

It's that time of year... be careful out there!

by Rick Ernst



*Photo of a moose collision with car.
Credit: State Troopers*

It's that time of year when moose-vehicle collisions climb at an alarming rate. During winter months food is scarce and the big animals must travel through deep snow and ice. You can make their winter struggle a little easier by being alert when driving Kenai Peninsula roads this winter.

Many factors contribute to the climbing numbers of wildlife-vehicle collisions during winter—darkness, icy roads, driving too fast, not paying attention, lower visibilities, and poor vehicle maintenance, as well as an increasing human population. Motorists should keep windshields, mirrors and headlights clean. Make sure both headlights are working, as well as brake lights.

Accidents do happen but hitting a large wild animal such as a caribou or moose will very likely cause expensive vehicle damage and possible injury or even death. The average cost of a moose-vehicle collision in Alaska is \$8,400, according to the Alaska Moose Federation website. Remember that if you see an animal cross in front of you there may be another one following. Slow down—be extra cautious.

There is a group of state, federal and non-profit individuals working on reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions for the Sterling Highway between mileposts 58 (the junction with the east entrance to Skilak Lake Road near Jim's Landing) and 79 (where the two-lane becomes a four-lane in Sterling). The Alaska Depart-

ment of Transportation and Public Facilities is looking at rebuilding this section of highway, much of which crosses the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Both cow moose and caribou were collared with global positioning system (GPS) receivers that stored satellite-based locations every 30 minutes from October until April, and then every 2 hours until the collars automatically dropped off the animals on July 1. Fifty-nine collars were retrieved from moose and 4 from caribou over the past 2 years.

Data downloaded from the collars provided over half a million locations and documented 918 crossings of the Sterling Highway between milepost 58 and 79. You may have noticed the half-mile mileposts along this stretch of highway, and the large signs at the east and west ends warning motorists of the "High Wildlife Crossing Area next 18 miles." The Refuge has encouraged motorists to call the Wildlife Hotline (262-2300) if they observe wildlife along this stretch of highway; and report between which milepost markers they saw the animal, what species, and the date and time of the sighting. Posters explaining the study are posted at local Post Offices, stores, and visitor centers. Brochures further explaining the study are available at Visitor Centers in Kenai and Soldotna, and at the Kenai Refuge Headquarters.

Since the study began in November of 2005 we have received over 166 calls on the hotline reporting over 300 animals crossing or along the Sterling Highway. Mostly moose have been reported, but motorists have also reported caribou, black and brown bears, lynx, and coyotes. We appreciate everyone who has supported this effort by calling the hotline to report their sightings. Please remember the hotline is specific to the Sterling Highway between milepost 58 and 79.

There have been 122 wildlife-vehicle collisions on the Sterling Highway between milepost 58 and 79 between years 2000 and 2006. Based on the average of \$8,400 per accident, that is over one million dollars! Traffic volume along this section of highway continues to increase. As the number of vehicles and the speed of vehicles increases, the highway becomes more and more of a barrier to wildlife trying to cross.

Many times people look to some government agency or someone else to solve such problems. Well, this is a problem that we as individuals can all help to solve. Please be extra careful driving this winter. Take your time, obey the speed limit and remember to slow down when road or weather conditions worsen. Blowing snow, darkness, icy roadways and driving too fast can ruin your day when a moose steps out onto the high-

way in front of you.

Make one of your New Year resolutions to be extra careful while driving. You may save the life of a moose and possibly your own as well. Happy New Year!

Rick Ernst has been a wildlife biologist and pilot at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1993. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.