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USDA FOREST SERVICE

# Kenai Critter Newsletter

## Notes From the Field

Greetings from the Wildlife Crew at the Seward Ranger District of the Chugach National Forest! Another field season has come and gone and now the snow is covering the mountains. We worked on many exciting projects this year! In the spring, we checked many of your owl boxes, and found some baby saw-whet and boreal owls! In the summer, we collected brown bear hair samples at the Russian River to get DNA to assist in telling us how many bears use the area. We also mapped vegetation using aerial photography with the University of Alaska in the Placer Valley. The data will be used in research that will estimate the amount of moose an area could support based on the amount of food available. We also trapped and radio collared wolverines this winter with Alaska Department of Fish and Game, to get a better understanding of their movements and den sites.

## Adopt-an-Owl

The Seward Ranger District hosts the Adopt–an–Owl–Box Program. This is part of the national program, *The Birdhouse Network* hosted by the Cornell University. The Forest Service and many volunteers like you have been participating for over a decade now by putting up owl boxes along the trails and on private land. Together, we have built, installed, maintained, and monitored these boxes since 1997. The boxes are meant to resemble an old woodpecker cavity and have a small circular opening for the owls to get in and out of. We supply fresh wood chips for nesting material. More often than not, the boxes remain empty from year to year, or have a squirrel as a winter occupant. But the occasional surprise of owlets huddled together in a bundle of fluff makes it all worth while!

*Northern Saw-whet owlets. Picture Taken by Michelle Dragoo*

The owl boxes are designed to attract the Northern Saw-whet and Boreal Owls. Both species are rather small. The Northern Saw-whet can grow up to 8 inches tall and weighs as much as 4 oz. The Boreal Owl is only slightly bigger. The Northern Saw-whet owl is very common in North America and the Kenai Peninsula is its most northern range. The Boreal owl has a smaller range but will travel further-north. In both species the male finds a suitable nest site, in a tree cavity or one of our nest boxes in late winter/early spring and sings to attract a female. Once the female has laid her eggs, she incubates them for 3 to 4 weeks. After the owlets hatch, the young fledge in 4 to 5 weeks. This year we checked 51 boxes in the Seward, Moose Pass, and Hope and found six boxes occupied by owls. Four of these owl boxes had three to four Northern Saw-whet owlets in them. Often ,the owlets could not stand upright and would be laying on their side. The other two boxes were no more than a hundred feet apart from each other. The first had a male eating a mouse, though it

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Inside this issue:



**Special points of interest:**

- *Owl results are in!*
- *Bird flights*
- *History of a hunter*
- *Dining then denning*

# Wolverines in Action

Wolverines are apart of the weasel family (Mustelidae) and are fierce in nature. They often scavenge for dead carcasses of moose, sheep, seals, etc. They will often hunt by creating an ambush. Wolverines will hunt for small rodents, but can prey on animals 5 times their size, for example caribou. These creatures live in remote mountains, boreal forests, and tundra. Their territories are very large and population occur in such low numbers that it is hard to see one and even harder to study them.

Much is still unknown about this species. Wolverine territories generally do not overlap, though male wolverines will partially overlap on the territories of the female wolverine. Their range is quite large. A wolverine can move fast and up to 15 miles a day. The females will build a snow cave to den up in the winter and give birth to young. The young are born between January and April and are protected from all predators at all costs by the mother. The juvenile wolverines need only one summer with their parent to learn everything that they need to survive. Come fall, the young wolverines will be ready for life on their own.

*Wolverine. Picture taken by sensor camera*

It has been documented that only the top carnivores will occasionally stand up to the wolverine, such as wolves, large bears, and mountain lions, otherwise most animals will retreat from the wolverine.

This past winter, the Forest Service and Alaska Department of Fish and Game collaborated on a project to study this elusive animal. Many Forest Service and AD F&G employees and several volunteers worked together on this project for three months. Approximately 10 traps were set up in the Moose Pass/Cooper Landing region. These traps were checked daily. Moose remains were generally used for bait.

Two wolverines were caught by trap and three were caught from using helicopters and darting the animal from the air. Once a wolverine was caught, a GPS tracking collar was fitted and data was collected on this animal. The collars are programmed to take a GPS location every 30 minutes and to fall off in 4 to 5 months. The data is stored in the collar until it has been collected. This is a very effective and accurate way of getting a detailed tracking report for the animal that is collared. We hope to learn more about their movement and denning areas

More research is planned for this up and coming winter to study these elusive creatures.

# Vantastic Van reaching the Public

Have you seen the white Forest Service van parked at Tern Lake? This van is the Seward Ranger District's "Vantastic" Mobile Wildlife Interpretive Van. The Forest Service funds the Vantastic or Seward Nature Watch-Program every summer as an outreach to the local communities and visitors to the Kenai Peninsula. The Vantastic van sets up from Thursday to Monday at Tern Lake, at the intersection of the Sterling and Seward Highway. The lake offers a beautiful landscape with many great wildlife viewing opportunities.

*Tern Lake. Picture taken by Carolyn Seramur*

This past summer, the Vantastic Interpreter Carolyn Seramur displayed hides, skulls, antlers, and horns of animals that can be seen at Tern Lake or on the Chugach National Forest. Spotting scopes that were set up, aided visitors to view the resident Common Loon family, mountain goats, bears, artic terns , gulls, ducks and other wildlife. Carolyn helped people who are new to the Alaskan environment by showing them where to look for certain animals and shared information about the Alaskan wildlife.

The Vantastic Program also took part in local events such as National Kid's Fishing Day, Environmental Awareness Days, and Bird Academy, Seward 4th of July Parade, Hope Wagon Wheel Run, and Chugach Discovery Days Vantastic Interpreters hosted Saturday Evening Campfire programs at Trail River and Quartz Creek Campgrounds. Programs included were: Lichenology, Outdoor Fun for the Long Haul, Hooting Silent Flyers, Get to know Brown and Black, and Little Invertebrate Flyers.

In 2009, a second Vantastic Van will be out and about, teaching folks about wildlife viewing and identification.

For anymore information you can contact Karen Kromery at kkromrey@fs.fed.us or Mary Ann Benoit at mbenoit@fs.fed.us.

*Vantastic Program at Tern Lake.*

# Owl Boxes

*Male N. Saw-whet owl. Picture Taken by Amy*

flew off as we got near, and the second had a female sitting on at least seven marbled-sized eggs.

This was likely a pair, as each parent helps with the brood, and commonly the male will hunt for both himself and the female who sits on the eggs. When we see the owlets we can be sure that the parent is not far away and try to keep our activity as limited as possible.

After we check the boxes, we submit the data into the Cornell website where our information becomes part of the national database. For more information you can visit the Cornell Birdhouse Website at http://watch.birds.cornell.edu/nest/home/index. To join our network and adopt an owl box of your own, you can contact Mary Ann Benoit at mbenoit@fs.fed.us.

*Female N. Saw-whet Owl with her brood. Picture taken by Amy Birt-*

# Bear Hair Snare

This summer, in coordination with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the University of Alaska, we collected brown bear hair for DNA analysis at the Russian River near Cooper Landing. The Russian River has long been famed for its high abundance of salmon . Each season, thousands of anglers flock to the area to take part in this fishing extravaganza, as well as many brown and black Bears. All of these different components add complexities to regulating and managing the river for people and wildlife.

Bear hair caught in barbwire. Picture taken by Michelle Dragoo

Once a week, Forest Service employees went out to the Russian River in search for bear hair. On trees that bears naturally stop to "scratch their backs" , we wrapped barbed wire around the trunk to catch hair. We collected hair from these rub trees and from chance findings on rose bushes and other vegetation. The DNA from these hair samples will help identify how many individual bears use the Russian River.

We checked over 25 sites for hair, which was then transported to the University of Alaska for analysis.

DNA Analysis will identify one bear from another, and give us an idea how many bears use the Russian River in the summer. Simply looking at appearance and markings is not enough to distinguish bears apart, as bears can look very similar, and their appearance changes as they age.

This information, will help determine management of humans and bears at the Russian River in the future.

*Looking for bear hair. Picture taken by Shannon Danahoe*

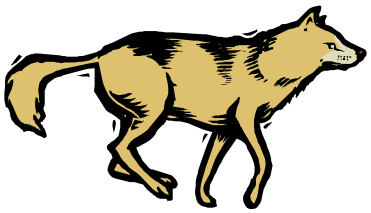
# Wolves

Wolves are interesting animals because of their social behavior. They are one of the top carnivores in Alaska, along with brown and black bears. They prey upon many of the same animal species such as moose and caribou. The techniques that wolves use to bring down their prey are one of the things that set them apart from bears. Bears tend to be more solitary while wolves hunt in packs and benefit from the cooperation of the group.

Alaska holds the largest wolf population in the United States. Wolves are very adaptable and can be abundant where there are large quantities of food for them. If population numbers are low, wolves can bounce back by having more pups, that is if there is a substantial food source.

Pack size for wolves generally ranges between 2 to 12 animals, although exceptions of 20 to 30 animals per pack can occur. A pack's territory can extend to a thousand square miles but often averages around 600 square miles. At times, wolf territories can over lap.

Wolves maintain a social dominance within the pack. There is always one alpha female and male in the pack. Pups are born in April through May and will generally stay with the pack for that summer. Depending on the pack size and the social construction, sometimes the pups will stay with the pack, though more often than not, the young wolf will be pushed away to find another pack or territory to roam.



**Wolf Facts**

- Fighting in packs is not common and a dominance is maintained by ritualized behavior.
- Their main source of food is from caribou and moose, though Dall sheep, mountain goats and many rodents are food sources.
- A wolf can dig into the snow and densely packed drifts up to 8 to 10 feet in search for frozen meals.
- A male wolf can weigh up to 145 lbs.
- Wolves generally only live up to 8 years but can live as much as 13 years in the wild.
- All members of the pack take part in caring for the young
- The wolf's sense of smell is at least 100 time greater than that of a human
- Wolves can generally travel up to 30 miles in one day in the winter
- A wolf's tail is used to keep its face warm.
- Sometimes the beta male wolf will mate with the alpha female wolf

**For more information you can visit:**

http://www.adfg.state.ak.us/pubs/notebook/furbear/wolf.php

http://www.alaskawolves.org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*"Caring for the land and serving people."*


**We're on the web!**
**http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/chugach/seward/wildlife/index.htm**


**Created by Amy Birtwistle and Mary Ann Benoit**


Harmony with land is like harmony with a friend; you cannot cherish his right hand and chop off his left.

*~Aldo Leopold*