

Wildlife Refuge has first annual Clean-Up, Green-Up Day

by Ted Bailey

On May 20th, about 50 dedicated community volunteers helped the employees of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge kickoff our first annual Spring Clean-Up, Green-Up Day. The cooperative work project focused on gathering more than 2 tons of debris from roadways, parking lots, campgrounds and trailheads within the refuge boundaries.

For sometime now, refuge employees have recognized a need to conduct a spring clean-up day to prepare for the summer busy season. Many out-of-area visitors travel to the refuge to enjoy the bountiful recreational opportunities that our road-accessible facilities provide. We want to ensure that their experience is a favorable one. We also want to show the public that we care deeply for the refuge and take our stewardship responsibilities seriously. So this year we stooped over and picked up what some not-so-caring others left behind.

On one stretch of local roadway, we picked up sixty-eight bags of discarded beer bottles, soda cans, cigarette boxes, fast food containers, auto parts, dead house pets, grocery bags, juice boxes, and seemingly just about anything else you could throw out the window as you drove through the lovely landscape of this great land we call our home. At a gravel pull-off at mile 63 on the Sterling Highway, with a spectacular view of the Kenai Mountains, another thoughtful soul left a toilet bowl. I'm certain they were thinking that this popular roadside "pit stop" could use a modern porcelain fixture. Besides the toilet bowl, a virtual snowstorm of toilet tissue was gathered up from this and another popular rest stop a mile or two down the road. Now I'm not one to deny a person's need to answer the call of nature, but has anyone ever heard of a shovel?

As you might have guessed I'm not in the particular best of moods as I write this message. You see, I just returned from a patrol out Funny River Road, where someone apparently didn't like the mundane appearance of a green roadside. So, they decided to "borrow" about 200 soda and beer cans from the transfer station and decorate the roadside. Nice touch.

Alaska—a land of dichotomies! Inarguably the most beautiful real estate God created anywhere on earth. An abundance of natural resources, wilderness, and awe-inspiring beauty that attracts throngs from every other part of the world. Yet, of all the places I've worked and lived, I find it unconscionable how some people treat this place. Now before you blame it on the "outsiders," remember this was a spring clean-up, for the refuse left behind during the winter's travel to and from our homes. This particular trash isn't a Lower-48 problem. You can't blame this one on tourists. The responsible parties are Alaskans. Littering has to be the ultimate act of lazy disrespect, as it serves absolutely no legitimate purpose. It is just an insult to everyone else who cares.

Over fifty community volunteers dedicated their day to help us spruce things up so that those who bring their families, and their wallets to our beautiful community find what they are looking for. School children and retired folks all pitched in and demonstrated their concern. UNOCAL, the Kenai Refuge Employees Association and the Alaska Natural History Association treated them to a picnic afterward at Upper Skilak Campground as a small token of our appreciation. Believe me when I say we are grateful.

And that leads me to my main point. How much do you as a resident care about any of this? Which camp are you in? Are you a litterer who could care less? Or, are you one that cares enough to get involved? Are you willing to take down a license plate and call refuge headquarters or trooper dispatch when you see the car ahead of you littering the road? Can you spare a few hours to pick up after those who just don't get it?

You know, I don't expect to reach many litterbugs with this article, but I do hope this "shot" will ruffle some feathers. We are so blessed here on the Peninsula. Let's not let a few rob us of that blessing.

James Neely has been a Law Enforcement Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 2003. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.