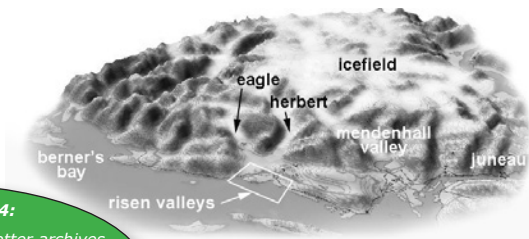


Discoveries

News & views from Discovery Southeast • summer 2003



Risen Valleys Wildlands 'out the road'

Kathy Hocker

March 2003—Strawberry Creek

Mink passed along the bank of the creek sometime last night. The past few days have been warm, softening the thick snow on the meadows. Then last night's drop to sub-freezing temperatures locked the snow surface into rock-like firmness, casting Mink's diagonally-paired footprints in ice.

June 20, 2003—Amalga Meadow

Bear rested here. Flattened sedge blades, showing silver undersides, mark the impression of her muscular body on the meadow. Nearby, a few tangled strands of her fur are caught on the limb of a little-wolf spruce.

June 21, 2003—Confluence of Herbert and Eagle Rivers

Otters traveled along this side channel. Each broad footprint perfectly preserved in the river mud-shows 5 stubby toes, and traces of the webbing between. Laid in loose, none-too-straight paths, the tracks evoke the makers' easy, bounding gait. This was a family of at least 4.

For several *Discovery* naturalists and a group of generous volunteers, this past year's adventures have included investigation of one of Juneau's treasures—the incredibly rich mosaic of coastline, forest, meadow, fen, bog, and waterways that

Missing from our digital newsletter archives have been several issues authored by DSE naturalist Kathy Hocker. I plan to reformat these as horizontal 'tablet' versions. Here's an example from 10 years ago.

Richard Cartensen

make up the 'Risen Valleys' between miles 24 and 29 of Veterans' Memorial Highway. This natural area, beginning at Jensen Arboretum at Pearl Harbor (orthophoto, page 2) and culminating in the wildlife-packed confluence of Herbert and Eagle Rivers, is almost all public land—managed by Alaska State Parks, City and Borough of Juneau (CBJ) Parks, the US Forest Service, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

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Banner: Context of Risen Valleys



Otter family,
Eagle River
sandbars



In many ways, the project was a naturalist's dream. Prowling around in woods and meadow, 'reading' how Weasel spent his evening, is what we like to do. To get paid for it, and to have our observations count toward land-use planning, was an added bonus.

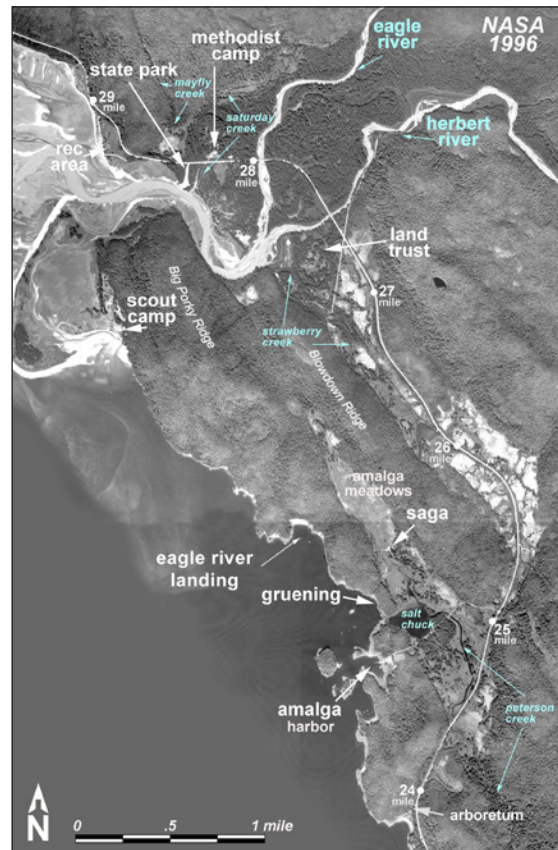
The study

In 2002, the Southeast Alaska Land Trust (SEAL Trust)¹ obtained funds from the Trust For Public Land to acquire a 157-acre parcel at the confluence of Herbert and Eagle Rivers and transfer it from private to public ownership. Concurrent with this landmark conservation achievement, stakeholders including CBJ, SEAL Trust, *Discovery Southeast*, Trail Mix, and private property owners in the area, facilitated by Sheinberg & Associates—began to discuss ways to coordinate the wide variety of private and public interests in use or protection of Risen Valleys properties.

One way suggested to ensure perpetuation of the area's

¹ Links to organizations in this paragraph: **SEAL Trust:** <http://southeastalaskalandtrust.org/> • **Trail Mix:** <http://juneautrails.org/> • **Sheinberg:** <http://www.sheinbergassociates.com/>

Left, above: Amalga Harbor resident Ed Mills beside bear-scratched red alder near Peterson Creek. Trees reveal extensive bear presence over many years. Interviews with experienced locals such as Ed were important in creating habitat maps for the Risen Valleys study. • **Left below:** Trail and tunnel entrance from very small mammal—probably masked shrew—January 2003, Amalga meadows. Shrews don't hibernate; they rely in winter on meadows and other open areas, where thick snow buildup insulates them from cold and predators.





world-class educational and recreational qualities was to develop an interconnecting trail system, including a ‘trunk’ trail from Amalga to Eagle Beach, with spurs leading to coastal overlooks, wildlife viewing sites, fishing spots, and ridges. But at a meeting of the joint CBJ Parks and Recreation and State Parks advisory boards on December 7, 2002, a clear consensus was expressed—that trail planning without regard to wildlife could damage the very qualities for which the area is best loved.

To gather baseline information about wildlife use in the Risen Valleys area, SEAL Trust and CBJ hired *Discovery Southeast* to conduct a preliminary wildlife study of the area, including habitat maps. Sweat and software would each have their share: naturalists would canvas the region on foot, skis, and snowshoes, making notes on animal sign through the seasons—then, using GIS systems, data would be recorded on a series of maps and aerial photos.

Seven months later, the study is complete.² Conducted by Richard

Panorama of bear territory—a rich mosaic of spruce, meadow, and red alder. Note the scratch marks on the alder at right center. The *Discovery* study found extensive bear sign in and near this rare habitat, as well as anadromous fish in its small streams.

Carstensen, with field assistance from Steve Merli, myself, and a host of volunteers, the study will be used to help route trails and make access decisions—ensuring that wildlife have their say in the process.

Risen Valleys

Although the area is known by a variety of names including the ‘Green Zone,’ Richard chose to call it ‘Risen Valleys’ for this study. The name reflects the land’s dynamic history—a saga of glacial movement and rebounding land, where tide-swept channels have sprung crops of Lyngbye sedge, and salt marshes have molted into uplift meadows of head-high fern.

In the late 1700s, at the peak of the Little Ice Age, Herbert and Eagle

² PS 2014: Download this report from <http://www.juneanature.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/carstensen-risen-valleys-03.pdf>



glaciers rested several miles downvalley from their present locations. The valley floors between Big Porky Ridge, Blowdown Ridge, and the Herbert River country (orthophoto, page 2) were estuaries. Tides pushed up from the mouth of the Herbert/Eagle drainage and inland from the Amalga Harbor area, their daily surges scouring and redepositing glacial sediments into patterns of sand, silt, and gravel. Porky Ridge was, at least ephemerally, an island.

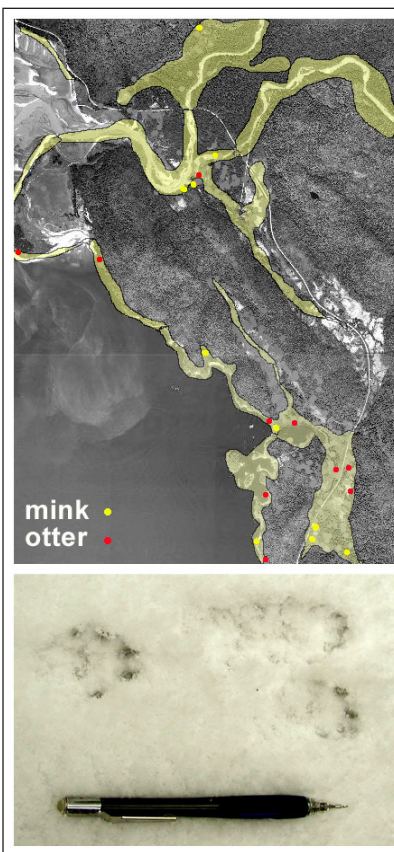
As the glaciers receded and the land rose, the two once-tidewashed flat valleys were colonized by upland vegetation—gradually emerging as the complex patchwork of spruce forest, uplift meadow, sedge fen, and marsh that we see today.

Tracking

Since this was to be a preliminary survey of wildlife, rather

Risen Valleys habitats, top to bottom: Uplift meadows are important foraging and resting habitats for bear. In winter these meadows host weasel, rodents, and snowshoe hare. • Among the less critical wildlife habitats in Risen Valleys are blowdown forests such as this one above Eagle Beach Recreation Area. Red squirrel and porcupine are among the few mammal species to thrive here. • ‘Pocket’ beaches such as this one between Amalga Harbor and the Scout Camp could make inviting—and relatively low-impact—destinations for spur trails.

Restricted to coastlines and riparian corridors, mink and otter are particularly sensitive to pressures such as trapping, free-ranging dogs, and excessive traffic on riverside trails. **Above:** range map for Risen Valleys mink and otter, extrapolated from interviews, sign survey, and habitat. **Right:** Mink tracks near Peterson Creek. Pencil is 5.5 inches



than an extensive study, *Discovery's* object was to cover as much of the area as possible, within time limits. Our survey routes followed established trails, proposed routes, and seldom-visited backcountry sites.

Field equipment included notebooks, pocket tape recorders, digital cameras, and handheld GPS units. As trackers crunched through snow, scrambled across fallen logs, or strolled along gravel bars, our focus stayed close at hand: is that a track in the mud? What animal left that tuft of hair? Is this a deer trail?

For each sign of an animal, a GPS waypoint was created, and notes on species, sign type, and habitat type were made. These notes and waypoints were then incorporated into an ArcMap (GIS) project file, previously set up to show vegetation types, topography, streams, proposed and established trails, and land ownership. Knowledgeable locals were interviewed, and their wildlife observations collected as well.

Results

The *Discovery Southeast* study confirmed that this piece of land is rich in habitat diversity. Its habitats include rocky shorelines, river bars, salt marshes, uplift meadows, bogs (muskegs), fens, freshwater marshes, deciduous thickets, uplift spruce forests, alluvial forests and alluvial fan forests (including Mayfly Creek fan—see spring 2003 issue of *Discoveries*), upland hemlock forests, and old clearcuts.

Tracking expeditions and interviews reveal that the area is rich in wildlife as well, showing signs of the present-day wanderings and workings of black bear, deer, otter, mink, weasel, snowshoe hare, marmot, beaver, porcupine, squirrel, and a host of small rodents. Reports tell of regular use by brown bear, wolf and lynx.

Combining the habitat and wildlife sign information reveals clear patterns of use—certain habitats, such as uplift meadows, salt marshes, and mixed

deciduous/conifer/meadow areas, are particularly important to wildlife. Others, such as blow down forests and bogs, show less wildlife use.

Conclusions

If it's true that one of the most important values of the Risen Valleys area is the richness of its wildlife, we can use our knowledge of the habits and movements of those wild creatures to guide us as we plan our own map of the country. Such a map would allow us to savor the things we love about the area—warm meadows, stunning coastal views, spring birdsong, the thrill of finding a wolf track or seeing a bear drift through the trees—without pushing its wild inhabitants out.

What would this map look like? According to *Discovery Southeast's* results, it might route main trails primarily through less-sensitive habitats such as muskegs and blowdown forests, with spur trails to ridgetop viewpoints, meadows, creeksides, and pocket beaches. It could include features such as wildlife-viewing platforms set in the trees at meadow edges, where we could stand and watch grazing deer and bear. And it might also include some guidelines for our own behavior in this country—with a few judicious use restrictions in certain particularly sensitive areas, or at sensitive times of the year.

The recent SEAL Trust purchase at the confluence of Herbert and Eagle Rivers was the touchstone for this project—in a way, perfect microcosm of the best of Risen Valleys, and a symbol for the area as a whole. It's diverse—encompassing river flood plains, cool forests of vigorous young wolf-spruce, boot-sucking fens, glowing uplift meadows of bear salad, and thickets where the calligraphy of baby black bear claws decorates the alder trunks. Every species of concern in this study—brown and black bear, wolf, lynx, otter, mink, weasel, marmot, and hare—is known to use or have used this land.

It's also land that hangs in a precarious balance just now. Resting as private property for decades, it has benefited from its many years of solitude. Bears bring their cubs to its meadows, buffered from the noisy and hazardous human world by "No Trespassing" signs. Mink and otter caper freely along the riverbank, where rarely are human tracks seen. Hares skitter over deep, fresh snow in winter, nipping willow-buds, wary but unmolested by skiers and dogs.

This is going to change. Public land—especially such luscious land as this—attracts, public attention and public visits. It's up to us to choose how we deal with the inevitable increased pressure on this parcel, and the rest of Risen Valleys.

Confluence of Herbert and Eagle Rivers at north end of Risen Valleys. During the Little Ice Age, tides reached inland as far as Methodist Camp (M), and flowed across what are now the meadows and spruce stands surrounding Strawberry Creek (S). The SEAL Trust purchase is at (T).



Dog day thoughts

Kathy Hocker

I am a dog owner; one of my great pleasures is taking my border collie mix, Magpie, on long rambles through the backcountry. But recent work tracking wildlife in the Risen Valleys, and ongoing discussions of the impacts of dogs on wildlife, have made me much more circumspect about where I hike with her, and where I leave her behind. This article stemmed from a tracking expedition to Amalga Meadows.

Magpie would love this place. The cool edge of woods, hemmed by on-again, off-again game trails ... the lush sun-warmed sedges of the meadow, laced with pad foot bear paths and sheltering pools of intense and intriguing scent... everywhere there are things for an inquisitive young dog to toy with, to follow, to investigate. If she were here with me today, my compact mutt would explode with joy: she'd gallop under the hemlocks, flinging herself over fallen logs, or leap across meadow-edge creeklets to spring in great exuberant leaps through the tall sedges.

Problem is, this place probably would not love Magpie. Even I—a lone human, carefully exploring off-trail at the edge of the rich meadow—can't help but leave behind crushed violets and flattened sedge stalks, fear-struck young savannah sparrows and great drifts of human scent. My dog would leave more.

It's not that Magpie is a particularly predatory beast. In fact, thinking to make her a proper 'naturalist's dog,' I trained her from puppyhood not to give in to her urges to chase wildlife. She stays within sight, obeys commands to 'leave it,' and will, when called to 'come,' spin toward me so quickly I'm amazed she doesn't sprain her back. I have never known her to harm a wild creature.

But that just may not be enough—not for this place. If she were here, she'd be taking seventeen leaps for each pace of mine, blasting through the meadow in curving paths that would decorate my straight-stitched trail with fancywork. Unlike me, she wouldn't wrench herself to a stop to avoid smashing into the life of another being. She's a dog ... why would she?



Add more dogs—more or less gently-disposed towards wild critters—and this rich world of bear, deer, mink, and ermine could eventually become the province of small rodents, hardy birds, porcupines, ... and dogs and people. It's already happened, at least in part, to plenty of similar local meadows: Brotherhood Bridge, Switzer Creek, Fish Creek.

Perhaps we could leash our canine friends, and have them follow us on the trail? Perhaps ... but there's evidence that their scent alone could deter wildlife. To species such as mink, marten, wolverine, otter, weasel, and hare, the dog tribe represents danger of a sort more ancient and potent than humans. Repeated trails of pungent dogginess could lace this meadow with scents as forbidding to them as the stench of spilled chemicals might be to us.

People have been hiking, skiing, and exploring here for decades, and use of these meadows is only going to grow in the future. Trail-planning is still in process here. Maybe this is a place, then, to test the effectiveness of no-dog zoning on wildlife use.

This isn't "anti-dog" sentiment at all. There's no malice in our dogs—only instinct, drive, and pleasure at being free to roam and sniff and run and leap and be with the people they adore. They are as exuberant, clumsy, and guileless as toddlers in the way that they greet the world. It's just that there are so many of them, and so many of us—and the more we bring ourselves into new, wild areas, the more we push the wildness out. It would be good to keep some of that wildness close.

Maggie would love this place. But she would also love a good gallop up Salmon Creek Road, where she can snuffle in the roadside alders; she'd like a trot down to Sandy Beach at low tide and a chance to careen across the wet sand after a flung tennis ball; she'd appreciate an afternoon spent nosing around in a relatively wildlife-poor second growth forest.

If a couple of carefully-chosen sensitive areas such as this are closed to dogs, there are still plenty of other places for us to take them—and there will be one place where we ourselves can come to find out whether their absence could benefit wildlife.

It's worth a try.

New Discovery Guide

Do you know the difference between a pink salmon fry and a coho fry? Ever wonder about that little water bug that builds a shell for itself out of spruce needles? Want to learn how to tell pondweed from maretail?

Thanks to a generous grant from the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (part of the same funding that supported our Creek Stewards project last year), we're pleased to present the newest in our *Discovery Guide* series: *Discovery guide to streamwalking*. This 4-fold, extra-tough laminated field guide is ready to slip into a pocket or a pack as you make your next trip to one of our many streams, rivers, and ponds. It includes illustrations of, and information about, 10 species of small fish, 3 species of amphibians, 22 plants, and 28 types of aquatic insects. It also includes an illustrated overview of common stream features.

The *Discovery guide to streamwalking* is available for \$8 from the *Discovery Southeast* office, and should be appearing in bookstores soon. Or if you just can't wait, buy it (and other *Discovery* publications) directly from our website at www.discoverysoutheast.org.



Tracking puzzlers

Wildlife of Risen Valleys

Kathy Hocker

All of these photos were taken in the Risen Valleys area near Juneau. You be the naturalist—try to figure out who left these tracks and signs. Answers are at the bottom of the page.



Answers: 1 Hoary marmot. 2 Great blue heron. 3 Beaver (the fact that it's a hemlock tree tells us the beavers may have run out of alder, cottonwood, and willow—their preferred foods). 4 River otter. 5 Porcupine.

Sweetgrass (*Hierochloa odorata*) is found in uplift meadows throughout northern Southeast Alaska. Its distinctive, aromatic scent has made it a sacred plant in both European and Native American cultures.



Field sketchbook—Sweetgrass

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