

# The Chugach: The Forest in Alaska's Backyard

A primer on the Chugach National Forest



The Chugach National Forest is our nation's most northerly forest.

The Chugach National Forest in south-central Alaska is one of our nation's most ecologically diverse landscapes. It is a breathtaking place defined by rugged landscapes of rock and ice, like the snowy peaks of Prince William Sound. Yet it is also a place where wildlife thrives, from crystal-clear streams overflowing with salmon and trout, to the surrounding forest land that is home to brown bears, bald eagles and an abundance of moose.

Roughly the size of New Hampshire, the Chugach National Forest is our nation's second largest national forest – second

only to its neighbor to the southeast, the Tongass. The Chugach has three distinct landscapes; the Copper River Delta, the Eastern Kenai Peninsula, and Prince William Sound. The Copper River Delta is the largest contiguous wetlands in the United States and is considered one of the most essential bird habitats in the world. The Kenai Peninsula includes the Russian River, and provides habitat to more than 5,000 moose. Prince William Sound is home to more than 3,000 shore land miles of bays, coves and deep fjords, and more than 20 tidewater glaciers. The 2.1 million acre Nellie Juan-College Fjord Wilderness Study Area is located within Prince William Sound, and is the country's largest Congressionally-mandated wilderness study area.

## Wildlife of the Chugach

The Chugach's geographic diversity is matched by the wide variety of wildlife that calls the forest home. The streams and waters of the Chugach contain many species of trout, plus Arctic grayling and all 5 species of pacific salmon. The Kenai Peninsula is truly a fisherman's paradise, renowned for its late summer salmon run. Mountain goats and more than 200 colonies of seabirds cling to the steep hillsides of Prince William Sound, while in its waters you can find Dall porpoises, harbor seals, sea otters, sea lions, Orcas and humpback whales. Somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 bald eagles nest in the cliffs and trees around Prince William Sound, a population equal to that of the entire lower 48. The Copper River Delta is one of the most essential shore bird habitats in the world. The area hosts more than 15 million birds—comprised of 214 species—every year.



Bald Eagle in the Nellie Juan Collage-wilderness study area. Photo by Debbie Miller

More than one million people visit the Chugach annually from all over the world; however it is local Alaskans that really utilize what the Chugach has to offer. According to the U.S. Forest Service, the Chugach serves as the “backyard” for half of Alaska’s residents. It is a place where residents enjoy hiking, bird watching, kayaking, skiing, bike riding, horseback riding and other recreation activities. It is also a place where people come to hunt, fish and gather as part of a subsistence lifestyle. The Chugach is a place Alaska residents hold near and dear to their hearts – Alaskans love the Chugach!

### History of Wilderness:



In the Nellie-Juan College Fjord Wilderness Study Area: Photo by Debbie Miller

Unfortunately, there currently are few protections in place to ensure the long-term health of the forest. Unique within the national forest system, the Chugach does not contain a single acre of protected Wilderness.

In 1980, Congress instructed the U.S. Forest Service to study a portion of the Chugach, designating the Nellie Juan-College Fjord Wilderness Study Area in Prince William Sound to determine whether the area qualified as viable for Wilderness. After examining the wilderness study area, the Forest Service twice recommended that Congress pass legislation to protect up to 1.5 million

acres of the Nellie-Juan as Wilderness. Thirty-three years later and despite widespread public support, no action has been taken in Congress to make Wilderness a reality in the Chugach.

### Why Now:

In 2010, the Obama administration announced a new forest planning rule under the Forests Management Act. The rule, finalized by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, provides a framework allowing the Forest Service to meet current and future needs of a forest taking into account current science, land management and resource management. Additionally, the administration picked eight national forests as early adopters of the new rule, including the Chugach. The U.S. Forest Service must recommend the continuation of the wilderness study area designation as a part of this plan in order for the Nellie -Juan-College Fjord Wilderness Study Area to have a hope of becoming Wilderness. If it is included in the plan, the Forest Service should then again petition Congress and ask it to designate Wilderness in the Chugach.

**For more information:**

**Contact Alaska Wilderness League’s Rainforest Program Director at (202)544-5205  
Or visit [www.alaskawild.org](http://www.alaskawild.org)**