

# Long road to the Kenai: wanderings of an itinerant biotech

by Toby Burke

As a newly hired biological technician (biotech) for Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service my main duties are to provide support to the refuge biological program. Specifically, I execute field studies designed to accurately and efficiently assess the biological resources of the refuge. In short, I am the eyes and ears of the biological program in the field, principally conducting vegetation and wildlife surveys.

A biotech develops their powers of observation through years of study and field experience. Most have acquired their field experience by serving as itinerant field assistants working on a variety of seasonal biological projects often wherever their interests or necessity led them. I am no exception.

After college with an education in forestry I went to work for Klamath National Forest in the southern Cascade Mountains of northern California. I worked as crew boss of a forest thinning crew on a timber stand improvement program. Later I became a timber cruiser and marker preparing forest units for various silvicultural operations. It was during this time that I assisted with pre-harvest raptor surveys and my interests started to shift from forest management to wildlife management.

Accordingly, I followed my wildlife management interests to Great Smoky Mountains National Park straddling western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee. I trapped exotic European wild boar on an ambitious control project.

Having worked out west and back east I thought it was high time I went north. I accepted a position with Alaska Peninsula and Becharof National Wildlife Refuges located in southwestern Alaska. While there I conducted waterfowl, seabird, marine mammal, ungulate, and bear surveys. One of our more interesting projects was assessing the effectiveness of bear hazing devices used to frighten away brown bears when coming in conflict with biotechs. I later spent considerable time fishing the Alaska Peninsula's largest lakes and their tributaries for an Arctic grayling study.

I next went to work for Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge eradicating exotic Arctic foxes in the Aleutian Islands and conducting seabird and marine

mammal surveys. After a few years I returned to the Alaska Peninsula and Becharof National Wildlife Refuges to work on an array of bird projects.

From there I went to work for Togiak National Wildlife Refuge monitoring large walrus and harbor seal haul-outs as well as migratory seabird, waterfowl, shorebird, and passerine populations. I then went to work for Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. I performed forest stand examinations and wildlife inventories in the boreal forests of the Copper River Basin in the midst of a spruce bark beetle epidemic.

After spending seven years as a biotech in Alaska I followed work back south. I went to work for Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuge Complex and Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge Complex working on fall and spring staging geese in California's and Oregon's Klamath Basin and wintering geese in California's Sacramento Valley.

I then traveled back east where I found employment with Assateague Island National Seashore monitoring nesting Piping Plovers. After completing that assignment, I went to work in the nearby Chesapeake Marshlands National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Here I trapped large aquatic rodents known as nutria and assisted in developing methods for the control of the exotic pest.

From there I returned to my forestry management background and went to work for a sugar maple research station run by Cornell University in northern New York. I worked within the Adirondack State Park developing improved growing stock and developing best management practices for the area's sugar maple forests.

This is basically what I did as a biotech prior to coming to work for Kenai NWR. I deliberately left out a several biotech jobs and quite a few projects. The point I want to make is my experience as a biotech is not unique! The field of wildlife management has legions of journeymen biotechs exactly like me. Well... maybe not exactly like me since very few journeymen biotechs have a wife and children. I guess I forgot to mention I married a fellow biotech I met on Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge a few years back. As you can

see we've been very busy living, working, and moving all over North America while simultaneously raising a family.

*Toby Burke is a new biological technician at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. His wife Laura for-*

*merly worked for Kenai National Wildlife Refuge as a biotech before she met Toby. They hope to settle down on the Kenai Peninsula with their six small children. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*