

The wacky ways of winter

by Nicole Johnson

Two weeks ago, I was startled and amazed at the same time. As I walked out the front door of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center there was a little animal that stood out like a sore thumb. There it was, an ermine sitting on the front tire of one of the government trucks. It would dash out into the open and quickly scamper back to the truck. The ermine's white fur stood out among the parking lot's black asphalt and the green grass. Normally, it would blend in with the snow-covered area, but not quite yet.

Many of us experienced the unusually warm 2002-2003 winter. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Climatic Data Center it was the second warmest winter in Alaska with an astounding 10.1° F above average temperature. The winner of the warmest winter in Alaska was in 2000-2001. Any guesses as what it will be like this year?

I know many people who are not fond of snow or cold temperatures. Then there are others, myself included, that can never get enough of the soft, fluffy white snow. Whether you are a fan of snow or not, do you ever wonder how wildlife deals with the challenges of winter, and the challenges of a warmer winter?

If you know a child that was a 4th-6th grader last winter who visited the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, they might be able to answer some of your questions. The theme of our environmental education program, "Wildlife in Winter" focuses on how Alaskan wildlife adapts and survives in winter. In 2002, we piloted this program and reached 118 students in five classes.

Word spread and the program is growing stronger. We had 18 classes register, and we reached 597 students in 2003.

Snow is an optimal part of this field trip experience because we introduce the students to snowshoeing and how it is similar to energy conservation methods used by wildlife in winter. We also use the snow to demonstrate the importance of the subnivean (below snow) layer. We also discuss how and why wildlife benefits from camouflage in winter. As you can guess we were scratching our heads last winter with the lack of snow. We even asked the students to do a "Snow Dance" to make it snow.

Like the ermine, and other wildlife are adapting to the changing seasons, we decided to incorporate the possibilities of warmer weather into our program. We now have activities that do not require snow. They illustrate how a mild winter might benefit or be a detriment to wildlife. I cannot help but wonder how the ermine is blending in now.

For interested teachers, the "Wildlife in Winter" field trips are scheduled during February and the beginning of March. To schedule a field trip please call the Environmental Education Office at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge at 262-7021. Also, if you want to go snowshoeing this winter on our field trips...do the snow dance with your students!

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>.