

# Chena Flats Greenbelt Project

December 2009

*Happy Holidays!*

Newsletter

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## Greenbelt grows by 163 acres in 2009

The last twelve months have swelled the size of the Greenbelt to a total of 361 acres – all since our inception in 2005! We acquired these most recent additions (163 acres, please see map on page 3) through a combination of donated and purchased property (with the assistance of The Conservation Fund, the State Recreational Trails Program, the



## Annual Fund Appeal

This newsletter will take the place of our annual December fund appeal. We are currently in the very early stages of two major land acquisitions and need your financial help. If you would like to contribute to our effort, please visit [www.chenaflats.org](http://www.chenaflats.org) to donate online, call 907-479-4345, or mail a check to The Interior Alaska Land Trust, PO Box 84169, Fairbanks, AK 99708 using the enclosed, pre-addressed envelope.

Donations to the Interior Alaska Land Trust are fully tax deductible. The Land Trust is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization (tax ID: 92-0156956).

North American Wetlands Conservation Act, and a generous donor). Although we are pleased with our progress, there is more work to be done, and we continue to work with other willing sellers to acquire additional properties, and we hope to interest landowners in donating conservation easements on parcels where there is significant conservation and/or recreational value.

Original Cripple Creek Channel.

## Rusty blackbirds in the Chena Flats

The rusty blackbird is the species that might benefit the most from land conservation in the Chena Flats area. This species was once abundant in Interior wetlands, but in recent years populations have declined as much as 90% or more. We have heard anecdotes from old-time Fairbanksans of flocks of rusty blackbirds swarming in the evening skies.



Dave Shaw/Wild Imagination Photo

The Alaska Bird Observatory has conducted preliminary investigations into this largely un-studied species and suggested that predation of eggs and young may be the cause for a high nest failure rate. Experts have wondered whether urbanization, with its resultant habitat fragmentation, may be the cause for higher than usual nest failure. Habitat

fragmentation by development is sometimes identified as the cause of increased predation on bird nests.

In the summer of 2008 the USFWS located four rusty blackbird nests on one of the Greenbelt properties to study possible causes of nest failures in our area. More nests were found in the Greenbelt than the other areas studied in Fairbanks. One of these nests failed. Mammal hairs were found near the nest, and were most likely to be from a domestic cat, domestic dog, or a fox. A raven made a meal of the nest contents at one of the two nests studied in Creamer's Field.

Some of the larger properties in the Chena Flats are likely excellent rusty blackbird habitat, and we are exploring funding opportunities in this area to further study rusty blackbird use in the Chena Flats.

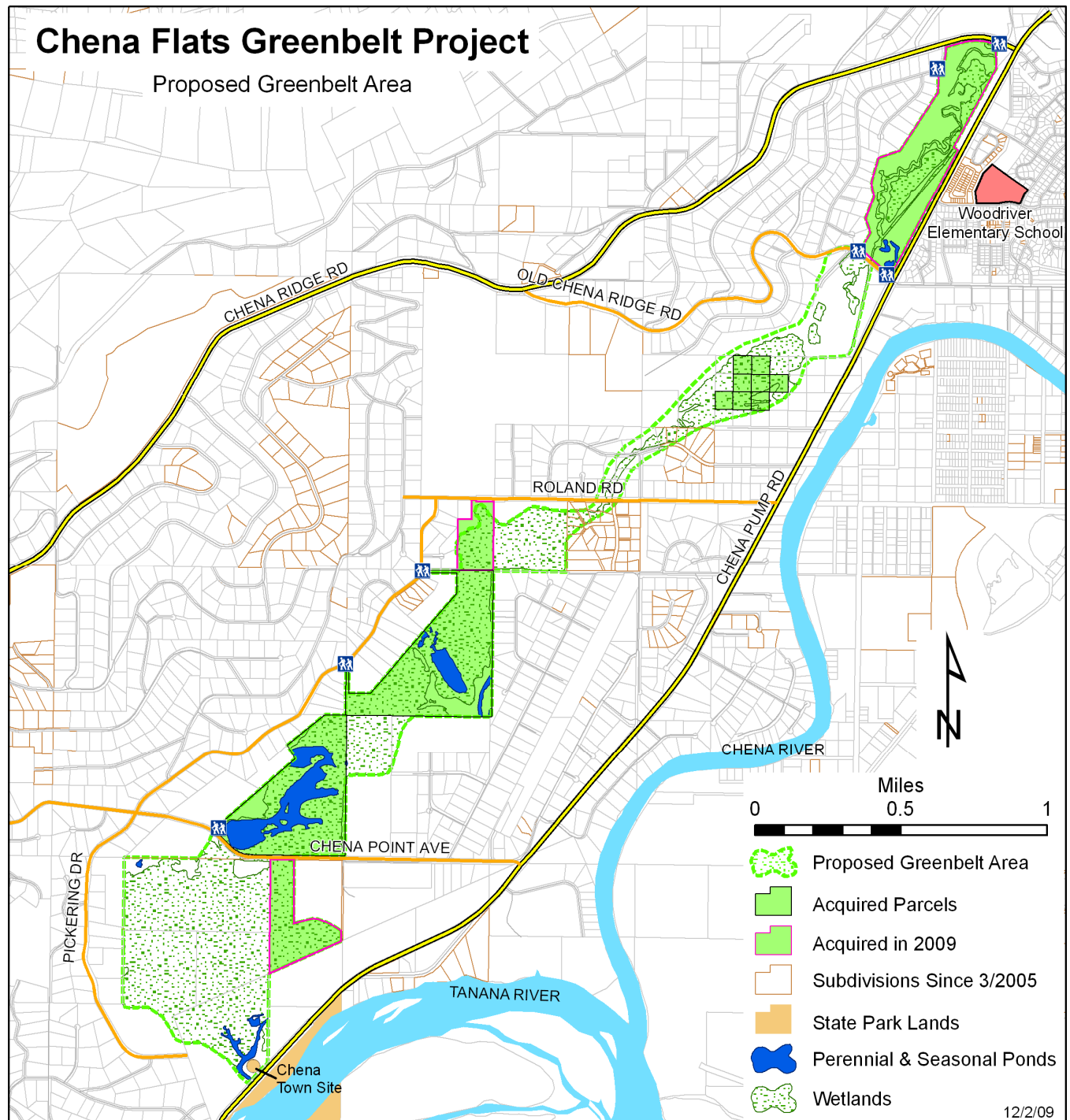
## Outdoor Open House

One of the additions to the Greenbelt in the last year is an 89-acre parcel between the Old and new Chena Ridge Roads. This property has nearly a mile of road frontage along Chena Pump Road, and also contains a portion of the original Cripple Creek channel (see photo, first page). We held an Outdoor Open House on the property in late September. Nearly 50 people stopped by to say hello, have a hot dog, or to explore the property despite the early snowfall. We hope you will explore the trails on skis or on foot this winter.





Some trails are more used than others. Please see the map if you are interested in trail access points or give Sally a call at 479-4345. Please note, with the exception of the Chena Point Avenue access, there is no dedicated parking at these trailheads.



One of the most interesting features of the property is Cripple Creek. Cripple Creek was diverted in the 1930s to a ditch, which was constructed to route wastewater from hydraulic mining in Ester back to the Chena River. The ditch is easily visible along Chena Pump Road, but to enjoy the creek, which is still a peaceful place despite having been without its flow for nearly 70-years, you have to leave both your car and then the trail. The US Fish and Wildlife Service conducted a preliminary fish study this past summer in the ditch, which was found to contain a few fingerling grayling, and they plan to explore the original

Cripple Creek channel next summer. There is some interest in the community in restoring the original flow to Cripple Creek. The USFWS and other partners are in the very early explorations of this idea. Such an effort would require the cooperation of the Alaska Department of Transportation, and funding from several sources over a number of years to accomplish.

## Need to raise \$75,000 for large parcel

The largest remaining undeveloped parcel in the Chena Flats area may be available for purchase. The owners have indicated they would be willing to sell to the Project (though the property is not on the market). The Conservation Fund, a national organization we have partnered with to assist with purchasing land, has agreed to match the purchase price of the land. We need to raise about \$75,000 for our share to purchase the property, and as is so often the case, the sooner the better! If you think you can help, please consider donating this year. Your contributions go directly to land purchases, not towards staff time, fundraising, or any other incidental expenses. You can hardly make a more lasting contribution than to purchase land for conservation. The land will remain forever undeveloped.

## Trail work in the Flats

The idea of a users group has come up several times at meetings and open houses. Now that there is a significant amount of land and trail in the Greenbelt, it might be time to form such a group, similar to the Pearl Creek Nordic Ski Park Users Group off of Ballaine Road. This is a “club” of sorts, where users and other interested folks gather once or twice a year to discuss the state of the trails, plan for upgrades and maintenance, and hold trail-work days.

There are several small, potential trail projects in the Greenbelt that would improve accessibility to users. This past July with the help of a group of student interns from the Fish and Wildlife Service Habitat Restoration program, we cleared a small trail along a section line easement off of Pickering Drive. The Habitat Restoration crew plus help and tools from local trails advocates Geoff Orth of Alaska



Danny Dashevsky, Sally Andersen and Zack Telfer clearing trail on the Flats (not pictured are Anna Quist, David Vokes, and Nick Wescott).

Trails, and Eric Troyer who writes the Interior Trails Quarterly, made quick work of the project. We removed downed logs from the trail, and cut brush and grass out of the right of way, making a visual line parallel to the existing driveway. There is more work that could be done at this location to direct traffic away from the adjacent driveway and make a better connection from a well-used trail on the other side of Pickering Drive. We have also discussed the possibility of building a small ramp and a two-car parking area at this location. We've heard from several users of the Lower Cripple Creek parcel who would like to clear a few shrubs to improve trails, and would like help addressing the severe trail damage in a few places. If this type of involvement interests you, please give Sally a call at 479-4345.



## What's next? The 5-year plan

In the midst of private land experiencing a boom of residential and light-industrial development, a group of interested and motivated people, with varied motives, some interested in wetlands conservation, some in recreational trails, have done something big. They—we, you, have conserved over 360 acres of the land we have been enjoying for years (although while sometimes trespassing) for future generations. That's a big deal. And now you can enjoy many of these areas without trespassing.

While there are several large, key parcels we would still like to see conserved (and we need your financial support for this), we are also moving out of this initial land acquisition phase. The formation of a Chena Flats Users Group is one logical step forward, and we hope to hear from our neighbors who are interested in being long-term stewards of these lands. We hope to improve access to the properties through signs and small parking areas. We will continue to work with the Fairbanks North Star Borough Department of Parks and Recreation to donate the title of Greenbelt properties for long-term management (while retaining the development rights). We hope to also encourage use of the Lower Cripple Creek parcel along Chena Pump Road by working with teachers at Woodriver School to make them aware of the potential of this outdoor classroom. This may require some significant infrastructure, such as a pedestrian bridge like the one spanning Geist Road near West Valley High School, to make crossing Chena Pump Road safe for students. There are also many potential trail projects on this property, which we hope will become a treasure to the community.



One of the tranquil wetlands conserved by the Chena Flats Greenbelt Project.

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