

Refuge education specialist migrates North

by Claire Caldes

The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge staff says good-bye to one of its own next week. Nicole Gustine, better known to some of you by her maiden name of Johnson, is moving to Fairbanks to continue her work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and to be with her new husband, Dave Gustine.

Nicole started working at the Kenai Refuge in June 2001 as a full-time Environmental Education Specialist. Upon starting her job, Nicole was immediately swept up in the summer season rush, when the staff size triples and the workload is very fast-paced and non-stop until mid-September. It wasn't until seasonal employees began to drift off for winter destinations, that some permanent employees realized that Nicole was a new addition to the staff and not one of the seasonal employees. We now know and appreciate what a wonderful addition to the staff she has been!

Environmental Education is a Congressional mandate for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and Nicole and her staff have worked hard to implement this special directive. Nicole has spent the last five years developing and presenting environmental education programs to local public and home school students of all ages. Through her dedicated efforts, school groups have received high quality environmental education programs on a wide variety of topics.

Each year approximately 3,000 students from south-central Alaska participate in educational programs at the Refuge. Participants range from kindergarten classes exploring animal senses to fourth, fifth, and sixth graders experiencing snowshoeing for the first time as a low-impact form of winter recreation. School groups, scout groups, youth groups, teacher and youth workshops are some of the more frequent groups attending environmental education trips lead by Nicole and crew.

Most of the programs take place at our new Environmental Education Center and on the Keen-Eye Trail located at our headquarters site here in Soldotna. Several programs are also taught in the field utilizing the Refuge's unique facilities such as our Outdoor Education Center located on Swan Lake Road, at campgrounds near Skilak, Hidden, and Kelly Lakes, and on our vast network of trails. The Environmental Educa-

tion team has developed nine curricula aligned with Kenai Peninsula Borough School District standards. All of these programs are designed to increase the participants' awareness and understanding of wildlife and the natural world. They also present ways in which individuals can reduce their impacts on the environment.

Nicole also coordinates the Refuge recycling program for our office and shop waste products. She set up collection areas in all the main facilities at our headquarters site where recyclable items are collected and separated. Everything from newspapers and aluminium cans to used batteries, scrap metal, and used oil are recycled. About once a month, she transports these items to the recycling center at the Borough landfill. In 2005, she received a National Fish and Wildlife Service Environmental Leadership Award for her efforts in recycling and reaching out to Refuge staff and the public alike in fostering better environmental stewardship. Only three such Environmental Leadership Awards were given nationally that year.

When the Arctic Winter Games came to the Kenai Peninsula in 2006, the snowshoe event was held at our headquarters site, and athletes used Refuge ski trails for their races. Nicole again stepped up to the plate and volunteered to be the chairperson for this event. She spent numerous hours in planning meetings, scheduling and coordinating volunteers, supervising the events, and dealing with coaches. There were some challenging and stressful moments for her during that weeklong event, but she came through with flying colors and lots of good memories of a lifetime experience. Nicole was also chosen to perform in both the opening and closing ceremonies of the Arctic Winter Games with other specially selected dancers. She loves to dance and is a student and part-time instructor at Encore Dance Academy in Kenai.

It has been a great experience working with Nicole and to have witnessed some of her interactions with school groups and adults. She strives to educate and promote environmental conservation in all aspects of her life. She has exposed numerous children and adults to the wonders of the natural world and hopefully opened their eyes to a new world that they will

learn to respect and protect. The Kenai Refuge staff will miss her, but she will do magnificent things wherever she goes. Good-bye and good-luck to a friend and colleague as she begins the next adventure in her life.

Claire Caldes is a Refuge Operations Specialist and

the Oil & Gas Liaison for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. She has been working with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for 28 years, 7 of those years on Alaska Refuges. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.