

Fall fireweed brings reflections and transitions

by Michelle Ostrowski



Fireweed. Photo Credit: Kenai Refuge Staff/ USFWS

The tell-tale sign of fireweed now blooming closer to the tip of the plant reminds me that summer is rapidly approaching its end. When fireweed has gone to seed they say that snow is six weeks away. Just this past weekend I felt the air changing and I noticed the mountain peaks are starting to change color. Fall is just around the corner.

Working at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, this time of year is often one for reflection and transition for me. Reflecting back on some of this past summer's highlights I am reminded that once again we have reached a considerable number of Refuge visitors through our interpretive programs. At our Hidden Lake Campfire programs Cheri Pavia and Nikki von-Hedemann creatively educated visitors about the lynx and hare relationship by dressing volunteers up as lynx and snowshoe hares, while Sarah Siefken taught visitors how to build a fire and use signal mirrors in

emergency situations. At our Discovery Room in the Environmental Education Center the self-led interactive tables allowed the public to learn about plant identification, mammals, trees, and birds through playing games and doing experiments. Our summer interpretive programs concluded with a "berry" successful Wild Berry Fun Day here at the Refuge on Friday August 17th. We had 158 people attend, one of our highest attended events which included 91 people on our scheduled guided hikes.

Sadly, we have begun to say good-bye to our seasonal volunteers who were instrumental in running our visitor centers and helping create, facilitate, and staff the variety of entertaining and educational interpretive programs we offer. Their smiling faces and creative minds will be missed. As many of them head back to college or off on new adventures, things quiet down in the visitor center and I begin to transition to fall duties.

Fall is not a time for rest for me here at the Refuge. In fact I often need to have more energy. The starting of school on Wednesday marks the beginning of field trip season. We offer seven kindergarten through sixth grade environmental education programs based on grade level and curriculum standards. The linking factor of all of these field trips is getting kids out into the Refuge and learning about Alaskan wildlife and their habitats. From learning about Animals and Their Senses (kindergarten) to Leave No Trace (sixth grade) students walk away learning why the Refuge is a special place and how they fit into the "big picture." Seeing nature through the eyes of these children reminds me why I love being an environmental educator and their curiosity rekindles my "sense of wonder" for this magnificent place we live in. Fall is my favorite time of year and I am thankful I get to spend almost every day outside teaching and sharing it with children.

Mark your calendars for the end of September. Our annual Refuge Open House, Saturday, September 29th will include activities, crafts, and guided walks.

Fireweed represents a calendar for the seasons in Alaska and my calendar is definitely busy but not completely filled yet. Please call 260-2839 to book a field trip or for more information on other environmental

education opportunities at the Refuge. Hopefully we still have a little more than six weeks before termination dust (snow), so I can complete few more of those unfinished things left on my “to do” list.

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Refuge and has assisted with educational school groups since 1997. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.