

The water's  
fine

Subhead	And so is the view in Cooper Landing on the Kenai River
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Story Byline	By <b>CATHY BROWN</b> Daily News correspondent
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Body Text	<p>The Kenai River is a vivid turquoise color as it leaves Kenai Lake and winds through Cooper Landing, making this small community about 100 miles south of Anchorage a serious contender for one of the loveliest spots on the Kenai Peninsula -- or in Alaska, for that matter.</p> <p>"It's just a phenomenal little area," said Catherine Nicholas, a former bed-and-breakfast owner who has lived in Cooper Landing 14 years.</p> <p>There are lots of ways to experience Cooper Landing and the surrounding area: horseback riding, rafting, kayaking, mountain biking, flightseeing and simply taking a walk.</p> <p>Nicholas said she recommends people take one of the daylong horseback riding trips sold by Alaska Horsemen Trail Adventures. "That's just an incredible way for a lot of folks to get up the mountain," she said.</p> <p>Alex Kime, owner of Alaska Horsemen, said the horseback trips he offers range from a few hours to a few days.</p> <p>Experiencing Kenai Lake and the Kenai River by water is also popular. In addition to a multitude of guided fishing opportunities, several companies offer rafting trips and one business provides kayaking trips on Kenai Lake. And if you have your own equipment, you can create your own rafting or kayaking outing.</p> <p>"I love going down the river myself," said Mona Painter, president of the Cooper Landing Historical Society and Museum. "I love the raft trips."</p> <p>Those excursions are a good way to see wildlife, said George Heim, who owns Alaska River Adventures. You can always see eagles along the river, he said, and you may see trumpeter swans, ducks, kingfishers, Dall sheep, mountain goats, moose, bears, coyotes and foxes, although there are no guarantees.</p> <p>"We have days where we see 10 or 11 bears, and we have days where we go down and don't see any," Heim said.</p> <p>Locals also urge visitors to get out on the hiking and mountain biking trails. "The amount of hiking trails in Cooper Landing is phenomenal," Kime said.</p> <p>There are trails to suit all ability levels -- 10-minute walks leading to scenic outlooks or rigorous multiday mountain treks for those with strong legs and lungs. The southern end of the 38.8-mile Resurrection Pass Trail starts in Cooper Landing, at Mile 53.2 of the Sterling Highway.</p> <p>Also ask the locals about trails that may not be on the maps, Nicholas suggests. One, called Slaughter Gulch, is a "fabulous day hike," she said. "You can be up on top of the ridge in two and a half hours."</p> <p>She also recommends taking part in whatever's going on in the community during your stay -- whether that's a bonfire or a dance at the community hall. Bed-and-breakfast owners will be able to tell you what's going on. "Everybody's really happy to give</p>

information," Nicholas said. "It's an adorable community."

For those with more cash than leg muscle, flightseeing is an option. Ingram's Base Camp offers flights that can take people over the Harding Icefield, above goats, sheep and bears, and up river corridors where you can see bears feasting on the bright-red spawning salmon.

"It's one of the prettiest helicopter rides you'll ever take," Heim said.

Visitors may also want to check out, or join in, the spectacle of "combat fishing" at the confluence of the Russian and Kenai rivers. Swarms of anglers crowd the banks during the peak of the sockeye salmon run in July. Anglers have to be careful to avoid run-ins with brown bears, which also fish there.

Local history and Alaska Native culture are on display at K'beq' Interpretive Site, an archaeological site at Mile 52.6 on the Sterling Highway operated by the Kenaitze Indian Tribe and the Seward Ranger District of the Chugach National Forest. Here visitors can learn about traditional plant use and see historical artifacts used by the Dena'ina Athabascans.

"Our interpretation starts with prehistoric and goes to today," said Sasha Lindgren, cultural and education department director for the Kenaitze tribe.

The site is open from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. seven days a week from May to September.

On Wednesdays and Thursdays visitors can take part in a beading class, and on Fridays they can hear storytelling from 6 to 7 p.m. On Saturdays is a craft fair that will feature artists at work.

Visitors can check out the Cooper Landing Historical Society Museum to learn about Cooper Landing from the 1800s to the present. Cooper Landing was the site of the first gold discovery in Alaska, albeit not an important enough discovery to spur a rush for gold. The mid-1800s discovery was reported by a mining engineer for the Russian-American Co.

From mid-May to mid-September the museum is open during the afternoons every day except Tuesday. It can be opened other hours by appointment for people who can't make it during those hours. "As long as I'm home, I'm available to open it up to show people," Painter said.

The museum's collections are housed in two buildings. In one is a fully articulated skeleton of a 20-year-old brown bear. "This is, I'm told, a rare specimen," Painter said.

"We call it 'Dead Bear Walking' because it's in a walking pose." The museum also contains photos and memorabilia from Cooper Landing's past and donated Alaska Native artifacts, such as baskets and mukluks.

Painter first visited Cooper Landing in 1949 and moved to the area in 1959.

"I loved it. I couldn't wait to come back," she said. "I just thought it was the most beautiful place -- still do."

Freelance writer Cathy Brown lives in Soldotna.

#### What locals say

"You're literally within 11 miles of some of the best trails in all of Alaska."

-- Catherine Nicholas, a former bed-and-breakfast owner who has lived in Cooper Landing for 14 years

#### Editor's picks

\* Sit back and enjoy: Quite simply, the Kenai River is beautiful. Find a quiet spot -- they do exist surprisingly enough -- and watch the river. Even if you never lift a fishing pole, the Kenai will leave its impression on you. And it's fun to watch anglers near the Russian River Ferry when the reds are in.

\* It's hiking country: One of the trail heads for the Resurrection Pass Trail is just outside Cooper Landing. You may not have the time or desire to cover the entire 38-mile trail but put on your boots and head out for some hiking.

\* See salmon jump: It's just a two-mile hike to the Russian River Falls, where you can see salmon trying to navigate the falls to continue on to their spawning area.

\* Oh, don't forget your pole: I'm not much for combat fishing, which is what you'll do quite a bit of at the confluence of the Russian and Kenai rivers. But if you love salmon, or love a good fish fight, this is the place -- kings, reds and silvers all return to fishing



mecca. And there is spectacular fishing for Dolly Varden and rainbow trout.