

# Investing in the future of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

*by Jim Neely*

Those of you who are tuned into the latest happenings in the halls of congress know that national security and disaster relief have been on the front burner for some time now. With a large percentage of the nation's tax dollars going to fight the war on terrorism, and recent national and international disaster relief efforts, many natural resource agencies are feeling the financial pinch. "Do more with less" has become the phrase of the day. To ensure that we are prepared to deal with the many needs of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (KENWR), in light of diminishing human and financial resources, we need to make some careful investments in the future.

One of the ways we are investing in a bright future is by reaching out to the community for volunteers. Dedicated volunteers can provide the "shot in the arm" that makes a real difference in the quantity and quality of programs and services we provide. Volunteers, by their very nature, bring a wealth of talent and genuine caring. The typical volunteer is someone who already uses the refuge and wants to give something back. That kind of ownership is exactly the value we want to invest in and watch grow. Here is an example of community ownership in action.

Over the last couple weeks we held our annual Spring Clean-Up / Green-Up event. Dedicated volunteers from the local community joined refuge employees in a campaign to pick-up the refuse left-behind by a few not so caring visitors. It is a sad fact that even today, with all the public education and laws meant to curb littering, we must expend time and dollars on this continuing eyesore. Without the help of our volunteers we would have to rob other already lean budgets to accomplish this task.

Students and teachers from Skyview High School and Sterling Elementary, volunteers from the AK DOT Adopt-a-Highway program, Boy Scouts, our KENWR Friends organization, and a number of individual "good neighbors" demonstrated their caring for the refuge by cleaning truckloads of debris from along the Sterling Highway, Funny River Road and public use facilities. We are very thankful for their contribution

and ask that the community will respect their hard work by not littering.

We recognize that the long-range future of the refuge lies in today's youth. The refuge's environmental education program is primarily geared toward investing in that resource with a variety of educational and experiential opportunities for school-aged children. Classroom curricula addressing environmental responsibility, the web of life, and other ecological themes are supplemented by hands-on field trips to bring the lessons home. Partnering with public educators has been the key to success. The refuge invested in a large, handsome environmental education cabin which opened this past year. It is our hope the lessons learned in this new Environmental Education Center will be applied in the students' lives and someday passed on to their children.

Another way we are working to ensure a bright future for the refuge is by investing in tomorrow's hunters. The refuge has a long heritage of hunting and it is important that we continue to invest in that tradition. Participating in the ADF&G Hunter Information and Training Program (H.I.T.), we offer hunter education classes at our Environmental Education Center. Refuge employees, who are certified H.I.T. instructors, work to instill strong ethics and conservation values in their students. It is refreshing to see how motivated some of the students are toward learning about how hunting fits into wildlife resource and land management. The skills these new hunter/conservationists gain from the H.I.T. program will last a lifetime.

Monitoring the whereabouts of wildlife on a two-million acre wildlife refuge is a daunting task. The refuge is soliciting public volunteers to report sightings in one particular area of the refuge, the Sterling Highway. In preparation for the proposed Sterling Highway improvement project, we are collecting data to determine how and where wildlife uses the portion of the refuge adjacent to the highway. This data will be used to develop wildlife crossings and other travel corridor mitigations to ensure the health and safety of our wildlife populations and reduce the potential for

wildlife /vehicle accidents. Including public reporting is a cost effective means of gaining valuable scientific information. If you are travelling the Sterling Highway through the refuge and wish to record your sightings, please call the Wildlife Hotline at 262-2300.

These are but a few examples of how the KENWR is reaching out to our community to accomplish our goals during this period of budgetary uncertainty. We know a bright future depends on the value placed by the community on this wonderful resource. It is our hope that we can encourage many more volunteers to

join in a partnership of joint stewardship.

From those of us who call the KENWR home, a heartfelt thanks to everyone who has stepped up to the plate already. If you haven't joined in yet, what are you waiting for?

If you are interested in learning how you can become involved, please call the refuge at 262-7021.

*Jim Neely is a Refuge Law Enforcement officer. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*