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Fish and Wildlife Habitat

Background

The PUA has very rich and diverse habitat consisting of two general areas: the valley floor and the sub-alpine/alpine habitat. The valley floor comprises approximately 14 percent of the total land area while sub-alpine/alpine and glacier comprises the remaining 86 percent.

The floor of the valley is dominated by Knik River and associated braided channels, sloughs, and exposed shorelands and includes extensive lakes and wetlands. The lakes, wetlands, and vegetated shorelands of the valley floor provides a rich habitat for a diversity of fish and wildlife species including waterfowl, moose, bear, wolves, and many small furbearers. Waterbodies on the valley floor are important habitat for resident and anadromous fish populations. Jim Creek supports a popular coho salmon fishery. Many of the lakes are used for spawning and rearing habitat by coho, sockeye and chum salmon.

The sub-alpine and alpine habitat is used by many species including bear, moose, sheep, and goats. The lower elevations of the sub-alpine are commonly used by moose and bear for forage and rearing young. While goats and sheep tend to use the alpine habitat, sheep are commonly found at lower elevations at several locations in the PUA.

Many members of the public indicated that current uses are negatively impacting nesting swans and loons. Swan numbers and cygnet survival rates appear to be stable within the PUA. Nonetheless, a critical life stage for swans and loons exists while they are incubating their eggs and rearing their young (typically from May 15 to August 31); at this period swans and loons are highly susceptible to harassment from recreational users. If the disturbance is serious enough, swans and loons may abandon their nest sites or cygnets. Once abandoned, swans and loons will not re-nest for the remainder of that year.

AS 41.23.180-230, provides direction to DNR for the protection of fish and wildlife habitat. This statute requires DNR to “perpetuate and enhance” the enjoyment of fish and wildlife, and to “protect and maintain” habitats for fish, wildlife and migratory waterfowl nesting so traditional use may continue. To achieve the mandate of perpetuating and enhancing the public use while protecting habitat, DNR has worked with ADFG to identify areas that require special management attention. After the review of available resource data and discussions with ADFG, DNR has concluded that there are currently no areas of critical habitat within the PUA; however, several areas of sensitive habitat within the PUA have been identified. These include: swan and loon nesting sites, waterfowl nesting areas, fish spawning and rearing locations, and moose calving concentration areas. These areas have been determined by DNR to merit increased management priority in order to minimize impacts to fish and wildlife and other sensitive habitats.

Goal

- Protect and maintain fish and wildlife habitat while allowing for continued recreational use.

Management Guidelines

- All trails (new and up-graded, expanded or re-routed) or facilities within the planning area should be sited and designed to avoid impacts to fish and wildlife and their habitats. If impacts to these habitats cannot be avoided, they should be minimized.
- All trails and developed facilities should be sited and developed to minimize impacts to anadromous waterbodies. Stream crossings should be developed generally perpendicular to the stream flow.
- Within 100 feet of an anadromous waterbody, excluding the Knik River and shorelands of the Knik River, trails should not be developed parallel to the ordinary high watermark. See Figure 1-1, pp. 1 - 9 for a depiction of state shorelands.
- DNR will initiate an educational program to inform the public of species and habitats that are susceptible to disturbance by recreational use. It is intended that DNR will install informational signs at major access points that provide information including; sensitive fish and wildlife habitats including swan, loon, and other waterfowl nesting habitat, the location of nest sites and importance of the incubation and rearing period, the potential for disturbing these species through recreational use, and recommendations for minimizing impact to species and their habitat. These signs should be placed at principle access points as determined by DNR.
- DNR will evaluate the feasibility of annually locating and signing swan and loon nesting habitat. To accomplish this DNR will, subsequent to plan adoption:
 - Engage in discussions with ADF&G, non-profit conservations groups or other third party stakeholders to determine their interest and ability to identify and sign active swan and loon nesting sites. Because of limited resources in DNR, it is believed that the most effective means of ensuring that identification occurs on a periodic basis is to involve these groups in this effort. If this interest and capabilities exist, DNR will provide support to the selected group in the annual identification and signing process. In addition to signing, DNR will develop a map that identifies sensitive habitat locations, including nesting areas, and make it along with educational materials, available to the public.
- As new information regarding fish and wildlife populations becomes available from ADFG, DNR should re-evaluate the habitat in the PUA to determine if areas could be identified as sensitive habitat.
- DNR should consult with ADFG to determine if uses are impacting fish, wildlife and their habitats.