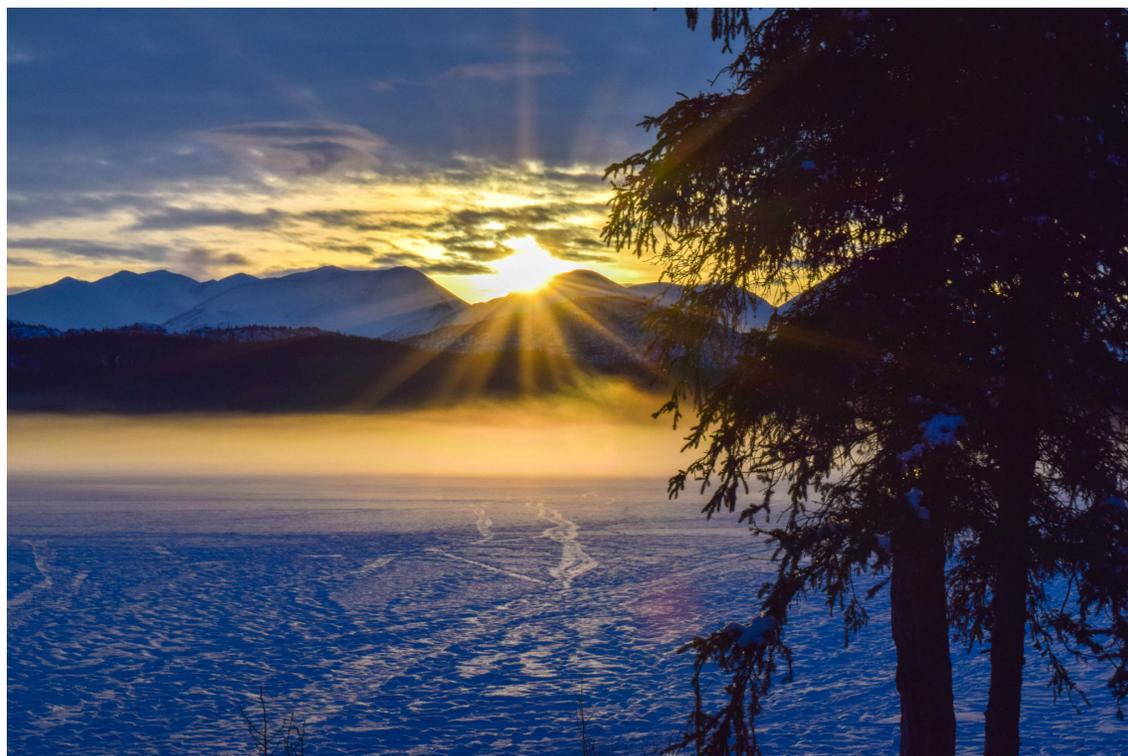


## A Christmas adventure

by Rebecca Uta



*Winter sunrise over the Kenai Mountains as viewed from the porch of the Engineer Lake cabin.*

Every person has a bucket list to be marked off when they come to this beautiful Land. Our list has always been simple: something Alaskan. As my family hails from the Midwest, we have to admit that back at home there are no mountains that reach beyond the sky, musical dancing night lights above, or the simply awe-inspiring beauty of the local wildlife and vegetation. I do declare that this land is truly blessed with plenty.

As it was coming into the Christmas season, we used this occasion as a reason to reserve four nights at the Engineer Lake Cabin, one of 16 public use cabins on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. With everyday activities pulling my family members every which direction, the Cabin was going to be our reconnecting adventure: off grid, unplugged, and remote with peace and quiet.

Besides packing for the simple 4 necessities—food, water, safety and shelter—we planned for comfort and

activity. We packed it all up into the truck, drove the 35 miles to Mile Post 9.5 on Skilak Lake Loop Road, and turned left. This short, narrow road to Engineer Lake was lined with dense trees but, as soon as we rounded a corner, our eyes were filled with a wondrous mountainous view that would be our front yard for the next few days.

Leaving our truck in the parking lot, we loaded our sleds and backpacks, and walked across the beautiful frozen lake towards the Cabin. You don't have to be completely geared out to have an adventure! We walked without showshoes or skis, although they would have been helpful. We had a borrowed sled and a pulk (which I had never heard of before). We knew that we had covered the basics and exuberantly walked into the wilds.

The walk was less than a mile straight across the lake. But with each step further onto the lake, I felt I was shrinking. The lake opened wide, covered in

snow, lined with dense forest, and majestic snow-capped mountains rising around us. Our family footsteps were only specks on the face of the lake. The mountains were tall, blue and white, the sky was grey, and the wind was picking up and stinging our faces with chilled wisps of flurries.

Approaching the cabin, our first impression was that it is indeed a cute, quaint cabin. There was a picnic table, a fire ring, a wood shed packed full. And, by the way, the outhouse was out of sight but not too far away.

It took a second trip to make sure we had all our stuff for 5 days. After we finished with the gear, we exclaimed it was Christmas Day! The first thing to do was to start the stove and get the blazing heat into the cabin. Before our hot breaths disappeared from sight inside the cold cabin, we had coffee on to warm. Percolated coffee is the best.

Next, we put the Christmas lights up over the porch and readied for dinner. The night crept across the already grey sky and we had settled into family games and had some pineapple chicken foil packets. Finally it was dark...incredibly dark. There are no lights for 25 miles in any direction. I experienced complete silence. After we tucked in for the night, I found myself being the last one awake. I was listening to the sound of crackling wood and the rhythmic breathing of my very tired family.

Around 11 p.m., as I tip-toed across the chilly floor to check the fire status, I saw the clouds break ever so slightly through the front door window. The planet Venus shone with such brilliance, this city lady sat in breathtaking awe. I put on my outer layers and crept outside, hoping not to stir a soul. I stood on the porch, inhaling the crisp, clean, cold air, and listened to the wind surge through the spruce trees, and I started singing. I sang O Holy Night, my favorite Christmas Carol. It echoed across the lake and reverberated back to my ears. I stood and smiled. Then in a blinking moment, the clouds covered the stars and left me in darkness bidding me good night. The end of Day One!

Over the next few days, we watched the sun rise, photographed the stars, played cards until the wee-hours, reconnected our family ties, laughed, and enjoyed the Christmas lights! It was a great Christmas adventure, and will be a story for the decades to come. We had no decorations, no presents, no cell phone service, and no major electronic distractions.

We sang carols and drank hot cocoa and coffee while we watched the fog ribbons whip across the lake blurring the mountains. We took deep breaths of the cleanest air we had ever taken into our lungs. We truly loved our Alaskan Adventure to the Cabin.



*Battery-powered lights helped create our Christmas adventure at one of the public use cabins on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.*

Each day we wrote a Journal entry in the Cabin Log Book. That is where we left our detailed Christmas chronicle. We really enjoyed reading the tales from previous guests. There were birthdays celebrated here, fish stories, great hikes, descriptions of scat, great and not-so-great poetry, and a sample of what was found... I'll leave that cliff hanger right there. Each person who has come through this same cabin had their own, very personal experience.

I hope as you read my family's adventure your anxiety eased with the idea of heading out onto the Refuge. The Refuge never closes and will always be here for your recreational use. From our family to yours, we hope you find your adventure, too! Some activities do take pre-planning but, by all means, give the Refuge a call or stop by the visitor center and chat with one of our rangers. To research and reserve a cabin, visit <http://www.recreation.gov> and search for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Cabins.

Take your camera and make some memories!

*Rebecca Uta is the Administrative Officer at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Find more information at <http://kenai.fws.gov> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.*