Kachemak Bay to Emerald Lake, east of Grewingk Glacier.

Emerald Lake lies nested in a bench-like sub-alpine valley. The east side is flanked by an 1,800-foot wall leading up to the flat crest of the mountains. The west side of the valley is rimmed by a line of hills overlooking the deep channel of Grewingk Glacier to the west. The north end of Emerald lies in Kachemak Bay State Park and can be accessed by a trail loop from Humpy Creek and the Grewingk outwash plain. The south end of Emerald Lake, where we camped, lies in the Kenai Refuge.

The broad valley southeast of Emerald Lake consists of willow and alder thickets, open flower-laced meadows, hilly moraines, and several small lakes. This is prime black bear country with good root digging and lots of salmonberries and blueberries. On the first day we saw a sow and cub, and two solitary adults, but generally had no unpleasant encounters or camp visitations.

At 5 a.m. every morning Todd Eskelin and one sleepy volunteer hit the bushes running to do songbird surveys. They would stop every 400 meters, and Eske-

lin, who has an incredible ear for birdcalls and songs, would listen for five minutes, counting the number of each species within and beyond 50 meters. Only calling or singing birds were counted; silent types in the bushes would be impossible to detect without x-ray vision.

A typical morning transect covered 3,200 meters (roughly two miles) with eight to 12 stops and generally involved a massive amount of bushwhacking.

The bird surveys yielded lots of golden-crowned sparrows, Wilson’s warblers, hermit thrushes and fox sparrows. Wilson’s warbler is the smallest warbler in Alaska and is brightly colored like a yellow canary. These species are typical of sub-alpine open brush and were expected. When Eskelin crested the last hill west of Emerald Lake, which had better spruce cover and a great view of the glacier, he picked up more of the boreal forest species such as varied thrushes, pine siskins, slate-colored juncos and ruby-crowned kinglets.

The golden crown sparrow, with its descending three-note call, was certainly the most noticeable bird in the valley, as in many areas of the southern Peninsula at this time of year. Some folks hear its plaintive falling call as “Three blind mice,” or “Oh dear me.” Across the Canadian border it says “Oh Cana-da.” In Homer it is known as the homesteader bird, which mocks the struggling homesteader with “You damn fool.” Listening to it as we thrashed through the alders and willows, this last interpretation seemed to fit best.

We saw a pair of golden eagles soaring high over the bluffs above Emerald Lake. No nest was visible, but they are known to prefer high craggy sites well above treeline. Eskelin also found a single song sparrow singing in its territory high up near the glacier. This is a typical coastal beach species, a long way from its proper turf.

Todd set up his mist net, which looks like a badminton net of very fine mesh, and captured 23 birds of five species for banding. Some of these birds may report back from Central America in the next few winters, and maybe we will find them back on the Kenai in

future summers. Eskelin has been banding birds since 1989, and often conducts bird-banding demonstrations at the Refuge headquarters. Watch for announcements of dates and times.

A second morning chore was checking the small mammal traps. Stephanie Rickabaugh deployed 47 pairs of snap traps and pitfall traps to capture some of the smaller denizens of the valley floor.

In the meadows we saw lots of vole tunnels from last winter running everywhere through the grass. We expected a large catch in the traps. It appeared, however, that the small critters had moved to less exposed areas for the summer. The total catch in four nights of trapping was eleven tundra and red-backed voles and seven masked shrews.

We saw a type of small mammal house that we have not seen before. The largest version was a mound of flat-lying dead grass eight to 10 inches high and about 18 inches wide, but typically the houses were smaller at six to eight inches high and 10 to 12 inches wide. When you lift off the top two-thirds of the grass, you find a central nest chamber about the size of your

fist, and a tunnel leading out at the base.

I would imagine that this is a very warm house with a few feet of snow on top. The houses would have to be constructed in the fall before snowfall, unlike the tunnels through the sod that probably provide a continuous winter-long food source. To construct the house a large amount of dead grass would have to be carried and piled up. Beavers are famous for this kind of industry, but voles?

Of the larger wildlife, we saw six goats one evening high on the ridge, three moose, at least four black bears, a coyote, scats of wolf and porcupine, and tracks of a lynx and possibly a mink. We didn't see or hear any marmots or pikas, although we did see lots of marmot-sized borrows.

Next week: Emerald Lake, Part 2: Catching bugs, a new plant, and rising treeline.

Ed Berg has been the ecologist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1993. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.