

## Swan Lake Fire trails update

by Christa Kennedy



*Skyline Trail has damaged tread as well as hazard trees from the Swan Lake Fire. (Credit: USFWS/Christa Kennedy).*

Last fall the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge was forced to close eight trails due to Swan Lake fire activity. Through the fall, all eight trails affected by the fire remained closed so Refuge staff could get boots on the ground and assess the damage sustained from the fire and work on opening up the trails. Late last fall, two trails were opened in full, two trails were partially opened, and four trails remained closed.

Egumen and Marsh Lake trails have both been open to the public since last fall and will remain open to the public at this time. Fuller Lakes trail is open up to Lower Fuller Lake and will remain open to that point. The trail from Lower Fuller Lake to Upper Fuller Lake remains closed. Seven Lakes Trail is open from the Kelly Lake Parking Lot for the first half mile to access Kelly Lake Cabin. In addition, Seven Lakes Trail

is also open from Engineer Lake parking to Engineer Lake Cabin. The Trail in between both cabins as well as the spur from Hidden Lake remains closed at this time.

The following four trails all remain closed to the public: Kenai River, Hideout, Surprise Creek and Skyline. All of these trails sustained significant damage related to the fire such as ash pits, hazard trees, tripping hazards and significant tread damage. As a friendly reminder, the Refuge staff is working on getting new signs posted to help reinforce that these are closed trails.

Ash pits are present throughout the fire's burn scar. Many of the trails have ash pits directly beside the trail tread and ash pits are also present where trail tread used to exist. Some ash pits are still hot after the long winter months, when the snow acted as insulation, holding in heat throughout the winter. As snow melts and things start to warm up, smokes and ash pits will reemerge.

Along with ash pits, there is still the danger of hazard trees. The weakened trees have roots systems that have been compromised. They will need to be cut down in order clear the trails and allow safe trail use by the public.

Tread work will be a huge part of moving forward on the remaining closed trails. In some places the tread is completely gone and what remains is like quicksand that sucks your feet right in. In other places tread remains about its normal 18–24 inches wide, but the moment you need to step off, you step right into the quicksand-like muck. Along with the muck there are also tree roots that have been exposed 2–3 feet above-ground and are now tripping hazards.

Refuge staff has also noticed that many people have been out on these closed trails and social trails have been popping up all over. Social trails begin when hikers create their own ways around obstacles. Another source of social trails is due to hikers not knowing where the original trail is and then creating their own trails. Social trails are reinforced as more and more people follow them. Staying off the trails and eliminating the potential of social trails will allow for natural regrowth to occur, which will stabilize the

ground surface, eventually eliminating the quicksand-like, mucky surface on the majority of the burned-over trails.

For all the reasons I described, we need to keep the public off of these closed trails for now.

The Trail Crew will be out working hard to get all the trails open as soon as possible. We will work on getting trails that are currently open logged out for easier hiking and enjoyment. We will also be working on getting Kenai River Trail open from the upper trail head to the Kenai River Canyon overlook for the enjoyment of seeing the Kenai River Canyon. Our main project this summer will be repairing Skyline Trail, building new tread and making sure it is stable as well as taking out any hazard trees.

Before heading out on the Refuge please check which trails are open or closed at this time. We would like to get these trails open as soon as possible, but it's going to be a process. We ask for the public to please respect our closures, stay off the closed trails and enjoy the open trails at this time. Our number one priority when it comes to these trails is public safety.

We are looking forward to seeing you all out on the increasingly open trails this summer!

*Christa Kennedy is the Trails Volunteer Coordinator for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Find more Refuge Notebook articles (1999–present) at [https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Kenai/community/refuge\\_notebook.html](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Kenai/community/refuge_notebook.html).*