

Refuge intern reflects on busy summer of fieldwork and travels

by Annie Widdel

Serving as an intern at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge offered me the opportunity to come up to Alaska for the summer and fall months. Originally hailing from Grand Forks in eastern North Dakota, I had spent the last six months prior to my Alaskan departure working near Hilo on the Big Island of Hawaii. Friends voiced concern that my going to Hawaii would result in the island stealing my heart and with that I would vanish from their lives. I responded that Hawaii didn't pose a threat; there was no need to worry until I made it to Alaska. While working in Volcanoes National Park I got a call from John Morton, the supervisory biologist at the Kenai refuge, asking me if I'd like to help out on the Kenai for the summer. Enthusiastically I accepted; I'd been waiting for this opportunity for months. Never having been to Alaska before, I didn't know exactly what to expect, but I knew I'd love this place.

As a Biological Science Research Volunteer, I lent a hand wherever it was needed. I assisted with songbird surveys in Mystery Creek, and near Birch Lake, which is located off of Swan Lake Road. These surveys involved recording the bird species we heard and saw at a series of points throughout a grid. This information will be used for monitoring purposes as well as comparisons between prescribed burn areas and unburned forest.

I also helped Jack Dean with long nose sucker research, and I inventoried nest productivity for cormorant and mew gulls on Skilak Lake. Later in the summer I assisted Ed Berg in a study of black spruce invasion into wetlands, caused by climate warming.

One of the sweetest memories from this summer's work is waking early on June mornings for bird surveys. Getting up just as dusk was just giving way to dawn and arriving in Mystery Creek just as the sun spills over the Mystery Hills—absolutely beautiful.

My work here has provided new experiences in wildlife science and the opportunity to work along side and learn from some excellent scientists. Working and living on the refuge also gave me plenty of time to play here on the Kenai, as well. And truth be told, although

I enjoyed the work immensely, the play was even more memorable.

Throughout the Kenai refuge there are countless beautiful places where one could lose oneself, figuratively as well as literally. The refuge serves not only as habitat for the animals whose presence we enjoy so greatly, such as moose, bears, lynx and wolves, but also as a place for people to enjoy nature. I was smitten with the landscape within seconds of my first good look at the refuge lands in May when I hiked from Fuller Lakes over the Mystery Hills ridgeline and down the Skyline trail. That hike produced heart-breaking views that will be remembered for a lifetime and with that hike, I forfeited my heart to Alaska.

I spent the vast majority of the summer outside, checking out the canoe systems and numerous trails around the region, and especially the fishing. Busy until sunset, I often got in too late to call home to friends and loved ones. After leaving numerous unreturned voice mails, my mother left a guilt-wrenching message on my answering machine, pleading with the other residents to please call her back if her daughter doesn't live there. That one hurt, but the fishing was good, and it was too gorgeous to stay inside long enough to chatter on the phone. I called home to explain, and she understood, I think.

The long days bred an industrious feeling that dominated my summer. There was a feverish sense that instigated motion, and so the summer was filled with everything except sleep. Armed with long days of sunshine (fueled by global warming) and half as much sleep as my body was accustomed to, the summer was stretched out to a satisfactory length instead of the more common feeling it gives me, that of being cheated by this swift moving season.

The need for fieldwork started to decline as the end of summer approached, so in late August I enjoyed a few weeks off and traveled north to investigate the interior and some other parts of the state I had not yet seen. I spent some time hiking in Denali, fishing in Valdez and hanging out in Fairbanks. I was in the Interior just in time to watch the fall colors set fire to

the landscape. Upon my return to the Peninsula it was strange to find so much green down here, but fall tagged along behind me and showed up, blessing the Kenai with its presence a week or two later. It was still a beautiful surprise even though I knew what to expect.

Of the countless reasons making my time here memorable, it's the intangible things that have left the greatest mark on me. I'm sure everyone who visits these northern latitudes gets excited about the lengthy days, but they are intoxicating if you are not used to them. I think it's easier to appreciate the changing photoperiod when you've spent a season here watching the daylight wax and wane. An extended stay allows one a much more thorough feeling for Alaska than just a quick jaunt in the RV. I've had the pleasure of arriving when green was taking hold of the landscape and watching the wildflowers escort us through the months. The lupine and the wild rose yielded to the

dandelions, and crimson brushed the fireweed when summer gave way to fall.

Under autumn skies punctured with stars not seen since May, I reflect back on the summer months. The wonderful people I've met and the inspiring places I've visited will stay with me for a lifetime. Taking home valuable occupational skills that will aid me in my career future, and a wealth of new experiences makes me very appreciative of the opportunity to live and work on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Annie Widdel is a volunteer intern with the biology program at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. She is from Grand Forks, North Dakota, and graduated last year from the University of North Dakota. 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>.