

Unattended property poses problems for refuge managers, users

by Rick Johnston

In my 20-plus years at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, one of the questions I have heard the most is, “How long can I leave my personal property out on the refuge?” Other variations are, “Can I leave my boat at XYZ lake until next spring?” Or, “Can I leave a tent up to reserve a campsite between vacation weekends in July?”

In most instances visitors are wanting to leave relatively inexpensive equipment that they hope to use on a subsequent trip. They want to avoid the time and cost of transporting the equipment to and from a favorite refuge location. The possibility of theft is often outweighed by the potential benefits and the perceived unlikelihood of theft or vandalism at a remote site.

In other instances, transporting gear out of a remote location seems at the time to be less costly than “donating” it to the refuge or to future potential users. Tarps, cheap tents, leaky boats, old snowmobiles, furniture, food caches, pots, pans, tree stands, fuel cans—full or empty—all fit into this category.

With few exceptions, my advice is to take on to the refuge only what you expect to take with you when you leave. This simple concept is supported by both general and specific regulations for national wildlife refuges, whose basic thrust is, “Take it out with you.” Even a well-intended donation of unused food left behind at a refuge cabin can unintentionally attract a spring bear that leaves the cabin in shambles.

Much of the personal property found on the refuge takes the form of unauthorized structures and camps, especially moose hunting camps, and the equipment and “furniture” associated with use of these unauthorized structures.

Just when I thought I had seen it all, I was flying back to Kenai one evening and observed four hunters sitting on chairs and playing cards at a card table situated on a large tree platform about 15 feet up in the air. By the time I was able to hike to the stand the next day, the card players were long gone, having left the high tree house, tables, chairs, playing cards, camo-net and miscellaneous personal property. I was never able to identify the card players, and none of the considerable

property was ever claimed.

Most of my discoveries are less noteworthy than this card game site, but each year we discover numerous abandoned tents, tent frames, lumber caches and tree stands. While commercially available friction-attached tree stands are legal for hunting, tree stands that are nailed into trees are not legal on refuge lands.

Hunters usually abandon nailed-down stands after their use, in part, because such stands can be difficult and dangerous to remove. Abandoned and aging tree stands often provide unsafe perches for unsuspecting opportunists, and can easily generate a broken leg or back.

Certain special circumstances for Alaska were recognized when Alaska-specific regulations were published. For example, Alaska refuges, except Kenai, generally allow certain personal property to be left for up to 12 months unattended, provided the property is not “abandoned” and that it does not interfere with the safe and orderly management of the refuge.

On the Kenai refuge, this privilege is only good for three days, and we ask that property owners leave a contact name or indication of ownership, so that any found property is not perceived to be stolen or abandoned.

In limited circumstances, refuge permits can be obtained for leaving property unattended for longer periods than three days. Examples of this would be a trapper who is permitted to leave a trap set for up to seven days. Or a visiting scientist who is specifically authorized to leave unattended boats, equipment and perhaps a shelter at a remote site between research visits.

Common examples of unattended property that would not be authorized are leaving an unattended tent and associated equipment at a popular riverside campsite from weekend to weekend, or leaving a boat or camper in a campground for storage and then visiting only on weekends.

One of my most puzzling abandoned property incidents was the discarding of a new Alumacraft square-stern canoe. In this episode, two adult women were

traveling through the Swanson River canoe route in two separate canoes with several small children. The women reportedly decided to abandon the heavier square-stern canoe and self-rescue by all piling into the lighter canoe.

Two weeks later, we located and retrieved the canoe, which had been abandoned along the remote stream. After numerous unsuccessful attempts to return the craft to its ill-fated owners, we put the canoe in storage, and after several years added it to the refuge fleet.

I'll always wonder why the canoeists didn't contact us regarding their problematic trip and seek assistance in recovering the canoe. Refuge officers find several boats and canoes annually left unattended at remote lakes. We post a dated note on abandoned boats and other property and request the owner to contact us. In some instances such as an emergency

or other circumstance, there is an explanation for the abandoned property, and simply removing the boat or equipment is the end of the matter. In other cases, we issue a notice of violation and a removal order if the owner can be determined.

I can understand that there are lots of practical reasons why a person might want to cache personal equipment on the refuge, especially in remote areas. Fifty years ago we had a lot fewer people using the refuge, and they only had horses and strong backs to tote in their gear. We are very privileged to have a 2 million-acre refuge in our back yard, but that great expanse could shrink up pretty fast if it is cluttered with too many "donations."

Rick Johnston has been a ranger/pilot for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1979. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.