

# Wedgewood Wildlife Sanctuary at Wedgewood Resort

212 Wedgewood Drive Fairbanks Alaska 99701



## Fat Birds and Frozen Frogs: New Wedgewood Wildlife Sanctuary Showcases Wild Living in the Far North

Alaska's boreal forest, or taiga, is a land of extremes. Drastic fluctuations in day length (ranging from 4 hours in the winter to almost 24 hours in the summer), temperature variations spanning from -60° to 100° F, low precipitation, frequent fires, and brief summers followed by long winters pose unique challenges for Alaska's wild animals and plant life.

One can learn how plants and animals tackle these challenges at the new Wedgewood Wildlife Sanctuary. The sanctuary was created by Fountainhead Hotels in 2007 to preserve 75 acres of boreal forest and wetland habitat within Fairbanks' expanding urban area. "Hotel companies don't typically buy land to turn it in to a wildlife refuge," says owner Tim Cerny, "but we wanted to preserve some green space next to the hotel for wildlife, as well as for our guests to enjoy." Wedgewood Resort is now sandwiched between the sanctuary and the 1,800-acre Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge—an impressive buffer against the burgeoning box-store development in Fairbanks.

Hotel patrons and other visitors are making good use of the 1.5 miles of new nature trails that meander through the forest and around scenic Wander Lake. The trails are made of compacted gravel, making them suitable for wheelchairs and strollers. Numerous benches provide ample opportunity to sit and watch for wildlife. Two observation decks and a blind also provide excellent vantage points from which to observe and photograph the birds and beaver family at Wander Lake.

The hotel has placed 16 interpretive signs along the trails to illustrate how animals and plants at the sanctuary have adapted to the extreme climate of Alaska's taiga ecosystem. Nancy DeWitt, project director for the sanctuary, developed the signs. "In my previous encounters with tourists, I found that they were very curious about how wildlife could stay alive during our long, cold winters," she says. "I wanted our signs to explain how uniquely adapted—and tough—the critters and plants that live here are."

The survival stories told on the signs are downright amazing. There are wood frogs that freeze solid in the winter without dying, trees that can grow on permanently frozen soil, and fish that gulp air at holes created by muskrats in the ice of oxygen-starved ponds. Arctic terns migrate 10,000 miles from Alaska to Antarctica each fall to enjoy continuous summer, while resident chickadees are able to quickly pack on a huge amount of fat each winter day so they can metabolize it to stay warm during the long night.

Clearly, a lot of animals aren't phased by the challenges of living in the boreal forest. More than 105 bird species plus moose, beavers, flying squirrels, muskrats, snowshoe hares and a variety of butterflies have been recorded at the Wedgewood Wildlife Sanctuary. This diversity is due in large part to newly developed wetlands created at Wander Lake, a former gravel pit. In 2008 Fountainhead Hotels re-contoured two sections of the deep lake's shoreline to create shallows for emergent plants, wading birds, and fish-rearing

habitat. To date, staff and youth volunteers have transplanted more than 1,000 wetland plants and 3,300 non-game fish into Wander Lake. Fourteen nesting boxes for swallows, ducks, owls and falcons have also been installed.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) recently designated Wander Lake as a model wetland restoration project for Alaska and uses it as a demonstration site to show other landowners what can be accomplished with old gravel pits. Many cooperators have partnered with Fountainhead Hotels on to improve Wander Lake, including the USFWS, Alaska Department of Fish & Game, Youth Conservation Corps, Alaska Bird Observatory, Fairbanks Cooperative Weed Management Area, scout troops, and the Fairbanks Water & Soil Conservation District. Members of Fort Wainwright's Wounded Warrior Transition Unit (comprised of soldiers wounded in Iraq/Afghanistan who are leaving the Army due to disabilities) have received valuable job training while helping with the Wander Lake project.

The Wedgewood Wildlife Sanctuary has increased nesting and migratory stopover habitat for numerous birds, including at-risk species such as rusty blackbird and horned grebe. New species, such as kingfishers, ospreys, and loons can now be found foraging for fish at the lake. Boreal owls, chickadees and tree swallows have moved into the nest boxes. Fish transplanted in 2007 have reproduced each spring, despite living under ice for six months each winter.

Humans love the sanctuary too. "Many of our guests have spent much of their trip looking for Alaska wildlife through a bus or train window," says Cerny, "so they really appreciate being able to step out their hotel door and take a peaceful walk in the woods to look and listen for wildlife." Lucky hikers may see a moose dipping its head under water to graze, spy on a sleeping owl, or perhaps watch a beaver dragging tree limbs to its food cache. In the winter, the trails will be groomed to provide smooth sailing for hikers and cross-country skiers.

Now, that's "wild living" we can all handle!

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