

**Wildlife Restoration OPERATING GRANT  
FINAL PERFORMANCE REPORT**

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME  
DIVISION OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION  
PO Box 115526  
Juneau, AK 99881-5526

**Alaska Department of Fish and Game  
Wildlife Restoration Grant**

**GRANT NUMBER:** AKW-23 FY2018

**PROJECT NUMBER:** 30.0

**PROJECT TITLE:** Refuges and Special Area Management

**PERFORMANCE PERIOD:** 1 July 2017 – 30 June 2018

**REPORT DUE DATE:** 28 SEPTEMBER 2018

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS:** Darren Bruning, Joe Meehan, Tom Schumacher

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Authorities: 2 CFR 200.328  
2 CFR 200.301  
50 CFR 80.90

**I. I. PROGRESS ON PROJECT OBJECTIVES DURING PERIOD OF  
PERFORMANCE**

**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 finalize and adopt a revised management plan for the Dude Creek Critical Habitat.
- Coordinated with Division of Habitat planning staff to finalize a public review draft of the management plan for the Willow Mountain Critical Habitat Area.
- Participated in eight multi-agency planning team meetings to revise and update the management plan for the Kachemak Bay Critical Habitat Area and the Fox River Flats Critical Habitat Area. Draft management plan goals were drafted as were some plan policies.
- 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.

**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 128 project proposals that resulted in the issuance of 123 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 a private land trust organization for their acquisition of a wetland parcel adjacent to the Anchorage Coastal refuge, with the intent to transfer ownership to the State of Alaska. 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. Additionally, the program again hosted a day-long meeting and information sharing for the Walrus Conservation Consortium which includes several state and federal agencies and multiple international entities with an interest in walruses such as zoos, aquaria and research entities.
- Staff attended symposia and conferences to gain a better understanding of managing wildlife, habitats and public uses. These included the Alaska Marine Science Symposium, Alaska Trails Conference, and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough Salmon Conservation Symposium.
- Assisted Division of Habitat staff in their preparation of scoping comments and a draft Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed Pebble Mine located in southwest Alaska near the McNeil River refuge.

**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 (~500 hrs.) 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/assisted by Refuge staff. Audiences ranged from general-attendance to specific professional-educators. Refuge staff conducted 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. Also, the Creamer's Field Visitor Center (Farmhouse) was open to the public and served ~10,000 visits.

- 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 (including hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing and general recreational opportunities), provide basic security, maintenance duties, and serve as onsite department representative.
- Conducted public events to cleanup refuge access sites and conduct minor repairs to trails and facilities.
- 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 vehicles, and dumped garbage (including hazardous materials) was removed from several refuge areas including Mendenhall Wetlands, Palmer Hay Flats, Anchorage Coastal, Goose Bay and Susitna Flats. An abandoned and unusable trespass cabin and several tons of associated debris were removed from the Redoubt Bay CHA. Unauthorized and dilapidated hunting blinds were removed from the Palmer Hay Flats refuge, and an unauthorized and vandalized ice fishing shack and associated debris were removed from the Susitna Flats refuge.

**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.

**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.
- Coordinated with Matanuska-Susitna Borough and Alaska Department of Transportation to maintain public access to the Palmer Hay Flats refuge via Nelson Road which was barricaded when nearby road construction eliminated the borough’s need to maintaining Nelson Road.
- Coordinated with Alaska Department of Natural Resources and Hillcorp Energy Corp. to address continued public access to the Susitna Flats refuge along the 5 mile Stump Lake road and bridge which is subject to removal at Hillcorp abandons their natural gas extraction well at this site.

**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.
- Worked with community hunting organizations to manage off-road use of ATVs on the Cottonwood Creek trail in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge.

**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 2 new locations and additional sites were identified.
- Public education and outreach continues to be a major focus of this program. Weekly natural history walks were conducted during summer at Potter Marsh in the Anchorage Coastal refuge. Public presentations on refuges and sanctuaries were made at the Alaska Public Lands Information Center, several annual meetings of refuge friends organizations, and at Dillingham’s Beaver Round Up event acknowledging the recent designation of the Walrus Islands sanctuary as a National Historic Landmark.
- Day-long or multi-day public educational events were held at Palmer Hay Flats (Fun on the Flats Day”), Anchorage Coastal (“Potter Marsh Discovery Day”), and Creamer’s Field (“Tanana Valley Sandhill Crane Festival”) refuges. These events are attended by several thousand visitors who engage in educational activities highlighting refuge activities, wildlife and other department programs.
- Staff continued to assess visitor facilities and needs within all refuges and have consulted with state and local agencies to address legal access issues.
- As part of 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.
- A bird checklist for the Anchorage Coastal refuge was reprinted and distributed in print and electronic format.
- A series on short videos was produced and posted online providing more information to those interested in visiting the McNeil River sanctuary.
- Initiated development of several interpretive panels addressing waterfowl identification, waterfowl hunting, wetlands conservation, and the Wildlife Restoration Program through the Pittman-Robertson program. These panels will be installed at popular waterfowl hunting and viewing sites across the state.

**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:**

- Routine trail upgrades were conducted at Goose Bay refuge, Palmer Hay Flats refuge (Cottonwood Creek; Scout Ridge; and Reflections Lake (including final improvements to the foundation of the wildlife viewing tower), and Susitna Flats refuge.

- Basic maintenance continued on refuge facilities to encourage public use and included trails, roads, parking areas, restroom facilities, etc.
- Informational kiosks at primary access sites were repaired and information was updated as necessary.
- Contracted with a trails construction/repair expert to assess repairs, upgrades and reroutes of the Scout Ridge trail in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge.

**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. In RY2017 we issued 433 permits to hunt waterfowl on the Mendenhall Refuge and 324 permit holders reported hunting. 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 2017 and 1 April through 15 May 2018.
- 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 2017.

**II. SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT REPORTS AND/OR AMENDMENTS:** none

**III. PUBLICATIONS:** none produced.

**IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THIS PROJECT** This is an ongoing project involving land management and public uses of these refuge areas.

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

**Date:** September 4, 2018