

Kenai Refuge sounds provide “ear opening” experiences

by Dave Kenagy

It's been a quiet winter here on the Kenai, but things are about to change. Migratory birds will soon be winging their way north to visit us, bringing their songs with them. In another month or so the local birds, mammals, frogs, and all the rest of our wild neighbors will become more vocal with their songs, barks, grunts, croaks, and hums.

Before we know it, the aspen leaves will again be fluttering in the wind, sounding like small waves sizzling on a beach. Adventuresome folks will hear chunks of glacial ice kersplashing into lakes, or squeaking and rumbling their way down the mountainsides. The rivers will start to roar again as water levels rise, and the landscape won't sound like quiet winter anymore.

OK, maybe I'm tottering dangerously on the edge of transcendentalist romanticism here, but if you're like me, the sounds of nature are a pure delight. Unfortunately, the sounds of nature are getting harder and harder to hear. We humans make a lot of noise, and much of our noise drowns out the sounds of nature.

I take heart, though, that there are still plenty of places where you and I can hear the sounds of wild Alaska. One of the best places is the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. It's a big refuge, and just about anywhere on it you can hear the sounds of undisturbed nature. But, where are some hotspots, and how about a few listening tips, too?

I'll start with the tips. First, be quiet so you can hear as many animals as possible, especially those with small voices. Second, be sure to keep a reasonable distance from wildlife, especially sensitive species like trumpeter swans. Third, go out to listen when wildlife is most vocal. For songbirds, this is usually early, early in the morning. Just ask one of our biologists! Fourth, be sure to listen to all other sounds of nature. Don't just focus on the birds. And, last of all, relax and enjoy!

All right, where to go? One of my favorite listening places is the Dave Spencer Unit of the Kenai Wilderness—what most people call the “Canoe System.” It's a great place to hear common loons, pacific loons, redneck grebes, trumpeter swans, arctic terns, great horned owls, bald eagles, songbirds, and a variety others. You can also hear, if you're lucky,

beavers slapping their tails on the water, wolves howling, or a big bull moose splashing through the shallows. I've had some incredible listening experiences on Loon Lake, Swan Lake, and Jean Lake, but you'll hear a wide variety of wildlife and natural sounds on any canoe trip you take.

How about a quiet place? Can you keep this a secret? Try the Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area, in early May. The road will not yet be busy with traffic, and the area is amazingly quiet. You can hear the breeze snaking through the tree branches, the gray jays meowing in the spruce trees, and maybe even some wood frogs croaking in chorus. You can do this as a short day trip. And, just think, you don't have to go on a long wilderness trip to enjoy the quiet. Park your car at one of the turnouts or trailheads, and take a walk while enjoying the sounds of spring.

How about a more adventuresome listening trip? All right, let's go listen to a glacier. This requires a trip into the Andrew Simons Unit of the Kenai Wilderness, to visit either Skilak or Tustumena Glaciers. Both glaciers have lakes at their bases, and icebergs calve into these lakes with a loud splash. If you get close to the edge and listen carefully you can hear a very low creaking, groaning sound, and water dripping and flowing every which way. These are not trips for the faint of heart, but I've done them and I'm sure most of you could, too. Ah, wilderness!

Well, those are just a few of the many places you could go. The best thing to do is get out a map, pick a likely listening spot, load up the canoe or the knapsack, and head out on the Refuge for your own listening adventure.

But, what if you'd like to do more than just listen? Well, there are plenty of people who do just that—they record what they hear. Some even record what they can't hear. Can't hear? One nature recordist has recorded the popping sound made by sap rising in a tree. As the water moved up the tree trunk, it changed the osmotic pressure in the wood cells. As the cells expanded, they made a popping sound.

As you can imagine, recording nature sounds can require specialized equipment, especially microphones. There are close-up microphones that can lis-

ten to the sounds of ants snapping their jaws, or sap rising in the trunk of a tree. Shotgun and parabolic microphones can pick up sounds at a distance, for subjects that are either difficult or dangerous to approach. Hydrophones receive underwater sounds made by animals such as whales or shrimp. There are several different types of stereo microphone set-ups that make “landscape” sounds seem three-dimensional. There are even microphone systems that can bring the ultrasonic echo-location sounds of bats within the range of human hearing.

To find out more about the art and science of nature sound recording, just do an internet search and you’ll find plenty of information. Try searching with keywords such as “nature recording,” “bird song recording,” or “parabolic mic.”

If you’re interesting in what organizations are doing, be sure to check out the Nature Sounds Society, which exists “to encourage the preservation, appreciation, and creative use of natural sounds.” Visit their web-site at: www.naturesounds.org. Be sure to take a

look at the links they provide. And, by the way, the Society isn’t just for recordists; it’s for anyone with an interest in the sounds of nature.

Another interesting website is the “Nature Recordists” e-mail group at Yahoo. Here you will find discussions on a wide variety of nature recording topics by some of the top nature recordists in the world. Go to: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/naturerecordists/>.

If you have questions about where to hear a particular sound on the Refuge, call (262-7021) or stop by Headquarters, on Ski Hill Road. We’ll do our best to point you in the right direction, and might even provide you with a map.

Dave Kenagy is the volunteer coordinator and image specialist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, who still wonders what an iceworm sounds like. 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>.