

## Warm wishes & winter warnings

by Robin West

I was on my way to pick up a child at school from an evening activity recently when it began to snow. You know how it looks: so many big white flakes flying toward your headlights that it reminds you of “going to warp speed” in a Star Trek movie. The view is beautiful, peaceful, and hypnotic. It was during this experience that my mind began to wander—how wonderful the mesmerizing sight of snow falling in front of me on the road—how dangerous both the road conditions were becoming and the daydreaming that was taking my mind off watching the road, other cars, pedestrians, a snow machine racing along side, or a moose that could step out from the shadows at almost any moment. I found myself controlling my daydreaming state, but only partially. I began to think of all of the close calls I had experienced in my 25 or so winters in Alaska.

It is written somewhere that God watches over children and fools. I am glad of it, for I have been both a child and a fool. I thought back to my first Alaska hunting adventure. I was so excited about becoming a resident that I could not wait to hunt caribou until the next fall. I embarked on a December fly out hunt which resulted in a caribou being taken, but also in a tale of survival. Upon taking an animal nearly seven miles out of a makeshift camp, I could not make it back to the tent and warm sleeping bag in the short daylight hours available. It was the longest night I ever spent, waiting for a blizzard to stop and daylight to occur, with nothing but the clothes on my back, a rifle, and a boned-out caribou which froze rock solid by morning in my backpack.

I thought back to the time I was following my trap line in Interior Alaska and decided to take a short cut across a frozen stream, breaking through the ice and catching myself with my arms (the ice holding then before I went in over my head). I pulled myself out and rolled in powdery snow, my arms and legs immediately stiffening like I had them surrounded by icy stove pipes. Another time I skied into a cabin that was located on a remote island (it was November—too early in the season really) approaching the lake after dark

and crossing to the island where a moose had crossed sometime earlier. In the morning I was shocked to see that the only ice on the lake at all was in the area where the moose had crossed, and where my ski tracks followed. And then there was the time that my partner and I left a trap line cabin in the extreme cold to fly back to Fairbanks because we wanted to watch the Super Bowl... It was more than eighty below at flying altitude and the ice fog was so thick at the airport that it was closed. We came in too steep when attempting to land at an alternate site along the Chena River and super-cooled the engine on the Cessna resulting in a VERY hard landing with a “dead stick.”

Oh, and of course there were the multiple times that I didn’t get the snow tires put on the car soon enough, or I reacted poorly to the driving conditions, resulting in vehicles spinning, sliding... well you know... But I am still here today; thankful, and hopefully a little smarter.

With much of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge recently opened to snow machine use, people of all ages, skill levels, and with a variety of equipment will be heading out to enjoy winter activities in remote areas of the Refuge. I encourage all riders to be especially cautious of crossing water bodies, avoiding rocks and stumps that are just barely visible, and control speeds to avoid collisions with other people, trees, and wildlife. Please take necessary survival equipment with you, let someone know where you are going and when you expect to return, and be sure to help out those you encounter along the way that may need a little assistance.

My wishes for each and everyone in Alaska this season is to have a safe and wonderful winter. Be prepared, be safe, and have a great holiday season and 2004!

*Robin West is the manager of 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>.*