

# I think I can ski

by Matt Conner



*A sign marks one of the groomed ski trails on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (credit: Matt Bowser/USWFS).*

Let us start with a riddle. There are eleven frogs sitting on a log. Five of the frogs decide to jump off the log. How many frogs are now on the log? Seems easy, but the answer is eleven. A decision without action results in no change. I have decided many times to take up cross-country skiing, but I find myself still sitting on a log. To better understand this dilemma, here is some background information on my skiing career.

I technically have cross-country skied when I was a kid. I even received a pair for my birthday one year (thanks mom and dad!). However, between the low snowfalls in Illinois and the even lower levels of my

dexterity, I never “truly” cross-country skied. I did, however, do a great Sasquatch impersonation in slow motion with 6-foot long, 2-inch wide sticks on my feet.

Before coming to the Kenai I was stationed at a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service environmental education facility in Fergus Falls MN called “Prairie Wetlands Learning Center.” The education center (PWLC) collaborated with schools to spend time outdoors and tie classroom curriculum with examples found in nature. Every day of the school year, 200 fourth and fifth graders would visit the PWLC for their daily dose of nature. In the winter, fourth graders used snowshoes to

explore the prairie and fifth graders explored via cross country skis.

I had a pair of skis available to me at work if I ever wanted to go out with the fifth graders skiing but instead I usually assigned myself to be with fourth graders on snowshoes. Funny, in the five years I have worked there, I was never free on days they were skiing and so I was unable to lead a group. I guess this is just one of those bizarre coincidences that can never be fully explained.

However, one day my daughter Bailey (8 years old at the time) had recently signed up for her first cross country skiing class as part of an after school program. The cross-country ski facility was a privately owned business located 14 miles from where we lived at that time. It was a small family operation and run out of the basement of a quaint farmhouse containing a modest ski rental and shop. The house was surrounded by rolling hills mixed with forest and prairie and 15 miles of cross country ski trails entwined within.

When I first heard that Bailey would be doing this on Saturdays, I imagined that my son and I could go fishing or just stay home alone. Nevertheless, as with most endeavors, I was informed that the whole family had to go and take Bailey so we would all know the location. I started to make my sarcastic comment that I have made in the past of, “The Four Headed Organism is on the move again.” I coined this term about four years before when it occurred to me that we were all four required to assemble and travel together anytime we needed groceries, clothing, doctors’ appointments, dentist appointments, sandpaper, etc. However, I had stopped using this term as I realized that spending time together as a family is always value added and I needed to “Daddy” up and go along for support. I saw myself sitting by a crackling fire, sipping hot chocolate, and reading a dog-eared *National Geographic* magazine.

So, given my expertise, I volunteered to assist Bailey with putting on her skis. I told Bailey to lean on my back as I bent over and tried to latch her ski. I found it hard to breath with my fluffy winter coat, natural insulation, and impatient daughter on my back. I became aware that I might be unconsciously grunting aloud and before I could register and redirect this action, I heard a male voice say, “let someone that knows how to do that teach her.” I looked up and at eye level, I saw a hermetically sealed ski instructor inches in front of me and thought, “Please don’t let me lose my balance

and fall over on this man.”

I was pinned with Bailey on my back, the instructor directly in front of me, and my same level of dexterity from my youth to support me. I took the most dignified way out and let myself fully collapse to the ground and rolled on my side, and abruptly returned to a standing position. Apparently, my wife missed all of this (even though she was standing next to me) because she said in her well-projected voice, “How did you get snow all over you?”

Bailey said she had a great time and kept telling us all the things she had learned as we drove home. She was even more excited when they told her she could take the skis home for the winter so she could practice between lessons. I felt a bit of guilt when I realized that she would have to practice all alone. At that moment, I decided to “Daddy-up” again and said, “Bailey, I have a pair of skis at work that I am supposed to use but I don’t know how to use them. Would you like to bring your skis to the PWLC and be Dad’s ski instructor?”

We spent several days with her as my instructor and she was patient with me. Recently I have decided that we need to commit to getting back into skiing as a family. This has been a wonderful year for skiing and we are all fortunate enough to live in an area with many miles of groomed cross-country ski trails that start at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center off Ski Hill road. The staff works together and volunteers time to keep the trails groomed and free of downed trees. It is a great commitment on their part, and reminds me to take time to appreciate this resource and the time that so many people volunteer to make it reality.

If you have ever thought about getting into skiing, the refuge is a great place to start. The trails are seldom crowded and the visitor center is a warm place to rest before or after a trip on the trail system. If you are fortunate enough to visit around noon, the fire is usually lit in the lobby and the lodge style furniture is warm and welcoming. We can provide you with trail maps, suggestions for future explorations and we might even be able to round up an old copy of a *National Geographic* to read by the fire.

*Matt Conner is the Visitor Services Manager at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Find more information at <http://kenai.fws.gov> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.*