



2014 Newsletter



Threats to McNeil River: The threat is now and it could modify the McNeil experience forever. Alaska's top administrators have brought all 32 of Alaska's Special Use Areas (McNeil included) under attack, by causing all management plans to be rewritten to remove essentially all restrictions set in place by Legislature and the writers of the original plans. The Governor, Sean Parnell, says "Alaska is Open for Business" and is ensuring that even these special areas come under fire. See articles included for more information.

2014 Permit Holders: All persons selected through the 2014 permits system to travel to McNeil River this summer should be aware that FOMR has two items for sale that can enhance your trip and memories of the Sanctuary. The Photo ID books are highly recommended for use in the park and as mementos later on. We also sell a great hat for McNeil. Due to regulations, only the Photo I.D. books are available in camp, whereas both are available on our website, with Homer air carriers, or by contacting us at 907-244-4041.

2014 Spring Volunteer Project

At the last minute this year, we got word that F&G needed two of our volunteers for this 2014 spring opening and we had to choose from the list of folks we already had. A trail improvement project in the sedge flats area will be implemented to reduce damage caused by our visitors walking through this section of the Sanctuary. As this was to be heavy, labor intensive work, we had to limit it to strong backed and hearty souls. This year Beluga Air was kind enough to extend a special rate to our spring volunteers, which is greatly appreciated. Your email address and phone number is required for rapid processing for next year if a project does happen to occur.



Friends of McNeil River
POB 231091, Anchorage, AK 99523-1091
KEEP ME ON YOUR MAILING LIST!

Name _____, Address _____

City _____, State _____ Zip _____ - _____

Phone _____ email _____

(emails area very important to reduce our printing costs):Note: We do not share or sell our email membership list!

Membership \$35 Family \$50 Donor \$100 Paw Patron \$250 Generous Griz
 _____ Other

Photo ID Donation \$29 3rd Ed, ID book
 \$5 mail \$20 air _____ add'l donation

McNeil River "got bears?" hats: \$20 FOMR Hat-Color _____ () \$3.00 mail
 \$25 FOMR Weatherguard Hat-Color _____

Name on Card _____ Credit Card # _____

Exp. Date _____ Security Code _____

() Yes, I want to be a Volunteer!

() We are taking names for next spring's potential volunteer opening (2015).

() Administrative help () Board Member Applicant

You can also visit our website at www.mcneilbears.org and use our PayPal credit card option for memberships or purchases!

Checks and money orders are certainly appreciated, but must be issued by a U.S. bank. If this isn't possible, please use a credit card. The postal service frowns on mailing cash, but we've been known to take that too.

With today's economy and to cut down on printing costs, we really need everyone's email address. We do not share nor sell our membership list to any other parties.

If you move or change your email address, please drop us a note of the change so we can keep you informed on McNeil issues!

Friends of McNeil River (FOMR) is a 501c(3) tax-deductible nonprofit corporation EIN #92-0149711, dedicated to ensuring the protection of the McNeil River Bears and their associated habitat.

For Alaskans eligible for receiving the Permanent Fund Dividend, please consider giving a portion, up to all of it, to FOMR, through the Lovalaska: Pick.Click.Give Project when you file on-line this year and next. This can be done anonymously, or let us know who you are & we'll send you a tax deductible receipt around the end of the year!



Air Carriers: Our volunteers have typically flown from Homer with one of these two flight services:

- o Beluga Air, LLC, 3409 Lambert Loop, Homer @ (907) 235-8256
- o Northwind Aviation, 1170 Lake Shore Dr., Homer @ (907) 235-7482

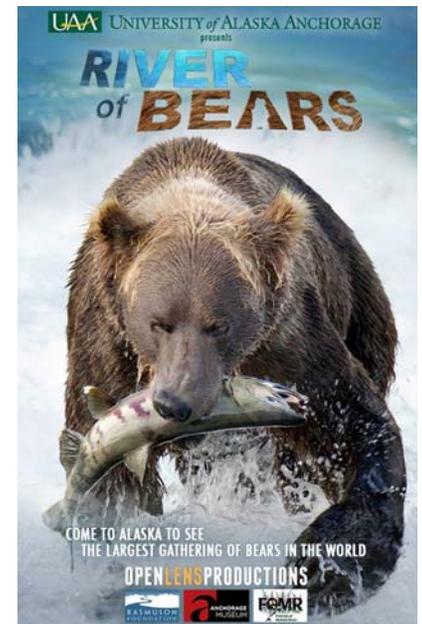
(others fly there too)

FOMR President 2014 Report by Mike Adams:

- FOMR has had a busy year in 2013 and getting a good start here in 2014. We had a good turn-out for our April, 2014 annual meeting at Wilda Marston Theatre in the Loussac Library in Anchorage, Alaska. Tom Griffin, and Drew Hamilton made great presentations on the 2013 season and differing dominance styles of many of the more prevalent bears in the McNeil River State Game Sanctuary.
- Late in the 2013 season, we got word from returning permit holders and staff that large numbers of bears had again been seen at the falls on several different occasions. It was a good summer all around! See Tom's article below.
- The Board of Game (BOG) has once again been active this past year in promoting their "Predator Control" plans, but to the best of our knowledge it should not affect the McNeil River bear population in their overall range, both in and out of the Sanctuary in the near future. There are lots of folks concerned on the directions the BOG directed predator control program is headed. We here at FOMR will continue to help track the proximity factors to and potential effects on the McNeil River greater bear population.
- Both years of the Refuges Friends groups "Art for Alaska Parks - Refuge Choice Award", put on by the Alaska Artist Guild, have been well received. See <http://artforalaskaparks.com/page4/refuges.html> for more information. This was a two-year seed project to see if there's interest within the non-photographic artist's community with a monetary award for art created within and about the state's refuges, with McNeil River Sanctuary and Refuge being included therein. The original competition is for Art in Alaska Parks with a separate monetary award. Unfortunately, we've been informed that the Refuge award will not be continued, although the competition for other categories will continue. The Palmer Hay Flats group had volunteered for both of the start-up years to judge and award the winning individuals' artwork.
- Late last year, we became informed that the governor of Alaska, Sean Parnell, has requested that the state staff rewrite all management plans of the 32 state sanctuaries, refuges, critical habitat areas and ranges under Administrative Order 266. This is said to be helpful in simplifying the administration of these areas and to make it easier to review permitting in and around the areas. This has come as quite a surprise to all interested parties, as it is being done behind closed doors and without involvement of publicly oriented, educationally supportive and active groups like FOMR. See the articles later in this newsletter for more information.
- We are now one of the proud sponsors of a very promising McNeil River video presentation which is being shown in the Anchorage UAA Planetarium's "in -the-round theater". The program has been developed by UAA Travis A, Rector, PhD, and videographer Jonathan VanBallenberger (Open Lens Productions). This is the first film ever made for this type of theater of this type of portrayal of wildlife. Tom Griffin, ADF&G, and other Sanctuary staffers assisted with the technical aspects of the film regarding bear activities. It has been well received and frequently the ADF&G McNeil staffers have been available to do short presentations after the film is shown. Larry Aumiller was kind enough to allow the title of his book to be used for the film title. Each showing has been sold out shortly after dates and times are announced. We hope that you get a chance to view it when you are in town, and that eventually it will be able to be seen in similar theaters around the world. Starting in May it will be available to be seen in the Anchorage Museum Planetarium. The film has already been seen in Denver, and has been accepted to be shown in Germany and China. Talk it up and maybe it can be licensed to be shown in a Planetarium near you! A flat screen version is being developed but needs funding. If interested, see Jonathan's funding campaign site at <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/river-of-bears>.



Art for Alaska Parks



Tom Griffin, Sanctuary Manager's Report to FOMR:

We had a wonderful 2013 summer viewing season at McNeil River! We were lucky to have Drew Hamilton on staff for his fourth season. Drew brings so much to McNeil with all his years of experience. We were also very fortunate to have Robin Dublin on as a new staff member for the summer. Robin is excellent with people and a first-class wildlife educator. We are sorry that she will not be joining us this upcoming summer, but we are so glad to have had her at McNeil for 2013. Thanks to Drew and Robin for all the hard work and the good fun! It was a truly exceptional team. We are currently in the process of hiring a third staff member for the upcoming season. And, as always, we had the invaluable support of Ed Weiss, the Statewide Lands and Refuge Manager, and Joe Meehan, Statewide Program Coordinator of the Lands and Refuge Program. McNeil is very fortunate to have this extended crew. Also notable in 2013 were some previous McNeil River staff members who came back to sub. Retired (and infamous) bear biologist John Hechtel provided his extensive knowledge and sense of humor, and Polly Hessing returned as one of the original staffers going back to the early 80's. Her expertise is legendary. Tony Carnahan took time from his busy research schedule to reprise his role as McNeil bear guide extraordinaire. Thanks to John, Polly and Tony.

Drew, Robin and I arrived at the sanctuary in late May to icebergs floating in the lagoon and a glacier (6 ft. wall of ice) in camp between the front cabin and the cook cabin. Imagine our surprise when we also found a small glacial lake inside of camp, engulfing a number of the tent sites. We were expecting to find snow after the May 17 snowstorm in Anchorage, but this exceeded our expectations. Regardless, we got to work with two talented carpenters, John Tuckey and Pete Robinson, to replace the ancient outhouses that had served camp for over 30 years. They built two new first-class outhouses for visitors that look like they could be in Architectural Digest. Thanks so much to John and Pete for their excellent work! Many visitors complimented the comfort, style and panache of the new outhouses.

Pre-season, before the visitors arrived, ice and snow covered a good part of the Mikfik flats area and some large frozen ice falls clung to the conglomerate walls. It was beautiful to see. We did a walk-about in Mikfik and saw some amazing, large brown bear tracks in the snow. Then, the glacier in camp melted, the glacial lake dried up and it was time for the first visitors to arrive.

June is always a special month at the Sanctuary. We view bears at Mikfik Creek, which is a favorite for many people, including me. There were many unseasonably warm days this past June and we got sunburned enjoying extended days of sun! Mikfik is special because in addition to viewing, we enjoy the long days leading up to summer solstice. Visitors spent many wonderful days along the Mikfik Riffles watching bears chase salmon and graze on sedge grasses through the end of June. We had good days walking to the Upper Falls and spending time watching one or two bears wander, follow each other, and fish in the creek as we sat up on the grass. There were also many good viewing days at the Lower Mikfik Falls. Mikfik season is a favorite of mine because within one month of arriving at the MRSRGs one can observe a huge awakening in the Sanctuary. Everything starts blooming as spring winds down and summer is officially here. The flats go from brown mud to lush green sedges very quickly, flowers begin to emerge, wood frogs are croaking up a storm in the sauna pond and brown bears are making their way down from the mountains to the coast. Watching them arrive back on the flats, and seeing them graze on the new sedges, reminds me of what is dynamic and remarkable about observing the seasons change in the sanctuary.

July arrived and the weather remained incredible through mid-month. It was warm and sunny for weeks. The bear viewing was excellent, with strong early numbers, and a high-point in mid-July of 57 bears in view at one time. This mid-July bear viewing is always a truly amazing occurrence and a memorable sight for the visitors, as well as for the staff. And with all the bears, we too often take for granted the many other species that are observed at the sanctuary over the summer, including birds, terrestrial mammals, and marine mammals. During the 2013 season, we observed many bird species, including the following: Wilson's Snipe, Golden-crowned Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, Wilson's Warbler, American Robin, Hermit Thrush, Tree Swallow, Common Redpoll, Glaucous-winged Gull, Mew Gull, Brant, Green-winged Teal, Common Raven, Red-breasted Merganser, Greater Yellowlegs, Northern Pintail, Black-billed Magpie, Northern Harrier and Bald Eagle. Less frequently seen birds were also observed, including an Arctic Tern, a Black Turnstone, Black Scoters, a Sandhill Crane, an Orange-crowned Warbler, Tundra Swans, Bank Swallows, Short-eared Owls, Double-crested Cormorants, Peregrine Falcons, Gadwall and a Greater White-fronted Goose. Willow Ptarmigan were

again observed on the McNeil River trail, and Pigeon Guillemots and Harlequin Ducks were observed from McNeil Head. We were excited to see a single Osprey flying over the Mikfik Creek riffles area on May 31st.

In addition to the bird species, there were several terrestrial and marine mammals observed at the Sanctuary, including a Gray Wolf in the lagoon in June. Also, a Hoary Marmot and a family of Red Fox with four kits were observed in and



around camp. Moose and a Beaver were observed in June from the Mikfik area and Pacific Harbor Seals were generally seen at high tide throughout the season in McNeil lagoon, McNeil Cove, and the lower tidal areas of McNeil River and Mikfik Creek. As always, there were a few courageous Arctic ground squirrels were observed near camp. All in all, 2013 was another memorable season for wildlife viewing at the sanctuary.

August 2013 provided the usual pleasant late-summer days visitors have come to enjoy. We watch bears chase post-spawners (Chum and Pinks) down by Ender's Island in the lower river. This is always a bittersweet time of the year since we know that the summer is drawing to a close. The colors in the Sanctuary shift from a peak-season verdant green to the yellows and browns of oncoming fall. Also, throughout the month of August, as the fish run wanes, bears start to disperse in search of other food sources. We can feel the end of the season approaching.

We look forward to the 2014 season at McNeil River State Game Sanctuary and to meeting all the visitors. Thanks to everyone behind the scenes for their hard work and dedication to MRSGS!

Cheers, Tom Griffin

McNeil Weather

If you are interested in weather data available from an on-site weather station erected in 2012 (and still operational), here is the link to the NRCS Snotel McNeil River site where you can view and download weather data from the Snotel Site located at Mikfik Lake (just above base camp)."

<http://www.wcc.nrcs.usda.gov/nwcc/site?sitenum=1191&state=ak>

Visitors and Volunteers

We can't survive without volunteers and we can always use some help. As mentioned above, we have two volunteers this year for the Spring, 2014, camp opening. We received notification just recently from F&G that they had finally secured funding for materials for a small robust crew to install partially submerged geo-grid pathway blocks in the sedge flats. We had to choose in a short period of time from a limited number of folks that had previously submitted their names for consideration, if a project presented itself. A short trial section had been installed previously and has held up well to the winter storms.

Perhaps you'd like to be considered to be a volunteer in opening camp in 2015, or helping us administratively or becoming a new Board member. If so, please contact us on our website comments page or on page two of this newsletter. There has to be projects needed in camp, in order for volunteers to be needed, so no guarantees until we hear in the spring from F&G if a need is there or not.

All of our Board of Directors and Officers are volunteers and many of us have been holding down positions for many years. We would like to encourage others to step forward to help us run this wonderful organization.

Threats to McNeil River and other Alaskan Special Use Areas: by Mike Adams, President of FOMR

Whether you're an Alaskan or not, and if you fish, hunt or otherwise recreate in this incredible state, you need to learn about what is going on right now behind closed doors. Please read this in its entirety to get a glimpse of the problem.

There is a reason Alaska has wildlife and fish habitat set aside and protected from intrusion by incompatible uses. The wildlife can't say.....and the fish can't say.....so, it's up to Alaskans and our friends around the world to become informed about this and have their say. It's the sort of thing that will change what you know to be true about our wildlife and fish, and your future access to them. If you read this and speak up, then we all can avoid unpleasant surprises later. It is Definitely the right thing to do to write all influential governmental and news-oriented parties and express your outrage in the backhanded manner in which all our Special Areas are about to be changed.

As mentioned above in the President's Notes, McNeil is under fire!!! The Sanctuary that FOMR was established to protect could drastically be altered by the Administration that is supposed to help protect it. The McNeil management plan is currently being rewritten in the same fashion as was done last year for Dude Creek Critical Habitat Area, which had been established by the Legislature to protect the nesting area of sandhill cranes near Gustavus, Alaska. APRN published a very thoroughly researched article on the boondoggle method that the state chose for rewriting the management plan for that "Special Use Area". See <http://www.alaskapublic.org/2013/10/25/the-battle-of-dude-creek/>. It will allow permits for 4-wheel trails and for low aircraft flights, along with pretty much any exploration that entrepreneurs might envision to occur in this preserve. Little to no local management capability will be in existence once it is enacted.

A similar action was occurring in the Alaska legislature earlier this year as HB77 under the guise of easing the permitting process. Both sets of activities are being done by the state to enhance the governor's stated policy that "Alaska is open for business and positioning itself for economic growth". Among many other aspects of this policy's impacts are the stated objectives to improve access for and allowance of mining, oil and gas exploration, along with reducing the management necessary for operating the 32 "Special Areas". Some review by the public will supposedly be allowed at the very end of the re-write process (we're told), but by that time it will likely be too late to change anything. All future permit applications and decisions under these new rules will not be available for public scrutiny or comment. FOMR and many other "Friends" groups are actively discussing and preparing actions to begin the battle against this process. Unfortunately, McNeil River State Game Sanctuary and Refuge is one of the eight management plans being rewritten this year. A first round of these activities was conducted last year for the Dude Creek Critical Habitat Area, near Juneau.

McNeil is likely to be equally devastated as to how the changes will affect Dude Creek. We will soon have information on our website on what you and your friends can do to help battle this elusive and potentially deadly change that the state is trying to put through.

There's a lot of info being dug up on this whole rewrite issue, but it is difficult to get specifics, as it is being done behind closed doors and everyone with any knowledge of what is going on, is under a gag order from high administration. It doesn't sound very American to me.

What we do know is that McNeil River is one of eight Special Use Areas (32 total Alaskan Sanctuaries, Refuges, Ranges and Critical Habitat Areas) that are currently being rewritten this year. They all will likely be released for a very short public comment period after all changes are made to the plans, (probably during the Christmas holidays) and any corrections based on public comment are not likely to be incorporated under the mindset of the current administration.

Instead of re-writing the plan for Round Island (Walrus) Sanctuary, they recently announced that that Sanctuary will be closed part way through this season (supposedly due to lack of funding to maintain the program) and will not be staffed or open next summer (2015). See the following Terry Johnson's Walrus Islands Compass piece:

<http://www.adn.com/2014/04/14/3421935/compass-loss-of-camp-at-round.html?sp=/99/328/640/646/>

This is all being done under an Administrative Order (AO266) issued by Gov. Sean Parnell. Randy Bates, head of Habitat Division is in charge. F&G & DNR are answerable to him. No employees are allowed to make public comments or statements or answer written questions, unless the response has been vetted by upper management. If even a conversation between F&G employees occurs at their office or outside the office, one of them is required to report the context and parties involved to upper management. If you followed any or all of the ruckus over HB77 this past winter,

which was thankfully and recently tabled (probably to reappear next fall), the verbiage changes to the management plans are almost identical to many of the very controversial portions of HB77.

Governor Parnell has stated that he wants the businesses of the world to know that Alaska is “Open for Business” and seeks to encourage all enterprises in working up here. AO266 is earmarked to reduce the difficulty in reviewing permits for working in and around the Special Use Areas. The Plans are being modified to eliminate all or nearly all existing restrictions that make it difficult to review permits. All permit apps will get reviewed by two top people, with no public notice that an app has been applied for, with no public review of the request or outcome of the app. No notice will be given to the public when apps are approved, and the only parties that can object are individuals that can prove that they are personally being harmed by the project being built or installed (essentially after the fact). No public interest groups will be allowed to comment or appeal, similar to HB77.

What we do not know are any specifics on how the McNeil Plan is being re-written. However, we do know that upper management likes the fact that McNeil makes money for them. They want it to make lots more money. This will most undoubtedly be to the detriment of the bears and their habitat. It can be surmised that this may lead to encouraging plans to expand operations, possibly including 4-wheeler trails from potential grass or Mikfik Lake alternate landing sites, along with potentially allowing more people in camp and more people visiting the bears.

Rick Sinnott, retired wildlife biologist with Alaska Department of Fish & Game recently wrote a two part article recently for the Alaska Dispatch. He outlines much of what I’ve said above and more. It can be found at:

FIRST PART: <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20140423/fish-and-game-weakening-land-use-regulations-alaskas-wildlife-refuges-sanctuaries>;

SECOND PART: <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20140424/will-fish-and-game-have-any-juice-left-protect-fish-and-wildlife-alaska-once>

ROUND ISLAND CLOSURE - A WAKE UP CALL, by Didier Lindsey , a well-known photographer and V.P. of FOMR:

The recent decision to by the Alaska Department of Fish & Game to close Round Island State Game Sanctuary after this year should be a wake up call for all members of Friends of McNeil River as well as for everyday Alaskans. The Governors bill to change the oil taxes has had a ripple effect throughout Alaska in the budgetary process. With the state now running a billion dollar plus budget deficit, budget cuts are taking a bite out of many state programs. Round Island is one of those cuts and money seems to be the major reason. \$95,000 to be exact. That is the amount that fees do not cover for operations at Round Island. That is 1/5 of 1% of the current ADF&G operating budget. For that little amount the state is willing to turn its back on the oldest and first state game refuge, considered one of the finest places in the world to safely observe pacific walrus. A fledgling group is now on Facebook called Walrus Advocates of Round Island Sanctuary. The state seems to be taking a position that it will not defend wildlife resources that do not turn a profit.

That position presents a different threat to the McNeil River State Game Sanctuary and Refuge. This attitude ties in directly with the current management plan review going on behind closed doors concerning McNeil River. There are some people in high places that would like to see McNeil River turned into a cash cow. If this scenario is allowed to happen, we could expect major changes coming to the Sanctuary. In order for the state to turn a serious profit at McNeil, wholesale changes to the number of visitors, permit application processes and selection, and overall access to McNeil would have to happen. Those of us who have had the opportunity of visiting McNeil River know how special the experience is because of how it is managed. A push for profits will forever alter the experience future visitors and generations will have when visiting and interacting with the bears. Not to mention how the bears will react to increased numbers of people, noise, and disturbances. After all, protection of the species is the reason these refuges and critical habitat areas were formed, so expect that to change as well. From my/our point of view the Administrative Order 266 (AO266) issued by our governor, which directs Habitat to review, change, or just plain cut and gut the state's obligation to its sanctuaries, refuges, ranges and critical habitat areas, is bad for McNeil River and bad for the state of Alaska. Now is the time to contact the Department of Fish & Game, the Habitat Division, the Governor's office and your local legislator. If we don't stand up and fight for McNeil River and the other 31 state special use areas, the current position stated by our current Alaskan Governor, Sean Parnell, of being “open for business” everywhere will significantly change the landscape of management of the state's public lands.

POTS AND PANS for McNeil River Base Camp have been Donated by Friends of McNeil River for use starting in summer, 2012. We have tried to help lighten folks load for flying to McNeil by donating 2 sets of “All-Clad” made in the USA, heavy duty, stainless-steel pots, pans, skillets, lids, oven mitts and a water kettle, plus high temperature utensils. This should help folks with their packing for the trip. Two stoves are already provided by F&G in the cookshack, and the older pots & skillets will be boxed & stored for emergency or high occupancy loads. The staff will instruct visitors in proper cleaning techniques to ensure a long life of use! We’ve gotten rave reviews!

McNeil River Hats(\$20): We currently have about 15 colors available. This year we have a couple of hat colors available in a weather resistant hat (\$25). We also have some knit stocking hats in a few colors-embroidered the same way and at the same \$20 price as the rest of the caps. Please add \$2.50 each for postage and handling, unless picked up in Anchorage or one of the following locations. Either mail a check to the PO Box below, or use the PayPal on our website with a follow-up email to let me know the particulars of your order and where to send it. They can also be picked up in Anchorage with some advance coordination by email or phone. Hats and Fieldbooks may be available in Homer at the Pratt Museum, Beluga Air, Northwind Aviation and Steller Air.

3rd Edition, McNeil River Photo ID Fieldbook

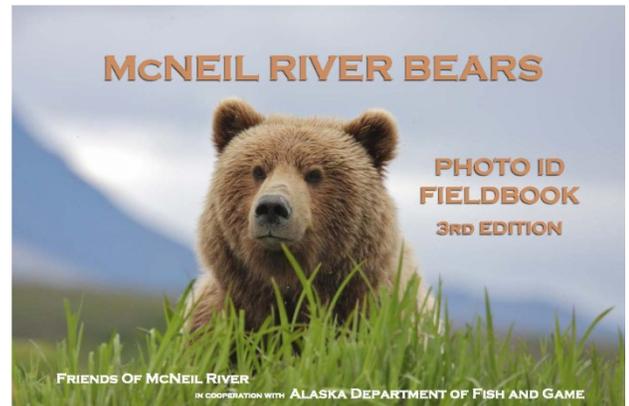
This is a **MUST HAVE** for everyone’s trip to McNeil!!!
(3rd Edition Cover photography by Drew Hamilton)



With the generous support of a Rasmuson Foundation Grant, FOMR published the 2009 and 2010 Photo ID Fieldbooks.

The Fieldbooks are a cooperative effort between the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and Friends of McNeil River. Both of the first two editions published in 2009 and 2010 were well received. The second edition was published with thirty-eight identified bears, new maps, and a more comprehensive photo guide of the plants of McNeil River. Books are available for sale through our website.

www.mcneilbears.org. To be fiscally responsible, we are recycling approximately 200 of the unsold 2nd editions by adding a new cover, adding additional information on which of the bears formerly in the book are no longer seen regularly and adding two new bears. The fieldbooks are also available for purchase from us in Anchorage, and in basecamp with payments sent to FOMR by mail.



We look forward to your thoughts and comments on this exciting project! Thanks go to Tom, Shawn, Larry, Colleen, Mike, Joe, Ed, Doug, Lennie and Drew for all their collaborative efforts. We could not do it without your help. This is a “**Must Have**” for your trip to McNeil River and is excellent as a gift for friends and family.

Don’t forget to visit our website for McNeil Wear clothing and gifts available from Café Press.

http://mcneilbears.org/home/?page_id=145 Check out our new Facebook page at

<https://www.facebook.com/mcneilbears> and “Like” us. Thank you very much for caring for the bears of McNeil River.

Please “bear” with us as we are all volunteers and are trying to keep you informed as information becomes available. Thank you.

2014 Friends of McNeil River Newsletter
POB 231091, Anchorage, AK 99523-1091
Contact: Mike@mcneilbears.org or visit our website at <http://www.mcneilbears.org/>

