

Michele "Shelly" Szepanski

Fairbanks resident, Michele "Shelly" Szepanski, died peacefully in Minnesota on Dec. 4, 2008, after a courageous four-year battle with melanoma. Like us, many of you knew Shelly as a friend and professional colleague. She contributed substantially in her short life to the conservation of Alaska's wildlife and she will be greatly missed.

Shelly was born in Minneapolis on Feb. 4, 1967, and lived in Juneau, Anchorage, McGrath, and Fairbanks for most of her 41 years. She graduated from Juneau-Douglas High School in 1985 and was a member of the All-State Girls' High School basketball team her junior and senior years.

Shelly was fascinated with the outdoors and its wildlife resources throughout her life. She received a B.S. in Biological Sciences from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks (UAF) and a M.S. in Wildlife Resources from the University of Idaho. Her M.S. research involved the study of marine resources in the diet of the Alexander Archipelago wolf using stable isotope analysis. She spent one summer working under Dr. David Mech in Northern Minnesota on wolf and deer population dynamics, and three years with the U.S. Forest Service in Juneau, working on habitat assessment projects for ungulates, sea birds, and marine mammals. Shelly developed long-lasting relationships with many ADF&G biologists while working on a variety of research projects in Juneau, Anchorage, and Fairbanks. In 2001 she became the Assistant Area Wildlife Biologist in McGrath. She was instrumental in the successful undertaking of field operations during the McGrath predator control project, assisting with bear, wolf, and moose calf captures and necropsies, and data management and analyses. She returned to Fairbanks in January, 2004 to begin a Ph.D. project through UAF, measuring large-scale dynamics of moose nutrition across Interior and Southwest Alaska.

While battling cancer, Shelly continued to work on her doctorate degree and also earned her pilot's license. She purchased a plane, flew cross-country flights from Fairbanks to McGrath and Anchorage, and enjoyed a solo fly-in caribou hunt. During her time in Minnesota, she began taking dressage lessons and was an increasingly proficient rider. Throughout her life, Shelly maintained her love for the outdoors and Alaska. Her positive, self-confident nature was an inspiration to her friends and colleagues.

Shelly is survived by her parents, Lynn and Bill Szepanski of Anoka, Minnesota; her sister and brother-in-law, Jennifer and Steve Mendive of Palmer; grandmother, Lorraine Waller of Minnesota; and her good friends, Kalin Kellie, Heather Wilson, and Caroline Brown of Alaska.

Shelly's cremains will be spread at various Alaska locations, according to her wishes. For more about Shelly and her inspiring life, please visit <http://shellyszepanski.blogspot.com/>.

It's often said that we, in the natural resources profession, are a family. We believe this to be true. As we unite in grieving the loss of our close friend and "family member", we respectfully ask that we also unite in celebrating the love of life and the many contributions Shelly made to many of us, personally, as well as to the natural resources we all care so passionately about. Let's ensure Shelly's life remains a legacy for all of us to aspire to. —*Kalin Kellie and Doug Larsen*



Photo provided by Kalin Kellie