



Volume 9, Issue 1

Fall/Winter 2013

**Special points of interest:**

- Palmer Hay Flats is under assault by off-trail ATVs
- WINTER FAMILY TRAILS DAY - FEBR. 15!
- Come join us for a day of ice-skating, skiing & fun!

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- Remember us when you register for your PFD

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**New Reflections Lake Pavilion Shelter**

by Kris Abshire

One of our most gratifying projects this past year was finally completed at popular Reflections Lake. After three years of partnering, planning, fundraising and construction, the new Education/Gathering Pavilion was officially celebrated on October 12<sup>th</sup>.

This covered shelter will further enhance the visitor and school education experience on the Refuge. Educational field trips for local schools, our annual Winter Family Fun Day, family picnics and other gatherings will be served year round by this wonderful community project.

A wide spectrum of community support and assistance brought this vision to reality: Boy Scouts of America Troop 300, Alaska Job Corps, Rotary District 5010 which includes the Susitna, Wasilla Noon, Wasilla Sunrise, Eagle River and Palmer Rotary Clubs, Lowes Corporation, Alaska Department of Fish

& Game and Mat-Su Schools Foundation.

From the beginning, APH has been a community collaborative organization.

This wonderful project represents the best of what can be accomplished when citizens come together for the benefit of all. We are fortunate and grateful for such tremendous community partners.



Kris Abshire, Terri Reynolds-Rogers, Catherine Inman, Monica Gilpin, Nathaniel Emery, Cherie LeBlanc-Shue, Sue Foley, Tyler Meyer, Joe Meehan, Mark Caruthers (obscured), Kevin Hall, Linda Jo Klapperich, Paul Morley



Kris Abshire speaking before the participants of the October 10 Education Pavilion ribbon-cutting ceremony - photo credits Bill Wood, APH

**Message From the Founders** by Kris Abshire

Over 50 years ago, wise Alaskans and their elected legislators created a process to set aside certain special places across Alaska, called Refuges, Wildlife Sanctuaries and Critical Habitat Areas, with the express purpose of protecting and preserving wildlife habitat. In 1975, Palmer Hay Flats State Game

Refuge became one of those special places. In addition to its bountiful fish and wildlife habitat, the Refuge is home to historic first peoples Den'aina settlement, the Iditarod Historical Trail, a rich colony farming history and exists as a magnificent gem in the necklace of the Pacific Flyway. For these

reasons and more, this Refuge is very special to Alaskans and visitors alike.

Since the time of its designation as a State Game Refuge, Palmer Hay Flats has been through great trials and tribulations: decades of abuse and disrespect by those with little regard for our public lands and

(continued page 4)

## Cottonwood Creek Trail Hardening, August 2013

by Bill Wood, Board of Directors

2013 was an important year for improvements at the Cottonwood Creek access area to the Palmer Hay Flats State Game Refuge. Summer saw a new bridge constructed across the Creek, replacing one long needing repair. The new bridge was constructed to accommodate standard sized wheeled/ tracked ATV's ( $\leq 1000$  lbs.).

Use of ATV's on established trails is allowed by Department of Fish and Game on the Refuge from November 9th through March 31st, during periods of sufficient ground freezing and snow cover to protect wetland soil conditions. In addition, ATV's may be used August 15th and November 15th in a corridor in the northwestern refuge management area.

A foot trail on the south side of the bridge provided an alignment to transition the ATV traffic towards other established ATV trail corridors lying to the east providing access to areas along the north bank of the Palmer Slough. A trail distance of about 400' needed hardening for ATV traffic to reach previously installed Geoblock® trail material. Geoblock® is a plastic waffle like structure, in this case about 2" tall and 6.5' wide, laid end-to-end and secured to the ground surface. This material pattern serves to provide a more supportive surface for



Long time Refuge user Julie Burt walks the trail line along the freshly placed Geo-block® underlayment.



Part of the Soggy Bottom Trail Crew at the end of the days hardened trail install. See text for the full list of Volunteers.

ATV travel over ground subject to erosion and/ or excessive wetness. Wetlands of the Refuge are highly susceptible to damage from ATV traffic, where heels/tires function like circular saw blades, cutting through surface vegetation and underlying saturated glacial silt soils. This creates wallowing ruts and grooves down which surface water may pond, channel and flow. Geo-block® can provide a hardened surface wheels do not cut through.

A great citizen volunteer group turned out for the installation according to the Mat-Su Frontiersman who posted this August 10th article ([http://www.frontiersman.com/valley\\_life/rain-chill-doesn-t-douse-spirits-at-palmer-hay-flats/article\\_f6f181c4-023f-11e3-8d70-0019bb2963f4.html?mode=story](http://www.frontiersman.com/valley_life/rain-chill-doesn-t-douse-spirits-at-palmer-hay-flats/article_f6f181c4-023f-11e3-8d70-0019bb2963f4.html?mode=story)) and quoted Joe Meehan from AK Dept. of Fish and Game, "At a cost of about \$100,000 a mile, the small part of trail volunteers installed Saturday comes to nearly \$7,100, paid for through state capital projects money from the Alaska Legislature and matching federal grant funds."

Check out the article at the Frontiersman web site, including the photos and video/ audio recording links there also. Greg Johnson reporter for the Frontiersman characterized the weather and citizen volunteer crew, "Like the 15 hardy volunteers who spent a wet Saturday at the Palmer Hay Flats State Game Refuge building nearly 400 feet of pedestrian and ATV trail. The men and women didn't mind the chill and constant drizzle as they connected hundreds of pieces of Geoblock® sections together to form a wide, flat surface that will connect a new Cottonwood Creek

bridge to existing trail within the refuge." About 275', it actually took two rounds for the full 400' install as the first day's crew ran out of material. People came and went during the day and it was a little hard to get everyone's name and affiliation but all were appreciated by Joe Meehan and Refuge Manager, Doug Hill, of ADF&G. Here's a partial list of individuals and groups (please forgive if we miss someone) Individuals - Joe Meehan, Doug Hill, Mark Bir, Steve Schaffer, Margaret Pickard, Julie Burt, Corrine Wiseman, Rick Ellis, Terry Holm, Michael Cauley, Bill Wood, Kris Abshire, Jennifer Heckler, Allison Thuensissen, Bill Brown, Doug Shepard, Jason Powell, Herman Griese. Organizations - Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Alaska Frontier Trappers Association, Bass Pro Shop, Alaskans For Palmer Hay Flats, Alaska Waterfowl Association, SAGA, Susitna Adventure Charters.

Indeed, due to the dynamic way Geoblock® functions, a pumping action from repeated up-and-down flexing as vehicles track over undulating and/or even slightly sloping ground surfaces displaces soil, vegetation and organic material. This material moves off the trail site with surface water flows regardless of whether the waters origins are tidal, precipitation related or due to existing saturated soil conditions. This condition has occurred on existing Geoblock® hardened sections of the trail in the Cottonwood Creek area. You can feel the hardened trail section beneath the wheels of the ATV's, but in some sections the Geoblock® is at least two-feet below the surface water.

Vegetation, soil and organic material were once two feet thicker in these areas. When this condition is coupled to adjacent tidal gut encroachment there is an accelerated threat to hundreds or thousands of existing acres of interconnected shallow surface water pools/ ponds, nesting, rearing and feeding habitat. A significant drainage potential exists. These tidal guts are pointed towards and into extremely important wetland and waterfowl/ shorebird habitat. Trail wallowing/deepening and widening is accelerating head-cutting of the natural tidal guts march towards these critical habitat areas. If/when this occurs, human users of these areas will also lose their lifestyle and recreational pursuits and enjoyment. A video shot at this location clearly depicts the events occurring this fall before freeze up; <http://youtu.be/1X53hRNEqyl> .

It is difficult to predict, but the head-cutting from the tidal gut could completely traverse the 60'-75' of over-widened trail within a short period of time (1-2 years, depending on climatic conditions). Once the head cut

reaches the east side of the trail area, it will gnaw through a small berm which is currently stabilizing the hydrology and surface water of a thousand or more acres of wetlands and shallow water areas to the east. Eventually the gut will wend its way through these wetlands, draining their water, removing the soil saturation and drying out the ecosystem. The associated landscape will become less attractive and useful for the Refuge's premier wetland waterfowl and shorebird species. And this wildlife will be forced to move to find other conditions suitable for their needs. The attending loss of recreational activity and enjoyment will impact all human user classes and wildlife equally.

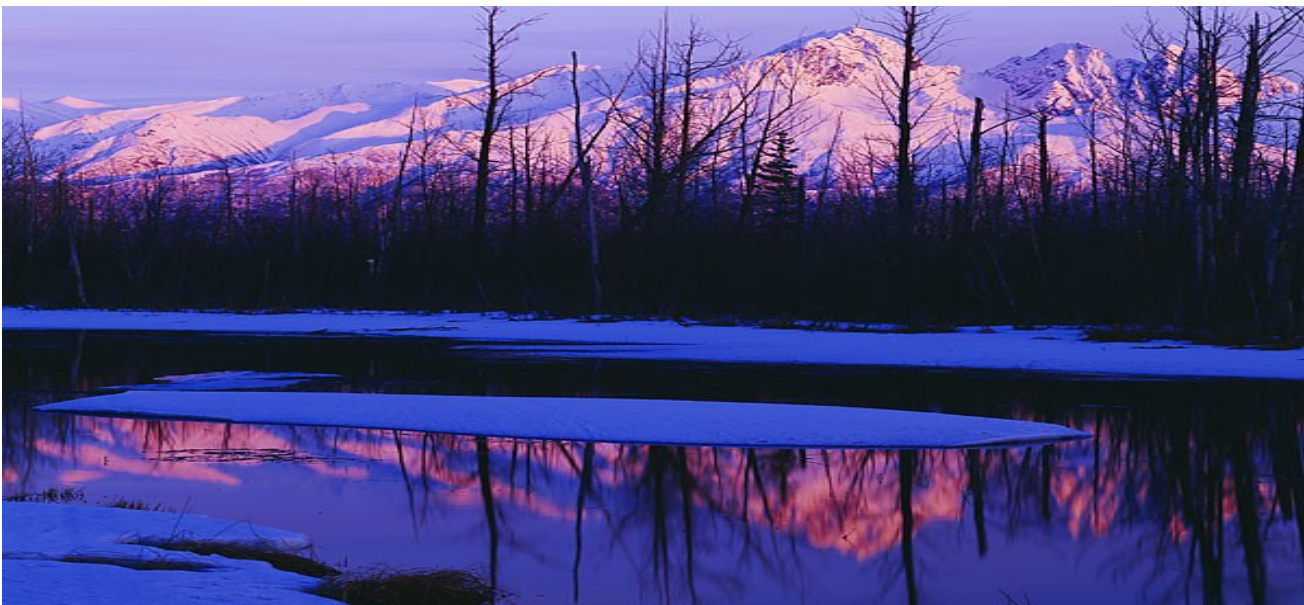
**APH finds this situation extremely alarming** and requests immediate attention and address of the conditions. Though the tidal gutting processes are natural and changes will come to the Refuge landscape from them eventually, we believe time can possibly be gained by implementing both management and structural fixes. There are several things which can be done, but first some baseline contour surveys



An area of trail widening by ATV's is causing accelerated water flows into an encroaching tidal gut head cut. The tidal gut is in the center left of the photo. The concentrated flows have created a plunge pool >3'-4' deep. Water runs down the ATV trail from both directions, concentrating at this location producing velocities which are accelerating head-cutting now about to cross the trail.

and hydrologic evaluations need to be conducted. We encourage our members and readers to get engaged in this process by contacting Joe Meehan (907 267-2281) and Doug Hill (907 861-2112) at ADF&G, and making your concerns known up the management food chain at ADF&G (Randy Bates, Habitat Division Director; 907 465-3176).

***There's no time to lose.***



Fred Hirschman©

## Introducing Our Executive Director: *Terri Reynolds-Rogers*



We moved to Alaska in Oct. 2004 from the American southwest. Before that I did research for the Univ of Papua New Guinea (PNG) as a marine biology major. I've tramped salt marshes in Papua New Guinea, trapped and categorized marine fishes, measured growth ridges on massive clams and evaded Wobbegong sharks on the Great Barrier coral reefs. I love to garden here and I keep horses for fun. I've been involved as a wildlife rehabilitation specialist, dog-training enthusiast and biology instructor in the Natural Sciences Department at Matsu College. And, have a NOAA 100' scuba cert., and 52 skydives. Whew ! This fall though I was privileged to join the dedicated folks at APH.

I have to think all that stuff I've done, has prepared me in many ways to work with such a splendid group as APH, and for such an important calling; protecting and preserving the ecologic integrity of the estuary and freshwater marshes with its patchwork of willow, cottonwood, ratty spruce and river birch of the Palmer Hay Flats State Game Refuge. How special this public land, all for the recreational and educational enjoyment of the public.

In April we relocated to our current location on the Palmer-Wasilla Highway. We hope you'll stop by and get acquainted. We want to hear from you and your thoughts on the Hayflats. We have so much going on (see What's Cooking ?), but are always interested in your ideas. I encourage you to get involved and celebrate the Refuge treasurer that is the Palmer Hay Flats State Game Refuge.

~ *Terri Reynolds-Rogers*

### Message From the Founders continued

their bounty of opportunities provided to visitors and Alaskans of all ages, conditions and pursuits of interest; neglect by responsible state agency and elected officials for embracing the Refuges expected public purpose and responsibility, by either underfunding or failure to fund resource maintenance, protection and enhancement needs.. These past and new current threats to the integrity of the very resources, politicians and state wildlife agency management officials have sworn to protect, must cue us to be ever vigilant and responsive for the sake of the resource treasures the Refuge contains and represents.

Eight years ago the first passionate Mat-Su Valley citizens came together and eventually formed the Alaskans for Palmer Hay Flats organization (a 501.c.3 non-profit). A great period of awareness and support has been

recognized by those who would respectfully use and enjoy the Refuge's incredible bounty. Remediation of toxic materials and sites coupled with several public use enhancement and wetland protection projects have been accomplished by like-minded partners who value the Refuge. Though we would prefer turning the calendar page to reveal only a bright new future for this very special Refuge and the community, we are pragmatically reminded of the new and remaining challenges and threats pointed at the Hay Flats Refuge today. We respectfully invite you to visit the Refuge now, to see the results of that hard-earned labor provided by dedicated citizens who recognized the intrinsic values provided by the unique opportunities this refuge provides. However, as time passes, it will be important not only to monitor

the protection and conservation of these lands, but to establish ongoing education and community connections through enriching school and adult programs on site. We have done so much, and come so far, yet there is and always will be a great need and opportunity to learn from this place which has so much to offer. So, as another year comes to a close, please consider supporting APH in this challenging, transitional time, as we move toward the true and sustaining future of Palmer Hay Flats, by making a tax deductible contribution, and also, please think about offering what time and talents you and your family may give. This is an important and rewarding mission which will enrich our lives and our children's lives immeasurably, but only if we support it.

Best Regards,

*Kate Ashere*

## What's Cooking ?

In November, we signed contracts to receive \$143,037 from the ADOT National Scenic Byways program for the Knik River Interpretive/Wildlife Viewing Tower, part of the Reflections Lake Interpretive Trail Project. APH will manage this project, in collaboration with Alaska Ironworkers Local 751, the United Sportsmen Alliance, Kiewit Construction, and BBFM Engineering and other community organizations and volunteers. We're all working for this great project: a 30-foot tall, rectangular steel structure, two-platform viewing platform.

We continue to work on grant-writing opportunities and solicit funding to help complete our work at Reflections Lake Interpretive Trail project.

We're very pleased to tell you about our developing education program. We have several education actions engaged.

In collaboration with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and the Matsu Schools Foundation, we're kicking off the new year with monthly Wildlife Wednesdays starting January 29<sup>th</sup>, joined by the complementary program Wildlife Weekends starting in April. We have an exciting group of educators, wildlife biologists, scientists and other experts eager to share their interests this coming year as part of this free public conservation education program.

APH will again coordinate the annual elementary schools education day. Check with us to see how to get your school enrolled for hosting an event.

This year we are working with our friends at Machetanz and Snowshoe Elementary schools; and in collaboration with the State Department of Fish and Game, to present monthly programs on a variety of subjects.

Be sure to join us for the Winter Family Trails Day February 15 at Reflections Lake.

Our very best wishes to your health and cheer and a safe and Happy 2014 New Year !!



Fred Hirschman©

**From all of us at APH:**

**“Merry Christmas and a Happy**



## SIGN ME UP FOR MEMBERSHIP TO SUPPORT PALMER HAY FLATS

Fledgling (12 & under)	FREE
Student	\$15
Individual Adult	\$20
Family	\$30
Sustaining Member	\$100
Sponsor	\$250
Patron	\$500
Steward	\$1,000
Benefactor	\$2,000
Other	_____
Science Ed Building fund	_____

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) \_\_\_\_\_

*"Cherish the Land No One Owns"*

*~ Li Po, 650 B.C.*

Alaskans for Palmer Hay Flats  
 Make Checks Payable and send to: 4900 E Palmer-Wasilla Hwy, Ste. 106  
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Join on-line at: [www.palmerhayflats.org](http://www.palmerhayflats.org)

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## A Message from our President



Hello all, it is a pleasure to write a few words, extending the best wishes of the Alaskans for Palmer Hay Flats Board of Directors. We would like to share good wishes, news and opportunities.

One of the great gifts we can have is good health. As we all know, regular exercise is part of a healthy lifestyle. We hope you will go to Reflections Lake, and give yourself the gift of a walk around the mile loop trail, or bring skis or snowshoes and explore the hay flats. It's a beautiful way to enjoy our winters. The staff, Board, our partners at the State of Alaska and the incredible funders and volunteers of APH have worked hard to make this area accessible for everyone.

As an organization, we have some significant accomplishments, including helping improve parking areas, a new Pavilion and the Reflections Lake loop trail. Beyond that, APH has helped introduce many to the beauty in their backyards, the Palmer Hay Flats State Game Refuge.

Now, its time to think about the next steps for the organization. Our goal is to promote stewardship, through environmental education. We need more help, new skills and fresh eyes to help move us forward. In short, APH needs you. We have several openings on the Board of Directors, and welcome volunteers for Winter Family Fun Day in February. If you are interested, please contact Terri Reynolds-Rogers, APH Executive Director at (907) 357-8711, email [director@palmerhayflats.org](mailto:director@palmerhayflats.org).

I hope to see you at Winter Family fun day. Until then, be safe, warm and enjoy the holidays.

*~ Michelle Davis*



*Bill Wood, 2012*