

# Sterling Highway reconstruction project for milepost 58 to 79 hits the fast lane

by Rick Ernst



It looks like the Sterling Highway between mileposts 58 (east junction with Skilak Lake Road) and 79 (junction with Kenai Keys Road) may be reconstructed sooner rather than later. This section of highway is on the state's list of high moose-vehicle collision areas.

An interagency working group has been grappling with ideas about how to make this dangerous road through the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge safer for motorists and wildlife. The working group consists of Alaska Departments of Transportation and Public Facilities, Fish and Game, and Public Safety; Federal Highway Administration, Alaska Moose Federation (an Anchorage non-profit) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

To get an idea of how much wildlife crosses this stretch of highway, we set up a telephone hotline and asked people to call in their wildlife sightings. To help people pin down the locations of their sightings we installed new mileposts in half-mile increments along the Refuge part of the highway (mileposts 58-76).

Since November 2005 we have received 276 calls on the wildlife hotline, which reported 29 black bears, 18 brown bears, 117 caribou, 12 lynx, and 265 moose.

We also put GPS-collars on 59 moose and 9 caribou, and after two winters of data collection we have recorded more than 1107 crossings of the highway within the project area.

The hotline phone number (262-2300) is advertised on highway signs, through a radio transmitter (1170 AM) located at milepost 62.5, and with brochures and posters displayed in post offices, food stores, and visitor centers. Information and a map are also posted

in kiosks at both the east and west entrance to Skilak Lake Road. Unfortunately, the radio transmitter is not presently working, but the hotline phone is alive and well.

We have also obtained wildlife-vehicle collision data from the State Troopers, as well as the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. This dataset includes not only road-kills but also collisions where wildlife were hit but not recovered. Between 2000 and 2007 there were at least 174 collisions with wildlife along this stretch of highway. This total includes 24 black bear, 3 brown bear, 5 caribou, and 142 moose.

The interagency working group is asking for your support in continuing to call the wildlife hotline (262-2300) anytime you see wildlife as you drive the Sterling Highway through the Kenai Refuge. Please provide the following information:

- (1) What kind of animal you observed (moose, caribou, wolf, etc.)
- (2) How many animals (cow and calf, sow with 2 cubs)
- (3) Location (between what milepost markers – MP 69.5 and MP 70)
- (4) Date and Time of your sighting

We greatly appreciate all the calls that we have received. This information will be used to help recommend mitigation measures—such as wildlife overpasses, wildlife underpasses, and crosswalks, and fencing—to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions. We hope to continue the hotline for several years after the highway reconstruction to help judge the effectiveness of the mitigation measures. You can see a map showing where motorists are reporting wildlife along this section of the Sterling Highway on the Kenai Refuge website:

[http://www.fws.gov/filedownloads/ftp\\_kenai/maps/sterling/map\\_wildlifeline.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/filedownloads/ftp_kenai/maps/sterling/map_wildlifeline.pdf)

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