

# Wildlife hotline needs your call!

by Rick Ernst



*Photo of biologist Rick Ernst stands beside the sign announcing the new wildlife crossing study area and its' hotline. USFWS*

You may have noticed the new “High Wildlife Crossing Area” and milepost signs along the Sterling Highway through the refuge when you are driving east of Sterling. The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities plans to reconstruct the Sterling Highway between milepost 58 (east entrance to Skilak Lake Road) and milepost 79 (start of the four-lane in Sterling). Most of this 21-mile section of highway runs through the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge or as many of the locals still refer to it—the Moose Range.

This section of highway is on the State list of high moose-vehicle collision zones. An inter-agency group is working to make the new roadway safer for both motorists and wildlife. The group includes representatives of the Alaska Departments of Transportation and Public Facilities, Fish & Game, and Public Safety; Federal Highway Administration; Alaska Moose Federation; and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Last October Refuge and Fish & Game biologists captured 30 moose along the highway corridor and attached GPS collars. The collars are white and carry a global position system (GPS) transmitter which records locations every 30 minutes. We hope to get detailed information on where, when, and how often moose are crossing the highway, even if we can't answer the proverbial question: Why did the moose cross the road?

We are also reviewing accident and road kill data from state troopers to pinpoint where most of the wildlife-vehicle collisions are occurring. Reporting in the past was by milepost markers but road-kills will now be recorded more accurately using latitude/longitude from GPS units.

We also hope to find out where animals are successfully crossing the highway without getting hit. We could station observers along the entire 21-mile stretch of road to record animal crossings 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. But the cost would be expensive, not to mention against OSHA or Department of Labor regulations. So we are asking the motoring public who drive this section of the Sterling Highway to report on our “Wildlife Hotline” any sightings of moose or other wildlife on or near the road. We are only asking for sightings between Milepost 58 and 79, i.e., on the section of the Sterling Highway that will be reconstructed. We have added “half-mile posts” to the mile posts along this section to help motorists describe their locations more precisely.

So next time you drive to Cooper Landing, Seward or Anchorage and see wildlife on or along side the Sterling Highway, please call 262-2300. When you call, you will hear a recording that you have reached the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge's bird and wildlife hotline. To report a Sterling Highway wildlife crossing (or observation), press “1” and after the tone leave your sighting information. Press “4” if you would like to hear more details on this study.

The information that we would like motorists to provide is:

- 1) What animal(s) did you see?
- 2) How many animals (for example a cow and calf moose)?
- 3) Between what milepost markers did you see the animal(s)?
- 4) Date and time of the sighting. You are encouraged to leave your name and phone number if you would like a return call.

The Kenai Refuge website will provide a map of the highway corridor with the hotline reports from motorists. Remember, the speed limit on the Sterling Highway is 55 mph. Slow down and save a life—yours

as well as a moose! Thanks for your help!

*Rick Ernst has been a wildlife biologist and pilot at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1993. Previous*

*Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*