

## A busy construction season improves refuge facilities

by Brenda Nichol



*Photo of Lower Ohmer Lake campsites. USFWS/Michelle Ostrowski*

This week, as I drive up Ski Hill Road, I've been enjoying the beautiful golden offerings of fall covering the road. I am starting to think about winter and how soon the ground will be covered with that first blanket of snow. Not wanting to dwell on that rapidly approaching event, I think back to the green lushness of... the construction season!

This past summer we saw many saw many construction projects underway on the Refuge. We started excavation in May for our new connection to city water and sewer. This was not a small undertaking for buildings located at a considerable distance and up a high hill from the water and sewer lines along Funny River Road. Getting to the Refuge headquarters on Ski Hill Road is normally an effortless drive, but trying to get to the headquarters this summer was quite the chore. It almost seemed that the route to the headquarters changed on a daily basis. This week we finally got the last building connected to the plumbing. Now all that remains is paving the roads of the headquarters complex. Ski Hill Road is not being paved, however.

Although the water-and-sewer project is still impacting Refuge visitors to some extent, construction projects at several Refuge campgrounds have been completed and are already being put to good use.

At Hidden Lake Campground, toilet facilities were upgraded to concrete outhouses. Landscaping was im-

proved and new concrete walkways were poured in some areas. Campsites were upgraded with concrete picnic tables and some fire pits were replaced.

Hidden Lake wasn't the only campground on Skilak Lake Road that received attention. Lower Ohmer Lake campground underwent an extreme remodeling and was closed for during July.

If you have camped at Lower Ohmer Lake before, you might not recognize it now. The access road into the campground was improved and widened, and the entire campground has been changed. A fourth campsite was added to the left of the pit toilet; and, to its right, a handicap accessible campsite was created. All the campsites that were formerly located on the right as you drove into the campground have been relocated, making this campground into more of a walk-in tent camping area. Additional parking was added to the area on the right where the bulletin board now stands and the boat launch was upgraded.

Watson Lake Campground received much of the same treatment as Lower Ohmer. The road was widened and the campground was returned to its original size of three sites. The water pump was relocated in order to be in compliance with state regulations. The most notable change was the placement of large rocks and grass buffers to define the camping areas.

Although campground construction projects have ended, there is one project that will be continued next spring along the Russian River.

If you drove the Sterling Highway this summer and looked to see how many people were fishing in the Russian River Ferry area, you probably noticed the bright orange fencing. This very popular salmon fishing area has received a lot of use, and the riverbank has eroded and lost most of its vegetation. This year the south bank of the river, upstream from the ferry, was closed to foot traffic. A wooden fence was built at the top of the bank to direct anglers to the stairways which were added to provide continued access to the river's salmon runs. This 650-foot section of riverbank was planted with alder and willow. Next year, the remaining 700 feet of riverbank will be re-vegetated and another temporary closure will be instituted to protect the newly planted vegetation. Although the

re-vegetation project may be an inconvenience again next year because of the temporary closure, the benefits to the Russian River fishery will be seen for years to come.

I know that this year's construction activities around the Refuge caused many visitors and employees to be inconvenienced. Hopefully the future benefits from all the construction projects will far outweigh the present inconvenience. Now when I drive down

Ski Hill Road, besides dreading the oncoming winter, I can look forward to reaping the rewards of one summer's construction.

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