

Thanks to those who serve at the Refuge

by Steve Miller



The Youth Conservation Corps crew takes a break from their work on the Hideout Trail.

Each year—and 2017 is no exception—I look back and am thankful for the many volunteers and seasonal employees without whom the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge could not keep up with the needs of our visitors. During the busy summer months the Refuge staff more than doubles in size with the addition of our seasonal employees and volunteers. For many of our visitors, the face they see wearing the refuge uniform will be a seasonal. Whether it is the person coming through the campground collecting fees, leading an interpretive walk or summer camp or working in the visitor center, our seasonal employees assist us in accomplishing all of these things.

We are blessed in that many of our seasonals have been coming back year after year. Every spring these experienced hands assist in organizing the new hires and coordinating the work of our many volunteers who are either new to Alaska or new to the Refuge.

In 2017 we had eleven volunteers from Wilderness

Trails that assisted in rerouting a section of the Cottonwood Trail in Kenai Wilderness. A group of enthusiastic volunteers from the Soldotna Church of the Nazarene helped us resurface the Keen Eye Trail. A contingent from the Friends of Alaska Refuges paddled with us in the Swan Lake Canoe System and assisted in clearing portages. A volunteer from the Local Chapter of the Back Country Horsemen of America, assisted by family, transported equipment and supplies along the Hansen Horse Trail and Bear Creek Trail for our trail crew. In addition, we had volunteers who assisted in keeping the visitor center operational and our campgrounds organized. All of these individuals, along with the Kenai Watershed Forum Stream Watch volunteers and others that I have not mentioned, kept up with the needs of our numerous visitors.

Again in 2017 we hired five students from the local community in our Youth Conservation Corps Program. Hopefully they will all have fond memories of

the work they helped us accomplish on Bear Mountain Trail, Hideout Trail, Kenai River Trail, Swan Lake Canoe System, and Dolly Varden and Nurses Public Use Cabins. If not all these memories are fond, at least they should have some interesting stories to tell. Our YCC students completed all these projects with an amazing attitude and without any accidents, maintaining the outstanding record of the Refuge's preceding YCC crews.



YCC leader Nick Longobardi looks over Skilak Lake from the Vista Trail.

Our seasonal trail crew seemed to be extremely busy this year. All of the trail crew are also collateral duty wildland firefighters and each year some of them travel on fire assignments in Alaska or the lower 48. This year all of them served one or more fire assignments. With our long growing season this made it challenging to keep up with the expectations of our

hiking visitors. This summer we had a big wind event while the trail crew all happened to be out on a fire assignment at the same time. Our maintenance staff stepped up and cleared downed trees from our busiest trails.

This wasn't the only time this year where permanent staff worked outside of their normal duties. To save money on a streambank stabilization project at the Russian River Ferry, we constructed the wooden rail fence in-house and staff from all the different programs got dirty digging holes. While the maintenance staff dug more than did the other staff members, all the additional help allowed us to accomplish this project and do it cost-effectively.

With all of our staff and volunteers driving the Peninsula's roads, floating or motoring on the Kenai River, hiking and flying across the Refuge and running chainsaws and heavy equipment, I am thankful that we were able to get our work done safely once again. We put our greatest effort into ensuring that our staff and volunteers are able to work safely and efficiently so that they may not only provide for the needs of our visitors, but, more importantly, go home each night (or at the end of the season) to be with their families.

For those individuals and families who entrusted themselves or their family members to us as volunteers, seasonal employees or permanent staff: Thank You! We could not do what we do without you. With your help we look forward to doing it even better in 2018.

Steve Miller is the Deputy Refuge Manager at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Find more information about the Refuge at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.