

## Special Section

### Kenai Peninsula's Stream Watch Program

*Fishers take an active role in protecting habitat and educating fellow anglers*

by Dave Atcheson



Above: Volunteers dismantled this fence that was blocking Soldotna Creek. Right: The hard work of the volunteers is inspiring.

While many of our group normally take to the stream to wet a line and tangle with one the Kenai's legendary salmon or huge native trout, today we have gathered for perhaps a more noble effort, to help protect the fishery we love. Our main goal is to dismantle a large steel fence that has fallen into disrepair and now blocks Soldotna Creek, inhibiting fish passage on this important Kenai River tributary. "While most of us would rather be out fishing," says Bruce King a retired biologist and avid angler, "it definitely feels good to be out here doing something like this."

This is only one of the many projects spearheaded by the Kenai Peninsula's unique Stream Watch Program, which began in 1994 as a way to assist the Chugach National Forest in protecting habitat and educating the public on the Russian and upper Kenai River. Today, it is a program that has evolved into a partnership of various public and private entities, with the bulk of the daily administrative duties handled by the Chugach National Forest and the Kenai Watershed Forum. Today's "Stewardship Work Day" is sponsored by Trout Unlimited Alaska and has brought a dozen of us together for a morning of hard yet gratifying work.

"This is the perfect program for us to be involved in," says Nellie Williams, Special Projects Coordinator for TU. "It completely goes along with our mission of protecting cold water fisheries, and it's easy to get our members, who are fishermen, excited about these types of projects."

Bobbie Jo Skibo, a ranger with the U.S. Forest Service who oversees the program, agrees, and says it has been gratifying to see a growing interest in Stream Watch. "In 2011, we formally expanded from just the Russian River to other popular sites along the Kenai River," she reports, "and now we are even on the Kasilof." This broadened effort, she says, gives people throughout the region the opportunity to participate closer to their home

waters while expanding the good work that the organization is known for.

Volunteers regularly interact with anglers from around the world as they spend a part of their day at various fishing hot spots, such as Soldotna's Centennial Park and Swiftwater Park, and in Sterling at Bing's Landing and the Izaak Walton Recreation Area, a well-known public campsite where the calm water of the Moose River meets and intermingles the swift currents of the mighty Kenai, creating a natural holding area for both red and, later in the season, silver salmon.

While the larger habitat protection and restoration projects such as "Stewardship Work Days," are a big part of the program, most Stream Watch volunteers are heading out to these popular sites to participate as river "Ambassadors." Their duties include maintaining habitat fencing and signage, while walking the trails and discussing with visitors important issues such as bear safety, fish waste management and regulation changes. While working to keep the river clean and keep habitat safeguards intact, their mission is also to help educate the general public, so we might all become better stewards of these great rivers and maintain for future generations these important fisheries resources.

It's a perfect fit for Henry Anderson, a retired school teacher and truly diehard angler, who at Stream Watch's early-May organizational meeting reported he had already logged 55 days of fishing. Henry has been a volunteer for five years and always prefers taking to his ambassador duties with rod in hand. "It gives me an immediate connection with people, especially fishermen," he says. "Most of us are always looking to talk a little bit about fishing and it's a great way to break the ice with folks along the river." All in all, Anderson maintains his Stream Watch experience has been an excellent one. He regularly walks the Russian River