

# Strange visitor questions keep Kenai National Wildlife Refuge staff hopping

by Brenda Wise

You might think that the job of an office worker at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is not very exciting. You might even think that doing the same job for over 12 years would be very boring and routine. Not so, dear reader.

When I started working at the refuge in January of 1989, I was a newcomer to Alaska. The only preconceived notions that I had about my new home were that it “didn’t get all that cold” and “it doesn’t snow all that much.”

Both these silly notions were soon tossed out the window when all it did was snow constantly for over a month, and then the temperature hit 67 degrees below zero.

It was back then that my friends and family in the Lower 48 started asking me strange questions. You know the ones, “Is it dark all the time?” and “Do people live in igloos?” I discovered that we “Alaskans,” the majority of whom have come from somewhere else, like to perpetuate the belief that we do live in igloos in order to deter the hords of people that would move here if they knew what a truly wonderful place Alaska is.

My first summer at the refuge had me looking forward to meeting and greeting people from all over the world who traveled here to visit. You may know them as the dreaded tourists that crowd our roads with their RVs and take up space on our riverbanks. These are the very same tourists that asked me the same questions, over and over, all summer long, regardless of where they came from. “Where can I see a moose? What are those plants with the big green leaves and red berries? Where can I catch a fish? What is that mountain across the water from Kenai? What is there to do here?” are just a few of the questions I answered on a daily basis.

By the next summer, I began to dread tourist season. I wasn’t looking forward to all those questions. Of course, I tried to take it all in stride, and developed some pretty standard answers. It wasn’t until I got my first really dumb question that I started looking forward to the dumb questions people ask. Once I started sharing my collection of funny tourist questions with

my co-workers, I discovered that we have all answered our share of strange questions.

Could you answer these questions, in a polite, professional manner and not give a smart answer or laugh?

Where do you keep the wild animals?

What color dye do you put in the river to make it that pretty color?

What time do you let the bears out?

What time of day is early morning (or late evening)?

Where can I see polar bears on the refuge?

Don’t you have the animals out back in cages?

At what mile marker will I see the bears?

Where are the wild animals? Well of course they are wild, so they are outside, not in cages. We have to explain where people can go to maybe get a chance to see what they are looking for, if they’re lucky.

What time of day is early morning or late evening? It varies, but most often you can base your answer on when sunrise or sunset occurs.

People that visit here often have no idea how vast and wild the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is. The refuge is almost 2 million acres and is roughly the size of the state of West Virginia or two and a half times the size of Rhode Island.

At what mile marker will we see the bears (moose, wolves, etc.)? Last year, I had the opportunity to do some traveling outside, and visited the National Bison Range in Montana, operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. There it finally dawned on me why so many people ask for specific mile markers and their desired critter.

The Bison Range is less than half the size of our Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area. There is a 19-mile drive (the length of Skilak Lake Road) and the staff knows exactly where their 350 to 500 bison are at any given moment and can tell you exactly where you can see them. Nice life, if you can lead it.

Some folks rightly complain that we answer in generalities about where they can see the wildlife. This isn’t a vest pocket Bison Range. It’s hard to pinpoint

the exact location of a caribou herd, brown bears eating salmon, moose, wolves, and elusive lynx in two million acres.

We give it our best shot, however, and we must be doing something right because the visitors keep coming back. And sometimes they come back with really

spectacular stories about what they have seen!

*Brenda Wise has been a refuge clerk at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1989. 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>.*