

# A volunteer intern from Hawaii studies invasive plants on the Kenai

by Sadie Purinton

My three-month internship with the Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska flew by in a heartbeat, yet I am thoroughly impressed when I look back on everything that was achieved in that brief period. I arrived at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in the last week of May, having flown in from Hawaii the week before. The first two weeks were devoted to learning the rules and regulations of the refuge, aviation safety, CPR, and firearms training, as well as an introduction to the facilities. During this time, I moved into the bunkhouse, where I would be living for the next three months along with seven other volunteers like myself.

After this initial introduction I dove into my primary project for the summer: assessing the exotic and invasive flora on the refuge. Our survey was the first systematic study done by the refuge to determine the severity of invasive and exotic flora on the refuge. Given vastness of the Kenai refuge—two million acres of forest, field, mountain and wetland habitat—we chose to limit our study to the areas most likely to have exotic and invasive plants, i.e., the human-altered “anthropogenic footprint” on the refuge. This 56 square-mile footprint, with trails, seismic and power lines, roads and oilfields scattered across the refuge, hosts over 500,000 visitors each year. These visitors could be bringing in plant seeds on their clothing or in mud on their vehicles, for example.

As a newcomer to Alaska, born and raised in New Hampshire, I was unfamiliar with the state’s plant life. Needless to say, over the course of this summer, I have become all too well acquainted with the exotic plants of the Peninsula. I was surprised to find that I recognized many of the non-native plants from my home back on the East coast, such as oxeye daisy, dandelion, plantain and clover, which can be found along most Peninsula roadsides.

Though Alaska—unlike lower 48 states—has relatively few exotic species, they are still pose a potential problem for native flora and fauna. For instance, we found twenty-one exotic plants in 194 of the 208 random sites we sampled on the anthropogenic footprint this summer. While our sampling sites concen-

trated on areas of high human impact where invasive and exotic plants are most likely to be found, in some places we found that they have spread well the off beaten paths. For example, on a recent mountain bike trip along the Resurrection Trail, I encountered a fairly large colony of pineapple weed around a cabin nearly ten miles from the road, at a site accessible only by foot, horseback or bike. Though the trail itself is not on Refuge land, the pineapple weed showed me the invasive potential of a common weed found on the majority of Refuge sites we sampled this summer.

When I came to this project at the beginning of the season, I wasn’t sure about the significance of my work. In college I chose to study Biology because, ever since I was a child, I wanted my life to in one way or another impact the world for the better. When I learned, at a young age, that many of the world’s plants and animals were becoming extinct, it became my goal to protect and preserve these species. In my mind, it is unrealistic to think that we can maintain all of Alaska as untouched “pristine” habitat. I do think, however, that we should assess the impact we humans are having on the ecosystem and what can be done to limit that impact on regions that are not yet part of the anthropogenic footprint.

Having recently graduated from college with a Bachelors degree in Biology, I am faced with the realization that I need to find a career to support my future family and me. I have goals of pursuing a graduate degree in Wildlife Biology, and finding a job, possibly with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife, where I can apply this knowledge. After long rides down washboard roads, rough climbs through post-fire blow-down, and many rainy transects along the Sterling highway, I have taken a closer look at some of the human impact on the native Alaskan landscape. And now, as I finish the last week of my internship, I hold no doubt that my work, through raising biological awareness, has in a small way contributed to the preservation of the native Alaskan ecosystem, a place to which I hope to return in the near future and perhaps one day call my home.

*Sadie Purinton is a volunteer Biological intern at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. She is a recent graduate from Keene State College in NH, with a Bachelor's degree in Biology. She spent her senior year on the Big Island in Hawaii through the National Student Exchange program, and will be returning in late Au-*

*gust. Sadie plans on pursuing a graduate degree in Wildlife Biology in the near future, and hopes to return to Alaska to visit or possibly find a home. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*