

**Wildlife Restoration  
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-C-2-2019

**PROJECT NUMBER:** 30.0

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

**PERFORMANCE PERIOD:** 1 July 2018 – 30 June 2019

**REPORT DUE DATE:** 1 SEPTEMBER 2019

**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. 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:**

- Participated in nine multi-agency planning team meetings in an ongoing effort 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 finalized and policies were drafted.
- Three meetings were 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 112 project proposals that resulted in the issuance of 107 Special Area Permits.

- Monitored various development projects within or near special areas including replacement of an Alaska Railroad bridge in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge; inspected authorized personal use cabins and documented unauthorized cabins in the Redoubt Bay Critical Habitat Area; removed unauthorized hunting blinds and camps in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge; and surveyed authorized cabins in the Susitna Flats refuge.
- The Douglas Area Biologist reviewed and provided comments on a large housing development being built on private land between Egan Expressway and the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge boundary. The potential for drainage and runoff from the development to effect water quality on the refuge was the primary issue.
- The Douglas Area Biologist also reviewed a proposal from ADF&G, Habitat Section to construct a hardened trail, bridges, and a sitting area at West Creek on the Mendenhall Wetlands refuge. Through that review the plan was scaled back to reduce the project's footprint and more closely align with intent of the management plan.
- 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 the Great Land Trust, a private non-profit land trust organization, for the acquisition of a 236-acre wetland parcel along Rabbit Slough in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge. The parcel was acquired by the State of Alaska and will be managed consistent with the refuge management plan and relevant regulations and statutes. Staff also worked with the Kachemak Heritage Land Trust and the Kachemak Moose Habitat, Inc. to help identify parcels for potential acquisition containing important 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 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 with the department's review of the draft Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed Pebble Mine located in southwest Alaska near the McNeil River sanctuary and 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:**

- During this reporting period DWC staff completed construction of a new refuge access stairway on the west side of Sunny Point in the Mendenhall Wetlands refuge. That location has been used by waterfowl hunters to access waterfowl hunting opportunity on the refuge for decades but required descending and climbing a steep and muddy slope. Over the last three years Region I staff worked with the Alaska Department of Transportation to acquire the necessary permit for a stairway within the road corridor and this year completed construction of that stairway.
- 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 discussed current refuge management issues and cautioned 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.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Audubon Society, and Alaska Songbird Institute staff participated in ADF&G-sponsored wildlife information programs at Creamer's Field refuge.
- 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 hosts were hired at the Palmer Hay Flats refuge and 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 at Palmer Hay Flats and Goose Bay refuges to cleanup refuge access sites and conduct minor repairs to trails and facilities.
- In partnership with community organizations, stabilized and rehabilitated stream bank habitat on the anadromous Wasilla Creek in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge where public use was trampling the stream banks.

- Staff participated in educational programs addressing the Palmer Hay Flats refuge, and the McNeil River and Walrus Islands sanctuaries.
- Materials including abandoned vehicles and discarded waste (household garbage and hazardous materials) were removed from several refuge areas including Palmer Hay Flats, Anchorage Coastal, Goose Bay, and Susitna Flats. Unauthorized and dilapidated hunting blinds were removed from the Palmer Hay 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), DWC 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.
- Coordinated refuge management and public outreach efforts with several refuge-related community organizations including Alaskans for Palmer Hay Flats, Friends of the Anchorage Coastal Refuge, Friends of McNeil River, Friends of Creamer’s Field Refuge, and Friends of the Walrus Islands.

**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:**

- Region I staff improved access for Mendenhall Wetlands refuge users within a DOT&PF right-of-way as described in Objective 1, Job/Activity c (i.e. Sunny Point stairway). Region I staff also continued to monitor for conflicts between waterfowl hunters and adjacent homeowners, primarily along the Mendenhall Peninsula.
- 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 landowners 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 landowners 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 maintain Nelson Road. The road was ultimately reopened to public access.
- Coordinated with Alaska Department of Natural Resources and Hillcorp Energy Corp. to address continued public access to the Susitna Flats refuge along the 5.6-mile Stump Lake road and bridge which is subject to removal as Hillcorp abandons their natural gas extraction well at this site.
- Coordinated with Cook Inlet Regional Corporation (a neighbor to the Palmer Hay Flats refuge) to assess public use and access on their private lands.

**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.

- Region I staff continued to monitor for conflicts between user groups, primarily on the Mendenhall Wetlands refuge. No conflicts were reported. We believe previous efforts to educate the public about appropriate refuge uses and land ownership have paid off.
- Staff 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 and Goose Bay refuges.
- Efforts 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 2,500 persons during the period.
- Continued participation with a multiagency and public group to manage a "water trail" in the Kachemak Bay CHA.
- Public education and outreach continued 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 Anchorage Alaska Public Lands Information Center and several annual meetings of refuge friends organizations.
- 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 participated in the multiagency "Beluga Watch" event which encouraged the public to view, survey, and learn about Beluga whales in Cook Inlet. Viewing stations were staffed in the Anchorage Coastal and Goose Bay refuges.

- 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 signs (directional, informational, and regulatory) were installed or replaced when damaged or vandalized. Volunteer refuge hosts were stationed at refuge access sites in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge and Anchorage Coastal 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 and Palmer Hay Flats refuge was reprinted and distributed in print and electronic format.
- Finalized the development and produced several interpretive panels addressing waterfowl identification, waterfowl hunting, wetlands conservation, and the Wildlife Restoration Program through the Pittman-Robertson program. Panels were installed at several locations throughout the state at select sites that attract waterfowl hunters and/or viewers.

**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:**

- Please see Objective 1, Job/Activity c (i.e. Sunny Point stairway). Region I staff continue to monitor signs, trails, and boardwalks that facilitate access to special areas, primarily the heavily used Mendenhall Wetlands refuge.
- To accommodate increasing uses, significant expansion and reconfiguration of the access road and parking lot at Rabbit Slough in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge was conducted. The primary goal was to increase available parking, to facilitate access by vehicles pulling boat trailers, and to facilitate launching of boats into Wasilla Creek.
- The entire access road and parking lots at Cottonwood Creek within the Palmer Hay Flats refuge were upgraded by resurfacing with recycled asphalt (RAP), and a new vehicle gate was installed on this road to manage access when road conditions warranted.
- Trail upgrades, repair, and maintenance were conducted in the Palmer Hay Flats refuge (Reflections Lake trail and boardwalk, Cottonwood Creek trail, Scout Ridge trail, and Wasilla Creek trail and boardwalk) and in the Goose Bay refuge.
- Basic maintenance continued on refuge facilities to encourage public use and included trails, roads, parking areas, restroom facilities, etc. All refuge facilities in southcentral were inspected after the November 30, 2018 earthquake and several structures were found to have been damaged and in need of repair including Cottonwood Creek and Reflections Lake pedestrian/ATV bridge abutments, parking lot and road surfaces, and restroom structures.
- Informational kiosks at primary access sites were repaired and information was updated as necessary.

**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:**

- Daily census counts of migrating waterfowl and sandhill cranes at Creamer's Field refuge were conducted from 1 August through 15 September 2018 and 1 April through 15 May 2019.

**II. SUMMARY OF WORK COMPLETED ON PROJECT TO DATE:** N/A

**III. SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT REPORTS AND/OR AMENDMENTS:** N/A

**IV. PUBLICATIONS:** While no publications were produced as part of this project, the following stories were carried by local media:

Property addition to Palmer Hay Flats: <https://www.ktva.com/story/41329349/200-acres-added-to-palmer-hay-flats>

Public use at Reflections Lake: <https://www.ktva.com/story/39368191/reflections-lake-recreation-area-considered-a-success-story-of-community-involvement>

Parking improvements at Reflections Lake: <https://www.ktva.com/story/39367553/more-parking-space-at-reflections-lake>

Vandalism at Potter Marsh: <https://www.ktva.com/story/40241255/potter-marsh-vandalized-by-gang-tagging>

Rare duck at Potter Marsh: <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/wildlife/2019/05/10/birders-flock-to-anchorage-potter-marsh-for-a-glimpse-of-the-rare-falcated-duck/>

**V. 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:** December 12, 2019