

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign

by Dave Kenagy

When I began work at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, over 22 years ago, I had the envious job of patrolling the backcountry. I made trips on the canoe system, hikes into remote backcountry, and explored the newly-designated Kenai Wilderness.

However, there were some very unglamorous parts to this envious job of mine. I had to pick up the trash that backcountry visitors left behind. I had to cut out windfall trees from trails, often with a handsaw. And, I had to put up signs. This article is a rambling about signs.

Long before I came to the Refuge, employees had been putting up signs. And, not just signs that say “Do This,” or “Don’t Do That.” We have always put up informational signs, too. These might say, “Welcome to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge,” or “Kenai Canoe Trails” (with an appropriate directional arrow, of course). As a new employee, I became part of this “sign tradition.”

One of the first sign projects I had was to replace small, often missing, wooden signs on the Canoe System with foot-square aluminum signs. I placed these signs at the portages. Each canoe trip I made, I’d take along a dozen or so of these metal signs. I’d always thought aluminum as one of the lightest of metals, but the weight in my pack said otherwise. But, light or not, they eventually graced each and every portage and waterway.

The new signs did the job. They could be seen easily from out on the lakes, were easy to slip into my portage pack, and were durable. Most of the signs I installed are still out there, attached to sturdy birch or spruce trees.

The new signs were garish, graphic, and bold. The old signs, the wooden ones, were warm, woodsy, and charming. They were smaller than their metal cousins, at about four by twelve inches. They were all hand-routed, made of cedar. The craftsman who made them had carefully painted the routed groove with lemon-yellow paint to make the lettering stand out, but not too garishly. They were a product of the forest, and they looked at home in the woods.

The wooden signs were made, I believe, by Bud Marrs. Bud came to the Refuge in the early seventies,

and though he did many things in his early years here, he eventually settled into making high-quality signs of clear cedar and (gasp!) redwood. If you travel around the Refuge on any road, you will see Bud’s signs. Some of them are huge, made of multiple planks bound together. They are all works of art. Bud retired from the Refuge this past summer. I for one, will always think of soft-spoken Bud (with his slight Tennessee accent) working patiently in the woodshop on one of his beautiful signs.

Signs come in many sizes and shapes. There are all the regulatory signs—STOP signs, NO PARKING signs, and the lot. There are campground signs, and boat ramp signs, and trailhead signs. But, if you’re willing to stretch your imagination a bit, you can also imagine bulletin boards as signs.

By the time I came to the Refuge, there had already been a long tradition of bulletin boards. Basically, they consist of panels, on one or two upright posts, covered by a little roof. Yes, we still have these, but let me tell you about the “old days.” Then, rangers would cut out photos (often pictures of wildlife, flowers, or scenery from magazines), add a “handbill” of Refuge regulations, and maybe draw a map of the local area. These they would staple or thumbtack to the panels.

The bulletin boards were a hodge-podge collage. Maybe even a montage. Actually, they were kind of cute in their own way. But, they were often confusing, contained irrelevant information, and were a real chore to maintain from year to year.

Wow, have things changed! In part, it is because we now have computers with neat little graphics programs that can “cut and paste” documents, maps, photos and any graphic into a layout, and print it all on one huge piece of paper—one printout per bulletin board. In part, it is because we have a graphics printer that can make such big printouts, and a laminator that can encapsulate them in plastic.

But, mostly, it’s because of a very talented ranger here at the Refuge—Michelle Ostrowski. Michelle has transformed our bulletin boards into easy-to-read displays that would make Goldilocks happy. You know—everything “just right.” When I say “just right,” I mean it. Michelle goes over each display with a fine-tooth-

comb to assure that all information is precise, correct, and necessary. Next time you're out and about on the Refuge, take a good look at Michelle's handiwork.

I have just scratched the surface when it comes to signs on the Refuge. Biologists put up signs about loon nesting areas, backcountry rangers and their crews put up boundary signs and trail signs, maintenance folks put up regulatory signs and some of those huge highway signs made of "lightweight" aluminum, and even I get into the act. I make ski trail signs and bulletin boards, and some of the interpretive wayside exhibits. At one time or another almost everybody here at the Refuge has made or put up signs. Hats off to all.

Let me take you behind the scenes to wrap this all up. I said that Michelle tries to do everything "just right." To tell you the truth, we all do. We don't make signs, bulletin boards, and displays for ourselves, we do it for you. We want you to know where you're going, what the rules of the Refuge are, and we want all the information we give you to be absolutely accurate. When we slip-up, you folks always let us know.

We are so precise, in no small part, due to a "sword of Damocles" hanging over our heads. The sword is named Candace Ward or Bill Kent, depending on the

project. Bill is responsible for the entire "Visitor Services" program at the Refuge. Candace is in charge of interpretive activities, exhibits and displays, campgrounds, visitor centers, brochure and publication development, and on and on...

Both Bill and Candace have worked with Refuge visitors for many years, and both understand how important it is that information, whether on signs, bulletin boards, or any printed format, be totally accurate. They are not cruel taskmasters, but they do demand the best of us. To them, "it ain't right 'til it's right."

You may thank them for signage that is kept to a minimum and that is easy to read and understand. You may also thank them for the great improvement in signage and interpretive displays during their tenures at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

If you see signs that need improvement, or places we should have signs that we don't, or have any comments at all, please let us know. We are always happy to hear from you.

Well, I must "sign-off" for now. Happy trails.

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