

Hyperspace: From the Yukon River to the Kenai River

by Geoff Beyersdorf

Do you remember that scene in Star Wars when Hans Solo hits the hyperspace button on the Millennium Falcon and all the stars become blurred lines of light as the ship rockets forward through space? Well, that's about how I feel right now, after moving from Galena to the Kenai. I've been magically vaulted through space and time into a completely different Alaska.

Two weeks ago in Galena it was a balmy -40°F (it's a dry cold...), gas was \$6 a gallon, milk \$8, no restaurants, no cell phones, and groceries are still run on a tab, where you sign your name on a piece of paper. Oh, and now I know why they call it the "road system." You can actually drive far enough on the Kenai that you can run out of gas. Getting my gas gauge fixed has suddenly moved to the top of my list. In Galena the longest road was eight miles long.

There are definitely some things on the Kenai that I will have to get used to, such as stepping into a car and having no idea what brand or model it is. You didn't see many new vehicles in Galena, so it was hard to keep up on the latest makes and models. On the bright side I now know what a hybrid vehicle looks like. And oh, if you are driving down the road and some guy in a red Toyota pickup with a duct taped shell waves at you, it's probably me. It's a hard habit to break after sixteen years of living in villages and knowing everyone and what they drive.

In my previous job I was the pilot/subsistence biologist for the Koyukuk/Nowitna National Wildlife Refuge, based in Galena along the Yukon River. My plane is basically the same, but much like the complexity added to life by moving to the road system, so goes the rest of my job, now at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in Soldotna.

The staff has more than tripled in size. My former refuge had less than a dozen permits for hunting and fishing guides, the Kenai Refuge has a cou-

ple hundred such permits. The primary focus at the Koyukuk/Nowitna Refuge was subsistence hunting and fishing, whereas the Kenai Refuge is definitely multiple use. Along with our primary mission of managing wildlife, other activities like recreation, wildlife viewing, photography, environmental education, and interpretation rank right up there with hunting and fishing. In Galena people still talk about the Japanese couple who visited for a day and took a tour of our sole, five-aisle grocery store. On the Kenai there are hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, and I'm told that you can go fishing on the Kenai River and hear five different languages spoken at once.

And the fish themselves are more complex on the Kenai. The Yukon River has three salmon species, each with single runs, but rivers on the Kenai can have five salmon species, some with multiple runs. Fisheries management on the Yukon River focused on escapement, subsistence, and commercial fisheries. On the Kenai River you can include personal use and sport fishing. Getting your salmon to take home is also completely different. Drift nets, set nets, and fish wheels were the way to get your subsistence salmon on the Yukon River. Dip netting will be new to me, and I haven't used a rod and reel to catch salmon since my days on Lake Michigan.

As you can see I've got a lot of learning ahead of me. I expect it's going to be a steep curve over the next few months, especially learning all the different hunting and fishing regulations. I look forward to the opportunity to visit with many of you down the road; and if you happen to catch a wave from a duct-taped red Toyota pickup, don't hesitate to wave back, it's just me.

Geoff Beyersdorf is the new Subsistence Biologist/Pilot for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.