



Eagle River Nature Center News

No. 62 Member Newsletter ~ February 2016 ~ Connecting People with Nature Since 1996

PARKING CONCERNS AT THE NATURE CENTER

by Pete Panarese

I really enjoy the Eagle River Nature Center and the Chugach State Park (CSP) wild lands to the east. On almost every visit something extraordinary happens. Last October, my wife and I drove to the Nature Center to look for wildlife. A short distance down the trail, the vista opens up to a majestic view of the surrounding mountains and beaver built wetlands adjacent to a salmon spawning stream. Much to our good fortune, a brown bear was at the far end of an open area going in and out of view chasing fish. We quickly moved to the safety of a viewing deck to get a better look using our binoculars. Other visitors were also on the deck but hadn't spotted the bear. They were elated and thankful when we pointed it out to them and gladly shared our binoculars.

Eventually, the bear came so close to the viewing deck that binoculars were no longer necessary. It was exciting to see the bear and to share the experience with others. Although initially fearful of being so close, with a little whispered coaching about bear behavior, they relaxed and enjoyed what they claimed to be the high point of their visit to Alaska.

The Nature Center is run by the Friends of Eagle River Nature Center (Friends). "Friends" is a private, non-profit business that operates the state owned building and surrounding land formerly known as the "Paradise Haven Lodge" under contract with CSP. Besides managing the trails, the Nature Center staff provides numerous programs that educate the public on the natural history and ecology of Eagle River, back country safety, and hiking information. The staff also rents and maintains six public use facilities: four yurts, a cabin, and a group camping area.

Last year, 85,000 people passed by the visitor counter at the Rodak/Crow Pass Trailhead just outside the door of the Nature Center. Many were students guided by a Friends Naturalist on field trips nearby. Others were people heading out to one of the public use facilities. Rental of the yurts and a cabin is one of the most popular programs offered by Friends and generated \$62,000 last year for Center operations.



Parking on Mount Yukla Drive (maintained by the Municipality of Anchorage) on a summer day when the parking lot was full.

Public interest in having a Chugach State Park visitor facility in Eagle River began as early as 1976. Many Alaskans thought such a facility would support local tourism and serve as an economic asset to the community. CSP acquired Paradise Haven Lodge in April 1980 for \$248,700 and converted the bar/restaurant into a visitor center which opened in March 1981.

Beginning with the recession of the 1980's, downward pressure on the budget has been a continuous challenge for CSP. The implementation of a park user fee system helped CSP continue to provide services park wide but other measures were needed to keep facilities open. Private operation of the Eagle River Visitor Center seemed to be a logical choice. A commercial use permit to operate the facility was issued to Friends in 1996. The name of the facility was changed to the Eagle River "Nature" Center. In 2006, CSP solicited competitive bids for a long term contract to operate the Nature Center. Friends won that 20 year contract.

(continued on next page)



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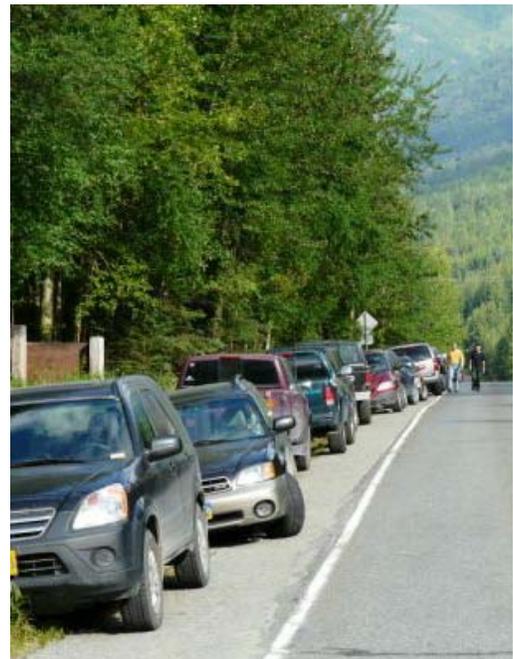
PARKING CONCERNS

(continued from front page)

Under the terms of their contract, Friends is responsible for providing educational programs; construction, rental and management of the public use facilities, i.e. public use cabins and yurts; maintaining the trails and trail facilities within a few miles of the Nature Center; and paying for the cost of those services and the operation of the Nature Center. In 2015, that cost came to \$320,000. The Friends were able to meet that cost by generating revenue from donations, sales of merchandise, rental of cabins and yurts, fund raising, group instruction, and most importantly, membership and parking fees.

The contract also stipulates that any improvements made to the Nature Center by Friends will become property of CSP. While Friends may construct a facility like a viewing deck, it is not financially feasible for them to construct a new Nature Center or ancillary facilities such as an additional parking area without the help of government or private funding.

When CSP purchased Paradise Haven Lodge in the early 1980's, the plan was to make temporary use of the old log cabin and surrounding land. CSP anticipated that the wealth from the oil fields of Prudhoe Bay would provide ample opportunity to fund a "Phase II" and build a new center. As anticipated, its function as a visitor contact and ranger station at a major trailhead has generated visitation levels that have quickly overwhelmed the capacity of the aging cabin and limited parking to accommodate safe public use. When the Nature Center opened in March 1981, a large drawing of "Phase II" was displayed for all to see. It depicted a larger, modern facility with paved parking for 100 vehicles as well as support buildings and improved trail access.



Parking on Eagle River Rd. before road improvements.

While waiting for "Phase II" to develop, CSP has helped Friends with some big-ticket items such as a badly needed new roof and septic system in the late 1990's. That project cost about \$30,000.

In 2006, Senator Lisa Murkowski provided a \$300,000 federal grant to the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation to assist Friends with a public process to determine the best location and design for a new Nature Center. The final product was a vetted conceptual drawing which very much resembled the old "Phase II" design from 1981. The new concept depicts a new facility with a parking area located below the existing center with an access road descending from Eagle River Road. The price tag for a new center, access road, and parking area was estimated to be around \$15,000,000.

In 2014, State Representative Lora Reinbold obtained \$300,000 for a new maintenance facility. This appropriation provided a secure building, complete with water, lights and heating, for equipment storage and trail maintenance activities. This facility also provides the many live-in volunteers that work at the Nature Center with a place to prepare meals, wash clothing, and shower.

3rd Annual Historic Roadhouse Day: A Fun *and* Educational Cultural Event



January 16, 2016: Our Historic Roadhouse Day and members-only 'After Hours Roadhouse' was a huge success thanks to many supporters and volunteers. **Kudos to our donors: Odd Man Rush Brewing** of Eagle River and musicians **Chera Boom, Jerry Bever** and the **Midnight Sun Zombies**. Thank you to our volunteer presenters:

Beth Baker, Lia Slemmons of the Kenai Mountains-Turnagain Arm National Heritage Area; **Rodger Fuson** of the Storyteller's Guild of Anchorage; and the **AllGood Family Band** (*below*). Thank you to **Kaylene and Bill Sullivan** for adding some authenticity to the roadhouse with their horses.



Last but definitely not least, a huge note of thanks to all our marvelous volunteer bakers, cooks and hosts: Colin Tyler Bogucki, Stacy Flagg, Angelika Harder, Sue May, Sheree Newton, Marc Derosier, Gail Sommerville, Candy Stanley, Ruth and Mark St. Amour and Stephanie Whaley. *Photos courtesy of Colin Tyler Bogucki.*

*Asta Spurgis,
Chera Boom, and
Laura Kruger.*





Let Nature be your teacher... and sometimes with a little help from our staff.

Over 3200 students attended field trips in 2015. From pre-schoolers to middle-schoolers the students learned how to identify leaves and animal tracks and much more. A field trip to the Nature Center is a memorable experience for children. Contact Chief Naturalist Ute Olsson for more information at naturalist@ernc.org.



YURT MEMORIES

From the Rapids Camp Yurt log book, Jan. 2016:

The hike in was pretty rough. Packed sleds hoping to pull them down snowy trails. Turns out it was mud and gravel. Made for a LONG and HEAVY two mile hike that ended with lanterns guiding us through the pitch blackness of Alaskan winter nights. But after sled failure, multiple trips to and from, we cooked burgers and sautéed some veggies and potatoes and morale returned to its respected level. After a good night's rest through lots and lots of wind, we woke up to a gorgeous sunrise over the mountains, did some awesome hiking, took lots of photos and filled over 10 rolls of film. Called it an early but very relaxed night so we could wake up early for the trip back out. This we took multiple trips to lower the weight. All of us are looking forward to many, many more trips to these yurts. Thanks for letting us play our speaker and guitars while we all sang along around a very warm fire. A group of young adults had an amazing time out here and I hope whoever reads this finds all the joys we did. – TM, JM, KM, MM, SM

Yurt and Cabin News

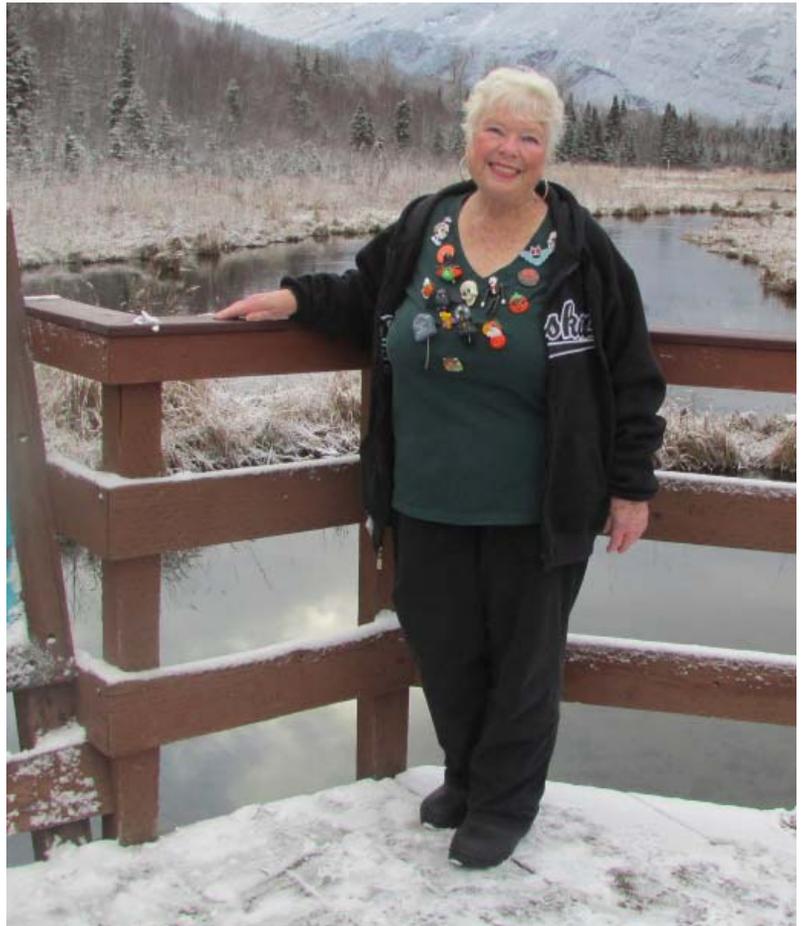
We are no longer providing a keyed entry to the cabin and yurts. People forget their combinations, lose the keys and our locks often freeze up during the winter months. You'll be able to lock the door from the inside, but please remember not to leave valuables inside when you go hiking. As mentioned in our previous newsletter, we've needed to raise the fees by \$5/night. We'll continue to provide firewood, but please do your best not to make huge outdoor campfires. Our volunteers work hard to get it to you to keep you warm and we don't want to cut more trees than we have to. Enjoy and conserve the beauty of the Eagle River Valley forest.

**2015 PICK. CLICK. GIVE DONORS CHOSE FRIENDS OF EAGLE RIVER NATURE CENTER
THANK YOU FOR SUPPORTING OUR ORGANIZATION & OTHERS AROUND THE STATE**

38 Anonymous donors are not listed here.

\$7800 gross contributions. We love the Pick Click Give Program!

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*Volunteer **Gail Sommerville** is all smiles when she helps with special events like our Halloween program. Thank you Gail for your infectious enthusiasm and love for the Nature Center programs.*

*Left, **Polar Bear Sue** (Sue Ellen May) entertains our youngest Halloween program hikers on the viewing deck.*



- | | | |
|-------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
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Communicating Climate Change

By Sue May

From global and national politics to science and education, climate change is in the news. Recent data confirms that the earth's temperature has risen measurably and is projected to continue in that direction. Images from space provided by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) show brown where green used to appear, as well as glaciers and pack ice shrinking. While it is clear that our earth's climate is changing, there is disagreement about causes. It might be difficult to attribute one particular weird weather event – this is where it is important to distinguish between climate and weather. Alaska writer Charles Wohlforth put it this way: "Choosing shorts or long underwear on a particular day is about weather, the ratio of shorts to long underwear in the drawer is about climate."

How does the Nature Center communicate with the public about climate change? In October 2015, Eagle River Nature Center's Chief Naturalist Ute Olsson and Substitute Naturalist Sue May attended a three-day **Earth to Sky** training workshop funded by NASA. This workshop for interpreters focused on communicating the science of climate change. Attendees developed action plans focused on Alaska and the circumpolar boreal ecosystems.

A major scientific study is underway in Alaska: the **Arctic-Boreal Vulnerability Experiment (ABOVE)** is a collaboration by four federal agencies: NASA, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the National Park Service and the U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management. From the ABOVE website: "Climate change in the Arctic and Boreal region is unfolding faster than anywhere else on Earth, resulting in reduced Arctic sea ice, thawing of permafrost soils, decomposition of long-frozen organic matter, widespread changes to lakes, rivers, coastlines, and alterations of ecosystem structure and function."

What does this mean for our corner of the world, the Chugach State Park, and the programs that the Nature Center provides? Visitors will notice that information about climate change science is woven into some of our programming. There is a NASA display inside the Nature Center that explores aspects the global water and carbon cycles. From **global to local**, we may notice impacts on local plants, trees, and animals as subtle changes occur right here in the Eagle River valley.

If the water temperature increases, the red and silver salmon that mill in the water near our viewing decks may suffer. Salmon require cold, fast-flowing streams and rivers to spawn. They may be more vulnerable to disease; for example, higher temperatures have led a harmful salmon parasite to invade the Yukon River. While salmon might currently be on our menu,



Sue May, Spring 2015

climate change is expected to impact major commercial and recreational fishing industries in the coming years.

Moose may move farther north as parasites (such as ticks and mosquitoes) survive in warmer winters. Tens of thousands of these parasites can gather on a single moose to feed on its blood — weakening the animal's immune system and cause death, especially in calves. Snowshoe hares may lose their camouflage advantage if snow cover disappears while their coats are still winter white.

All of these changes are part of a warming world, in which natural processes are accelerated by human activity such as burning fossil fuels. The good news, as local "Climate Enthusiast" John Morris recently stated during his talk at the Nature Center, is that we can moderate our activities to affect the human-caused part. What can we do? We can modify our own energy use, select "green" purchase options, recycle, and advocate for public policy to address local and national behaviors. Check out websites listed below for information and ideas.

Climate Change, What You Can Do; <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/wyed/index.html>
Realclimate.org; <http://www.realclimate.org/>
NASA climate change website: <http://climate.nasa.gov>
Alaska Climate Science Center; <https://csc.alaska.edu/>

Many thanks to this month's
renewing Corporate Sponsors!



BP - helping to support our
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Icy River Rampage fat bike racers, 2015.

PARKING CONCERNS

(continued from p.2)

In 2014, the Rasmuson Foundation provided a \$100,000 matching grant to replace the floors in the main room of the Nature Center, modernize the kitchen, and upgrade the restrooms.

Starting in 2013, Eagle River Road was rebuilt to modern standards. This \$26,000,000 project, 91% paid for by federal highway funds, created a spectacularly scenic drive that ends at the Nature Center. This improvement has greatly impacted the use of the area. Visitation has increased dramatically especially during the summer. The improved road, combined with the growing popularity of Nature Center programs and special events, has put increasing pressure on the forty parking spaces currently available.

For years, visitors have been using the emergency lanes alongside Eagle River Road as overflow parking. Although there is a small overflow parking area near the Nature Center, it is hard to find and the access is a steep, single lane road. Volunteers are not always available to direct circulating drivers and they park wherever they can.

Neighbors began to complain about cars parked in the emergency lane blocking their view of oncoming traffic and clogging up their subdivision roads. The Department of Transportation (DOT) has placed signs along both sides of the 25 mph approach to the Nature Center indicating "No Parking" areas. Even the area in front of the old restrooms near the Nature Center were signed "No Parking". After someone drives all the way out to the Nature Center, they are going to park anywhere they can. Occasionally, they park on the subdivision roads nearby.

Mark Your Calendars for these great events & programs!

See the enclosed program for details of a new **AK Naturalist Certification Program** coming to the Nature Center.

Night with the Stars, February 20, 2016

Crow Pass Crossing, July 23, 2016

Eagle River Challenge 5K & 10K Trail Races,
August 13, 2016

20th Anniversary Auction, October 8, 2016 at the AK
Native Heritage Center

There's still time to donate to the **Dick Griffith Matching Challenge**. Go to www.ernc.org to contribute.

DOT has a permit system to allow the legal use of no parking areas. The permit costs \$100. It requires the permittee to buy insurance, hire a certified flag person paid \$150 per hour for a minimum of four hours, and provide or hire staff to assist the flag person. In December 2015, Friends obtained a permit for the "Solstice Lantern Walk", an event which drew more than 350 people to the Nature Center. Those attending the holiday celebration were mostly parents with kids enjoying the ambiance of candlelight and bonfires along the Rodak Trail. Reports from the staff indicate that the event went off without a hitch even though a neighbor did call the police to complain about a parking problem. Because Friends had obtained a permit, no citations were issued.

Friends is currently seeking grant funding to construct additional parking below the Nature Center. The grant will provide seasonal overflow parking and an improved access road leading to parking near the new maintenance facility. Until additional parking is available, DOT should allow visitors to park in the emergency lane on one side, preferably the mountain side, of Eagle River Road. If the parking problem is not soon improved, Friends may have to stop hosting events such as the Crow Pass Crossing or pass the additional \$700 permit along to the organizers.

Alaska is strapped for funds and it's going to be that way for many years to come. We all need to work together to solve this untenable parking problem. Please help the Nature Center; call your Legislators and ask for their support. Become a member and use "Pick, Click and Give" to donate a small portion of your PFD to the Nature Center.

Pete Panarese serves on the Board of Friends. He is a retired CSP Ranger and AK State Parks administrator.



EAGLE RIVER NATURE CENTER
February 2016 Member Newsletter
and March Program Schedule
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Nature Center lights 2015-16. Photo courtesy of Colin Tyler Bogucki.



Omega Smith was born and raised in Anchorage and received degrees in Astronomy and Physics from the University of Hawaii, Hilo. During her time on the Big Island, she spent numerous nights atop Mauna Kea plus got involved with research at the Gemini Observatory, Institute for Astronomy, and Hoku Kea Telescope. Her research ranged in topics from resolving telescope optics to mapping high redshift galaxies. She is currently the Planetarium Manager at the University of Alaska Anchorage. She is working on developing full dome visualizations for undergraduate curricula, expanding public programming for UAA, and spreading the wonders of the big and unknown Universe to students of all ages. Join her at **Night with the Stars** on Feb. 20th.

2016 Night with the Stars pluto



Saturday, February 20, 2016, 5pm
Eagle River Nature Center

Guest Speaker, Omega Smith, UAA Planetarium Mngr
Guest Chefs, Naomi Everett and Alayna Cuddy
Harpist Beth Baker

Tickets \$100/person. Single seats or tables of 8 available.
Reservations and details at www.ernc.org or 907-694-2108.

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