

**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-10 Wildlife Restoration FY2016

**PROJECT NUMBER:** 30.0

**PROJECT TITLE:** Refuges and other Special Areas Management

**PROJECT DURATION:** 1 July 2015 – 30 June 2016

**REPORT DUE DATE:** 28 SEPTEMBER 2016

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

**WORK LOCATION:** Statewide

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**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. This plan will be moved forward into the regulatory adoption process in the following fiscal year.
- Coordinated with Division of Habitat planning staff to conduct a department review of the draft management plan for the Willow Mountain Critical Habitat Area. This draft will be used to reengage the planning team prior to issuing a 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.
- Held public comment meetings to help develop options and strategies to address coastal erosion concerns in the Palmer Hay Flats State Game Refuge and the impacts to refuge wetlands and ATV access trails.

**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 project proposals that resulted in the issuance of 138 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 in the Palmer Hay Flats 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.
- 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 14 interpretive articles printed in the Fairbanks newspaper on topics of refuge wildlife and conservation.
- 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.

- Efforts continued to reduce impacts from an authorized ATV trail in the Cottonwood Creek area of the Palmer Hay Flats refuge and to prevent ATV use in unauthorized areas. Erosion control structures were installed where tidal guts were intersecting an ATV trail and resulting in drainage of coastal wetlands. A volunteer camper host was hired to provide information to visitors and serve as onsite department representative.
- Trails in the Reflections Lake area of the Palmer Hay Flats refuge were maintained and a site host was hired to oversee the area, educate refuge users, and deter activities harmful to refuge resources.
- Boundary marking continued at Palmer Hay Flats refuge, particularly along the Matanuska River floodplain where illegal off-road use of vehicles is impacting anadromous fish streams and wetland habitats.
- 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.
- Materials included abandoned boats and 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:**

- Coordinated with Division of Habitat on the successful public review and commenting process for the new Dude Creek CHA management plan.
- 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.
- 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.
- Staffed booths at the Fairbanks Outdoors Show and at the local Fairbanks dog park to talk about Creamer’s Field refuge rules and borough leash laws to reduce disturbance to wildlife.

- Held public meetings to discuss management strategies and impacts from the Cottonwood Creek ATV trail and option for protecting coastal wetlands and maintaining motorized access.

**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 educate 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.
- Management of certain areas in Creamer's Field refuge are closed to hunting or only open after much of the waterfowl migration has progressed as a means to preserve wildlife viewing opportunities.

- 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.
- Creamer's Field refuge trail maps and brochures were updated. Refuge maps and brochures of the refuge were utilized in education programs serving 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 3 locations and additional sites were assessed.
- 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.

**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:**

- Two additional public education signs were posted at the entrance to the very popular Dike Trail on the Mendenhall Wetlands refuge. Also on the Mendenhall refuge, staff drew plans, acquired materials, and completed a permitting process with the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities that will allow future construction of a stairway down a steep muddy slope at the Sunny Point refuge access point.
- The Creamer's Field refuge visitor center's parking lot was improved and resurfaced.
- A verbal agreement was arranged that a commercial snow machine tour operator would plow the Creamer's Field refuge north end parking lot through the winter months in order to maintain parking access to all refuge users throughout the winter.
- Boardwalk construction materials were acquired for new and repaired boardwalks at Creamer's Field refuge.
- Emergency trail repairs were conducted at Reflections Lake in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge when 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.
- Acquired materials for limited trail repairs in the Fox River Flats Critical Habitat Area, and Watermelon Trail in the Anchor River-Fritz Creek CHA.
- Contracted with a trails expert for a trail repair assessment on the Cottonwood Creek ATV trail (Palmer Hay Flats refuge), Willow Mountain CHA ATV trail, and McNeil River sanctuary foot trails.

**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.

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- Daily census counts of migrating waterfowl and sandhill cranes at Creamer's Field refuge were conducted from 1 April through 15 May 2016 and 1 August through 15 September 2016. 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.

**Prepared by:** Joe Meehan, Lands and Refuge Program Coordinator