

Refuge takes a new look at cabin program

by Robin West

Cabins of various shapes and sizes have existed on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for all of the 60 plus years it has been part of the National Wildlife Refuge System—and for many years before. Unlike adjacent lands, however, where the U.S. Forest Service, Kenai Fjords National Park, and Alaska State Parks have provided public use cabins by reservation and fee, the Refuge has maintained an informal program. Use of cabins on the Refuge has been available for many years on a first-come-first-served basis, without any fee or reservation.

Our cabins have received minimal maintenance by Refuge staff and volunteers, and have provided reasonable shelter for Refuge users, but never with any guarantee. Often a visitor might approach a cabin and find it occupied, thereby necessitating finding other accommodations for the night, or brokering a deal with the current occupant. While there may have been unwritten rules, no one could lay claim to any cabin at any time, so you could potentially have folks move in on you whether you liked it or not.

Other cabins, not maintained by the Refuge specifically for public use, have received occasional repairs by anonymous users that have kept them from falling down. And yet other cabins have deteriorated to complete ruins or have been lost due to vandalism or wild-fire. Many of these structures had historical significance and have been lost forever.

The informal approach the Refuge has historically taken on cabin management appealed to many users, but over the years we have come to believe that as cabins are lost, so too is a piece of the area's history, an opportunity for visitors to experience the Refuge in a unique way, and the safety that cabins can offer during emergencies. We are proposing a new course of action. We have completed some basic cabin maintenance the past two summers and have spent the better part of a year drafting a proposed cabin management plan.

The draft plan, if funded and implemented, would spell many changes for cabin management on the Refuge. The draft preferred alternative would place eight older existing cabins into a new reservation system. Three of them would be relocated to better locations in nearby areas. Two would be completely renovated or replaced.

Up to six new cabins would also be built and added to the reservation system. Proposed locations for these new cabins include Snag Lake, the Swanson River area, McLain Lake, the Headquarters area, Upper Ohmer Lake, and the Skilak Recreation area.

Three existing cabins (Emma Lake, Trapper Joe, and ENSTAR/Mystery Creek) would remain available on a first-come-first-served basis.

The Berg home cabin and Big Bay cabins on Tustumena Lake, the Andrew Berg cabin at the headquarters area, and the Harry Johnson trapping cabin in the Mystery Hills would be managed primarily for historic and interpretive values where day use would be emphasized. All of the cabins mentioned above would receive increased maintenance on a routine basis.

The draft plan is based on what we hope are the general desires of our visiting public, and what we hope we can accomplish given our financial resources. The draft plan is available now for a 30-day public review. We encourage everyone with an interest in the future of cabin management on the Refuge to “weigh in.” Please contact the Refuge to provide comments, and thank you in advance for your help in finalizing this plan!

Copies of the draft cabin plan are available at the front desk of the refuge Visitor Center on Ski Hill Road. If you e-mail a request to us at kenai@fws.gov, we can e-mail you a copy in .pdf format.

Robin West is the manager of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.