

Permitting Kenai National Wildlife Refuge commercial guides and outfitters

by Donna Handley



An angler enjoys a day of fishing on the banks of the upper Kenai River within the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

It's a slow Tuesday morning in February, when suddenly the phone rings for the first time all day. It's Betty Lou from Arlington, Texas, and she is planning her very first trip to Alaska! Betty Lou is thrilled and is wondering what the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge has to offer her.

Usually, at this point, I have to remind myself not to overwhelm her with all the great things there are to do on the Refuge. So, I probe a bit to find where her true interests lie. After a 30 minute conversation about all the different recreation opportunities, it is crystal clear that Betty Lou's main goal is to fish for salmon on the Kenai River.

However, Betty Lou is a classy lady and doesn't want any of that elbow-to-elbow stuff. She wants a well-qualified fishing guide to show her the sights from the comfort of a boat. Luckily for the Refuge

and Betty Lou, there are many well qualified, permitted guides and outfitters to ensure that she will leave a happy visitor with fond memories and a smile on her face.

The Refuge provides commercial guiding/outfitting permits for many reasons. At the most basic level, without guides some of our visitors would be unable to experience the Refuge in the ways they wish. After all, not everyone can back up a boat trailer, safely operate a boat, rig up a fishing rod, interpret fishing regulations, and identify the bird flying overhead or the mountain range on the horizon.

Also, it is within our Refuge purposes to ensure visitors have great recreational opportunities and, if service is needed, then we want to ensure that it is offered by qualified permit holders in a safe and conservation-minded way.

Meanwhile, Betty Lou also has other interests like a multiple-day wilderness canoe trip or maybe even an air taxi ride out to one of our remote public use cabins for the night. My job is to share information on the commercial guided and outfitting services available in the area. With a clear conscience, I know that she is in good hands no matter which individual or company she chooses because they have met the requirements set by state and federal regulations.

Let's take the a commercial sportfishing permit as an example since the majority of the Refuge commercial visitor service providers are for water-based activities such as sportfishing or scenic floats on the Kenai River. Portions of the Kenai River within the Refuge include river miles 25.1 to 28, river mile 45.4 upstream to Skilak Lake, Skilak Lake itself, and Skilak Lake upstream to Russian River (Upper Kenai River). The Upper River is an area with a limited number of permits that are awarded through a "prospectus process." The prospectus process is a lengthy application process (that is not available every year) that includes review and ranking by a panel of at least five people.

All other areas of the Kenai River are non-competitive based but still require a permit. After an application for a non-competitive Special Use Permit is submitted and reviewed, it is probationary for the first year once approved. A successful year allows for a five-year renewal, but annual updates must occur each year before the start of operation for the season (no later than June 1). The application process starts over at expiration in 5-year intervals.

By sending out new releases and posting them under the "news" section of our website, we try to give as much time and information for outfitters and guides to be successful in completing the application process by posted deadlines. Failure to return client use reports in a timely manner (by November 15th) or committing permit violations can jeopardize future permit opportunities and limit visitor experience. Other required licenses and permits are also issued by Alaska State Parks, Alaska Department of Fish & Game, and the U.S. Coast Guard, all of which also have their own agency requirements.

It is great to build this symbiotic relationship with commercial service providers here on the Peninsula. The Refuge just recently announced the application open period for the described non-competitive commercial visitor service permits. Follow the link to see our news release on the subject here: <http://www.fws.gov/uploadedFiles/15-001.pdf>.

I look forward to working with all who have permitting needs here at the Refuge Headquarters office, helping to update and issue the annual permit decals, and meeting new applicants for a commercial special use permit. If you are interested in obtaining a permit remember the deadlines are creeping up like the sunshine every day, and visitors like Betty Lou are calling!

Donna Handley is an administrative assistant at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. You can find more information about the Refuge at <http://kenai.fws.gov> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.