

## Local kids do big work

by Michelle Mulder



*Left to Right or Back to Front; Nathan Lervold, Talon Musgrave, Atom Skeebea, Elizabeth Keys and Amber Hamar repair benches used for outdoor educational programs at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters.*

This year's Youth Conservation Corps program has come to an end. Every summer a few lucky, randomly-chosen local high school students apply for positions to help maintain the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The YCC contributes to conservation work even as it engages participants in learning about their environment.

We help maintain trails, prevent streams from erosion, improve public use areas due to the normal wear and tear it sees every year, and learn about the Refuge. The YCC crew works with everyone on

the Kenai Refuge (Trail Crew, Environmental Education, Cabin Restoration and Biology) to maintain nature and wildlife opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts, whether they are locals or tourists.

Throughout this summer, we had a variety of tasks and projects. The goal was to not only thoroughly maintain but to enhance whatever we were working on.

Rerouting and enhancing the Skyline Trail was our big task this summer. Perhaps the busiest trail on the Refuge, this was a project that will reflect our work for

many years to come. We helped volunteers from the Student Conservation Association (also high school students) dig the new tread for Skyline Trail. The hike up to the beginning of the reroute was difficult for some of the YCC members in the beginning, but closer to the end of the season it was smiles all around. When we arrived, we started the reroute by removing all of the organic material, or “duff,” until we hit rich mineral soil. Once mineral soil was reached, we removed the protruding roots.



*Left to Right; Nathan Lervold, Amber Hamar and Talon Musgrave with a representative from the Kenai Watershed Forum help restore a bank by anchoring a spruce tree on the Kenai River.*

One of the big accomplishments on the reroute was helping the Refuge Trail Crew create a stone stair case so that uphill travel was easier, conducive to an easy flow of rain runoff, and preventative of erosion. We agree that the Skyline Trail is an amazing trail to hike and climb, although bits of the hike may be difficult to do—at the end it’s completely worth it!

We also did maintenance on scenic nature trails near the Refuge Visitor Center on Ski Hill Road. This new facility has become quite an attraction for the general public. As a result, the Keen-Eye Trail located nearby was in need of a more durable surface. To make the part of the trail that connects the Visitor Center to Headquarters Lake ADA-accessible and long lasting,

we efficiently replaced the existing pea gravel with recycled asphalt.

The most tedious task the YCC had this summer was mulching other segments of the Keen-Eye Trail. We reused some of the downed trees from the Card Street Fire as mulch. We first acquired piles of the mulch from the Skilak Lake Loop road by shoveling it into trucks and bringing it back to Refuge Headquarters. With the help of the Trail Crew, we used wheelbarrows to transfer the mulch to desired locations on the trail. It’s funny that what might look like a big pile of mulch actually disappears very quickly when you start spreading it out on a trail.

One of our favorite contributions to the Refuge was helping to restore its public use cabins, which are a great attraction to tourists and locals. The astonishing thing about some of these structures is that they are historic cabins—they are restored to match the original construction from early pioneer days, and yet they are open for public use. We got the opportunity to help restore and maintain the Doroshin Bay Cabin which was awesome because not only will our work be appreciated in the future, it also helped restore all the work that was put into the cabin in the past.

Another highlight of the summer was spending time in the Swan Lake and Swanson River canoe trails. Using hand tools, we reconstructed degraded portage trails, as well as rehangng missing canoe portage signs. We enjoyed knowing that our work will assist canoeists, hunters and anglers in their outdoor activities. While there was hard work involved, it also meant that we got to enjoy these fun, happy, serene and relaxing places—a good reminder of the opportunities the Kenai Refuge holds.

We spent a lot of time this summer out on the trails, sometimes on ones which we had never seen or even heard of before. We personally invite you to get outside, hike the trails, to take advantage of our work and to enjoy the wonders of our Refuge!

*Michelle Mulder is the seasonal Youth Conservation Corps coordinator at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. You can find more information at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.*