

Local riders dreaming of a White Christmas

by Rick Johnston



This photo shows a homemade “snow traveler” used by early Refuge inholder and homesteader Robert Mathison, long after its useful life. Mathison used the machine to service his trap line in the Chickaloon River area. (Photo by Bob Richey, Kenai National Moose Range Annual Narrative, 1970)

The moderate temperatures and lack of snow this fall and early winter over much of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge have delayed the opening of snowmobile season on the Refuge.

While such delays are not uncommon, the snow base this year is less than most years.

Some years snow conditions can be relatively poor in the lowlands, but much better at higher elevations. With a few exceptions Refuge managers have tended to open the Refuge as a single unit. This year the higher elevation snow base is low and was not helped by two recent warm and wet weather systems, so the rationale for a delayed opening is obvious, with few calls to Refuge Headquarters inquiring about an official opening.

Refuge regulations authorize snowmobile use from December 1 to April 30, provided adequate snow cover exists to protect the underlying vegetation. Other factors also go into making December 1 the earliest opening date. The highly variable temperatures of our maritime weather pattern make early season snow subject to repeated melting in November before permanent snow cover takes hold. Further-

more, moose rutting in lowland open areas is common in November. Managers believe that reducing snowmobile-moose interaction in November is in the best interest of the moose conservation. Lastly, our numerous lakes are collectively less safe and unlikely to have adequate ice thickness prior to December 1. For these reasons we have established December 1 as the earliest possible snowmobile opening.

Snowmobile use has evolved on the Refuge since it was first permitted. In the earliest years of the Kenai National Moose Range, commercially manufactured snow travelers/snow goes/snowmobiles/snowmachines did not exist, and the Moose Range was closed to motorized travel off established roads. Commercially manufactured snowmobiles became available to the public in the early to mid-1960s.

National Wildlife Refuges in Alaska and other northern areas faced a decision on whether to authorize the use of this new “snow traveler” technology. A determination was made nationally that use would be authorized, but with regulations and restriction to protect wildlife and other Refuge resources. Early use on the Kenai National Moose Range was permitted and managed by new regulations as early as 1966, although some records and photographs show earlier use including some homemade contraptions. Relatively little formal analysis was made of the potential impact to wildlife or habitat, but managers were already concerned about this new conveyance and restricted the size of machines, and time and type of use.

Snowmobile use then and now remains a balance between legitimate access for recreation and potential loss of natural resources and other non-motorized recreational opportunities. Early regulations prohibited snowmobile use within certain portions of the Refuge, including areas important to wintering wildlife and/or other non-motorized Refuge uses. Many of the alpine areas and areas within the Swanson River and Swan Lake Canoe Routes were closed to snowmobile use.

Managers have sought to balance snowmobile use with other established uses such as cross country skiing and dog mushing. Safety was also a concern at sev-

eral locations. In 1972 for example, areas popular with skiers and mushers adjacent to the Soldotna headquarters were closed, and snowmobile racing and use of snowmobiles on roads was also prohibited. Restrictions on the size of snowmobiles (must be less than 40 inches wide) were maintained and additional adjustments to restrictions in alpine areas and within the Skilak Loop area were later instituted.

Over the years Refuge files document both the growing use of snowmobiles and the growing concern over potential impacts to wildlife and habitats. While the body of general knowledge has increased, the balancing act between opportunity and resource protection remains a work in progress. Much like early discussions and correspondence, our current Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) planning process is a dialogue on both the recreational opportunities and the protection needed to meet our sometimes conflicting trust responsibilities and purposes.

Today approximately 1.25 million acres (6%) of the Refuge remain open to snowmobile use each winter after the Refuge Manager determines that adequate snow cover exists.

The following list illustrates the actual times of snowmobile opening and closing dates for the past 30 years and show the significant variability of snow cover of Kenai Peninsula winters:

WINTER	OPEN	CLOSE
76/77	12/20/76	4/30/77
77/78	01/25/78	4/30/78
78/79	12/07/78	4/30/79
79/80	12/14/79	4/30/80
80/81	NOT OPENED	NOT OPENED
81/82	12/01/81	4/05/82
82/83	12/01/82	3/23/83
83/84	01/06/84	3/17/84
84/85	03/06/85	4/26/85
85/86	NOT OPENED	NOT OPENED
86/87	01/10/87	4/01/87
87/88	12/01/87	4/22/88
88/89	12/01/88	4/19/89
89/90	12/01/89	4/16/90
90/91	12/05/90	4/12/91
91/92	12/01/91	4/27/92
92/93	01/04/93	2/27/93
93/94	01/05/94	4/03/94
94/95	12/01/94	4/30/95
95/96	02/09/96	4/07/96
96/97	12/01/96	4/13/97
97/98	12/24/97	3/22/98
98/99	12/04/98	4/21/99
99/00	12/26/99	4/30/00
00/01	02/13/01	3/25/01
01/02	12/22/01	4/30/02
02/03	NOT OPENED	NOT OPENED
03/04	12/13/04	4/18/04
04/05	12/18/04	3/19/05
05/06	01/22/06	4/09/06
06/07	12/24/06	4/12/07

Due to variable weather conditions, the dependability of having suitable snow cover to allow snowmobile use at any given date each winter is uncertain. This seems to have been even more the case in recent years with warmer early winter conditions. However, looking at past opening dates shows that late openings in the early 1980s including the 1980/81 and 1985/86 seasons when the Refuge was never opened due to lack of snow cover. Only once in 30 years has the Refuge been open to snowmobile use for the entire period potentially allowed by regulation.

Because snowmobiling on the Refuge is so popular as a recreational activity, as well as providing access for such things as small game hunting, trapping, ice fishing, travel to private cabins, and winter sight-seeing, the Refuge Manager's annual decision on this matter is subject to considerable discussion and has become a closely watched date.

If you would like information about snowmobile opportunities, regulations, or other winter refuge recreational opportunities contact Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters at 262-7021 for information.

Rick Johnston is a Ranger/Pilot at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He has worked on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1979. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.