

## National Wildlife Refuge System started on tiny Florida island 100 years ago

by Stephanie Rickabaugh and Kelly Modla

This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the National Wildlife Refuge System, which includes the two million acres of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge with headquarters in Soldotna. Last month two of us from the Kenai refuge journeyed to Florida for the kick-off national centennial celebration, held at the very first refuge, called Pelican Island, established by Teddy Roosevelt in 1903.

Here is a bit of the story about how the tiny Pelican Island wildlife refuge got started, and inspired today's national refuge system that protects over 100 million acres in 540 refuges around the country.

Ten thousand years ago, the Indian River formed a lagoon along the east central coast of Florida, supporting the fish-based economy of the native Ais Indians. American settlers arriving in the mid-1800s soon discovered the thriving bird rookeries around the Indian River lagoon. Nineteenth-century fashions favored fancy plumes of bird feathers, and created an aggressive market for plume hunters and a mindless slaughter of colorful waterfowl such as herons, egrets, spoonbills and pelicans. In 1858, for example, witnesses reported seeing upwards of sixty spoonbills being shot each day.

In 1881 a naturalist named Paul Kroegel homesteaded an area overlooking the Indian River lagoon. Kroegel was visited by many influential naturalists during the 1880s to the 1900s, who took an active interest in protecting the local birds. One of the visiting naturalists was Frank Chapman, a well-known ornithologist and curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Chapman discovered that Pelican Island was the last rookery for brown pelicans on the east coast of Florida, and he decided that government action was necessary to protect the birds.

Congress had some conservation-minded leaders during this period, and in 1900 it passed the Lacey Act to protect game birds and other wildlife from illegal interstate commerce. In Florida the state legislature passed laws protecting non-game birds. Paul Kroegel and Frank Chapman lobbied President Theodore Roosevelt to protect Pelican Island. On March 14, 1903

President Theodore Roosevelt signed the papers to set aside Pelican Island as the first National Wildlife Refuge.

The forward thinking of a few concerned citizens, backed by a conservationist President, have subsequently convinced most Americans that it is important to set aside wild lands to protect fish and wildlife for the benefit of future generations. We owe these pioneers a great vote of thanks.

Similar stories of concerned citizenry lie behind the establishment of many if not most of the nation's wildlife refuges. On the Kenai Peninsula hunters and conservationists lobbied Congress for years to protect the Giant Kenai Moose, which was thought to be a genetically distinct variety of moose. On December 16, 1941, the day after we entered World War II, another President Roosevelt—Franklin Delano—signed the papers establishing the Kenai National Moose Range, which subsequently became the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in 1980 under ANILCA.

When we were chosen as delegates from the Kenai refuge to attend the Refuge Centennial celebration at the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge in Florida, it seemed like we had come full circle. There was much pomp and circumstance and many speeches, but it all seemed worthwhile; this celebration will only happen every 100 years. We had the opportunity to meet many other employees of the National Wildlife Refuge System who are as jazzed about their work as we are about ours.

The public turnout was overwhelming! We estimated that at least 350 people per day stopped by our Kenai National Wildlife Refuge exhibit to talk with us. (It's hard to beat the "Alaska mystique," no doubt!) There were 35 other refuges with exhibits, showcasing a wide variety of refuge habitats and recreational opportunities.

Representatives from the U.S. Postal Service and U.S. Mint unveiled the new Refuge Centennial postage stamp and coin. Perhaps you have seen the new stamp; it's the one with the brown pelican.

The Centennial celebration was an opportunity

to reflect on the 100 years of wildlife conservation progress and what that means to us personally. We thoroughly enjoyed telling everyone about all the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge has to offer: terrific mountain views, fascinating big mammals such as brown bears, outstanding fishing, great hiking, and back country camping that let you get away from it all. We do believe that we live in a little piece of heaven and that our jobs here at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge are the icing on the cake.

Back home again, we are starting to plan a Refuge Centennial celebration on August 2<sup>nd</sup> at the Ninilchik Fairgrounds, with staff from all of the Alaska refuges

coming together for lots of “show and tell” about what the National Wildlife Refuge System has to offer in Alaska. Watch the paper for details on this upcoming event, and put on your boots for some great hiking on the Kenai refuge as spring unfolds.

*Stephanie Rickabaugh works in the Biology Program and Kelly Modla works as a Law Enforcement Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Kelly is expecting the arrival of a new junior Wildlife Refuge user sometime in late spring. 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>.*