

WILDLIFE WATCHERS' NEWSLETTER



published twice a year by
NONGAME WILDLIFE PROGRAM

**ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
DIVISION OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION**

Winter Eagle Viewing Near Haines

The winter gathering of bald eagles at the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve near Haines is the world's largest known concentration of eagles. Upwellings of warm water below the massive Tsirku River's alluvial fan support a late run of chum salmon, one of the bald eagle's favorite foods.



Eagles begin to congregate in the Chilkat Valley in late September, and the numbers usually peak in November. Although nearly 4,000 eagles have been counted during November throughout the preserve, usually fewer birds are seen. Eagles can be observed perched in cottonwood trees between the Chilkat River and Haines Highway, soaring overhead, or squabbling over salmon.

Ice formation in river channels determines how much food is available to eagles, and the eagle numbers drop substantially when they are not able to obtain food. By late January, most birds have left the area.

Coastal spruce-hemlock forest typical of much of Southeast Alaska meets with the mixed conifer/hardwood forest of Interior Alaska within the broad Chilkat Valley floodplain, providing a diversity of wildlife habitats. While the dramatic concentration of feeding bald eagles occurs in late fall and early winter, moose, black and brown bears, nesting eagles, and a variety of other birds might be seen in the preserve other times of the year.

Controversy Continues Over Paint River Project

Most readers of this newsletter are familiar with the McNeil River State Game Sanctuary which is ranked as one of the foremost wildlife viewing experiences in the world. Each year about 300 visitors lucky enough to draw permits are able to view, at close proximity, up to 65 wild Alaskan brown bears fishing for salmon in the sanctuary.

Last summer and fall many of you heard about the sanctuary and a salmon enhancement project on the nearby Paint River which some feel may adversely affect the viewing experience in the sanctuary. This article will provide some background information about the controversy.

On the McNeil River, chum salmon concentrate below a rapids ("falls") about 1/2 mile from tidewater. Because these salmon are highly concentrated and easy to catch, some bears travel at least 50 miles to fish here. Fishing is so good that the bears demonstrate atypical tolerance for other bears and for people and this has led to the spectacular viewing opportunity.

Several years ago, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game turned down a request from the Cook Inlet Aquaculture Association (CIAA) to introduce a run of sockeye salmon to McNeil River. This request was refused because of concerns over impacts the addition of readily-catchable fish in the 10 miles between the falls and the lake would have on the McNeil falls bear viewing experience.

CIAA then begin to plan a project to introduce a salmon run into the Paint River, a large drainage immediately to the north of McNeil that has no salmon because of a 32-foot falls at tideline. By 1990, CIAA had the construction permits they needed to build a fish ladder around this falls from the Army Corps of Engineers (COE), and from the Alaska Department of Natural

(continued on page 2)

(continued on page 2)

Eagle Viewing... (Continued from page 1)

Visitors to the preserve may make a day trip to the Haines area from Juneau and Skagway, or may find motel and hotel accommodations in Haines for longer stays. Haines can be reached by regularly-scheduled air taxi service from Juneau, by State Highway 7, and by Alaska State Ferry service. During the summer, fall, and winter commercial tours provide transportation and guides for natural history, viewing, and photography expeditions.

At the time of this writing, there are no facilities like toilets or garbage containers, but there are a few pullouts along the highway where parking is possible. The best places for close looks and photographs may be found along the Haines Highway between Mileposts 18 and 22. Do not park on the road shoulders, as they are very narrow.

To reduce disturbance to the eagles, view and photograph them from a distance, using binoculars and telephoto lenses and **do not walk out on the gravel bars**. Remember that the birds cannot afford unnecessary expenditures of energy.

The 48,000 - acre Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, a unit of the Alaska State Park System, includes the 4,800 - acre Chilkat River Critical Habitat Area, managed by ADF&G. **For more information, contact:**

Alaska State Parks
P. O. Box 263
Haines, AK 99827
(907) 766-2292

ADF&G Div. of Habitat
P.O. Box 20
Douglas, AK 99824
(907) 465-4290



Paint River Project... (Continued from page 1)

Resources (DNR). To build the ladder CIAA had a \$1 million grant from the federal government plus \$1.6 million from the State of Alaska and \$255,000 of its own.

A private organization called Friends of McNeil River filed a suit last winter to revoke the Corps' permit pending completion of an environment impact statement (EIS) on the fish ladder and its impacts on the McNeil sanctuary. Requests for a preliminary injunction to stop construction failed, and the ladder was completed last summer. The lawsuit continues, however, and operation of the ladder may be delayed until an EIS is completed.

During its last session, the Alaska Legislature passed a law creating a new wildlife refuge surrounding the upper Paint River and extending the McNeil Sanctuary around the lower Paint River. The purpose of this bill was to give the ADF&G increased authority to control land use activities in the Paint River area that might be found incompatible with the McNeil viewing experience. Although passed by the legislature, this law does not go into effect until the Commissioner of Fish and Game declares the fish ladder operational.

There is widespread disagreement about the impacts of the fish ladder on bear populations and bear viewing opportunities in this area. It is clear that additional food sources area would be either helpful or have no effect on bear populations in the area. If this population is distributed over a wider area because of the more widespread availability of salmon, however, it may impact the number, sex and age composition, or behavior of the bears using McNeil falls. Concerns have also been expressed over the impacts of hunting in the Paint River area on bears that have become habituated to humans during the summer. Bears using the Paint River might learn to associate humans with food and carry this expectation back to the sanctuary. If any of these concerns transpired, it could have a major impact on the existing bear viewing experience in the sanctuary.

The department is beginning a public process that will lead to a management plan for the McNeil Sanctuary and Refuge. The plan is scheduled for completion in December, 1992. At its fall meeting, the Alaska Board of Game froze the status quo in the refuge and adjacent Amakdedori drainage, and gave the Department authority to close the refuge if plan objectives cannot otherwise be met. Because salmon are an integral element of McNeil, the plan will address fisheries management in addition to human uses of the area.

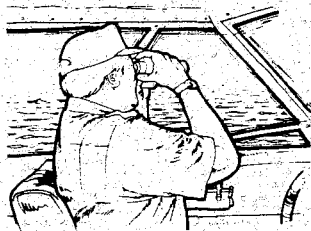
ADF&G Expands Wildlife Viewing Program

There have been a number of exciting developments to expand ADF&G's role in providing wildlife viewing opportunities. One of the most significant projects was the establishment of an Alaska Watchable Wildlife Conservation Trust. (See the accompanying article for a description of the Wildlife Trust). The 1991 spring issue of ALASKA'S WILDLIFE was a special edition featuring Alaska's Watchable Wildlife. If you haven't seen this issue you can still order one (see ad in this newsletter).

In July, ADF&G organized the first Alaska Watchable Wildlife Steering Committee meeting. The meeting was held in Fairbanks and was attended by 11 people representing ADF&G, BLM, NPS, USFS, USF&WS, and University of Alaska. Projects discussed included organizing a forum for interagency cooperation, an inventory of wildlife viewing sites, and interpretive facilities, information, and education.

Since this meeting, ADF&G has distributed a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Watchable Wildlife and Ecotourism in Alaska to a variety of resource agencies, conservation groups, and the tourism industry. This MOU will help facilitate public and private partnerships to enhance wildlife viewing and ecotourism development. The second meeting was held in November in Anchorage with participation from a larger group of state and federal agencies, conservation groups, and the visitor industry.

Specific projects ADF&G plans to work on over the winter and spring include publishing a booklet on wildlife viewing on state lands, expanding and enhancing interpretive and educational projects on Creamer's Refuge, providing interpretive signs on state refuges, and cooperating with other agencies to inventory and develop wildlife viewing sites along Alaska highways.



New Trust Fund Benefits Wildlife Viewers

The Alaska Watchable Wildlife Conservation Trust was established last summer by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the Alaska Conservation Foundation (ACF). The objective of the trust is to expand wildlife conservation efforts by supporting interpretive, research, and educational programs about Alaska's wildlife and their habitats, and the development of viewing opportunities.

The Wildlife Trust will: (1) enhance wildlife viewing through facilities construction, interpretive signs, trail construction and maintenance, roadside turnouts for wildlife viewing, viewing guides, interpretive centers with naturalists, media programming, and research on the social and economic values of watching wildlife; (2) support wildlife education efforts through school curriculum, brochures for public distribution, articles for magazines, posters, video tapes, etc.; and (3) conserve the biological diversity of Alaska through ecosystem research and acquisition of critical wildlife habitats.

Gifts to the Wildlife Trust Fund will be used for unrestricted granting purposes unless the donor asks that the gift be put to a specific use (e.g., McNeil River, Round Island, etc.). Gifts are deposited in a specific account and ACF will acknowledge all contributions directly to the donor.

The Alaska Watchable Wildlife Conservation Trust is an "advised fund." The Trust Fund Advisory Board is made up of six individuals including a representative from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, a federal resource agency, an Alaskan tourism operator, a watchable wildlife-related business, a conservation organization, and an environmental educator. The board will make grant recommendations on specific projects to enhance wildlife viewing, interpretation, and conservation in Alaska. ACF receives 15 percent of donated funds to cover administrative overhead and fund specific expenses such as promotions.

For more information, please contact:

Jim Stratton
Program Director
AK Conservation Foundation
430 W. 7th Avenue #215
Anchorage, AK 99501
(907)276-1917

John Schoen
Conservation Biologist
Div of Wildlife Conservation
Alaska Dep Fish & Game
Fairbanks, AK 99701
(907)456-5156

ALASKA WATCHABLE WILDLIFE TRUST FUND

YES! I want to help enhance wildlife viewing, wildlife education and nongame species conservation. Enclosed is my tax-deductible check for \$ _____ made out to the "Alaska Conservation Foundation" for the Watchable Wildlife Trust Fund.

Send this coupon plus your check to:

Alaska Conservation Foundation/Watchable Wildlife Trust
430 W. Seventh Street, Suite 215
Anchorage, AK 99501

THANK YOU

Wolf Plan Adopted By Board of Game

The Alaska Board of Game has adopted a strategic wolf management plan designed to defuse controversy through more public involvement in key decisions.

The plan itself was a product of such public participation. The board, acting as a committee of the whole, sat with ADF&G staff and six representatives of diverse interest groups to write the plan, line by line, word by word.

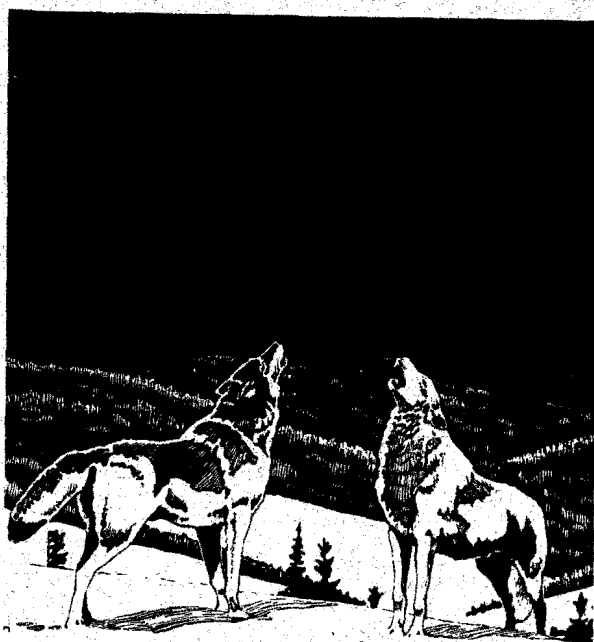
The starting point was a report written by a 12-member citizens advisory team last spring. The management plan incorporated most of the findings and principles contained in the team's report.

The plan is based on the zone system recommended by the team. Zones range from total wolf protection from hunting and trapping to intensive management where wolf numbers may be reduced in specific areas for brief periods.

The primary goal of the plan is to guarantee the long-term conservation of wolves and their prey in Alaska.

While the plan provides a framework, some very difficult work lies ahead in drawing the zones on a map. Residents of affected areas, local land owners/managers and fish and game advisory committees will help make the decision through several public meetings.

The board will consider area-specific plans for several parts of the state at its spring meeting in Anchorage, providing yet another opportunity for public review and comment.



Board of Game Considers Bear and Walrus Viewing

At its fall meeting in Fairbanks, the Alaska Board of Game declined to tinker much with three of Alaska's best-known wildlife-viewing areas.

Somewhat surprisingly, the most heated debate revolved around Pack Creek on Admiralty Island. The board was faced with two proposals to shrink the area closed to hunting north and south of Pack Creek and four proposals to expand the closed area.

After lengthy arguments over the merits of managing brown bears for viewing at the expense of hunting, the board voted 4-3 to retain the existing boundaries.

The board made a few minor changes regarding McNeil River, but postponed any major decision until the spring of 1993. The board allowed hunting to continue in what is to be a refuge north of the McNeil sanctuary. But the board turned it into a registration hunt with a quota of three bears per year — the historical average harvest in the area.

Dick Sellers, area biologist for the Division of Wildlife conservation in King Salmon, said at least five bears were killed in the area immediately north of McNeil this fall so the spring season will be closed by emergency order.

Because brown bear seasons are open only every other year on the Alaska Peninsula, the effect of the emergency order will be to ensure that no bears are taken by hunters until the matter comes before the board again.

The board instructed the ADF&G to bring back a new management plan for the sanctuary and refuge in the spring of 1993. Several board members said they hoped public participation in the process, similar to what went on with the strategic wolf management plan, would yield a solution.

The board also postponed action on a proposal from the village of Togiak to be allowed to take 10 walrus a year from Round Island. Board members said they didn't have enough data to make a sound decision on the issue since the state no longer manages marine mammals. The board noted that the federal government is working on a Bristol Bay walrus management plan and urged the ADF&G and Togiak to get involved.

Critical Habitat Area Planning

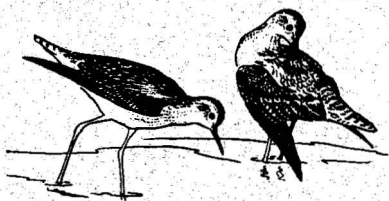
ADF&G is beginning work on a management plan for the Kachemak Bay and Fox River Flats Critical Habitat Areas.

The plan will describe management goals and will set policies to decide what activities are compatible with the protection of fish and wildlife, their habitats, and public use of the area.

When completed, the plan will guide the department's decisions on activities in the critical habitat areas for the next 10 years.

Public involvement is a critical element of the planning process, according to Debra Clausen, the biologist in charge of developing the plan. Clausen encourages interested citizens to participate in the planning process through meetings, by mail, by phone, or a visit to a Fish and Game office in Homer or Anchorage.

For more information, contact Debra Clausen at 267-2284.



New Creamer's Refuge Manager



In September 1991, Kristine Hartnett became manager at Creamer's Migratory Waterfowl Refuge in Fairbanks. As refuge manager, Kris will have responsibility not only for farming the fields and maintaining existing programs and facilities, but will take charge of the broadening education and interpretation programs planned on the refuge. She is looking forward to developing displays in the historic farmhouse that will serve as the refuge center, producing educational curricula focused on the refuge, enhancing and adding to the interpretive trails, and promoting use of the refuge by schools, local residents, and visitors.

Kris brings a combination of hands-on experience and buoyant enthusiasm to her new job. In Juneau, she was involved in a variety of programs, including development of trail systems and curricula with local schools and leading Project WILD, Project Learning Tree and other natural history training workshops.

Prior to coming to Alaska she developed instructional materials, led workshops, and taught natural and cultural field study courses for Yosemite National Institute and San Mateo County Outdoor Education Program. She also created interpretive programs, built trails, and worked on resource management projects in several parks and recreation areas.

We are happy to have Kris join us at Creamer's. We look forward to using the programs being developed on this refuge in Fairbanks as a model for urban refuges throughout the state.

Please check appropriate boxes and return this coupon to the Anchorage office:

- ☐ Please add my name to your mailing list.
☐ Address correction:

- ☐ Please send me a Fish and Game magazine subscription form. People who order a new two-year subscription to the magazine (\$18) will receive a free copy of ADF&G's 170-page book, *A Guide to Wildlife Viewing in Alaska* (sold at \$12.95).

- ☐ I would like to order ____ Alaska's Wildlife special issue(s) on wildlife viewing. Enclosed please find \$5.00 per issue. (Orders of 25 copies or more receive a 25% discount).

☐ Suggestions: _____

Thank you

For Volunteer Work at Creamer's Field:

- * Friends of Creamer's Field (nonprofit refuge support group) especially Gail Mayo, President
- * Susan Grace Stolz, Director of Camp Habitat
- * Arctic Audubon Society
- * Creamer's Refuge Planning Advisory Group

For Loon Watch:

- * Cecelia "Pudge" Kleinkauf - for more than 20 hours of nest mapping
- * Volunteer observers - for posting signs and turning in survey forms.

Donations to Alaska Watchable Wildlife Trust Fund:

Memorial Gifts for Christen Scanlon
Jack Randall
Jim Dau
John Schoen
Rainbow King Lodge

Calendar

Reminder to Loon Watch Volunteer Observers:

Turn in your 1991 survey forms as soon as possible. Results and 1992 packets will be mailed in April.

Mark Your Calendar!

Board of Game
March 19-April 10 - Anchorage
Alaska Loon Festival
May 8 and 9 - Anchorage

Gift Idea for Wildlife Viewers and Visitors

The special edition of ADF&G's magazine *Alaska Wildlife* featuring wildlife viewing is still available. Articles include special viewing sites, species of high interest, monthly viewing highlights, guidelines for viewing, and tips for collecting or purchasing wildlife souvenirs. Background articles on the growing interest in wildlife viewing and the economic, tourism, and management impacts are also included in this 45-page magazine.

This attractive full-color issue will be of interest to residents and visitors who are interested in seeing wildlife. Individual copies are available for purchase for \$5 (including shipping and handling) from ADF&G's Public Communication Section, PO Box 3-2000, Juneau, AK 99802-2000. Orders of 25 copies or more receive a 25% discount.



The Alaska Department of Fish and Game operates all of its public programs and activities free from discrimination on the basis of race, religion, color, national origin, age, sex or handicap. Because the department receives federal funding, any person who believes he or she has been discriminated against should write to: O.E.O., U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, DC 20240.

Printed on recycled paper



State of Alaska
Department of Fish & Game
Nongame Wildlife Program
333 Raspberry Road
Anchorage, AK 99518

BULK RATE
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
PERMIT NO. 145
ANCHORAGE
AK 99518

LANCE TRASKY
HABITAT
ANCHORAGE