

Headline	Explore Soldotna
Subhead	Area offers salmon fishing, hiking, camping and much more
Sumhead	Visitors' Guide
Labelhead	
Run Date	4/22/2007
Day	Sunday
Page	136
Section	Special
Edition	Final
Length	
Dateline	
Illustrator	
Story Byline	By CATHY BROWN <u>Daily News correspondent</u>
Type	Freelance
Correction	
Body Text	<p>Salmon decorate roadside signs from Sterling through Soldotna, advertising fishing charters, fish processing, fishing tackle. In Soldotna, even the hardware store is called Trustworthy Hardware and Fishing.</p> <p>Soldotna is unquestionably a great place to fish. But believe it or not, you can also find other things to do in this part of the Kenai Peninsula. You can canoe, hike, camp, watch wildlife, pick berries, learn about local homesteading history and even shop. Soldotna is a relatively young town, settled by homesteaders who began arriving after World War II. You can get a taste of its brief past at the Soldotna Historical Museum, which features a historic log village.</p> <p>"Chances are you'll get a homesteader who lived in one of those cabins give you a tour," said Sylvia Reid, manager of the Soldotna Visitors Center. "It's just a hoot."</p> <p>The museum's collection of buildings includes a territorial school built in 1958 in which students studied by the light of gas lanterns, which are still hanging in the school. A building housing wildlife mounts is also located here.</p> <p>The museum, which is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays to Saturdays and noon to 4 p.m. on Sundays, is on Centennial Park Road. To get there, turn right on Kalifornsky Beach Road as you're heading south out of Soldotna, then look for Centennial Park Road on your right.</p> <p>You can also reach the museum by walking down a quarter-mile trail from the Soldotna Visitors Center. The visitors center is on the Sterling Highway in Soldotna, just past the Kenai River bridge if you're coming from Anchorage.</p> <p>The visitors center has some attractions of its own. In addition to providing brochures on area businesses, you can see mounts of several Alaska animals here, including the world- record sport-caught king salmon, which was pulled in by a Soldotna resident in 1985.</p> <p>Another piece of Soldotna history is a cabin at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge headquarters. It was built in the 1930s near Tustumena Lake by Andrew Berg, a Finnish immigrant who arrived in Alaska in the 1880s. He was the first licensed big-game guide in Alaska and was an advocate for establishing the refuge.</p> <p>The refuge headquarters is just a mile south of Soldotna on the Sterling Highway. Here you can find maps and details on hiking, canoeing, camping and other activities in the 1.9 million-acre refuge.</p> <p>"Wildlife viewing is very popular," refuge manager Robin West said. You may see black bears, brown bears, moose, coyotes, loons, trumpeter swans on the refuge, and if you're very lucky, wolves and lynx.</p> <p>Your chances for seeing wildlife depend on when and where you go and how long</p>

you stay there, West said. The Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area, along Skilak Loop Road north of Sterling, is managed specifically for wildlife viewing and photography. If you spend a couple of days in that area camping and hiking or paddling on the Kenai River or Skilak Lake, you're probably going to at least see a black bear. "If you don't see one, it's pretty odd," West said.

Your chances are not as good if you just take a quick drive along Skilak Loop Road in the middle of the day. You can improve your odds by taking that drive slowly in the early morning or late evening hours, when many species of wildlife are most active, West said.

The refuge has several campgrounds along Skilak Loop Road and several primitive cabins that can be rented with reservations.

Canoeing is another good way to experience the refuge and see wildlife. There are two canoe systems in the northern lowlands of the refuge, the Swan Lake system and the Swanson River system. You reach these canoe trails by turning on Swanson River Road in Sterling and taking it to Swan Lake Road.

"There are lots of options within each route," West said. You can take a day trip on just one lake or plan a two- to three-day paddle with short portages between lakes. You can also take on a more challenging multilake route that requires carrying a canoe for more than a mile between lakes.

"Most people who do the backcountry (route) go very light; they have lightweight canoes, lightweight camping equipment," West said. "You can spend a couple of weeks out there and not backtrack very much."

Hiking is also a great way to see the area. The refuge headquarters has information on trails that range from relatively flat, wheelchair-accessible trails of less than a mile to very steep treks a few miles long.

A couple of those trails are right off the headquarters parking lot. Peggy Mullen, a longtime Soldotna resident whose parents were among the original homesteaders, suggests families check out the Keen Eye trail, a wide, paved trail leading to a lake.

"The lake is nonmotorized, so it's just very peaceful," she said. "A lot of people miss that."

If you're experienced in the outdoors and want to escape for several days into the backcountry, refuge staff can also point you to unmaintained routes that can lead you into the wilderness.

"There are a lot of routes that are hikable for folks who are more adventurous," West said.

The headquarters visitors center also shows films on wildlife and similar topics daily and has environmental education programs for children. It's open seven days a week. Another hiking option near Soldotna is the Tsalteshi trail system behind Skyview High School, Reid said. This wintertime cross-country skiing trail system turns into a series of hiking trails in the summer. Skyview High School is about a mile south of Soldotna on the opposite side of the Sterling Highway from the refuge headquarters.

Soldotna also has several "river parks" where people can picnic, camp, launch their boats or walk along the Kenai River banks on elevated "fishwalks." Maps showing how to reach the river parks are available at the Soldotna Visitors Center.

Although few tourists would come to Soldotna to shop, if someone tagging along on a fishing trip wants to do that, Reid said, she can also steer them to local quilt stores, art stores and so forth, and she can provide dates and times for the local farmer's market.

You could also take a bike ride to Kenai and back. A paved bike path leads from the Sterling Highway along the Kenai Spur Highway to Kenai, then back to Soldotna via Bridge Access Road and Kalifornsky Beach Road.

Freelance writer Cathy Brown lives in Soldotna.

?

What locals say

"If you're in there camping somewhere and moving around -- hiking, paddling -- odds are you will see a black bear."

-- Robin West, manager of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, on the Skilak Wildlife

Recreation Area

Editor's picks

* The biggest fish: You must see the world-record king salmon on display at the Soldotna Visitors Center. Les Anderson hooked the 97-pound, 4-ounce monster in 1985. The center is just steps away from the Kenai River, which has a number of boardwalks designed to get visitors and anglers down to the river. Several boardwalks were damaged during a winter flood, but look for ones that survived; it's a good way to get in on the fishing action.

* Homestead history: The Soldotna Homestead Museum preserves the community's history in a homesteaders' village, with wildlife displays and Alaska Native artifacts.

* Get in the boat: The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge has two canoe trail systems, the Swanson River and the Swan Lake trails. There are several routes that can be as short as a day paddle or up to a week. Alaska is wild; this is a great way to enjoy it.

[Send All Archives](#)