

Completion of the Sterling Highway Improvements Project

by Lynnnda Kahn



The underpass for the Skyline Trail, one of several improvements that were part of the Sterling Highway MP 58–79 Improvements Project, provides a safe crossing for hikers.

As anyone visiting the Skilak Lake Wildlife Recreation Area or traveling between the Kenai Peninsula and Anchorage knows, construction has been underway on the Sterling Highway Mile Post (MP) 58–79 Improvements Project since June of 2017. There is an end in sight though, as the remaining roadwork is scheduled for completion by the end of June this year.

What is left to do within the Sterling Highway right-of-way? Adding topsoil and seeding, finishing slope stabilization and ditches, final striping, and installing permanent regulatory and information signs

remain. While most of this work should not result in traffic delays on the highway, Granite Construction (Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities' contractor) does anticipate delays during the final striping efforts, which will occur over a 2-week period. Weather permitting, Granite Construction plans to begin the remaining work in May 2020 and be finished with Sterling Highway work no later than the end of June.

The MP 58–79 Project, 18 miles of which cross the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (Kenai NWR), involved

the installation of 3 sets of passing lanes; widening the shoulders to 8 feet; repair, replacement, and improvement of storm-water drainage facilities under the highway; erosion protection; upgrading vertical and horizontal curves as needed; utilities relocation; guardrails and signage.

In addition, much needed wildlife crossing structures have been installed, consisting of a 140-foot long × 43-foot wide × 18-foot high bridge and 5 additional wildlife under-crossings at strategic locations throughout the corridor. The new bridge not only provides a safe passage for wildlife to move under the highway, but it also improves fish passage up and down the East Fork Moose River, which is an anadromous stream. For further details on these wildlife crossing structures see Dr. John Morton's [Refuge Notebook Article from August 2018](#).

Public access from the Skyline Trailhead parking on the south side of the Sterling Highway to the trail on the north side has also been greatly improved and made much safer with the installation of a pedestrian tunnel under the highway. We hope that visitors will be able to enjoy this new pedestrian tunnel once we are able to reopen the Skyline Trail.

Impacts to the Skyline Trail from the 2019 Swan Lake Fire were substantial, yet while the trail is currently closed, repairs should be completed this summer. Kenai NWR will be adding a second trail crew this summer to focus on opening and restoring the 5 trails damaged by the Swan Lake Fire that remain closed (Skyline Trail, Kenai River Trail, Seven Lakes Trail, Hideout Trail and Surprise Creek Trail).

Other work that Granite Construction will be completing this summer will not affect Sterling Highway drivers but will be noticeable to Kenai NWR visitors this fall. For many years, access off the Sterling Highway to Mystery Creek Road has been a safety concern as it was located on a curve and the access road was steep. During winter, snowmachiners and mushers had to park one-half mile away and then go cross-country to reach Mystery Creek Road in order to then travel on the road to access various places in the Mystery Creek watershed.

The MP 58–79 project provided an opportunity to obtain a safer intersection and enhanced visitor park-

ing. Mystery Creek Road is now being realigned, in conjunction with relocating its intersection with the Sterling Highway, and construction of a parking area near this new intersection. These enhancements will provide additional public access to the Mystery Creek and Mystery Hills area. This road realignment and enhancement work should be completed later this summer, just in time for the Mystery Creek Road opening this fall (usually occurring the second week in August).

Associated with the Mystery Creek Road realignment will be the restoration of one of the material sites utilized for the MP 58–79 Project. This material site is located where the new alignment of Mystery Creek Road will terminate, near MP 63. Once the remaining work along the highway corridor is complete, the contractor will begin a major reclamation effort at this site. The restoration work will enhance the existing disturbed area by softening slopes and reshaping the bottom of the pit, which includes placing overburden and organics removed during grubbing work along the highway to provide a more natural rolling and diverse topography. The entire material site will be revegetated using native plants and seeds, which will help facilitate return to a more natural vegetated state over time.

We envisioned this effort would, over the course of the coming decades, eventually result in the restoration of the site to mimic the adjacent, natural forested area. However, with the surrounding intact forest being significantly changed by the Swan Lake Fire, natural recolonization of the fire-impacted landscape and the planned reclamation effort at the extraction site will be occurring simultaneously.

All of this work is being completed just in time for the start of the Sterling Highway MP 45–60 Project (Cooper Landing Bypass) construction, coming soon...

Lynnda Kahn serves as Fish and Wildlife Biologist at the Refuge. She represents the Kenai NWR as oil/gas liaison, ensuring compliance with habitat conservation and management policies; and as Permits Coordinator for utility and transmission lines, pipelines and highway improvements that occur within the various right-of-ways on Refuge land. Find more Refuge Notebook articles (1999–present) at https://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/community/refuge_notebook.html