

Getting ready for Spring Fever

by Steve Miller



Even though the Swanson River has a slow current, canoeists smartly wear life jackets.

It doesn't take too many warm sunny days, coupled with almost three additional hours of daylight gained over the last month, for Spring Fever to arrive. You go into stores and they have gardening materials out and, just to heighten your desire to get more stuff and do something with it, this year's Kenai Peninsula Sport, Rec & Trade Show is coming up in a week. In preparation for the busy season that is fast approaching, here are some tips for preparing you and your gear for outdoor activities.

First, get mentally prepared. When staff at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge are getting ready to take on a

task, we pause to take time for a "tailgate safety meeting". These meetings are intended to ensure we have thought of the important details to safely complete the mission. All participants engage in describing the objective and talking through the details of our planned day. During our discussion, we identify potential obstacles or unsafe activities that may occur.

The next step is to be sure we have the proper state of mind and the gear appropriate for all the possible conditions we might encounter. Often we come up with scenarios we may be unprepared for, so we add the proper gear and define safe practices to help us

handle what would have been unexpected had we not had the tailgate meeting.

One consideration for first-of-the-season trips, especially for those who did not spend all winter out on Tsalteshi Trails or Headquarters Lake skiing and staying in shape (such as myself), is to take it easy! Plan to make that first hike after a long winter a short one that is not too steep. Skyline Trail and Fuller Lakes Trail still have quite a bit of snow, so why not start with Hidden Creek Trail or drive out Swanson River Road and take Drake/Skookum Trail as a start for this year's outdoor adventures? If you do decide to go up high on a hike somewhere on the Peninsula, just be prepared for post-holing through some deep snow spots...and, remember, avalanches are still a danger!

For those who are just now pulling the boat out to prepare for your upcoming fishing, rowing or paddling season, make sure you take the time to go over trailer brakes, lights, hitches and tie-downs. Check your trailer tires and wheel bearings as well, since you don't want to be that person we have all seen sitting by the roadside in the wee hours of the morning with a flat or missing tire, and losing out on that perfect early-morning uncrowded fishing spot. Is your vehicle and boat registration up-to-date? Also, take the time now to replace that fishing line still on your reel from last year so that you don't have to do it out on the river.

On those upcoming days on the water or out hiking, please make sure you take the time to go over safety for the day with your family members, friends or visitors who may be with you. Check the weather forecast but be prepared for unexpected precipitation. Let your guests know those spots where they can usually get a cell phone signal in the area just in case they get stranded or there's some other emergency. Review

with your guests and family what to do if you spot a bear or a moose while hiking—carry bear spray and know how to use it. Remember to wear a personal flotation device while out on the water.

It's also time to start preparing yourself for—you guessed it—crowds. We've spent all winter driving in town and not having a problem turning left onto the Sterling and Kenai Spur Highways. That is about to change. Keep in mind that those businesses that stay open all year for us now depend on these few busy summer months to keep going for another year and make a living. Also, that slow rented motorhome, the one you've been following for what seems like 20 miles on the Sterling Highway and unable to pass, may be carrying a family that has saved up for a once-in-a-lifetime trip to visit the place that we all get to call home. So, take a deep breath and be thankful that we live year-round in a place that some folks will visit once or twice for a week or two at most.

With all of those folks out driving, always wear a seatbelt to guard against the distracted driver who is more focused on the view than the road. Watch out for those visitors who land in Anchorage on a red-eye flight and insist on driving down half-asleep so they won't miss a day of fishing. And wait to have that conversation or text on your cell phone once you reach your destination, or perhaps pull over at a scenic lookout!

Get out and enjoy the long days and great views on the Kenai Peninsula and wherever else you may be going this summer. Most of all...be safe out there.

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