

## Veteran warden brings career to Kenai

by James Neely

Descending through the dark clouds that had obscured any visual stimulation since we departed Oakland, I caught my first glimpse of this great land as the plane descended to Anchorage. The Chugach Mountains, Turnagain Arm, and to the south a place that I had read about in *Outdoor Life*, *Field and Stream* and countless other hunting and fishing magazines—the Kenai Peninsula. This was Alaska! The place I dreamed about calling home.

It was the early 1970s and I was heading overseas for Uncle Sam. I would be carrying a gun and a badge, but believe me, the scenery would leave a lot to be desired. As we made our approach to Anchorage, the stewardess of the Flying Tiger DC-8 said that we would be delayed for several hours for repairs. Settling in at the airport in front of the big glass panes, looking out at the distant landscape, I recall thinking that I could get “delayed” here forever.

In 1976 my buddy Mike and I were police officers in a college town in northwest Pennsylvania. We had made our minds up that we were going to cash in and head North. We’d work our way across the States, up through Canada, and settle in Alaska. Maybe I could get a state trooper job and hopefully a game warden assignment someday.

Of course we had done all our homework on land deals, interim oil and fishing jobs, and all of that. Then, I had a chance to attend the Pennsylvania State Police Academy, so we delayed our plans and agreed that as soon as I returned, we would give our notices, pack our bags and head out.

I remember thinking we would need a good canoe, so I used an overtime check and bought a glass Sawyer guide model. Wanted to be ready. Well, when I returned, Mike had met a girl and, as they say, the rest is history. At least Mike was.

In 1981, I had the good fortune of being selected to attend the 18<sup>th</sup> class of the Ross Leffler School of Conservation, otherwise known as the Pennsylvania Game Commission Training School. Over nine thousand applicants vied for a handful of District Game Protector commissions.

For nearly a year we lived, studied, ate, slept and breathed game warden subjects. We were housed in an

early 1900s hunting lodge in the middle of State Game Lands 44. Nothing fancy here, folks. The main building slept fifteen souls in two tiny dorm rooms, and the classroom building slept another fifteen upstairs.

The “old school,” now replaced by a modern facility in Harrisburg, was hard-core game warden training. You got up at the break of dawn for PT, ate a big home-cooked breakfast, cracked the books hard, and then you walked outside into the woods and did it. Natural history, ecology, dendrology, land management, and the breadth and width of conservation law enforcement subjects filled the curriculum.

During the fall hunting season, October through December, we worked under the tutelage of seasoned District Game Protectors who showed us the ropes. We lived in the game warden’s house, ate the game warden’s food, and experienced a lot of the same family/job stressors that this demanding line of work dishes out. Faye and I were married during our Christmas break.

I spent the next five years managing a 400 square-mile game protector district in the “mountains” of Pennsylvania. Lots of deer and bear, lots of woods, and lots of poachers. Living off venison was a way of life for some folks, and bragging about the biggest buck, no matter if it was shot out of the truck window with a spotlight at 3 a.m., was a favorite pastime. I kept ten deputy game wardens a lot busier than their wives and children would have liked.

It wasn’t all outlaws and late nights though; I became acquainted with a lot of great folks who shared my love of Penn’s woods. I occasionally instructed at Penn State’s Wildlife Sciences program at the DuBois campus and helped a number of promising students get their start in a “ride-along with the game warden” program. Between my collateral duties as a bear research handler, firearms and self-defense and arrest tactics instructor, and my volunteer work with local conservation organizations the time passed quickly.

Never forgetting my desire to live in Alaska, and now that I was a game warden, I started looking at how I could combine the two interests. Several game protector associates had made the transition from the Pennsylvania Game Commission to the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service, and they encouraged me to apply for a special agent position.

I knew that the Alaska Region had occasional openings and I thought this might be my ticket North. Unfortunately, no positions were available. On the advice of one of my special agent friends, I made the transition to federal law enforcement by accepting a position with the Federal Bureau of Prisons in a brand new correctional facility on the outskirts of the half-million acre Allegheny National Forest.

Faced with environmental issues and no one on his management team with environmental expertise, the warden quickly promoted me into management. I spent the next twelve years managing employee training and development and overseeing our environmental compliance issues. Although the job was rewarding in many ways, something wasn't what I really wanted.

About a year ago, my dear wife Faye directed me to a job advertisement for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. When I found out it was a game warden job, I don't think I had a good night's sleep until last September 9<sup>th</sup> when I received a phone call that started with "Congratulations!"

In January, I began a fourteen-week training program at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Academy in Georgia. The curriculum was a demanding study of constitutional law, criminal procedures, defensive tactics, physical efficiency, firearms instruction, pursuit driving, criminal and traffic investigations, interpersonal communications, narcotics identification, counter-terrorism, report writing, and myriad of related police skills. Training was six days a week, starting at 5 a.m. and typically ending as I fell asleep studying around midnight.

I remember being challenged by the leadership at the Kenai Refuge, just prior to leaving for the Academy, with the words that, "Here at the Kenai

Refuge, we set the bar high. We expect you to graduate at the top of your class." I remember responding, "I'll promise you this, I'll graduate at the top of my age class!"

Finding that I was ten to twenty-years senior of the rest of the class of twenty-two, I thought I've got my work cut out. On graduation day, I am proud to say that I had held up my end of the Kenai tradition by graduating as the sole "Honor Student," achieving top overall marks in academics, firearms and physical efficiency.

After my training at the Academy, I spent another week of Refuge Officer Basic School at the USFWS National Conservation Training Center in West Virginia studying federal wildlife protection law and agency specific regulations.

In May, Faye and I completed our household move and currently reside at Moose Range Meadows with our English setter "Ammo," amidst the colorful local flora and fauna (spelled black spruce, red salmon, and brown bears.) By the way, that old Sawyer canoe made the trip as well. We recently attended a meeting of the neighborhood residents and were warmly received. Faye and I look forward to making many good friends in the community.

I consider myself most fortunate indeed to have the chance to fulfill what has been a life-long dream. Alaska in general, and the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in particular is a special piece of God's creation. I am honored to play a small role in its conservation legacy.

*The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is pleased to welcome Refuge Law Enforcement Officer Jim Neely to the staff. 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>.*