

The Kenai Peninsula rediscovered

by Nate Perrine



Sockeye salmon returning to Bear Creek are one of those special events in nature that occur every season in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Browsing through my grandfather's stack of *In-Fisherman* magazines as a boy was the first time I had ever heard of the Kenai River. At the time, my life was consumed with all things fishing. Most of my summers were spent at the local park catching half-pound stocked rainbow trout or fishing other lakes and reservoirs in Colorado with my grandparents on camping trips.

The images and stories of fisherman holding giant salmon along the banks of the Kenai with brown bears in the background and giant smiles on their faces

made me dream of coming to this place and trying to catch one for myself. My young mind couldn't even fathom how much of a thrill it must be to have one of those monsters hooked to the other end of your line. I pictured myself as a young Captain Ahab battling the salmon version of *Moby Dick*, on a boat, in a storm, and yelling "Arghhhh!" crassly.

Life is a strange thing—it leads you to places you never even dreamed would be possible. I have recently found myself as a new employee at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, where I work as the Fire Operations

and Prescribed Fire Technician.

When I saw the Kenai for the first time, the feeling that went through me was indescribable. It was a soulful moment. The blue-green water that is so brilliant even to a semi-colorblind person such as myself is something that every person should see to really gauge just how rare and special of a place this is. *In-Fisherman* magazine is fantastic but their photos and words barely scratch the surface of the true depth of this land.

I look forward to experiencing all that the Kenai Peninsula and the Refuge have to offer. The list of possibilities is so immense that it is somewhat overwhelming to decide what to do first. But of all the problems in Life, this is one problem that visitors to the Refuge are blessed to have.

Although I have only been here less than three weeks, my list of “firsts” has already been whittled down considerably. The wildlife and landscape viewing is fantastic! I have seen numerous moose (the first of my life!), coyotes, porcupines, glaciers and mountain goats, and leaned out of a helicopter to watch spawning salmon struggling upstream. I look forward to all the things I am bound to see in the future.

I also caught my first sockeye salmon. I have always had a tremendous amount of respect for wildlife,

but something about these fish in particular sticks in my mind. My initial thought that 20-pound test line on a reel with the drag cinched down tight would haul in a four-pound fish with ease was dead wrong. After hooking my first red, and then watching helplessly as my line scorched off the reel, gave me a real taste of the power and tenacity of these fish. Mother Nature is amazing—these fish will stop at nothing to reach their goal, and my hat is tipped to them.

I feel so lucky and grateful to be able to do the job I do now. The challenges faced by the Refuge and other land management agencies to conserve habitats, while also balancing the protection of life and property, is a monumental task. I look forward to contributing to the management of this land in any way I can.

Hopefully, other eight year olds (or 80 year olds!) will be able to see this place in much the same way as it is now long after my time here is over. Maybe by then there will be a word that can accurately describe the feeling that one has when arriving here for the first time, but I doubt there ever will be.

Nathan Perrine is the new Fire Operations and Prescribed Fire Technician at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. You can find more information at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.