



Alaska Department of Fish and Game

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Palmer Hay Flats — State Game Refuge

Area Overview

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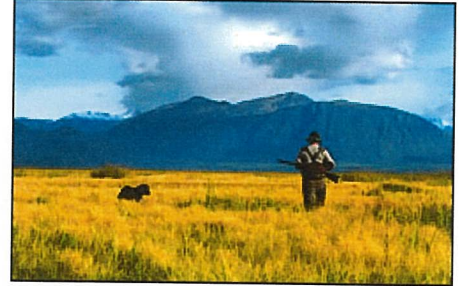
Palmer Hay Flats



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Created in 1975, this Upper Cook Inlet refuge located near Wasilla protects 28,800 acres of coastal and freshwater wetlands, tidal sloughs and mudflats, lakes and streams, as well as upland birch forests. Much of the Hay Flats that now supports wetland habitats was relatively dry grasslands prior to the 1964 Alaskan Earthquake. Land subsidence of 2 feet or more during the earthquake transformed the area into the wetlands we now see as Cook Inlet tidal waters and freshwater runoff inundated the area.



During spring, tens-of-thousands of migrating ducks, geese, swans, shorebirds and other birds stop in the Hay Flats to refuel during their migration to their northern nesting grounds. Many species of waterbirds remain in the refuge for the summer to nest and raise their young. During winter, the refuge provides important habitat for hundreds of moose that move out of the mountains to take advantage of the lower snow depths in their search of browse.

While the Knikatu native peoples of Upper Cook Inlet have lived in and around what is now the Palmer Hay Flats for centuries, there are currently no settlements within the refuge; although evidence of their historic occupation exists along the bluffs above the Hay Flats. Much of the surrounding region was settled by Midwest farmers the U.S. Government brought to Alaska during the Great Depression. Hay and other agricultural crops were grown within the area now comprising the refuge, particularly near Cottonwood Creek.

Created in the late-1800s and mostly following existing trails created by Alaska's native peoples, the historic Iditarod Trail passes through today's refuge. This trail was created as a way to transport supplies to and from gold mining camps and other settlements in the state's interior from the coastal supply port of Seward. Travelers on the trail utilized teams of dogs pulling cargo sleds.



Today, easy access and proximity to over half of Alaska's population has made the Palmer Hay Flats refuge one of the most important year-round wildlife and outdoor recreational areas in the state. While the refuge is mostly undeveloped, several sites provide parking and access to marked trails, streams and lakes. Waterfowl hunting, bird dog (retriever) training, trapping, bird watching, nature study, hiking, sport fishing, canoeing and winter snow machining and cross-country skiing provide diverse opportunities for those wishing to enjoy the refuge. The refuge's wildlife, wetlands and dramatic mountain backdrop provide many opportunities for photographers and others wishing to enjoy the scenery in Upper Cook Inlet.