

Restoring old cabins on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Molly Slocum

Midnight, June 21st you are sitting on the shore of Lake Tustumena near Andrew Berg's cabin. The colors of twilight surround you, painting the lake and mountains with pink, blue, and lavender hues. The only sounds reaching your ears are the water lapping at the sand and the wind rustling through the treetops. The year could be 1895; you are on a hunting or fishing trip, and you are now relaxing after a day of hiking in the high country. Or it could be 2003, and you are enjoying a peaceful summer solstice retreat.

The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge offers unique backcountry experiences with many historic cabins. Over the years cabins were built around the Kenai Peninsula to support activities such as hunting, fishing, trapping, and mining, as well as for year-round homes. Today these structures have historical value and are important living history that is worth preserving. These cabins symbolize the wildness of Alaska: a simple, rustic life and a close, primitive relationship to the Earth. Today they provide backcountry users with a historical perspective as well as a wilderness experience.

This summer the Kenai Refuge has a new crew of folks who will be restoring some of these cabins that are in danger of disintegration. The crew of four, along with volunteers, will work on replacing some of the cabin base logs as well as replacing bunks, tables, benches, windows, shelves, roofs and floors. The restorations are designed to maintain the original rustic atmosphere.

Restoring these cabins requires many hours of hard labor. Springtime starts with assessing the cabins, in addition to hauling all the building materials to the cabins. Currently the Finger Lakes cabin, located off Swanson River Road is closed while the work is in progress. The base logs are rotting and need replacing, as well as new bunks, tables, and benches. There are no dead trees near the cabin, so while the lake was still frozen we hauled five 20-foot logs across the lake, along with pier blocks, 40 five-gallon buckets of gravel for the foundation, and roofing material. Next we have to get all the materials from the lakeshore up the hill to the cabin to actually do the building work. This requires long hours of hard work, but there is no better

place to enjoy the warm, sunny spring days than outdoors next to a lake beneath the great blue sky.

I recently spent a weekend on Tustumena Lake assessing the condition of various cabins. We will be restoring another of Andrew Berg's cabins, which was built in 1902. Andrew Berg was a big game guide, and fish and game officer. After restoration, the cabin will be exactly the same as it was before; no changes will be made to the original design.

It is a shame to visit these historical places and find them defaced with graffiti carved into the old logs and trash littering the inside and the ground around the outside of the structures. This shows a lack of respect for people who lived here before us, who worked hard for their food and living. The refuge crew will also be sanding the logs to rid them of the graffiti, so that in the future backcountry users can enjoy a clean, peaceful, historic treasure.

Some of the other cabins scheduled for restoration this summer are Caribou Island Cabin, Nurses Cabin, and Pipe Creek Cabin on Tustumena Lake, and Doroshin Bay cabin on Skilak Lake. Trapper Joe Cabin, Vogel Lake Cabin, and Chickaloon Cabin will also be worked on. Most of these cabins were built in the early 1900's; however, a few were built more recently and have varying levels of conditions and repairs needed. Since the cabins were built before the Wilderness Act, they can still be maintained, even though some are located on Wilderness land.

The cabins are open on a first-come-first serve basis. It is expected that visitors will treat the cabins and surrounding property with respect, and not leave trash and graffiti everywhere. If this happens in the future, the cabins will be closed to the public. If you carry it in, carry it out. Leave the place neater than you found it for the next visitor; it might be you. These cabins provide us with a special historical aspect of a rustic, simple life, which can be considered the spirit of Alaska. It is important to preserve these artifacts of history so that others in the future can enjoy them.

If you are interested in volunteering with the upkeep and restoration of the cabins, contact Gary Titus at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge at 262-7021.

Kenai and Alaska Maritime National Wildlife

Refuges will host a Refuge Centennial Celebration at the Ninilchik fairgrounds on Saturday, August 2nd. Come join us for music, exhibits, and a chance to meet Teddy Roosevelt, who established the first National Wildlife Refuge in 1903.

Molly Slocum began working at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge on the SCA backcountry crew in 2001;

she became a Firefighter in 2002, and worked this spring on cabin management. She is now working for the U.S. Forest Service on the backcountry crew out of Moose Pass. 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>.