

# Horses and the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Richard Johnston

I'm the first to admit there are few subjects that I know less about than horses. I had hoped to get through raising two girls without having to buy, lease, board or spend money on man's four-legged buddy the "horse." Don't get me wrong; I've always appreciated the utility and tradition of horse ownership and use. But there always seems to be more important things to do with my time and dollars than the long list of "projects and expense" associated with horses.

Well, my long horse-free life came to an end this summer. Our family is now the proud owners of a Welsh Pony/Morgan cross and a registered appendix quarter horse. I have to admit it's been interesting. They seem to easily recognize inexperienced owners and exploit vulnerabilities like traveling salesmen. The willing dispositions and perfect behavior exhibited during sale negotiations have been replaced by more typical stubbornness and focus on the feeder. The amount of hay alleged to be adequate for horses of their size and weights seems to temporarily distract them from chewing on the few remaining trees in their new home. Actually, though, I'm optimistic. No one has been stepped on except me; and my daughters have at least shared the less desirable duties of horse and paddock care. Our two "steeds" have done reasonably well with the move to their new home and new owners. However, it will be some time before they'll be packing out game or winning any barrel competitions.

Like most people, I took the occasional trail ride when growing up, but it was a summer internship in Okanogan National Forest where I really got to experience the usefulness and requisite pain of riding. I was assigned to accompany the U.S. Forest Service, Winthrop District grazing specialist and a long time rancher on a cattle grazing allotment inspection. Both were bow-legged from years in the saddle and I'm sure had no compassion for a city kid who had ridden less than several miles in a lifetime. I discovered first hand what being "saddle sore" was all about. We rode over twenty miles that day gaining and losing thousands of feet of elevation. By days end, I was in such misery, that I had to walk my horse the last two miles home. The Wilderness terrain we traversed that day

was rugged and closed to motorized vehicles. Horses made the remote terrain accessible and were part of a long Cascade Mountain tradition of equestrian use. Congress recognized the history and tradition of horse and pack animal access on western federal lands by authorizing horse use in the 1964 Wilderness Preservation and Management Act. Commercial, administrative, and pleasure use of horses and pack animals was authorized for recreational access. Even pre-existing livestock grazing leases were allowed under the Act.

Like many Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management District Ranger posts, the Winthrop District of Okanogan National Forest had over fifty head of horses and mules to assist in the management duties.

Refuge staff have recognized the potential value of transport and pack animals in support of refuge management, however the tradition of government horse and pack animal use has somehow alluded fifty years of management. The long Alaska winters, expense, and lack of horse knowledge may have played a role in the Refuge's limited horse use. The Refuge has occasionally contracted for horse access but foot travel, boats, and aircraft are more prevalent methods of official access. Several Refuge employees have acquired horses and donated use of their private stock for official duties. Local volunteers with horses have also cooperated with Refuge trail crews to accomplish remote trail maintenance. Many projects that occurred during the summer of 2003 in the Funny River area would have been difficult without "four-legged" support and equipment packing muscle.

One of my duties at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is to manage the commercial visitor services program. Commercial providers offer a variety of access and support for recreational use of the refuge. Several guides, including transporters, big game guides, sport-fishing guides, and recreational trail ride guides use horses and/or mules to access remote areas of the Refuge.

Two thirds of Kenai Refuge was designated as Kenai Wilderness in 1980. Although Congress allowed for more liberal use of aircraft, snowmobiles and motorboats within designated Wilderness in Alaska, many portions of the Kenai Wilderness and other

Refuge lands remain accessible only on foot or by horse.

In a conversation with a local ferrier, he noted that there might be nearly one thousand horses on the Kenai Peninsula. While driving around road accessible areas in southcentral and interior Alaska seeing pasture lands and grazing horses is common. In part, this occurrence of pastureland can be attributed to the early federal homestead requirements. Homestead entry rules required agricultural clearing of land in order to “prove up” on a homestead. Land clearing, leveling and planting of a pasture mix was the preferred method of meeting the agricultural requirement. Consequently, enough land became available for hay production to support horses and other livestock on a local scale. Many local horse owners import hay from the lower 48 or the Delta area, but “homestead pastures” continue to play a role in the Kenai Peninsula horse culture.

One designated Refuge trail was developed and even named specifically as a horse trail. Horse packers gained access to the remote Kenai bench lands for trophy moose hunting on the Funny River Horse Trail. My first Kenai Refuge experience with horses was when I contracted with one of our permitted packers to support a moose hunt in 1982. I was impressed with the stamina, endurance and memory of the Ninilchik packers’ horses. The Funny River Horse Trail was difficult to follow, even back in 1982 when it was used more often than today. In looming darkness my horse was able to follow a difficult to find trail he had not been on for eight years. The 20 year old gelding and other horses in the line were also able to find camp after a long days ride in un-trailed terrain simply by releasing the reins and letting the horses follow their own lead to camp. Perhaps more impressive was their weight carrying ability. After a successful hunt, a mare that was packed with 66+ inch moose antlers carried the load without protest even after becoming lodged several times between narrowly placed trees.

Conflict with other users is fairly common on many trails throughout Conservation areas in the western United States, but has been largely avoided on the Kenai Refuge. In part minimal conflict can be attributed to different destination interests and good common sense on the part of horse users. Only one trail is closed to horse use. Fuller Lake trail was never built or routed to sustain the wear associated with hoofed animals. After receiving extensive repairs and maintenance in 1994 and 1995, the Fuller Lake Trail

was designated hiking only. Horse users were able to achieve access to the Mystery Hills via alternative routes.

As any experienced horsemen and a few ill fated others can tell you, the remote Kenai Wilderness is no place for an inexperienced horse, unless accompanied by a string of experienced horses, or an inexperienced horse with an experienced rider. Similarly it is no place for an out-of-shape horse packing heavy loads of gear and moose meat. According to knowledgeable horse handlers, horses are just like human athletes... they need to build endurance and strength.

Every few years a group of hunters are abandoned far into the Kenai Mountains by runaway horses. In most cases these animals are children’s pets or young animals that have been impressed into service by Dads who have drawn a Caribou or Moose permit and are scrambling to get access. Far worse than unfortunate hunters walking out with their gear on their back is a more dangerous situation that can occur when undernourished horses are taken on a difficult pack with less than adequate rations.

Experienced horsemen seem to agree that starting a “pack” trip with a well nourished horse and plenty of supplemental feed is critical. On at least two occasions equine rescues have been initiated by Refuge Officers having observed animals in poor shape while on pack trips on Refuge lands.

A particularly bright spot for me about horse ownership has been the local Kenai Peninsula community’s willingness to share information and advise about getting set up for horses. At least a few have chidingly requested mercy for some future time, when I might ride into their moose camp and find a sub-legal antler size moose hanging from the meat pole.

At my current rate of progression it will be some time before I, in any official capacity, will be much risk of riding successfully into a poachers camp. But you never know. I’ve been reading my daughters *Young Rider* magazine and some say I’m a quick study.

If you would like information about Refuge trails, special use permits and regulations contact Rick Johnston at Refuge headquarters at 907-262-7021.

If you would like information about horses you would be well advised to contact someone else such as a long time Kenai Peninsula horse owner or one of several visitor service businesses that provide trail rides and/or packing services on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

*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>.*