

What I did at Refuge summer camp

by Michelle Ostrowski



Besides learning & getting dirty, we also found time to socialize & be silly. Photo credit: KNWR Staff

There are sports camps, music camps and lots of other summer camps to help children learn and make the most of their summers. This year, for the first time, 14 fourth and fifth graders with an interest in the outdoors participated in the Kenai Refuge's "Get Out & Get Dirty" summer camp. "My favorite things at camp were dissecting fish, treasure hunting, predator-prey game, Andy Goldsworthy-inspired trail art, making new friends, fairy houses, and touching trees," according to camper Jackson Blackwell. From July 28-August 1st, we were busy from 9am and didn't stop until 3pm. Most of the kids were amazed at how fast six hours flew by and didn't want to leave when their parents came to pick them up. On the other hand Eve Smallwood, my co-counselor, and I were exhausted but smiling after those same six hours.

Each day parents told us how much fun the kids were having and what interesting things the kids shared with them about the day's adventure. One parent stated, "I'm learning so many new things from him. Brian came home Friday and made the most beautiful Fairy House in our back yard. I was AMAZED! Thanks for showing him the importance of appreciating and enjoying the beautiful outdoors."

Getting kids outdoors, appreciating, and connecting with nature were our goals when we decided to create this program. The Kenai Peninsula community has a great resource (the Refuge) practically in their

backyard. We wanted to invoke a "sense of wonder" in these children and ultimately to help ensure future conservationists.

Fortunately, the rain gave us a break and the weather cooperated for the entire week although we were prepared to be outside rain or shine. The only complaints we heard from the kids were about the relentless mosquitoes. Using binoculars, magnifiers, dip nets, and other tools we were able to get a closer look at some of the creatures living in the Refuge. A magpie, which had been injured here in Soldotna, even came to visit one day courtesy of Myke Bon with Alaska WildBird Rehabilitation Center in Wasilla.

The kids learned how and why biologists use radio telemetry to track wildlife. They all understand the basics of map and compass use, some important knot tying techniques, can identify the major tree species on the peninsula, and each camper made a survival kit and a plant press with about 16 local plants. The week was 99% outdoors and 100% hands-on. When Patti Berkham from Alaska Department of Fish and Game came in to dissect salmon with us, half the kids jumped right in to get fish guts all over their hands. The other half hesitated, but by the end everyone smelled fishy.

Another highlight was "Animal Olympics" where teams learned about animal adaptations through fun games. So many of the activities the campers enjoyed during the week can be done with few supplies and in a variety of natural settings. Hopefully they will teach their parents, siblings, and friends some of the things they learned.

I would like to send out a big "thanks" to the 14 camp participants who made being outdoors extra fun for me during camp week. You know who you are: Moon Wolverine, Sun Fox, Storm Eagle, Rain Lynx, Lightning Moose, Stone Coyote, Sun Salmon, Stone Bear, Star Owl, Thunder Puffin, Rain Wolf, Sun Marten, Stone Caribou, and Rain Otter! I also couldn't have done it without the help of Eve, my education intern who is from Illinois volunteering with the Refuge until October. It is my hope that the Refuge can repeat this program again next summer and maybe even add a 2nd/3rd grade half day "Critter Camp."

Other outdoor-inspired events at the Refuge in-

clude Wild Berry Fun Day happening TODAY on Ski Hill Road from 11am-3pm with activities, crafts, snacks and guided berry identification hikes. On August 19th join us for a fitness walk on the two mile Centennial Trail starting at 2pm. "Connecting People with the Outdoors" is the theme to this years Refuge open house scheduled for Saturday September 27, 2008. Guest speaker Taz Tally, Homer author of *50 Hikes In Alaska's Kenai Peninsula*, will share some of his experiences hiking and taking pictures on the Peninsula. We will also be teaching some basics on how to use a map and compass, outdoor family activities, a trail scavenger hunt, and will be providing guided walks.

All guided hikes require pre-registration. Lastly, all local K-6 teachers are encouraged to call and book a fall field trip with the Refuge to get their students outdoors. Call Michelle at 260-2839 for more information.

Michelle Ostrowski, aka Snow Wolverine, is the education specialist at the Refuge and has worked with educational school groups and outreach since 1997. She is one of 10 Alaska Refuge Employees on the USFWS Connecting People With Nature Working Group helping to GET MORE PEOPLE OUTDOORS. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.