

A season full of wonder and enjoyment for everyone

by Candace Cartwright

Well here we are, another fall has come and swept all of its leaves and frost onto our doorsteps. For the past three years, this season has been one of chaos and uncertainty for me. Being a seasonal employee here at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, I only work from May to October. Each year I would migrate up to Fairbanks, following my husband, who was attending college there. Of course, with that comes the endless tasks of moving: looking for a new job, packing, changing all our addresses, packing, pulling hair out and repacking.

Finally, I am down on the Kenai Peninsula year-round. This fall I decided to embrace the days rather than stress about them. After all, who could argue that fall is the most enchanting of the seasons? There are colors of gold, orange, brown and green painted across the countryside like a scene out of a Bob Ross painting. The trees sway and dance, while at the same time showering the ground with colorful leaves. And sometimes, the landscape shimmers with ice crystals built up ever so delicately on the leaves and twigs. And there is always a fresh, sweet and crisp taste in the air.

Fall is a time of year that symbolizes the end and a new beginning to some of nature's life cycles. Strong winds of the season are blowing down dead trees, making new nurse log material for future seedlings, as well as dousing our lights. The wasps that seemed to target me last summer are now cowering helplessly about the ground, as only the queens survive to hibernate through the winter and rear a new brood for next spring.

For many animals, fall is a time of great preparation. You can often see voles and red squirrels frantically running about collecting every bit of food they can find to cache for the oncoming winter.

My big push for this fall is to get outdoors and do the activities that I have been wanting to do all summer. Hiking, canoeing and non-rainy camping trips are always on my wish list. Unfortunately, I always have trouble finding people with whom to do things and I am not one for going it alone in the outdoors. If there is one thing I have learned about Alaska, it is that summers are non-stop and extremely chaotic. If people aren't working at their job, they're working on their house, yard or just trying to avoid the mad rush

of tourist traffic. I spent most of my weekends helping my in-laws with their yard work and avoiding the traffic (which is more than enough to try my patience).

Now that summer is over and done with, I am looking forward to getting out on some recreational hikes in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. I hope to venture up the Fuller Lakes Trail or the Kenai River Trail this coming weekend, before too much snow falls. I have always wanted to go up Hideout Mountain, so that is a possibility as well. And of course, a nice canoe trip along the Swan Lake Canoe system doesn't sound too bad either. If anything, it will be a nice time to do some relaxing and stress-free activities with my husband.

There are so many options to choose from when it comes to recreation on the refuge: hiking, canoeing, kayaking and horseback riding are just a few. Any one of them would make for a fun and enjoyable day, especially during this time of year. Now that the windstorm has come and blown all the leaves off the trees, you might spot something new that you could not have seen before. And with the migration of many birds and waterfowl under way, now is a great time to get out the binoculars and do some wildlife viewing.

It is a relief not having to head north this year. I am more than content to take a nice walk outdoors, then come inside and crawl up on the couch with a hot cup of apple cider and a good book at the end of a day. Some things will remain constant. I still will be searching for a winter job, and I'll try convincing myself that I will go through and clean out the massive amount of junk I have collected through the years. A great and never-ending task this last one is, I know, but fall gives me the energy to even think about it!

For me, fall is a time to shed away the old and begin with the new. I hope that whatever fall is for you, that it brings all the joy and freshness of mind it brings me. I just wish it would last a little longer!

Candace Cartwright has been a seasonal Biological Technician with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1999. 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>.