

The Kenai crusader: tales of a Kenai Refuge intern

by Jacob Heslop



Ranger Jake dissects a salmon at one of his amazing summer camps for local kids at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

People are screaming and sirens are wailing throughout the city. Children are lost, stumbling lone through the streets. Parents and guardians scramble to sift through the hordes of zombie-like children to identify their own. Something is missing; the light has been cast away from their eyes.

A spotlight clicks on. A beacon of hope emerges from the confusion and chaos. A giant “R” is outlined against the clouds. “He’s here!” the people exclaim, “we are saved!” A tall, handsome man adorned in brown tights and a green cape enters the scene. A big “R” lies flat upon his chest. Ranger Jake is here, restoring the connection to nature and serving environmental justice.

The job description for Youth and Visitor Services Intern at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge did not include mobs of nature-deprived children or tights and a cape, but Ranger Jake did not mind stepping up to the challenge, he’s a superhero after all. Crowds of children sixteen strong flocked to his base, the Environmental Education Center, for days at a time. He shared his own fiery passion for nature with them. After a week of education, crafts, activities, and age-old magic, the children left with sparks in their eyes. Over the course of a few weeks (and with a little help from his sidekicks, Rangers Michelle and William) sixty-four children left the base with those sparks, ready to start a wildfire of change across their community.

Apart from leading amazing summer camps, Ranger Jake had appearances all over the city. He popped up at the Soldotna Public Library to talk about animal superheroes and killed it at the Kenai River Festival with fishing safety. Even the grand opening of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center was graced with his presence. Everywhere he went the winds of change followed him and blew in a new era for the city of Soldotna.

Soldotna was not the only city to have the pleasure of his company. He wandered all over the Kenai Peninsula, connecting with nature so that he could connect others. He met the Harding Icefield, swam with a sea otter in Seldovia, and had dinner with a family of orcas in Resurrection Bay. A delegation was even sent to take him on a backpacking trip to Ptarmigan Creek trail for his birthday. Oh, how he adored nature, and how he loved to share that passion with the people of the Kenai Peninsula.

Then, just as everybody was getting to know and love Ranger Jake, he vanished. People gathered outside his base, but he could not be found. They scoured the trails and the canoe systems, but he was not there. People spent many evenings in the campgrounds and public use cabins waiting for him to join them for a campfire, but he did not show up. The spotlight shined that giant “R” against the sky for hours on end. The citizens of Soldotna grew worried that he was gone for good.

It was at that moment, however, that the hikers and the campers found something, but it was not Ranger Jake. They found their own connection with nature out there in the trails and campgrounds. Instead of only one person promoting stewardship of the land, an entire community stepped up. There was no longer a need for Ranger Jake.

The city still shines the spotlight at least once a month. It is a call for everyday citizens to restore the connection to the outdoors and serve environmental justice. It also serves as a memorial to Ranger Jake, and all the good he brought to such a wonderful community.

Only one question remains—where did such an awesome superhero come from? Some say that he rode in on the backs of caribou. Others say he was born in the fire of Mt. Redoubt, sent by the Earth itself to inspire change. Some suggest he is from another world entirely. Yet, there are a few who say that he is from Ohio, just a normal person with an extraordinary purpose.

Jacob Heslop was a volunteer with the Student Conservation Association from May to August. He will be volunteering directly with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge through October assisting in Environmental Education and Visitor Center duties. You can find more information at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.