

## Refuge trail crew has many refuge trails ready for hiking and canoes

by Scott Slavik

So, you've caught your limit of fish for the day, now what do you do? I would recommend heading out on the trail system of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge offers and maintains more than 200 miles of hiking, canoeing and portage trails. Trails range in difficulty from relatively easy family day trails to strenuous mountain routes. There is a trail type and hiking opportunity for just about every interest.

The refuge backcountry crew has been actively maintaining the most popular road-accessible trails, which now are in fairly good condition. Trail maintenance is accomplished by refuge employees, youth work programs, Student Conservation Association Volunteers and community volunteers. These various groups have been dealing with extensive windfall from several fall and winter windstorms, which left many trails blocked. Additionally, the spruce bark beetle infestation and resulting dead trees have made clearing affected trails an annual event.

**Swanson River Road Trails:** These trails are relatively short day hikes providing access to nearby lakes. They pass through gently rolling hills of spruce and birch with no significant gain or loss in elevation. These trails are a good choice for families with children due to their shorter distances and the level terrain they traverse. They provide good wildlife viewing and birding opportunities. Moose are present in good numbers and bear, wolf, and coyote tracks can often be seen along the trail. These trails may also offer the perfect solution for anyone seeking a quiet backcountry fishing experience. All trails along Swanson River Road have been cleared of downfall. The backcountry crew will perform additional light maintenance on each of these trails, throughout the summer. This includes trimming overhanging limbs and branches and managing the explosion of seasonal vegetation along the trail tread. Generally speaking, these trails are in good condition with no major problems. As with many of the Refuge's trails however, exposed root systems in the trail tread are to be expected.

For those seeking a bigger adventure above tree-

line, I would suggest one of the following trails.

**Cottonwood Creek Trail:** Located on the south shore of Skilak Lake, this trail can only be reached by boat or floatplane, but it provides quick access to alpine country. The closest boat launch is at Upper Skilak Campground; however, winds can develop suddenly without warning making a lake crossing extremely rough and dangerous. Spectacular views of Skilak Lake and the surrounding mountains can be enjoyed above timberline and on clear days Mt. McKinley can be seen to the North.

This trail was heavily damaged during the floods of last fall. The creek jumped its banks and carved a new drainage, which "washed out" approximately one-quarter mile of the lower portion of the trail near Skilak Lake. Users still access the trail at the original trailhead on the west side of Cottonwood Creek, but must now navigate "the wash-out" and cross the creek before re-connecting with the upper, undisturbed portion of the trail. The backcountry crew has cleared and flagged a route through the "wash-out" to a narrow point on the creek that must be crossed. At this time, trail users are "on their own" with regards to making a safe creek crossing. As of June 8<sup>th</sup> the creek was fairly shallow in several places, but deceptively swift! Hikers should be prepared to go in over their boots! After re-connecting with the original trail, there is a clear route to timberline. Although portions of the route are somewhat overgrown with alders and devil's club, all downfall has been cleared to tree line. The trail generally remains dry in the lowland forest, but can be very wet just below timberline. Berry picking can be good in late summer. This is an excellent area to view wildlife, including Dall sheep, marmots, bears, and various species of birds.

**Surprise Creek Trail:** Surprise Creek Trail provides quick access to alpine country, and climbs rapidly in elevation through a spruce and hemlock forest until it emerges above timberline. The Surprise Creek Trailhead can only be reached by boat. The closest boat launch is at Jim's Landing (on Skilak Lake

Road 0.1 mile from the east entrance junction with the Sterling Highway) on the Kenai River. This portion of the Kenai River is CLOSED to powerboats. The Kenai River can be extremely swift and dangerous. The trailhead is directly across the river from Jim's Landing boat ramp. The trail is clear of downfall to timberline, although it is significantly overgrown with low-hanging alders at the lower end and encroaching hemlocks at upper elevations. The trail is also plagued with areas of standing water and deep muddy sections. The route has been flagged in a few places above the cabin site where it is difficult to follow the trail. In its present condition, it would perhaps be more accurate to describe this trail as a "wilderness route," but hikers will be rewarded with panoramic views of the Kenai Mountains and Kenai River drainage.

**Skilak Loop Road:** All trails within the Skilak Loop area have been patrolled and cleared of downfall. This represents the completion of phase I of the backcountry crew's maintenance efforts. Additional maintenance will continue on all of these trails throughout the summer.

**Hidden Creek Trail:** Although clear of downfall and completely accessible, this trail still has a few issues needing to be addressed. This year's High School SCA crew will be working on repairing broken boardwalks and consideration will be given to a possible re-route or installing additional boardwalks.

**Kenai River Trail:** Clear of downfall. There are several short overgrown sections on the Upper River route that require further attention. The trail, however, is clear and accessible. The backcountry crew is currently developing a better signage program to route visitors through this network of trails. The High School SCA crew will also be spending time on this trail. One possible project on the west entrance includes a re-route at the steep hill near the Kenai River.

**Seven Lakes Trail:** (patrolled & maintained 5/8/03, 6/5/03 & 6/21/03) Clear of downfall. Plans to replace the vandalized directional sign at the intersection of the Hidden Lakes Spur are underway.

**Swanson River canoe system:** the following routes have been patrolled and are clear of downfall and have appropriate portage trail signage in place:

- Entrance @ Paddle Lake to Kuviak Lake
- Kuviak Lake to Gene Lake (East Passage – Redpoll, Berry, Campers, Swanson)
- Kuviak Lake to Gene Lake (West Passage – Junco, Lost, Red Squirrel, Woods)
- Lonely Lake to Mouse Lake (Lonely, Lo, Hat, Rodent, Pan, Mouse)

**Hanson Horse Trail / Funny River Horse Trail:**

The entire route from the trailhead near Brown's Lake to timberline is clear of downfall. The trail tread, however, is severely eroded and plagued with roots throughout and the upper section is fairly overgrown with alders. The backcountry crew removed an estimated 150-200 trees from the trail. The overwhelming number of downfall and lack of regular maintenance has caused a proliferation of detours that are as heavily impacted as the main trail. The crew attempted to obscure these old routes wherever possible. The typical deep pockets found on most horse trails are in abundance and sometimes 20" - 24" inches deep. The trail is relatively flat and runs through some beautiful stands of birch.

**Pollard Horse Trail:** This trail is generally cleared by moose hunters in the fall for horse travel, and is not maintained by Refuge crews. The access to the trail on Borough land between Yukon Loop and the refuge boundary is presently clogged with logging debris and is inaccessible to horses. There are some blowdowns in the first several miles of the trail on the Refuge. (Note added by Ed Berg)

It takes a lot of work to keep these trails open, and I would like to thank all of our backcountry trail crew and Student Conservation Association volunteers for the excellent job that they have been doing on these trails!

Mark your calendars for August 2, 2003, when Kenai NWR and Alaska Maritime NWR host a Centennial Celebration of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The event is free to the public at the Alaska Fairgrounds in Ninilchik and lasts from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Attractions include speakers, movies, displays, and kid's activities sharing Alaska's refuges and wildlife. Live music and delicious food will also be provided.

*Scott Slavik is a Backcountry Ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.*