

## Cabin restoration program, summer 2003

by Gary Titus

Thursday October 30, 1930, "... been busy putting things to order and finding lots of tings missing—so much that if it contius I will have to lock the cabin—it is rotten when people get so low that they can't respect an open door ofering shelter to any one who my happen along" -Andrew Berg.

It really is 'rotten' when people disrespect ownership and kindness, yet most people have not sunk as low as one might expect in the seventy-three years subsequent to Andrew Berg's journal entry. Berg's cabin is still standing on the shores of Tustumena Lake with its door unlocked, offering shelter to anyone 'who may happen along.' And so far, people have respected the open door and treated the cabin quite well.

Berg's Home cabin is one of the numerous historical cabins scattered across the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. There are over 120 cabin sites on refuge land alone, but at many of the cabin sites only a few deteriorated logs remain. Berg's Home cabin, and about twenty other cabins, have survived the odds of time and weather and remain as reminders of our Alaskan heritage.

Hikers, hunters, fishermen, and boaters staying in the refuge often use the cabins that are still upright. Most of these cabins have been on a "first come, first served" basis and free for public use, but with the increasing number of visitors in the refuge, the use of cabins has greatly increased. In most cases, increased use has coincided with increased vandalism and other more 'rotten' things, such as irresponsible fires (which have now destroyed two cabins). To some people, the cabins on the refuge are a nuisance—worth much less than all the hassle they cause. Others would like the cabins protected from abuse and preserved as Alaskan cultural heritage sites. Still others would like to see more cabins built for public use—including fee cabins along trails, much like those in the Chugach National Forest.

During the spring of this year, the refuge received much needed funding to address the future of the various cabins on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Before a new program to protect and preserve cabins throughout the refuge could be developed, many is-

ues needed to be assessed: Are the cabins safe for continued public use? How will we regulate the use and safety of these cabins? How can we work to preserve those that remain standing? The refuge manager and a team of refuge officials are currently creating a cabin management plan that will take charge of the future of each cabin, and also decide upon locations for new public use cabins. In the meantime, six highly used cabins were chosen for restoration.

The first official cabin restoration program on the refuge began this summer. With goals to stabilize as many cabins as possible, a crew of Iven Sjodin, Josh Hightower, and Temperance Taylor—under the direction of Gary Titus—restored six cabins to their original height, function, and stability.

The restoration process itself is very intense and full of back-aching labor. Cabins must be lifted out of the ground, so that rotten logs can be replaced with beetle kill replicas. The log replacing process is a long, yet very rewarding process. One by one, each rotten log is removed and replaced, matching the notches as well as the fit between the logs. Gradually, with every new log, the cabin rises up to its full height. Afterwards, the cabin is left on concrete blocks atop gravel pads to prevent further settling. Finally, each cabin is prepared for public use with new floors, bunks, and outhouses.

After digging, hauling logs, adzing, axing, eating, and sleeping next to each cabin for one to three weeks, respect for the pioneers who constructed these cabins comes naturally. In fact, it only takes hewing a few feet of a cabin log to really realize and appreciate the hard work put into each cabin. Each cabin has its own history with its own unique construction that is definitely worth preserving: while Trapper Joe was in desperate need of a square, Andrew Berg's notches are beautiful fitting dovetails, and the two cannery Nurses chose not even to mess with notches.

As our sweat dripped over each cabin log, all we could do was hope that the public would see the restored cabin and appreciate our labor enough to refrain from disrespecting or vandalizing it. So far, reports in the logbooks at each cabin have been appreciative. Also the cabins are being kept clean and free

of graffiti, which is a major encouragement.

The summer of 2003 has been a test summer to see what a crew could accomplish in the short summer months. With the help of volunteers Bill Nelson, Shelly Dockins, Josh Thatchik, and an engaging Youth Conservation Corps crew, we finished restoring Caribou Island Cabin in two labor-intensive weeks. Restoring Doroshin Bay Cabin, Berg's Home Cabin, Pipe Creek Cabin, Trapper Joe Cabin, and Nurses' Cabin this summer were also each massive accomplishments in themselves. Still, numerous cabins remain in need of attention.

In the future, we hope to protect the remaining cabins on the refuge, preserving them as historical monuments as well as public use cabins. Working as the Refuge Cabin Manager, Gary Titus has assessed

the needs of each of the remaining historic cabins. Overall, each cabin needs at least two weeks of intensive restoration. This means that the next few summers will be full of hard work.

So the 'door is always open' for anyone wishing to help in the restoration process. If you would like to volunteer, please contact Gary Titus at the Kenai National Wildlife Headquarters (262-7021).

To learn more about the public use cabins on the Kenai Wildlife refuge, visit <http://kenai.fws.gov/> click 'Learn More' and then click on 'Refuge History.'

*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>.*