

A love for the outdoors should be shared

by Doug Newbould

One week from today some of us will recognize our relationships with loved ones in a special way. And if you are one of those who are prone to forget dates like Valentine's Day or Mother's Day, this can serve as a reminder. You can thank me later. I know that some of you might chafe at such sentimental holidays, or like me—at the commercialism that overwhelms us every year on these days. But Valentine's Day is well placed on the calendar, late in the winter when we might suffer from cabin fever or some other form of depression.

Valentine's Day is special to me because it carries the promise of spring, of longer days and warm sunshine, of new life and nature's beauty. And that brings me to the subject of my article this week. I believe that a love of the outdoors, of time spent outside in the wildlands or in a park, a garden or even your backyard—a love for all things natural, is so much more meaningful if it can be shared with someone else.

When I think about the most romantic times in my life, it seems to me that all of them occurred outdoors. I remember a beautiful spring day in Giant City State Park in southern Illinois. I think I was eleven or twelve. The air was fresh and fragrant with new buds and blossoms, a soft breeze brought gentle motion to the leaves on the bushes and trees. The songbirds traded phrases in a lighthearted game of one-ups-manship. I was standing in the valley between the ivy-covered limestone walls that gave the park its name, when I saw a vision from heaven. It was a girl, whom I had shyly met once before at some grade school function. I don't remember her name. But I remember she was dressed in a loose white outfit that fluttered softly as she floated across my view. Her long golden brown hair reflected the light of the sun. She was so graceful and beautiful to me that my mouth fell open. I called out her name, but she didn't hear me. I started after her, but then I lost my courage. How could some gangly, dorky kid like me hope to fit into that vision of beauty?

It was in another grand outdoor theater that I met my future wife. As natural resource majors at Colorado State University, we were both required to at-

tend forestry summer camp at Pingree Park, high in the Rocky Mountains. If you have not been there, Pingree Park is a spectacular place. The campus sits in a broad glacier-carved valley, just north of Rocky Mountain National Park. Large old ponderosa pines watch over the grassland meadows in the bottom of the valley. Higher on the slopes, the pines give way to Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir. The snow-capped summits of the Mummy Range and the Never Summer Mountains encompass the park, creating a large natural amphitheater.

It was in that idyllic setting I met my soul mate. As I recall that summer, there were about sixty students and the male-female ratio was almost 50-50. We spent six weeks together studying forest ecology and natural resources measurements. I don't know if the gender make-up of the Pingree Park class of 1978 was by design or mere coincidence, but in such a beautiful place, romance seemed inevitable.

I didn't go to Pingree looking for love or anything like that. I was still kind of shy, gangly and dorky, so it took me several weeks to get up the nerve to approach her. I remember admiring Denise from afar. She was really cute—vivacious and fun loving. She always seemed to be smiling or laughing at something. I found myself wanting to share her joy. And to my good fortune, I am still sharing the joys of life and love with her today.

Our common love for the outdoors and for nature provided a foundation on which we built our friendship. Our friendship and the many outdoor adventures we have shared over the past twenty-five years have helped sustain and nurture our love for each other. What does all this have to do with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge? Nothing really...I've just got spring on my mind!

Doug Newbould is the Fire Management Officer at the 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>.