

## “It’s been more than sixteen years ... really ”?

by Bill Kent

April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1991... I drove onto the Kenai Peninsula for the first time. However, it wasn't my first trip to Alaska; in January, 1971, my military charter flight refueled in Anchorage before continuing westward (or is that east after crossing the International Dateline?) to a significantly warmer climate. My clearest memory of that brief “visit” is seeing the white-capped mountains through the terminal windows, thinking I wouldn't see anything like that for a while, and that I'd like to come back for a closer look.

The usual career progression for a refuge employee is to move on to a new station every five to six years. That was generally how my career had progressed over the preceding fourteen years, and driving onto Kenai Refuge that April day, I had no idea my career was about to take a sixteen year diversion. The refuge manager that had hired me to work at the Klamath Basin Refuges literally stopped sidewalk traffic in Portland, Oregon when I was voicing some indecision about whether I should apply for this position. “Do you want to go to Alaska,” he quite forcefully asked me while we were walking back to the regional office there. “Well, yes, I do,” I replied. “There's only one refuge there you want to work—that's the Kenai, and don't go anywhere else,” he concluded.

I knew that my duties at Kenai Refuge would be a test of all my previous assignments at refuges across the country and I wondered if those positions had prepared me for the responsibilities I was soon to face. However, I also knew that being selected for this position on Kenai Refuge would be a wonderful experience for my wife and daughter, and that the time spent here would be an adventure.

While my wife and I make final preparations to leave Alaska for my new position in south Georgia, I have reflected on the past 16 years, and how quickly the “adventure” began. During my first summer, the Pothole Lake Fire required evacuation of Hidden Lake Campground during Memorial Day weekend; in late July and early August, the Hidden Creek Dipnet Fishery required Refuge staff to be on duty around the clock for nearly three weeks, and the event was covered by the national news media and appeared on CNN and other national networks. Immediately after the

Pothole Lake fire, I was quickly introduced to the Russian River Ferry... oh my, was that a shock to a Georgia boy who thought fishing got crowded when I saw another bass fishermen within 100 yards. But, I came to the conclusion that what I was seeing was a social phenomenon, and the folks who return year after year truly enjoy and even revel in that proximity to others.

Although I found myself desk-bound more than I ever expected, I continued to enjoy speaking to visitors whenever I got the opportunity. For one thing, these conversations reminded me how proud I am of the Kenai Refuge and of the National Wildlife Refuge System; there is no other system of lands like it anywhere in the world. My family has lived in some of the most beautiful parts of this country, and we have been able to hunt, fish and observe wildlife at each of these stops along the way; those activities were available because there was a local National Wildlife Refuge nearby. Here in Alaska, I have heard people complaining that there is too much land “tied up” in refuges, parks, and national forests. A couple of trips to the Lower-48 might cure that view, as human development continues its exponential growth down there, and less and less land is available to enjoy the hunting, fishing, hiking, boating or other recreational activities that we pursue so handily here in Alaska. We will certainly experience a new reality when we arrive in Brunswick, Georgia.

My sixteen years working on Kenai Refuge have been unbelievably rewarding, primarily because the Refuge staff has been the very best I've had the pleasure to work with anywhere. Each one of them is professional, dedicated to the refuge's resources, and more than willing to insure that our visitors and visitors have the very best experience.

Our daughter was only five years old when we arrived and grew up and received a great education here. She recently graduated from the University of Washington and is living and working in Seattle; the values she possesses came from not only her parents, but from everyone she came into contact with here on the Kenai Peninsula. Thank You for helping her become the fine young woman she is today.

Lisa and I will depart the Kenai Peninsula knowing

we have made lasting friendships, and that our sixteen years will be forever in our fondest memories.

*Bill Kent began his duties as the Supervisory Park Ranger at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in 1991; he and his family lived in both Soldotna and Sterling. Ear-*

*lier in his career Bill worked at Okefenokee, Merritt Island, Parker River, and Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuges. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*