

**Wildlife Restoration OPERATING GRANT
FINAL PERFORMANCE REPORT**

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
DIVISION OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION
PO Box 115526
Juneau, AK 99811-5526

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

GRANT NUMBER: AKW-B-VERS-2020 Amendment #1

PROJECT NUMBER: 32.0

PROJECT TITLE: Sanctuary and Refuge Field Operations (Region I, II, IV and V)

PERIOD OF PERFORMANCE: 07/01/2019 – 06/30/2021

PERFORMANCE YEAR: July 1, 2020 - June 30, 2021; year 2 of a 2-year grant

REPORT DUE DATE: September 1, 2021

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Joe Meehan, Statewide Program Coordinator

COOPERATORS: N/A

Authorities: 2 CFR 200.328
2 CFR 200.301
50 CFR 80.90

I. PROGRESS ON PROJECT OBJECTIVES DURING PERFORMANCE YEAR

OBJECTIVE 1: Operate all aspects of visitor use programs at select refuge areas including McNeil River sanctuary, Walrus Islands sanctuary (including Round Island), Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge (including Potter Marsh), Stan Price sanctuary (Pack Creek), and other refuge areas.

Job/Activity 1a: Manage public access and use as required by statute and/or regulation at McNeil River, Round Island, and Pack Creek.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Staff cooperatively managed public access and bear viewing at the Stan Price Sanctuary and adjacent U.S. Forest Service Pack Creek Bear Viewing Area with U.S. Forest Service staff. From June through early September 2020 about 1,200 permitted visitors viewed bears at Pack Creek. The number of visitors was lower than normal due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Staff also met with Forest Service staff during the off-season to resolve visitor management issues and discuss ways to improve operations.

The access permit program for McNeil River and Round Island were administered through their respective processes (i.e. lottery for McNeil River, as requested for Round Island). Additionally, a limited number of permits for McNeil River are issued under a

Special Access Program at the commissioner's discretion for scientific, educational, media, and other purposes deemed beneficial for the sanctuary or wildlife management. For the 2020 summer season, 1,211 applications were received for the McNeil River lottery and 1,144 were received for the 2021 summer season. Permitted visitors (169) and visitor use days (937) for the McNeil River bear viewing program was lower in 2020 due to travel and other restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. These visitors were also primarily Alaska residents. Approximately 207 visitors were permitted for the 2021 season for the McNeil River bear viewing program. Total permitted visitors and visitor use days for the 2021 season are not yet available.

There were 22 camping permits and 2 day-use permits issued for visitors to Round Island for the 2020 season; however due to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions only two day-use visitors arrived. There were 39 visitor use permits issued for the 2021 season; 33 camping permits, 4 day-use permits, and 2 educational access permits. Both these sites experienced high permit cancellation rates for the 2020 season due to Covid-19; but appear to have rebounded to near normal visitation for 2021.

Job/Activity 1b: Conduct visitor guiding, orientations, monitoring, and/or educational programs at all listed sites.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Staff cooperated with U.S. Forest Service staff to orient permitted visitors to the Pack Creek area and protocols for bear viewing. They also monitored and guided visitors' bear viewing activities and educated visitors about brown bear behavior, ecology, and the history of the Stan Price Sanctuary/Pack Creek Bear Viewing Area.

Visitor access programs at McNeil River and Round Island were generally managed as anticipated during the 2020 and early 2021 summer field seasons. Visitor guiding, orientations, monitoring, interpretation, and educational programs at McNeil River and Round Island proceeded as expected for the 2020 season but were affected by COVID-19 pandemic response. COVID-19 response resulted in overall fewer visitors; changes to operational procedures for guiding, interpretation, and educational programs; and increased staff participation related sanitary and social distancing practices. However, with the exception of reduced visitor participation and COVID-19 modifications, these programs proceeded more or less normally. Staff were able to host and mentor a Bristol Bay Native Association intern at Round Island in June 2021.

The visitor program at Potter Marsh involved supporting volunteer hosts and providing educational materials at the boardwalk facility; however the program was significantly curtailed during the 2020 and 2021 summer season due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While daily visitor contacts were conducted and educational materials made available, no natural history talks, bird identification walks, or other educational program were conducted during this reporting period. The hosts also provided general oversight and orientation of the facility. While traffic counts were not conducted during this reporting period, we estimate high visitor use in excess of the typical 150,000 annual visits due to local residents seeking outdoor activities as well as a resurgence of independent travelers to Alaska in summer 2021.

OBJECTIVE 2: Monitor changes in abundance, use patterns, population health, and/or productivity of wildlife populations.

Job/Activity 2a: Conduct wildlife surveys and monitoring programs to assess Pacific walrus, Steller sea lion, seabirds, and other wildlife species and resources (Round Island); brown bears other wildlife species and resources (McNeil River, Pack Creek); and wildlife species and resources at other selected program sites.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Staff monitored the numbers, ages, sexes of bears visiting the Pack Creek viewing area each day. They noted the presence of bears that could be identified from previous years and new bears. They also noted the number of older cubs returning and new cubs with adult female bears. Staff also noted bear feeding habits and the timing and relative abundance of salmon runs in Pack Creek and other creeks within the sanctuary.

Wildlife surveys and resource monitoring programs at McNeil River and Round Island proceeded normally for the second half of the 2020 summer season and for the first half of the 2021 season. More details on these surveys are provided in Section II below.

OBJECTIVE 3: Provide appropriate and safe facilities for public uses, research, management, maintenance, and other administrative duties at the McNeil River sanctuary, Walrus Islands sanctuary (including Round Island), Anchorage Coastal refuge (including Potter Marsh), Stan Price sanctuary (Pack Creek), and others

Job/Activity 3a: Maintain, enhance, repair, and expand as appropriate facilities including trails, boardwalks, buildings, educational materials, viewing platforms, cabins, signs, campgrounds, parking areas, restrooms, and other facilities necessary for public use and administrative functions.

Accomplishments: Staff cooperated with U.S. Forest Service staff to maintain visitor facilities at Pack Creek. Tasks included rearranging logs for sitting on the viewing spit, annual trail clearing and maintenance to the viewing tower, installing a new foot bridge, and maintaining the viewing tower. In late August 2019, a severe 2-day windstorm tipped or blew down trees at the shared administrative camp on Windfall Island requiring staff to abandon the camp in the middle of the night. ADF&G and U.S. Forest Service staff continued to cooperate to re-establish camp facilities in areas safe from leaning trees and convenient to operating the viewing program.

Maintenance, repair, and enhancement projects to camp and visitor facilities were carried out normally at McNeil River and Round Island during the last part of the 2020 summer season and first half of the 2021 season. This included general trail maintenance, general building and campground maintenance at both McNeil River and Round Island. Generally, there was a reduction in these maintenance projects at these areas in 2020 due to logistical issues related to COVID-19 mandates. However, minor building and trail maintenance with available materials occurred at both locations in 2020 and these trail, building and campground maintenance activities resumed fully in early 2021. Increased sanitary maintenance is ongoing at both locations due to COVID-19 response.

Four new interpretive panels were added to the Round Island campground. The panels were designed and produced under a National Park Service grant but transported and installed under this project.

General maintenance and janitorial duties were conducted at Potter Marsh on the boardwalk, restrooms, parking area, trails, and other facilities at Potter Marsh. A broken septic holding tank at the volunteer host site required repair.

Job/Activity 3b: Maintain, repair, enhance, and/or protect habitats and other resources as required to provide for public use and administrative facilities.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Staff cooperated with U.S. Forest Service staff on trail repairs to maintain habitats at Pack Creek.

Trail repair work conducted at McNeil River and Round Island sites is largely to minimize impacts to coastal sedge flats and upland tundra habitats. Additionally, small scale removal of invasive vegetation such as dandelions and chickweed was done when the species were found.

II. SUMMARY OF WORK COMPLETED ON PROJECT TO DATE: Visitor use and wildlife and resource monitoring results for the 2021 season are pending for the Round Island and McNeil River sites. Complete results for the 2020 McNeil River season can be found within the annual report noted below. Complete results for the 2020 season at Round Island are pending.

At Round Island summary conclusions include: Pacific walrus, common murre, and black-legged kittiwake are still at lower-than-normal numbers following the Bering Sea heat blob of 2014-15. Peak walrus numbers only approach 2,000; however smaller groups of walruses seem to be more consistently present at Round Island. Common murre and black-legged kittiwake numbers are slowly increasing on the plots with some nesting occurring, which is an improvement over prior year. Visitor use was down for 2020 with all camp visitors cancelling due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. A single male sea otter has taken up residence near East Cape at Round Island for the last two years and is often found relaxing with the Steller sea lions there. This is outside the normal range for this species.

At McNeil River bear numbers are lower than the highs experienced in 2010-11. Low water conditions and reduced fish numbers in 2019 and 2020 appear to be contributing factors. Visitor interest appears up at McNeil River with 1,211 applications for 2020 and 1,144 for the 2021 season. One hundred fifty-three permitted bear viewers participated in 937 bear viewing days in 2020. Use figures for 2021 are still pending; however, visitor participation is expected to have returned to pre-COVID levels.

III. SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT REPORTS AND/OR AMENDMENTS: Response to COVID-19 mandates required significant changes to operations and logistical challenges at McNeil River and Round Island during summer of 2020, with

some operational changes extending into the early 2021 season. However, except for some deployment delays and reductions in visitor numbers we were able to complete basic operations and complete work as anticipated. Resultant operational changes due to COVID-19 response included: logistical issues and increased costs related to materials and services shortages, elimination of cooperators live streaming internet cameras at Round Island, increased COVID-19 related sanitation, and social distancing practices at Round Island and McNeil River. Increased costs were largely offset by reductions in travel costs and reductions in staff time .

IV. PUBLICATIONS:

Griffin, T. M., and E. W. Weiss. 2021. McNeil River State Game Sanctuary annual management report 2020. Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Special Areas Management Report ADF&G/DWC/SAMR-2021-1, Juneau.

http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static-f/home/library/pdfs/wildlife/mgt_rpts/mcneil_river_state_game_sanctuary_annual_mgt_rpt_2020.pdf

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THIS PROJECT: none.

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