

## Get out and ski!

by Mark Laker

Ok, almost to the top now. It's 5° out, but I'm getting warm and a little winded. I'm on the Centennial Ski Trail at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna. The Centennial trail was completed in 2004, in recognition of the National Wildlife Refuge system's centennial. It's the weekend and I'm out with my wife and our two year old son getting a little fresh air. My son is cheering me on, "Faster daddy faster!" from his sled—which I'm pulling.

His sled is actually called a ski pulk. It has stiff poles that are attached to a waist belt, and the sled has a little seat with buckles—a good feature for hauling two year olds. My ski tips are spread wide and my knees are turned in making a "V" and giving me traction. This technique is called the Herringbone because of the pattern it creates in the snow as you go up the hill.

Ok we made it; I'm actually hot and starting to sweat. I'm looking forward to the cold air in my face as we go down the hill. We are off! I start to hear giggles and "Wee! faster faster!" behind me and I feel that exhilaration of speed under my feet. The air feels very good; it is a long hill. When we finally stop, I ask my son, "Now was that fun or what?" He says "Yes daddy, let's do it again." Cross country skiing is one of my favorite winter activities. I especially like going in February and March as the days are longer, warmer and the snow is usually better. We have great Nordic skiing opportunities here in Soldotna and on the Refuge.

It may surprise you to hear we have 12 miles of ski trails at the refuge headquarters. There are six groomed loops: Centennial (2.8 miles), Cheechako (0.9 miles), Howling Hill (2.3 miles), Nordic View (3.5 miles), Raven Ridge (4.6 miles), and a loop around Headquarters Lake (2.2 miles). The trails offer a good range of difficulty. Cheechako is a beginner loop with a few small hills. If you want really flat, try Headquarters Lake. The lake is a favorite for skate skiing.

There are some great trails off the Refuge too. The Tsalteshi ski trails at Skyview High School offer

15 kilometers of groomed trails, and some are even lighted ([www.tsalteshi.org](http://www.tsalteshi.org)).

Looking to trim down or make some of those New Year resolutions? Working both the upper and lower body simultaneously, cross country skiing is the total body workout. Every major muscle group is being used to propel you along or maintain balance. With all those muscles working, a lot of calories get burned. In fact no other sport or activity burns as many calories (up to 1100 calories/hour). At a brisk recreational level you can burn about 700 calories/hour (<http://caloriecount.about.com>).

This is just what I need after a holiday full of meatballs, potatoes, pie, and ice cream. Beside burning calories, you will be burning off stress, feeling better and maybe getting smarter. Exercise stimulates the brain to release chemicals that promote the growth, strength and health of brain neurons. There is growing research linking academic achievement and exercise. Exercise itself won't make you smarter, but it appears to help you learn.

Mostly I like skiing because it's fun and offers a little adventure. My days as a field biologist spending four months a year in a little tent are just a memory—that's not all bad. Though odd things do occur at the office, I miss the daily opportunity to see or discover something new and fascinating.

Our public recreational cabins are another great skiing destination. You can rent cabins nightly for \$35 to \$45. Several cabins are just an easy ski across a lake. The ice is usually plenty safe this time of year, but you can call and ask our visitor services staff for an update.

My most memorable ski experiences are from clear, cold, full moon nights when the crystals of hoar frost become illuminated. The adventure of a ski trek in to a cabin, and the solitude of a quiet starry sky, will create fond memories for years to come. So get out and ski!

*Mark Laker has been the ecologist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 2003. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*