

Refuge trail crews taking action after floods and windstorms

by Scott Slavik

Perhaps our early warm and sunny spring is Mother Nature's way of apologizing for the disappointing snow conditions of the past winter. If you're like me, you've long since swapped your cross-country skis and snowshoes for hiking boots and Extra Tuffs. Recently I've met quite a few Peninsula residents taking advantage of the recent warm weather and enjoying the trails on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Although each person claimed to love Alaska winters, their attention was now focused on catching some great bug-free hiking time and spring sunshine.

If you've spent any time on Refuge trails lately, you've probably seen or heard the author of this article. My name is Scott Slavik. I work as a Backcountry Ranger on the Kenai Refuge, and the noise you heard was probably the "whirr" of my chainsaw.

In the past few weeks, trail users have had to confront not a few trail obstacles. The high winds of mid-March caused an above-average number of downed trees, especially on trails within beetle-kill or burn areas. Hikers have had to duck under, climb over, and scurry around fallen trees; this can be challenging, unsafe, and create additional routes and impacts to surrounding vegetation. The fall 2002 floods that swept the drainages of the Kenai Mountains and washed out several state facilities on the Anchor River and Deep Creek also flooded and eroded several trails on the Refuge. So, part of my work this spring has been erosion control, as well as tree cutting. In addition to the challenges on the trail, hikers in the Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area have also faced difficulties on the road. Indeed, Skilak Loop has been in pretty rough shape. Although currently open, parts of the road have been impassable due to severe break-up conditions and last fall's heavy rains. The Department of Transportation will begin road maintenance and grading next week, so the road should soon be improved.

We got started early this year in clearing some of the most popular routes of winter downfall. Currently we have cleared the trails along Swanson River Road. In the Skilak area we have cleared the Bear Mountain, Upper Ohmer, Hideout, and Kenai River

trails. Along the Sterling Highway, downfall has been removed from the Skyline and Egumen Lake trails. The Refuge's volunteer trail crew will begin work June 1st with further maintenance efforts and trail improvement projects continuing throughout the summer. You can always check with the Refuge Headquarters for updates and current trail conditions.

A few hikers I've recently met told me about their favorite trails and special spots on the Refuge that they return to again and again. I was impressed by their intimate knowledge and appreciation of the wildflowers and berry picking, and enjoyed listening to detailed descriptions of their special moments involving a chance encounter with wildlife, a particularly dramatic sunset, or a unique photographic opportunity.

Other hikers seem to be constantly seeking new challenges, unexplored territory, a higher peak, or another vista. For those adventurers, I've been recommending the Refuge's newest trail located off Upper Skilak Campground. Although still unnamed and needing a few "finishing touches," a few curious hikers have already explored the route. This trail leads east from the campground to a plateau just below Henton Peak and affords spectacular panoramic views of Skilak Lake. Like the Hideout Trail, it climbs through a recent (1996) burn with open views in all directions. It is approximately 2.5 miles round trip and gains 1300 feet in elevation. Hikers will be treated to abundant wild flowers, wildlife sightings, and a challenging day hike. Student Conservation Association (SCA) volunteers constructed the trail over the past three seasons. We expect to complete this trail and have a formal opening later this summer.

Also scheduled for this season are improvements to the Hidden Creek and Kenai River trails. Volunteer high school and college students will be working on these and other trail upgrade projects this summer.

Memorial day weekend is just around the corner, the RV's are heading this way, and we will all soon have to share "our Alaska" with our summer guests. You still have time, however, to enjoy a quiet and peaceful wilderness moment on one of the many trails

on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

If you would like more information on Refuge trails and hiking opportunities, contact Refuge Headquarters for additional information or check out the websites below. If you would like to report downed trees or trail washouts that you have discovered, please give me a call at Refuge Headquarters (262-7021).

Scott Slavik is a Backcountry Ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Additional information on Kenai Peninsula trails can be found on Refuge Ecologist Ed Berg's website at: <http://chinook.kpc.alaska.edu/~ifeeb/index.html>. 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>.