

Big back yard: Winter activities abound on wildlife refuge lands

by Bill Kent

Most folks who make use of the resources of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge do so during our splendid Alaska summers. Fishing, hiking, camping and wildlife watching are favorite pursuits of refuge visitors.

I wonder how many of you are aware of all the opportunities available during our long, dark Alaska winters? The days are getting somewhat longer and warmer now, and this is the prime time for winter activities on the refuge.

One of the most popular winter activities is ice fishing; many of the lakes with good populations of trout are accessible with a short drive onto the refuge. Engineer and Hidden lakes in the Skilak Loop are very popular destinations, as well as lakes along Swanson River and Swan Lake roads. But as the weather warms, watch out for thin ice; it seems inevitable that someone manages to drop a vehicle or two through the ice as temperatures rise in the late spring.

Snowmobile enthusiasts make good use of the refuge areas that are open for snowmachining. A large portion of the popular Caribou Hills lies within the refuge, and there are excellent trails leading into the northern parts of the refuge.

I should note that we ask snowmachiners to stay below timberline in their travels. This restriction is intended help avoid disturbing the caribou and other wildlife that are feeding on the windswept high plateaus and exposed mountain slopes. You can pick up a map at our visitor center that shows which areas of the refuge are open or closed to snowmachines.

There are good cross-country ski trails at our headquarters and visitor center on Ski Hill Road south of Soldotna. These trails are not as wide as the heavily groomed Tsalteshi Trails at Skyview High School. Our trails are narrower and not groomed as frequently; however they are rolling, have some tight turns and offer you a different and quieter skiing experience—and your chances of seeing a moose or other wildlife are quite good.

At this time of the year, long-distance skiers can pick up good snowmachine trails that lead for miles into the backcountry, such as the Funny River horse trail, or the Pollard Trail from Kasilof to Tustumena Lake. On a bright, sunny day you can ski forever on these trails, especially if they have an inch or two of fresh powder or have been groomed by the snowmachiners.

Have you ever through about winter camping? Many of the refuge campgrounds remain open through the winter, and a good number of folks have discovered the contrast with the crowded summer days.

Winter camping exposes you to a new world—it is VERY quiet in the campgrounds, and the sounds of the refuge in winter are quite different from the hustle and bustle of summer. It's getting to be a good time for owl listening, for example, because owls set up house-keeping about this time of year. Check out the great horned owls along Swan Lake Road in the evenings.

Winter wildlife watching can be quite rewarding on the refuge, particularly for moose and bald eagles. Don't approach those moose too closely, however; they've had a tough winter and any excitement uses up valuable calories that they need to survive until green-up. They are getting a bit stubborn now and aren't too quick to move out of the way. If you take the family pet along with you, please keep it under control and away from the moose, also.

Hopefully, you have already discovered some of these great winter activities on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Two million acres is a lot of back yard, and wintertime makes a lot of it much more accessible than it is in the summertime.

Bill Kent is the Supervisory Park Ranger responsible for visitor services at the refuge. He and his family live in Sterling. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.