

**FEDERAL AID
ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT**

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
DIVISION OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION
PO Box 25526
Juneau, AK 99802-5526

**ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
WILDLIFE RESTORATION GRANT**

GRANT NUMBER: AKW-20 Wildlife Restoration FY2017

PROJECT NUMBER: 30.0

PROJECT TITLE: Refuges and other Special Areas Management

PROJECT DURATION: 1 July 2016 – 30 June 2017

REPORT DUE DATE: 29 SEPTEMBER 2017

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS: Tom Schumacher RI; Joe Meehan RII, IV and V; and
Darren Bruning RIII

WORK LOCATION: Statewide

Objective 1: Manage special areas to protect and conserve wildlife populations and their habitats.

Job/Activity a: Through internal review and/or participation in public and interagency planning processes, create, review and/or revise special area management plans and strategies to address current issues and problems.

Accomplishments:

- Coordinated with Division of Habitat planning staff to complete a public and agency review of a revised management plan for the Dude Creek Critical Habitat Area which was moved into the regulatory adoption process.
- Coordinated with Division of Habitat planning staff to conduct two planning team meetings and to update a department review draft of the management plan for the Willow Mountain Critical Habitat Area. This draft will subsequently be released as the public review draft of the plan.
- An annual meeting was held with department staff and winter trail users at Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge in order to discuss ways to improve trail conditions and other issues that occur through winter months.
- In conjunction with Habitat Division, initiated the process to revise and update the management plan for the Kachemak Bay Critical Habitat Area. This included staff visits to field sites of management concern, meetings with local governments, and public scoping meetings in Homer, Seldovia and Anchorage.

Job/Activity b: Consult with Division of Habitat, other state departments, and other agencies with responsibilities for permitting and land management to assure development and land use activities in special areas do not significantly impact wildlife and their habitats.

Accomplishments:

- Division management staff reviewed and commented on various development projects potentially affecting refuge lands and wildlife resource, including 104 project proposals that resulted in the issuance of 100 Special Area Permits.
- Staff cooperated with U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services staff to help mitigate wildlife safety hazards at the Juneau International Airport adjacent to the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge.
- Land acquisition efforts were coordinated with private land trust organizations for potential acquisitions adjacent to the Anchorage Coastal refuge. Staff also worked with the Kachemak Moose Habitat, Inc. a local non-profit organization that acts as a land trust to help protect and enhance moose habitat on the southern Kenai Peninsula near the Homer Airport CHA and Anchor River-Fritz Creek CHA.
- Staff worked with the Quayasiq Walrus Commission on walrus management and habitat issues in Bristol Bay including management of a traditional harvest of Walrus at the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary.
- Staff attended the Alaska Marine Science Symposium to gain a better understanding of habitats and wildlife in marine refuge areas.
- Participated in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough “Salmon Conservation Symposium” seeking management actions to protect salmon and other wildlife habitats.

Job/Activity c: Conduct public education, field projects (SHPO exempt), and other efforts to assure public use of lands is consistent with protection of wildlife populations and their habitats. Coordinate these efforts with other state departments, other agencies, and public organizations such as citizen support groups and conservation organizations.

Accomplishments:

- Provided an on-line training program that waterfowl hunters in the Mendenhall Wetlands SGR are required to complete prior to being issued a refuge waterfowl hunting permit. When issuing permits management staff also discuss current refuge management issues and caution hunters to be considerate of adjacent landowners.
- Fifteen (15) public education programs on the topics of wildlife conservation and habitat were conducted on Creamer’s Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge. Program types ranged from 3-day festivals to 3 hour presentations. During the 15 programs, more than 4,000 persons attended a variety of wildlife, habitat and conservation programs conducted by Refuge staff. Audiences ranged from general-attendance to specific professional-educators. Refuge staff conducted more than 30 hours of training sessions for community members assisting with wildlife and conservation programs. Refuge staff composed 18 interpretive articles printed in the Fairbanks newspaper on topics of refuge wildlife and conservation.
- United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Audubon Society, and Alaska Songbird Institute staff participated in ADF&G-sponsored wildlife information programs.

- ADF&G Creamer's Refuge staff worked in cooperation with NGO Friends of Creamer's Field to conduct daily natural history walks on the refuge trail system.
- Through media outlets, informational signs, interpretive panels, informational kiosks, brochures, websites, staff field presence, meeting with user groups and other means; provided the public with general and detailed information on refuge resources, appropriate uses, and activities that are consistent with protecting habitats, wildlife resources, and existing public uses.
- Volunteer camper host were hired at two sites in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge, and in the Anchorage Coastal refuge to provide refuge related information to visitors, provide basic security, maintenance duties, and serve as onsite department representative.
- Staff participated in educational programs addressing the Palmer Hay Flats and Anchorage Coastal refuges, and the McNeil River sanctuary. Staff visited the Redoubt Bay CHA to monitor heavy use by the public (approx. 10,000 annual visits) and to survey potential user conflicts and resource impacts from boats and other use. Staff also conducted field visits to the Trading Bay refuge to assess sites known to receive high public uses.
- Materials included abandoned vehicles, and dumped garbage was removed from several refuge areas including Mendenhall Wetlands, Palmer Hay Flats, Goose Bay and Susitna Flats.

Objective 2: Promote community and individual stewardship of special areas through public participation and multi-use of special areas.

Job/Activity a: Assist the public in being active and informed participants in the special areas planning processes and conservation strategies.

Accomplishments:

- Management staff maintained contact with the Mendenhall Wetlands refuge advisory committee and provided educational brochures and interpretation to a variety of refuge users.
- In cooperation with the US Forest Service, Admiralty Island National Monument staff, division staff seasonally stationed at the Stan Price State Wildlife Sanctuary provided information on ecology, behavior, and conservation of brown bears to over about 1,400 permitted visitors during the June – September season.
- Staff maintained regular and frequent communication with private user/conservation groups to provide information and gain input about management of Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge.
- Concerned members of the public that called or walked into regional offices were given advice on the Alaska Board of Game proposal process for changes to hunting boundaries and rules in refuges.
- Staff attended the Fairbanks Outdoors Show to provide information about reducing disturbance to wildlife on Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge. Creamer's

Field refuge rules and borough leash laws were emphasized during interactions with the public.

Job/Activity b: Work with the public, neighboring landowners and state/local agencies to assure legal public access to special areas is maintained or enhanced; and conflicts between refuge users and neighboring landowners are minimized.

Accomplishments:

- Provided an on-line training program that waterfowl hunters in the Mendenhall Wetlands refuge are required to complete prior to being issued a refuge hunting permit. When issuing permits management staff also discuss current refuge management issues and caution hunters to be considerate of adjacent landowners. Staff also educated refuge users about quiet title claims by upland land owners and ongoing changes to the boundary between refuge and private lands.
- Signs were updated at Creamer's Field refuge locations adjacent to private land informing hunters and landowners about rules and regulations regarding trespass, hunter harassment, and to report hunting and/or refuge violations if observed.
- Staff continued to coordinate with other agencies and private land owners to manage public access to lands along the eastern border of the Palmer Hay Flats refuge.
- Regular consultations were made with staff from the Habitat Division in their review of state/local land disposals, easement and right-of-way vacations, and other actions to assure public access is maintained to these refuges.

Job/Activity c: Manage, maintain, enhance and promote compatible public uses of special areas (including hunting, trapping, fishing, wildlife viewing, and others) and minimize conflicts between user groups.

Accomplishments:

- Encouraged public use of special areas by providing maps, educational brochures, and other information to a diversity of Special Areas users, including the Mendenhall Wetlands refuge, Stan Price sanctuary and other areas throughout the state. In addition to the above we operated a waterfowl hunter education and permitting process for the Mendenhall Wetlands refuge including explaining that use to other refuge users. At the Stan Price sanctuary, we cooperated with the U.S. Forest Service to operate a visitor permitting system, oversaw permitted visitors to educate and ensure they viewed bears safely and in accordance with rules, and cleared and maintained a one mile walking trail and two viewing areas.
- Hunting on Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge was managed to preserve wildlife viewing opportunities. This was accomplished by closing some areas of the refuge to hunting and/or delaying access to some areas until after much of the waterfowl migration.

- Staff have continued to coordinate with refuge user groups (various friends' groups, conservation organizations, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, area community councils, and others) to eliminate inappropriate use at refuge access points (garbage dumping, target shooting, off-road vehicle use, etc.) in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge, Goose Bay refuge, and Susitna Flats refuge. Road, trail and parking lot improvements continued at Palmer Hay Flats (Reflections Lake, Cottonwood Creek and Rabbit Slough) and in the Goose Bay refuge.
- Efforts have continued with federal, state, local, and nongovernmental entities to address access issues and illegal activities in the Goose Bay refuge.
- Information was provided to members of the public inquiring about opportunities to enjoy refuge resources, access issues, laws and regulations, etc.

Job/Activity d: Encourage public access to, and understanding of, special areas by placing signs (exempt) along access routes, creating brochures and maps, maintaining special areas websites, developing educational panels, and through other educational programs or promotional methods.

Accomplishments:

- In southeast Alaska, staff inspected and in some cases maintained existing signs, primarily at the Mendenhall Wetlands refuge and Stan Price sanctuary. We also provided maps and educational brochures to special areas users and answered user's questions.
- Updated Creamer's Field refuge trail maps and brochures were produced and distributed to the public. Refuge maps and brochures of the refuge were utilized in education programs serving approximately 1,500 persons during the period.
- Continued participation with a multiagency and public group to manage a "water trail" in the Kachemak Bay CHA. An interpretive panel for the Kachemak Bay CHA was installed at 1 new location and additional sites were identified.
- Weekly natural history walks were conducted during summer at Potter Marsh in the Anchorage Coastal refuge.
- Staff continued to assess visitor facilities and needs within all refuges and have consulted with state and local agencies to address legal access issues.
- This is an ongoing effort in many Special Areas. Various refuge directional signs were replaced when damaged or vandalized. Volunteer refuge hosts were stationed at several refuge access sites in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge and their duties included providing information to refuge users and alerting managers to issues of concern.
- Several public events were held to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the creation of the McNeil River State Game Sanctuary.
- Two retractable displays promoting awareness and use of state refuge areas were designed and produced for use at conferences, meetings, and other venues visible to the public.

- A bird checklist was updated, printed and distributed in print and electronic format.

Job/Activity e: Plan, maintain and develop improvements for public access and other facilities to special areas as needed (e.g. trails, roads, bridges, parking lots, kiosks, and other facilities).

Accomplishments:

- Boardwalk construction materials were acquired to repair boardwalks and to construct new boardwalks at Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge.
- One mile of flood damaged forest trail was repaired on Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge.
- Design work was completed for improvement of 120 yards of existing trail on Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge.
- Emergency trail repairs were finalized at Reflections Lake in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge after high tidal waters undercut and collapsed a berm supporting the trail.
- Routine trail upgrades were conducted at Goose Bay refuge, Palmer Hay Flats refuge (Cottonwood Creek; Scout Ridge; and Reflections Lake, including improvements to the foundation of the wildlife viewing tower), and Susitna Flats refuge.
- To manage harmful off-road vehicle use in Mud Bay in the Kachemak Bay CHA, a gate was installed on the access trail and vehicle access was restricted to those obtaining Special Area Permits. Signs were also added to encourage appropriate use of this site, including wildlife watching, hiking, etc.
- Basic maintenance continued on refuge facilities to encourage public use and included trails, roads, parking areas, restroom facilities, etc.

Objective 3: Conduct and support studies of various species of wildlife and wildlife habitat to support local refuge management and planning.

Job/Activity a: When possible and appropriate, develop and conduct studies to assist in management of refuges, address biological knowledge gaps, and improve management of wildlife and their habitats.

Accomplishments:

- Although the Dude Creek Critical Habitat Area was established to protect an important migratory stopover area for sandhill cranes, DWC's research and management activities in this area continue to focus on moose. We flew aerial population surveys, monitored reproduction and body condition, conducted annual browse surveys, and maintained about 30 radio collared moose. Data gathered informs management of a very popular moose hunt on the Gustavus forelands including Critical Habitat Area lands. We also collected data on harvest of bears and furbearers on all Special Areas in Region I and detailed information on waterfowl hunter effort and harvest on the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge.

Collectively these efforts provide information on how the public and wildlife species use the Special Areas and feed directly into management and planning processes.

- Daily census counts of migrating waterfowl and sandhill cranes at Creamer's Field refuge were conducted from 1 August through 15 September 2016 and 1 April through 15 May 2017. This information will be compiled into an annual report comparing bird activities between Creamer's Field refuge, the Fairbanks International Airport, and the University of Alaska Fairbanks.
- Staff assisted U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services National Wildlife Disease Program with avian influenza surveillance in hunter harvested ducks on Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge during September 2016.
- Assessed historic wildlife monitoring data files from McNeil River and Walrus Islands sanctuaries and converted data to electronic format for use in future analyses.

Prepared by: Joe Meehan, Lands and Refuge Program Coordinator