Journey down the tag

by Jetta Minerva

The author dons her rain gear for another day of vegetation surveying on the Tagagwik River in the Selawik National Wildlife Refuge. Photo Credit: Michelle Prehoda

I started working for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service as a biological technician after my sophomore year in college while attending the University of Alaska Fairbanks. I could write an entire novel about the experiences I had as a biotech, but the most memorable experience happened during the summer of 2003 when I was stationed in the village of Kotzebue working for the Selawik National Wildlife Refuge. There I was assigned to assist a Graduate student named Michelle Prehoda from the University of Michigan. Michelle was doing an intensive study on moose browse (what moose were eating) at various locations on the Refuge. Our first study involved a 10-day float down the Tagagwik (Tag) River conducting vegetation assessments at 1 (river) mile intervals.

We flew on a charter to a narrow pond that ran parallel to the river. The plane had to make several trips to transport the 700+ lbs. of gear we needed to conduct the study. I went on the first trip and began portaging our gear while the pilot went back for Michelle and the second load. With a shotgun loaded with 3" slugs strapped across my back, I began transporting food, camping gear, and equipment to the riverbank. Michelle arrived and we heaved the rest of the gear and the motor-less raft to the bank of the river and began assembling it. It took several hours and lots of jumping up and down to get the floor boards in. From there we ferried our gear to the other side of the river and set up camp.

It was a beautiful summer day without a cloud in the sky and the mini temperature gauge on my zipper pull read 80° F. A nap was in short order and, using our life jackets, I made myself a cozy little spot on the gravel beach while Michelle curled up on one of the tubes on the raft. I awoke with beads of sweat trickling into my ears and vivid memories of a grizzly sniffing my legs. I had covered my face with my raincoat to block the midday sun and now found myself trembling with fear, aware of every hair on the back of my neck sticking straight out, afraid of what I would see. After what seemed like hours, I slowly peeked over the edge of my raincoat to find nothing amiss. Sighing with relief, I awoke Michelle and told her that I had just had a "dream" that a grizzly bear was sniffing my legs. With wide eyes she began telling me she had a similar "dream" in which a large bear was sniffing her back. We began investigating the area.

It did not take Sherlock Holmes to tell us not only where this grizzly had been, but also how large he was. His tracks came from upriver, right along the edge of the water in the sand. I was wearing hip boots and put both of my feet in one of the tracks and they did not fill the width of his foot. I immediately looked up at Michelle and I'm sure her expression matched mine; an expression similar to one who has nearly missed death. That was not the first time I've seen that expression, nor the last.

The tracks left the sand and onto the gravel in a direction that lead straight to my life jacket bed. Gasping, our eyes followed the tracks as they crossed back

over the sand right next to the raft where Michelle had been napping. The tracks then went to the cooler where water was leaking out of holes made by what appeared to be large teeth marks. The tracks then followed the narrow strip of sand all the way down the beach and on around the bend. After taking out and loading the second shotgun, we prepared dinner and reviewed our course on the map and GPS.

We awoke the next morning after a night of fitful sleep and realized the river was much higher after last night's rain. We were walking toward our gear when we both realized something was missing. The raft! We had pulled it up at least 15 feet out of the water, but that was not enough. It was gone, and it could only be one place: down river. But how far? Everything was in the raft: our radio, satellite phone, water purifier, even my shoes for goodness sakes! I grabbed a shotgun and took off running with Michelle following suit. We found the raft stuck in an eddy on the other side of the river. Without thinking I jumped in to go after it. After nearly drowning I scrambled up the bank and lay on my stomach gasping for air. It felt like I had been to a non-licensed acupuncturist with no patience. Michelle came on the scene and started laughing at me. I couldn't help but join in. How silly! If my dad was there, he would have thumped me on the head for not using it.

After acclimating ourselves to the water, we swam across and retrieved the raft. Nearly 2 hours later we radioed base for our daily welfare check. Michelle got on the radio: "Selawik Base, this is unit 22, over." "This is Base, go ahead 22" was the response. "Myself and 23 are just checking in; everything's fine and we're heading down river." "10-4, Base copies. We'll be waiting for your next welfare check tomorrow morning at 10 am, over." We were not about to reveal the mishaps that had already occurred on day 1 of our study. We were afraid they would send us back to the office and we hadn't even begun! Now we were ready; two women in the open country; not a boat or plane could be seen or heard. We were in wild Alaska and our journey had just begun!

We reached our first study site after 1 river mile. Using a compass we followed an imaginary line directly perpendicular to the river into the woods, stopping every 50 feet. There we established 15 meter plots and inventoried all the plants within that plot and estimated their abundance. We kept doing these plots every 50 feet until we passed the riparian zone into tundra (riparian refers to the plant communities along a river or stream). Some of the plots were extremely thick with alder and willow, making it difficult to keep a straight line. We did transects on both sides of the river. Sometimes it would take hours to reach the tundra.

When we came across plants that had been browsed by moose, we identified them, estimated abundance and percentage of browse, measured the width of the plant, and took leaf samples. Since there are over 40 species of willow in Alaska, identifying them could be difficult. Samples were important so that we could correctly identify them back at the office using microscopes. Samples of hybrid species were sent to a lab in Washington for identification. We did hundreds of plots on that trip. We hiked through rain and shine, clouds of mosquitoes, and piles of steaming bear scat, all in the name of science. We were constantly rewarded with sightings of hawks, owls, falcons, jaegers, black bears, not to mention waterfowl and songbirds. Grayling and pike adorned our mess kits, and ice from permafrost in the banks replenished our cooler.

That summer, we owned the Tag River. It was ours to explore, to learn from, and enjoy. I hope to go back to that wild and scenic river someday. Perhaps take my nephew; to watch his face light up with the sighting of a sharp-shinned hawk or peregrine falcon. To ask what kind of bird is singing, or what kind of fish are swimming under the boat. I realize now the importance of our National Wildlife Refuges; to experience the great outdoors and share them.

Jetta Minerva has been a Park Ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 2006. She worked previously at Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge as a manager trainee after graduating from the University of Alaska – Fairbanks in biology. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/.