

## Refuge education intern contributes to Kenai Peninsula youth while gaining valuable career experience

by Eve Smallwood



*Eve Smallwood and camper Anna Loehr investigate an insect at Summer Camp. Photo Credit Kenai NWR Staff*

When I got the phone call last November that I'd been accepted for a position as an environmental education intern at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, I remember jumping around and yelling, "I'm going to Alaska!" I was ecstatic!

As a forestry major that had never lived outside of Illinois, I was eager for the chance to get to know another part of the country and get some hands-on training in the environmental education (EE) field. I love the outdoors and working with kids, but my forestry courses had only briefly touched on the subject of EE. What better way to learn about becoming an environmental educator than to get some experience spending the next eight months working directly with the Refuge's education specialist, Michelle Ostrowski, do-

ing environmental education programs with a variety of audiences.

One of my primary responsibilities at the Refuge was facilitating field trips. Local students come to the Refuge to learn about topics from fire ecology to wetlands, and much more! Many field trips take place at the Refuge Environmental Education Center in Soldotna, while others go to the Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area in the heart of the Refuge. The majority of our time on field trips is spent outside. In the winter, we get students into snowshoes to learn about how wildlife adapt in winter in Alaska. As we lead students on these hikes, we play educational activities and games to help them learn about these topics. We try to make sure the students are having fun while gaining valuable information about the outdoors at the same time.

At the end of one field trip, as the students prepared to return to school, I heard one kid groaning about having to go back to "learning." I laughed and told him we had been learning all kinds of things throughout the field trip. He had been having such a good time, he didn't realize he was learning too!

Along with helping lead field trips, I also got to create some of my own programs and activities for groups such as the Girl Scouts and local homeschool students. During the summer, I also created a new campfire program, "Have You Hugged a Tree Today?" with another intern that we presented at Hidden Lake Campground. I also helped out with the Refuge's various Fun Days, including Winter Fun Day, Wild Berry Fun Day, and Fall Fun Day. These community events provide a fun atmosphere for families and friends to learn about the Refuge and to enjoy the outdoors while doing activities, going on guided walks, making a craft or snacking on a theme-based treat.

One of my favorite projects at the refuge was helping create the first "Get Out & Get Dirty" Summer Camp for kids. On the one sunny week in July, fourteen 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders came to the Refuge and had a blast learning about outdoor-related topics. We did activities such as salmon dissection, insect catching,

plant and tree identification, wilderness survival, map and compass use, nature art, and scat identification. The list goes on! It was certainly one of my favorite weeks all summer, and I know the kids had just as much fun.

Teaching kids about the outdoors really is fun, but it is much more than that. We hope that by teaching children about natural environments and how they function, the children will develop an increased interest in the outdoors and become environmental stewards. We are also optimistic that the kids will develop a personal relationship with the Refuge so that they may help care for it, and will bring others to share the natural wonders that the Refuge has to offer. Just the other day I was at the Refuge Headquarters when a car pulled up with one of the kids who had recently been on a field trip. He had brought his family back to go on a hike. The adult driving told me, "This is one way to get people out here!" We certainly hope so!

This internship has been an inspirational stepping stone for me. It gave me the assurance that being an

environmental educator is truly what I am passionate about and that I am on the correct career path. It gave me experience that I could not have received solely from my college courses. I have also been privileged to see the beauty of Alaska. As I leave Alaska and the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, I will take with me good memories, increased confidence, and new skills that will help me reach my goal of becoming a great environmental educator.

Thank you to all of the people who enriched my experience here, especially to my mentor and friend, education specialist Michelle Ostrowski.

*Eve Smallwood has been an Environmental Education Intern at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for the past eight months. She is heading back to Illinois before moving on to her next adventure. Anyone who is interested in participating in an environmental internship in the United States should visit the Student Conservation Association (SCA) website at <http://www.thesca.org>. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*