

## What's going on at the refuge these days?

by Kimo Rogala



*Brown bear on the Kenai Refuge. USFWS. An automatic camera captured this brown bear checking out a scent station on the Kenai Refuge. If the bear crawls through the barbwire, some hair may be scraped off that can be used for DNA fingerprinting, just as in criminal investigations. Scent stations use lures such as fermented blood that attract but do not actually reward the animals with food.*

“Do you think we got any good pictures of bears?” I said excitedly to my fellow biologist. We were chit-chatting as we stood in line at Fred Meyer on our way back to the office from a day in the field. I had just dropped off several rolls of film to be developed and was waiting to pay the previous batch of pictures.

“What’s going on at the refuge these days?” asked a man in back of us, breaking into our conversation. I thought to myself, “There are so many things to talk about. Where do I begin?” I took me a couple of seconds to come up with an answer, and then I figured that I would start with the pictures.

“Well, these pictures are from our mammal hair snagging stations,” I replied. “We set up temporary scented stations to attract large carnivores. The animals smell the scents and approach the area to investigate. They soon leave, finding only some smells and nothing to eat, but if we’re lucky some hair gets scraped off on the barbwire surrounding the scented area. We can then do various tests on the hair samples

such as DNA fingerprinting to identify the species or even the individual critter, just like a crime lab. We can also store the samples for future analysis of heavy metal or pesticide accumulation in animals. The pictures in my hand are from passive infrared cameras that we set up to catch visual images in addition to the hair samples.” My long-winded answer was probably more than he wanted to know. Luckily for him it was our turn at the checkout line.

The Kenai NWR belongs to all of us and if asked, I always enjoy telling people what we are doing at the refuge. I especially like situations that look a bit weird to the casual observer, because they often prompt interesting questions. For example, if you were driving along the Sterling Highway at the beginning of summer you might have seen some odd sights. At one long straight stretch you could have seen four people walking along the highway with full-body mosquito netting, hip waders, and large nets. Were they dip netting for the elusive Kenai land salmon? No. What you saw was tadpole sampling at some ponds along the highway. This sampling was part of a comprehensive study on deformed frogs. It is a follow-up on an earlier study, which suggested that the rate of frog deformity is higher than normal on the refuge. The current study is also asking why we might have more deformities than normal.

You could have also seen along that same stretch of Sterling Highway a lone person sitting in a camp chair on the grass looking at the road. I’m sure that many passersby thought, “Why is a person lounging on the side of the open highway in the middle of the day, doing nothing?” Although there are many sleek-looking cars and trucks on the peninsula, vehicle viewing is not some kind of new recreational fad. What you saw as you sped past was a noise disturbance study. There was one person sitting at the highway with a noise meter and counting vehicles, while two other people with noise meters were moving away from the road. The goal was to see how noise drops off as you move away from the road. Unlike many other wildlife refuges, the Kenai Refuge combines wilderness with high human habitation. We are trying to see how vehicle noise levels might affect wildlife in an otherwise pristine set-

ting, and the first step is to actually measure the noise.

Then there was the couple visiting from Nebraska. They were driving along Skilak Lake Road, when out of the alder bushes popped three refuge biologists. The couple stopped and said, "You're the first wildlife we've seen around here!" They had been driving along the road hoping to get lucky and see a moose or bear. Instead they found us coming out of an isolated stretch of forest, with no obvious means of transportation. We had been dropped off to conduct a snowshoe hare survey at one of several long-term plots. Data have been recorded since 1983 at different post-fire successional forest habitat sites around the refuge. We had been counting snowshoe hare pellets in the permanent plots to monitor the hare population. Since lynx go up and down with the hare populations, counting these hare pellets gives us an indirect measure of how the lynx are doing, as well as a fairly direct measure of hare abundance.

Hikers often walk up the Russian River trail and see fishermen loaded with all their gear. If, however you see someone who looks like a fisherman, but sporting an antenna rather than a pole, it might be a refuge biologist. Fishing is not the object here, but rather radio telemetry. Radio telemetry is fairly well known by many people for large animals. Most com-

ments I received such as, "Can I watch the football game too?" were made in jest. However, most people think telemetry is used only on large mammals such as bears or wolves. Indeed, several wolves on the refuge do have collars on them and we regularly use radio telemetry to keep track of their whereabouts. What you may not know is that we use telemetry for many other projects. For example, earlier in the summer we used telemetry to locate nesting areas of harlequin ducks. Although they are often seen on the Kenai and Russian Rivers, little is known about harlequin ducks so we are using small radio collars to find out where they nest.

These are just a few of the biology projects occurring on the Kenai NWR. Additionally, there are many other projects occurring with law enforcement, visitor services, volunteers, education, trails & cabins, and fire management. So next time you see a Kenai NWR employee engaged in a curious activity, feel free to ask "What's going on at the refuge these days?"

*Kimo Rogala is a seasonal biological intern at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He recently graduated from San Diego State University with a bachelor's degree in zoology. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*