

2004 held many accomplishments for Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Robin West

As 2004 fades into history, I reflect on what the year held for Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and I also look ahead to 2005 to begin planning what promises to be another challenging and rewarding year.

We started 2004 working aggressively on the mandated revisions to our Comprehensive Conservation Plan—holding scoping meetings in Soldotna, Seward, Homer, Cooper Landing, and Anchorage. We began drafting the updated plan in the fall and hope to have a draft plan out for public review and comment by summer 2005. We also completed a cabin management plan early in 2004, and began to implement it by summer. Eleven older cabins had renovations completed, and three new public use cabins were constructed. In 2005 many of the older cabins, and all of the newly constructed cabins, will be available for public use via a reservation system. Major improvements were also completed on many of the over 200 miles of Refuge trails in 2004 using a one-time Congressional appropriation. The loop for the Centennial Trail at the Refuge headquarters, and improvements to the Nordic ski trail system, were also completed in the fall. Visitors should start enjoying these easily accessible trails for year-round activities in 2005.

Other construction projects in 2004 included the upgrades to trail heads and camp sites along the Swanson River and Swan Lake Roads, completion of the riverbank protection and fishermen access project at Jim's Landing, and completion of the interpretive displays to greet visitors at the Kenai airport. In 2004 the State of Alaska agreed to relinquish the right-of-ways to the Refuge for Ski Hill and Skilak Loop Roads, and 2005 will see planning activities for upgrades to these two routes. Planning will also occur in 2005 to connect the Refuge headquarters facilities to the City of Soldotna water and sewer systems.

Cooperative ventures in 2004 included an agreement with the U.S. Forest Service to use data from their Forest Inventory and Analysis Program to help the Refuge with a long-term cost effective method to collect status and trend information for many plants, animals, and insects. We also signed a memorandum

of understanding with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game for collaborative efforts on moose research, and another agreement with multiple agencies in an "All Hands and All Lands" effort to address forest management, wildfire protection, and fuels treatment on the Kenai Peninsula in the aftermath of many years of spruce bark beetle impacts. In 2005 I expect substantial progress in implementing these cooperative ventures, and potential new partnerships to address long-term changes to fish and wildlife habitats on and adjacent to the Refuge.

The Refuge had 17 wildland fires in 2004, all but one human-caused fire. The most notable fire was the Glacier Creek Fire, first discovered on August 14, 2004 and declared out October 15, 2004. The fire burned approximately 6,000 acres over a several week period. Its only real threat was to remote cabins, which we were able to successfully protect. Concerns over smoke and the fire's potential were hot topics in the late summer, when fires were still a significant issue in Interior Alaska. The 2005 fire season will remain as speculation, until it has come and gone, but Refuge crews are completing necessary preparedness and training exercises this winter. Winter snows also provide some promise of moist soil and duff conditions in spring, reducing the probability of large fires early in the coming year.

A few other notable accomplishments of 2004 include: a record number of Refuge volunteers (setting a new high at 121 people and contributing 20,047 hours of labor); Refuge rangers were involved in over 500 law enforcement cases in 2004 and sentencing occurred for several significant cases, including a felony bear poaching case involving two Anchorage men; Refuge law enforcement also received a new staff member in 2004—a young black lab named "Samson"—this K-9 capability will assist officers in detecting a variety of wildlife species, common illegal drugs, and help with search and rescue activities for lost and missing persons in 2005 and beyond; 2004 saw new environmental education programs created at the Refuge and students now have eight different field trip options—1,179 stu-

dents participated in Fall 2004 Refuge education programs. We look forward to the completion and grand opening of our log environmental education classroom at our headquarters in 2005!

At the end of 2004 Refuge staff had just completed involvement with a couple of oil spills on the Refuge when the freighter Selendang Ayu went aground within Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge near Dutch Harbor. As we prepare to help out with this event by deploying Kenai crews to the Aleutians, I am reminded that our work is never really done. Day-by-day, month-by-month, and year after year, there are continuing threats to Refuge resources, human and wildlife needs that must be addressed, ongoing requirements for maintenance and repairs, and all with an “emergency” thrown our way on a seemingly regular basis, but I never hear any complaints

from staff. They love their work and they are good at it. I am lucky to have the co-workers that I do, and even more fortunate because of the support we receive from the community. People on the Kenai Peninsula, with rare exception, care for the wild lands, clean air, water, salmon fisheries, wildlife and scenery that the Refuge provides. Such values are why many of our friends and neighbors choose to live here. So, at year’s end I not only want to thank the Kenai Refuge staff for a job well done, but also thank you, the Kenai Peninsula community for your help and support in 2004. Best wishes for 2005!

2005 will be the 10th year that Robin West has been the Refuge Manager at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.