

CURRENTS

"Working together for community vitality in a healthy watershed."

Newsletter of the KENAI WATERSHED FORUM

Winter 1998

WINTERING ON THE KENAI

LATE SILVER SALMON RUN ATTRACTS EAGLES FROM SUSITNA TO YAKUTAT



An adult and an immature bald eagle share a tree branch along the Kenai River. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.)

There's a migration quietly happening on the Kenai River this time of year. Bald eagles are flying in from all over southcentral Alaska to make a winter meal out of the Kenai's late silver salmon run.

Peak numbers of eagles came to the Kenai River in the mid 1980s, when biologists with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service counted roughly 600 bald eagles between Kenai Lake and Bing's Landing near Sterling. That makes the Kenai River home to the second largest concentration of wintering eagles in the state, behind Haines.

Counts vary from year to year depending on how many silver salmon are available. In recent years, though, counts have been in the 200 to 300 range. The peak of the migration is usually January and February.

The eagles are attracted to the Kenai's unique run of silver salmon. These salmon spawn in the heart of the winter, taking advantage of the river's open water. It's such a rare feast, that some eagles travel hundreds of miles to dine on the spawned fish. Radio tags tracked the birds across Cook Inlet, to Homer, Seward and Yakutat.

Ever wonder why stretches of the Kenai River run free throughout the Kenai Peninsula's winters? After all, many other rivers succumb to the freezing temperatures by November. The key is the Kenai River's two, big lakes.

Thanks to a continual flow of ground water, Kenai Lake and Skilak Lake continue to pour large amounts of relatively warm water

into the river throughout much of the winter. Because of that continual flush, the water in the Kenai takes much longer to freeze than other rivers.

Wildlife has learned to take advantage of the open water. In addition to salmon and eagles, ducks and trumpeter swans use upper stretches of the Kenai as wintering grounds.

KENAI WATERSHED FORUM BOARD OF DIRECTORS



Catherine Cassidy is chair of KWF. She works in the commercial fishing and tourism industries. Catherine has been active in the Kenai River Festival and with local historical societies.

Charles Quarre is a retired mariner and cattle rancher. He is past president of the Resource, Conservation and Development Council and now serves as the secretary of the Kenai River Property Owners Association.



Ken Marlow owns Marlow's On the Kenai, a lodge that provides fishing, birding and sightseeing trips as well as corporate retreats. Ken is a retired teacher and has lived in Alaska since 1965.

Brenda Stoops is KWF's secretary/treasurer. She is co-owner of Snug Harbor Seafoods with her husband Paul Dale. Brenda, who has five kids, is pursuing a degree in Natural Resources Management.



Peggy Mullen is vice-chair of KWF. She is a longtime river activist and one of the founders of the Kenai River Festival. She is a member of the Kenai River Special Management Area Board.

Benjamin Jackinsky is a lifelong peninsula resident. He has never missed a summer fishing at his family's setnet site on K-Beach.



Bob Correia has been a commercial fisherman for 33 seasons. In the winter, he builds and repairs boats out of his Kasilof shop. Bob has lived on the peninsula for 35 years.

WHAT'S GOING ON WITH KWF

This has been a busy winter for us. Here's a little more about what we've been up to.

American Heritage Rivers Initiative: In November, KWF invited Deborah Williams, special assistant to the Secretary of the Interior for Alaska, to talk and answer questions about the American Heritage Rivers Initiative. Roughly 50 people attended the meeting, expressing a variety of opinions. The Borough Assembly decided not to include the Kenai River as a candidate for the federal program this year due to a lack of community support.

Forest Service Meeting: KWF helped organize a meeting with the Forest Service on Dec. 1 to talk about changes to the Chugach National Forest management plan. Roughly 15 people attended the forum. We should all pay attention for future meetings. Remember, what happens to the forest in the Kenai Mountains will have a direct impact on the entire Kenai River.

Water Quality Monitoring Program: KWF volunteers have started keeping an eye on the health of the Kenai River. With the help of the Department of Environmental Conservation, these folks are measuring pH levels, dissolved oxygen, water temperature and other factors important to water quality at 8 sites along the river. This summer, Fish and Game will help coordinate efforts to study bugs on the Kenai's tributaries in an effort to evaluate habitat. Training begins this spring. More volunteers will be needed. Contact Robert Ruffner at 260-5449.

Kenai River Festival: Pending approval of our tax-exempt status, KWF will host the Kenai River Festival this year. In the past, ReGroup has sponsored the June event, which includes music, crafts, food, children's activities and information about the Kenai River. We're looking forward to continuing the festival's great tradition.

Newsletter: This is the second issue of CURRENTS. The purpose of the newsletter is two-fold. We want to keep you up to date on KWF activities as well as offer information about the watershed in a fun, informative style. Let us know how we're doing.

FORGET

Forget Me Not is a regular feature that focuses on lesser-known plants and animals of the Kenai watershed.

M
E
N
O
T



Species: Common Merganser

Description: Male has green head and white breast. Female has brown, crested head and white breast.

Range: Common throughout the Northern Hemisphere

Diet: Eats mostly small fish such as young salmon and Dolly Varden.

Breeding Habits: Usually nests in hollow trees. Lays between 6 and 18 eggs.

Predators: Glaucous-winged gulls attack young. Mink and large fish will also sometimes feed on juvenile ducks.

Special feature: Long, slender bills that are serrated — look like teeth — to help them catch fish.

“Fly south,” Mother Nature cries in the fall. It’s a strong warning for most ducks. Not the Common Merganser. Ignoring nature’s call, this Kenai River waterfowl hangs around as long as there’s open water on the river. Even when the river freezes, the merganser never strays far from home.

Most go to Kachemak Bay or Resurrection Bay to find food while ice covers the Kenai. A few may go as far as Prince William Sound. But there’s no place like home for the merganser. Through the dead of winter, these birds make frequent night flights over the Kenai, searching for open water, says bird expert Boyd Shaffer. If they find it, they’ll be on the river when the sun rises, swimming in the current and diving for small fish.

CURRENT EVENTS

Changes Ahead For Kenai River Center

With the help of a \$1.75 million grant from the state, the Kenai River Center will have a facelift and new location. For the past couple years, the center has been operating out of a rented building on the Spur Highway in Soldotna. A citizens’ committee, headed by former Borough Mayor Don Gilman, is tackling questions about where the new building should be located and what function it should serve. The committee will take its recommendations to the Borough Assembly.

Comments Sought On Sterling Bridge

A bridge that would cross the Kenai River and link the communities of Sterling and Funny River is once again being considered by the state. An environmental impact statement is now done, and the Alaska Department of Transportation is seeking public input. The complete environmental report can be found at the Kenai and Soldotna public libraries. Comments must be received by March 3.

We Have A Name

In case you didn’t notice, our newsletter now has a name — CURRENTS. In our first issue, we asked readers to help us in our search for a title. Nine suggestions were made, including: The Source, Watershed Watch, and Erosion Waterworks. Several people came up with “Currents,” and Dave Jones was randomly selected as the winner of a framed Kenai River poster. Congratulations Dave.

KENAI CALENDAR

Feb. 19: KWF party

Feb. 19: KRSMA Board meeting

Feb. 26: Annual meeting of the newly organized Trout Unlimited. Call Joe Skrha at 262-6100 for more information.

March 3: Comments due to DOT on Funny River bridge project.



Fish and Game biologists place radio tags in Dolly Varden in Cooper Creek last summer. The radio tags allow the biologists to track the fish and study their habits. (Picture courtesy of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game).

FUTURE OF COOPER CREEK DAM AT STAKE

For more than 40 years, Cooper Creek Dam has produced cheap electricity for Southcentral Alaska. But the dam, located on Cooper Lake in the Kenai Mountains above Cooper Landing, has had a price. Rainbow trout no longer spawn in the creek, and runs of sockeye and king salmon are nearly gone.

Chugach Electric's permit to run the dam will soon be up for review, and some sport fishers are calling for changes that they think will help restore the damaged fisheries.

The dam was built by Chugach Electric in the 1950s and produces enough electricity to power Seward's needs. To make the electricity, the outlet of Cooper Lake was blocked off and the water diverted. Without any warm lake water entering into Cooper Creek, the temperature of the creek has decreased 8.5 degrees, making spawning much more difficult.

Chugach Electric's 50-year permit for the dam will be reviewed in 2007. The company must have all its paperwork in by 2002. In anticipation of that review, U.S. Forest Service hydrologist Dave Blanchet is trying to get interested parties to come to an agreement on the future of the dam. The first informational meeting was held Jan. 22. Dates have not yet been set for additional meetings.

If you have questions or comments about KWF we'd love to hear from you. Stop by and see our office sometime, too. We're located on the second floor in the Blazy Mall in Soldotna.

ADDRESS: P.O. Box 2937, Soldotna, Ak 99669

PHONE #: 260-5449 FAX #: 260-5412

WEB PAGE: <http://www.kenaiwatershed.org>

E-MAIL: robert@kenaiwatershed.org

The Kenai Watershed Forum
P.O. Box 2937
Soldotna, AK 99669-2937

Standard A Mail
US Postage
PAID
Soldotna, AK
Permit NO. 23