

## Kenai Refuge has new Visitor Services Manager

by Matt Conner



*Matt Conner, the new Visitor Services Manager at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, kneels next to the entrance sign being completed for the opening of the new visitor center in early 2015.*

The other day I was in the garage unpacking boxes from our recent move from Fergus Falls, Minnesota, to work as the Visitor Services Manager for Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. I have heard people say, "It is like Christmas when you open your moving boxes." This might be true if what I got for Christmas was a bunch of stuff that I already own, plugs and wires to computers that have since been disposed, keys with no known source, and used and dried paint rollers that I don't remember ever using.

One of the more interesting finds was a fireplace tool set. It had been owned by the previous occupants of our home in MN but, as we converted the fireplace to gas after moving in, the tools were left under the stairs and forgotten about. I had never really looked at them until now and I was shocked to see that they had been hand forged from beautiful twisted iron. As

I was admiring the tools, my 10-year-old son Wyatt walked into the garage and said, "Whoa, cool!" Wyatt was presently tending a fire in the backyard so I handed him the poker and told him he could use it.

Perhaps there were still fumes emitting from the crusty paint roller and this is what lapsed my judgment to hand a 10-year-old boy a giant iron spear. Several hours later I was inside the house when I heard what sounded like a ruffed grouse beating its chest with its wings. I walked out to discover the sound was Wyatt beating something on the ground with the iron poker that I had handed him hours ago. I told Wyatt to bring me the poker and asked why he thought it was okay to treat something like this with such disregard for its care. He gave me his typical shrug and muttered something that sounded like "Idaho" (I don't know).

As the sun began to set I walked down the hill to-

wards the creek and made a startling discovery. I saw that Wyatt had not been beating the ground with the poker; rather, he had been mutilating his sister Bailey's pumpkin. I went back in the house and after more "Idaho" mumblings, Wyatt went outside and picked up the remains of the pumpkin left in the yard.

Later that night, a small figure stood in our doorway to say, "I threw up in my bed." It was Wyatt and when the mess was assessed, it was found to be bright orange. I asked Wyatt if he had eaten the raw pumpkin that he had smashed with the fireplace poker. He smirked and said, "We eat what we kill!" He went back to bed and as I was falling asleep, I heard the dog hacking up in her kennel. She too had produced lovely orange slur containing pulp and seeds.

I appreciated my son's response, "we eat what we kill" for a couple of reasons. First it proved he had a sense of humor and knew it would illicit a positive response at 3:00 a.m. It also indicated that he remembered some of the ethics we have discussed on several occasions while exploring national wildlife refuges. He has obviously heard me state this several times when hunting together at my previous position at the Fergus Falls Wetland Management District, as well as the many hours the family spent bird watching and on canoeing trips when we were stationed at White River NWR in St. Charles, Arkansas.

As a father, I feel that my children have a wonderful privilege to grow up around National Wildlife Refuges. We have spent many hours as a family fishing, hunting, watching wildlife, learning about nature and spending time outdoors because of the opportunities offered by refuges. My hope is that my work at Kenai NWR will help offer similar experiences to all visitors of the refuge. Simply put, my job at Kenai NWR is to share the story and significance of the

refuge as well as assist in managing the recreational opportunities of this amazing place.

This is no small feat to accomplish, however, the new Kenai NWR visitor center will help us better inform our visitors. For 35 years, visitors to the Kenai Refuge have walked into the small lobby of the headquarters building to ask questions, obtain maps and maybe watch a video in the quaint exhibit hall. Soon, our visitors will have an entirely new experience!

The new visitor center is being constructed next to the existing headquarters building. Once completed in early 2015, the facility will be host to thousands of visitors looking to learn and understand more about the refuge. The visitor center will have multi-purpose rooms, a cozy fireplace to sit by while a ranger shares information about the refuge, and an exhibit hall that is best described as a manifestation of the majestic Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

I was thinking about the opportunities for our family to explore and learn on the Kenai later the next morning at breakfast with my wife Stacey and our two children Wyatt (10) and Bailey (8). As I sat daydreaming of future hikes, back country cabins, and wildlife of the refuge, Wyatt asked if he was in trouble for the pumpkin crime. I told him no, but I did have to ask one question. "Did you have a partner in crime in the pumpkin murder?" Wyatt smiled and said, "yes, our dog Lucy ate it too. How did you know?"

"Oh," I said, "I'm just smart like that. Now hurry up and finish breakfast because it's your turn to clean out Lucy's kennel before school today!"

*Matt Conner is the new Visitor Services Manager at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. You can find more information about the Kenai Refuge at <http://kenai.fws.gov> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.*