

Caribou Trails



Jim Dau

News from the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group

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Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group

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New caribou hunting rules in effect

After more than 30 years of liberal caribou hunting, the Board of Game has changed regulations to reduce the total harvest from the Western Arctic and Teshekpuk caribou herds. Each herd has declined significantly and cannot support the previous levels of harvest by hunters.

The most recent Western Arctic Herd caribou census in 2013 shows that the herd has declined by more than half from its peak population of 490,000 caribou to a count of 235,000 caribou. There was a steep increase in the annual rate of decline between the last two population counts completed in 2011 to 2013.

The Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group's Cooperative Management Plan (CMP) has caribou management recommendations based on four levels of population size and trend. The latest population count and herd's declining trend puts the herd below the 'Liberal Management' level and well into the 'Conservative Management' level where conservation measures, including reducing harvest, are outlined by the plan. If the decline continues, the herd could be in 'Preservative Management' level within the next 1-3 years and even 'Critical Management', if the herd continues to decline to 130,000 or less. If the herd does fall below these levels, continued guidance on how to restrict harvests in the future will be needed.



Jim Dau

In the past year, Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G) staff engaged in a comprehensive and widespread outreach effort to advise the Working Group, communities within the range of the herd, advisory committees, subsistence advisory councils, and federal agencies about the herd decline and gather feedback from the public on potential changes in management. The majority of the feedback from these meetings indicated that people felt the need to reduce caribou harvests now, as well as the need to reduce numbers of wolves and brown bears (predators).

As these meetings were taking place, ADF&G asked the Board of Game to consider a proposal to change caribou hunting regulations for both the Western Arctic and Teshekpuk herds following guidelines outlined in the CMP that would begin to reduce harvest: 1) stop the harvest of calves (caribou less than 1 year old) by all hunters; 2) close the nonresident cow season; and 3) begin reducing the harvest of bulls by nonresidents. In addition, ADF&G proposed closing the same-day-airborne winter hunt for caribou in Unit 22.

Advisory committee representatives quickly realized the proposal would have little real effect on caribou harvests because very few people take calves; few nonresident hunters harvest cows; nonresident hunters generally take less than 3% of the total WAH harvest each year; and few caribou have been taken under the same-day-airborne hunt in Unit 22.

Although none of the representatives liked the prospect of restricting people who depend on caribou for meat, they realized it was necessary. Everyone needs to share the burden of reducing harvests regardless of where they live or why they hunt caribou. Advisory Committees (AC) from across the range of the herd discussed and reached agreement to further reduce harvests and submitted them to the Board. Other amendments, such as prohibiting the harvest of cows with calves and creating daily quotas for bulls and cows, were also submitted to the Board. In March of 2015, the Board considered herd status, AC amendments and testimony, and public comments before amending and adopting harvest restrictions.

For most of the range of the WAH, the bag limit under state regulations will remain 5 caribou per day (no change from past years). There will be no time of year when caribou hunting is completely closed. For residents, depending on the date, hunters will be able to take either bulls or cows, and at some times of the year they will be able to take caribou of either sex. At this time, multiple proposals have been submitted to the Federal Subsistence Board to make federal caribou hunting regulations consistent with the new State hunting regulations.

Season dates and bag limits for caribou hunting under state regulations by resident and nonresident hunters are shown by Game Management Unit on page 3.

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Listening to our elders



Minnie Gray

A Kobuk River elder shares her experience, knowledge, and appreciation of caribou

Minnie Gray addressed the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group at the 2014 annual meeting. She spoke to the group in Inupiaq, translated by her niece Helena Jones. Some excerpts from her presentation are highlighted below.

“Before the caribou came around the men would go north with dogs to pack meat back home from the north.”

My name is Aliitchak. I grew up and lived in Shungnak and later moved to Ambler. When we were growing up, there were hardly any caribou in our area. We had meat like porcupine, ducks, geese, once in a while caribou arrived but not often did caribou come around. Before the caribou came around the men would go north with dogs to pack meat back home from the north. When the caribou started arriving, Inupiaq culture and our elders told us

not to block the caribou that are about to cross or coming in because you will lessen the migration. Don't interrupt the migration, this is important. After the first group crosses the river, then it is ok to hunt. When the caribou finally arrived, nobody wasted anything. The fur was saved and dried for winter use. In summer time they dried everything with no waste for winter use. When they bring the fur and legs they use them for mukluks. Summer meat is dried along with fat. At Christmas time, Akutuk was made, and dried meat was used year around when caribou was brought from the north.

“Our elders told us not to waste.”

When I was growing up, caribou were not abundant so using everything was very important. When we were young we camped and it was not easy, we had hard time hunting so we didn't waste anything. The fur was never thrown in the country. Everything was taken home. Our elders told us not to waste. Not to throw anything out. When you get caribou in the fall, then you dry it for winter. When it is spring you take the bones and smash and boil them. The fat on the surface is collected and you dry caribou stomach inside out and then clean it and dry it. Then you put the bone fat in there and eat it with dried meat and dried fish. Yoi... good meat!! The caribou fur is used in many ways. It is used for sleeping bags, mattresses, winter fur is better because it doesn't shed as much as spring fur. It is better for waterproof mukluks. That is how we lived way back in my days. Our elders always advised us to not be wasteful. Today there seems to be little respect from our young ones and our children are not respecting and learning what they should. You take everything home and you dry it. Now days it seems like the young ones kill it and leave it out. We were told by our elders that is wasteful and that is not a thing to do.

“That is how I hunted at 73 and we dried the skins.”

When my cousin Sarah and I were camping the caribou came around. I was 73 and I shot three caribou. We took them to camp, cut and dried. That is how I hunted at 73 and we dried the skins. Now today I am not able to do now what I did at 73. I thank my Lord for providing all these years and I am happy to be here today.



Minnie with birch bark (left) for her famous baskets (right) and Minnie checking her ptarmigan snares (center). Photos courtesy of her family.

Helping the herd through harvest

New State Caribou Hunting Regulations July 1, 2015 to June 30, 2016



GMU 22A North, 22B Remainder, 22D Kuzitrin, 22E East

- Residents- 5 caribou per day with no harvest of calves
- o Bulls are open from July 1 - Oct. 14 and Feb. 1 - June 30
 - o Cows are open from Sept. 1 - Mar. 31

- Nonresidents- 1 bull with no harvest of calves
- o Bulls are open Aug. 1 - Sept. 30

GMU 22A Remainder, 22C, 22D Remainder, 22E Remainder

- Residents and Nonresidents-
- o A season may be announced by emergency order

GMU 22B West, 22D Pilgrim River

- Residents- 5 caribou per day with no harvest of calves
- o Bulls are open Oct. 1 - Oct. 14 and Feb. 1 - Apr. 30
 - o Cows are open from Oct. 1 - Mar. 31
 - o An additional season may be announced by emergency order

- Nonresidents-
- o A season may be announced by emergency order



GMU 23 Remainder

- Residents- 5 caribou per day with no harvest of calves
- o Bulls are open from July 1 - Oct. 14 & Feb. 1 - June 30
 - o Cows are open from Sept. 1 - Mar. 31

- Nonresidents- 1 bull with no harvest of calves
- o Bulls are open from Aug. 1 - Sept. 30

GMU 23 Northwest (Singoalik River to Point Hope)

- Residents- 5 caribou per day with no harvest of calves
- o Bulls are open from July 1 - Oct. 14 & Feb. 1 - June 30
 - o Cows are open from July 15 - Apr. 30

- Nonresidents- 1 bull with no harvest of calves
- o Bulls are open from Aug. 1 - Sept. 30



GMU 26A South of and including Colville & Utukok

- Residents- 5 caribou per day with no harvest of calves
- o Bulls are open Feb. 1- Oct. 14
 - o Cows are open from July 15 - Apr. 30
- Nonresidents- 1 bull with no harvest of calves
- o Bulls are open from July 15 - Sept. 30

GMU 26A North of Colville & Utukok

- Residents- no harvest of calves
- o 5 Caribou per day (no more than 3 cows per day) Jan. 1- Mar. 15
 - o 5 Bulls per day Mar. 16- July 15
 - o 5 caribou per day (no more than 3 cows per day and cows with calves may not be taken) July 16- Oct. 15
 - o 3 cows per day Oct. 16- Dec. 31st
- Nonresidents- 1 bull with no harvest of calves
- o Bulls are open from July 15 - Sept. 30

GMU 26B Northwest

- Residents- 5 caribou total per day
- o Bulls no closed season
 - o Cows are open July 1 - May 15
- Nonresidents- 5 caribou total
- o July 1- Apr. 30

GMU 26B South & West of the Dalton

- Residents and Nonresidents- 5 caribou total per regulatory year
- o Bulls are open May 16- Oct. 10
 - o Cows are open July 1 - Oct. 10

GMU 26B South & East of the Dalton

- Residents and Nonresidents- 5 caribou total per regulatory year
- o Bulls no closed season
 - o Cows are open July 1 - May 15

GMU 26B Remainder

- Residents and Nonresidents- 5 caribou total per regulatory year
- o July 1 - Apr. 30

GMU 26C

- Residents- 10 caribou total per regulatory year
- o Any caribou open July 1- Apr. 30
 - o Bulls are open June 23 - June 30
- Nonresidents- 2 bulls
- o Bulls are open from Aug. 1 - Sept. 30

It is your responsibility to read the regulations and understand the hunt areas and requirements. Regulations are available at ADF&G offices or online at www.hunt.alaska.gov

Identifying bull, cow and calf caribou



Western Arctic and Teshekpuk caribou herds have new hunting regulations. Whether choosing to harvest a bull or cow caribou for your own personal reasons, or regulatory requirements, knowing how to determine the sex of a caribou is critical.

Male and female caribou, as well as calves have antlers and there is significant overlap in the characteristics of young bulls and adult cows. It is impossible to consistently tell young bulls from cows by looking only at their antlers.

“Even experienced subsistence hunters can mistake a cow for a young bull.” –Cyrus Harris, Kotzebue

Bull and Cow Caribou Have Antlers!

Used alone, antlers are not a reliable clue to determine caribou sex.

Bulls



Penis sheath

- Bulls have antlers from late April to mid-winter. The oldest bulls drop antlers first, as early as late October, while young bulls (yearlings and 2-year-olds) may not drop their antlers until April.
- The presence of a penis sheath, or a forward direction of urination should be used for positive identification. For young bulls (1-3 yrs) the sex organs are less apparent.



Testicles

- Bulls have large antlers relative to body size.
- Young bulls typically have smaller antlers with relatively small brow tines/shovels, and often cannot be distinguished from cows by the antlers alone.

Cows



No penis sheath

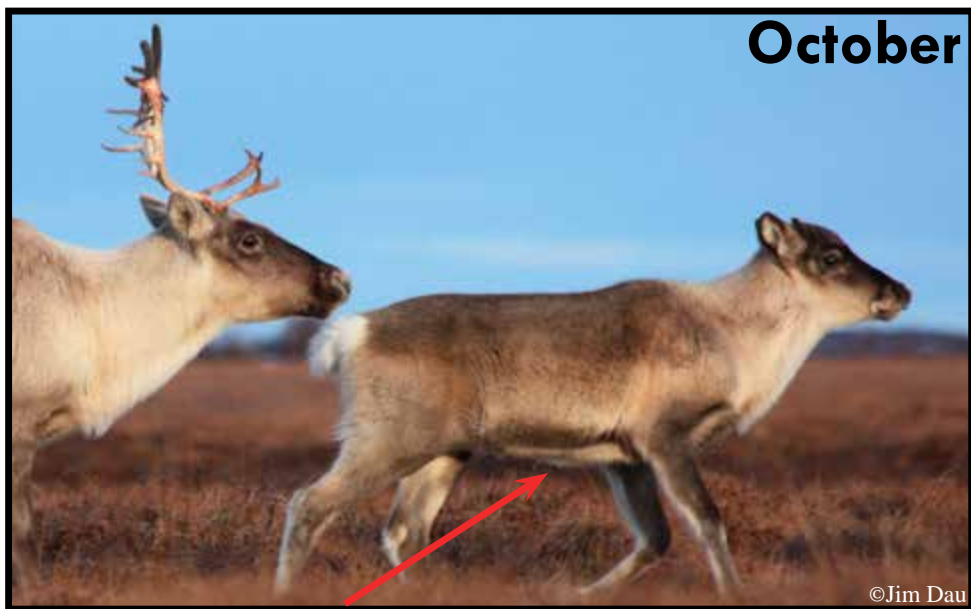
- Most cow caribou have antlers from June through April of the following year.
- For cows, the presence of a vulva patch and rearward direction of urination should be used for positive identification.
- Cows have small antlers relative to body size.
- The vulva is apparent when carefully viewed from the rear. The white rump patch is wider on cows than bulls.
- The antlers of cows are smaller than those of most bulls
- Many yearling bulls and a small percentage of 2-year-old bulls can look like cows.



Vulva

Caribou gender identification tips for legal harvest

Caribou Gender Identification Tips for Legal Harvest



Calf

Don't shoot! Harvesting calves is illegal. A calf is defined as any caribou under 1 year of age. They are small in body, have relatively short heads compared to adults, no antlers (above) or small spike antlers (right) and may or may not be accompanied by a cow.



Calf

Cow

Bull

Remember it is illegal to shoot calves. On the cow in the center you can see the vulva patch. The young bull could be confused with a cow. In this photo you can just see the penis sheath, but be sure to get a better view of the sex organs prior to shooting.



Bull

Bull

Two antlerless mature bulls. You can just see the penis sheath in each of these photos.



Bull

Cow

Bull

Cow

There is no reliable way to distinguish young male from female caribou by their antlers. Pregnant cows can retain antlers until after calving in early June. You must look at the sex organs or see caribou urinate to tell for certain.



?

Cow

What is it? Wait for better view to accurately determine sex before shooting.

Cow. Sometimes the vulva patch is not as dark as you would expect.



?

Cow & Calf

What is it? Wait for better view to accurately determine sex before shooting.

Cow has dark vulva patch. Also notice the calf behind the cow! Don't shoot calves!

Not sure? Don't shoot until you can make a positive identification.

Unalakleet students are busy at Onion Portage

Paatitaaq, Onion Portage

Along the banks of the Kobuk River, half way from its headwaters to the sea, is a place called Onion Portage. Onion Portage is known for abundant wildlife, particularly caribou, and one of the oldest uncovered areas of human habitation in North America. Paatitaaq, Inupiaq for Onion Portage, means “wild chives”. The name “Onion”, given for the same reason the Inupiaq name suggests, and “Portage” for the overland haul. With caribou plentiful during the migrating periods, Onion Portage, inside the Kobuk Valley National Park, was an indispensable location for food gathering in ancient societies and remains so today.

Caribou have been migrating through the Paatitaaq region for thousands and thousands of years. Kuuvanmiut, or people of the Kobuk, historically and presently use the location to hunt caribou. Just as the Kuuvanmiut rely on Paatitaaq for obtaining caribou, so too do wildlife managers.



The Unalakleet & BLM Crew

Wildlife Biology at Onion Portage

For the almost forty years, the ADF&G biologists have gone to Onion Portage each fall to deploy radio collars on caribou. Since the early 1990s federal agency staff and students from schools within the range of the WAH have accompanied department biologists to work on this project. As caribou swim the river, a boat drives alongside a chosen group where agency staff and students catch and hold an adult caribou and adorn it with a collar, take a blood sample, and record its body condition. If the chosen caribou is a female with a calf, a second boat captures the calf to weigh it and release it near its mother. A third boat ensures that those caribou not being handled swim to the south side of the river to continue their migration. Using boats to capture caribou is quick and efficient, safe for caribou, uses no immobilization drugs, and is more accepted by local people than aerial capture techniques used on other wildlife collaring projects.

Traditions and Science

It is common for elders to join students and biologists at Onion Portage. When elders travel with students to Onion Portage, students learn subsistence skills such as how to hunt, butcher, cut, and cook caribou. They also learn skills for camping and about traditional hunting values. The Onion Portage collaring project continues to be successful from both a scientific standpoint as well as being a great hands-on learning experience for students. Including elders in students groups while working with biologists is a wonderful way to meld western science with traditional practices. Onion Portage continues to be a location where history and western science coincide for the continued care and prosperity of the WAH.



Talon Erickson



Angela Nashalook



Bobbi Storms
Jolene Nanouk



Kirstian Haugen



Ryan Woodruff



Lawrence Bradley



Bobbi Storms



Taylor Harvey
Bobbi Storms



Angela Nashalook

All photos on this page courtesy of Unalakleet School.

Nome students learn about caribou



The Nome Crew



A 'boat-load' of Nome kids



Campfire Fun



**Shalaeya Martin
Ayomide
Ayowole-Obi**



**Rachel Sahlin
Ayomide Ayowole-obi**



**Erin Julianus- BLM
Moses Milligrock
Liam Hukil
John Gilder**



Shalaeya Martin



**John Gilder
Liam Hukil**

All photos on this page courtesy of Nome School

Notes from the 2014 annual meeting

Meeting Highlights

This was a busy year for members of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group. With a declining caribou population, the group took action with recommendations to the Board of Game following the management recommendations outlined in the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group Management Plan. The Working Group submitted comments on season changes for bulls and cows, closure of calf harvests, and changes to reduce nonresident harvests. Working Group members realize the importance of conserving the herd and advise all users to reduce harvests if possible and take only the amount caribou absolutely necessary.

Caribou Roundtable Discussion

Each year, members of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group share their observations during the “caribou round table” discussion. The members are grouped by regions, with their comments generally falling into four categories: physical environment (weather, water, habitat, etc.); caribou (locations, numbers, harvest, health); other animals (predators, unusual wildlife sightings); and people & caribou (uses of caribou, conflicts, development etc.). Next is a selection of observations of caribou across the range of the herd.



Hunters are reminded to salvage all of their caribou.



Working Group members engage in detailed discussions while making recommendations on changing caribou hunting opportunities for hunters.

Observations on Caribou:

Koyukuk/Middle Yukon: No caribou in the area. Caribou used to come consistently before 1974.

NANA Region: Caribou migration (this year) was again later than normal, and mainly to the east. Noatak hasn't had caribou in several years.

North Slope: Saw a smaller proportion of bulls compared to cows.

NANA Region: Caribou harvested were in good condition; some seen near Kivalina were small, possibly reindeer hybrids.

Seward Peninsula: Caribou were present on the Seward Peninsula in early winter; groups of 25 up to several hundred. Communities like Nome and White Mountain who could access caribou via road had better success. Caribou harvested were lean, but that is normal for this area. Body condition improves in early spring before caribou move north again.

Student Presentations



Kirstian Haugen, Jolene Nanouk, and Bobbi Storms from Unalakleet school.

Kirstian Haugen and Bobbi Storms from Unalakleet School, along with their chaperone Jolene Nanouk, gave a presentation at the annual meeting of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group on their experiences at Onion Portage collaring caribou. Both girls told Working Group members what caribou means to their community. The migration routes of the Western Arctic Herd have changed over time and caribou don't use the same traditional routes that they once did. For many of the Unalakleet students, seeing Western Arctic caribou at Onion Portage was their first time seeing the animals that were once a staple in the diets of their elders. The students thanked the Working Group, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Bureau of Land Management, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service for making their trip to Onion Portage and the Working Group meeting possible. Involving students in caribou science and these meetings helps ensure a future of people who care about caribou and will work hard to conserve the resource.

Caribou hunting and transporter activity

The National Park Service (NPS) recently completed a study to better understand how nonlocal hunting and the use of air transporters interact with caribou and local hunters within Noatak National Preserve.

The study included mail surveys, sound monitoring stations, and caribou collar location data to explore ways of reducing impacts of nonlocal hunters on migrating caribou and local hunting groups.

Exposure to motorized noise (e.g., aircraft and boats) has been shown to degrade recreational or hunting experiences and increase potential conflict between groups using a common resource.

Through the use of sound recordings, researchers looked at the number of motorized events by sound source (e.g., propeller aircraft and boats) and the amount of time they are potentially audible to humans and caribou. Almost all motorized events during the fall season (August and September) were associated with hunting activity. Therefore, sound recordings are considered a good measure of overall caribou hunt related activity.

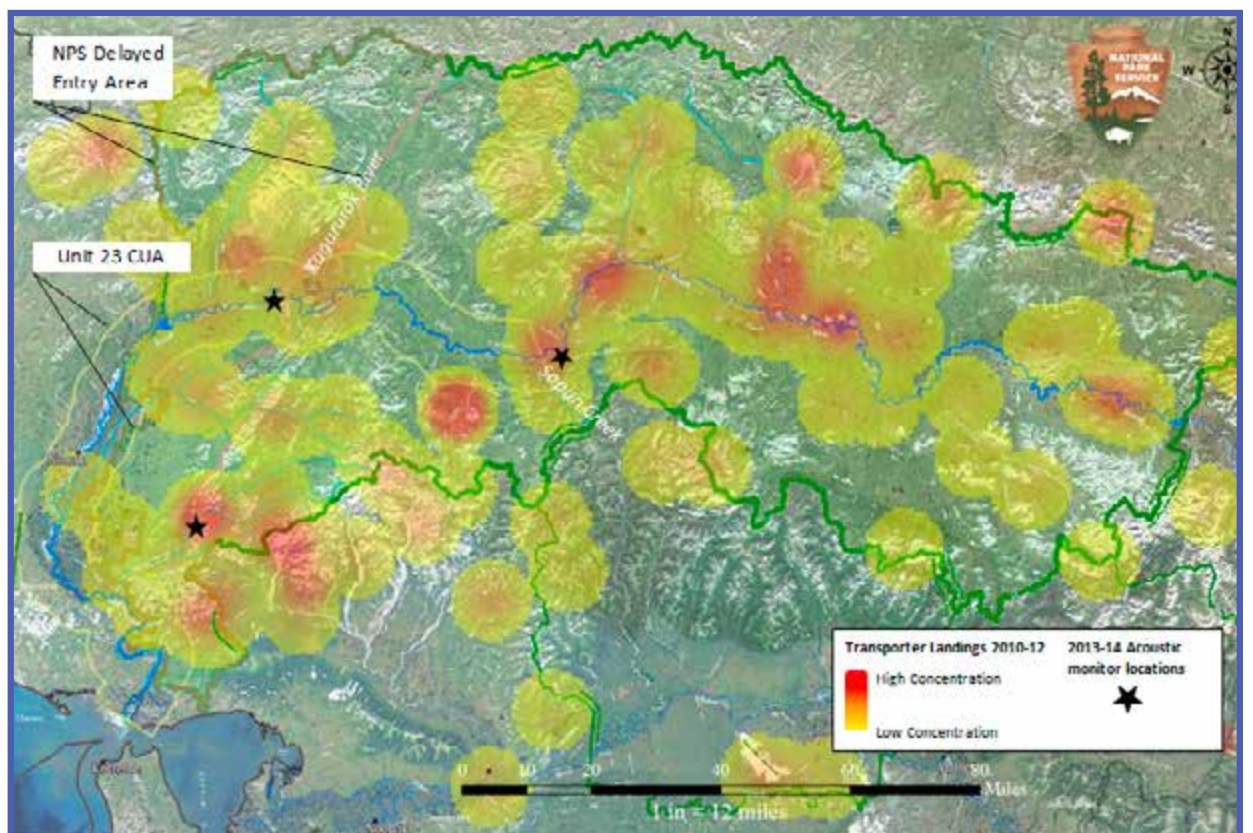


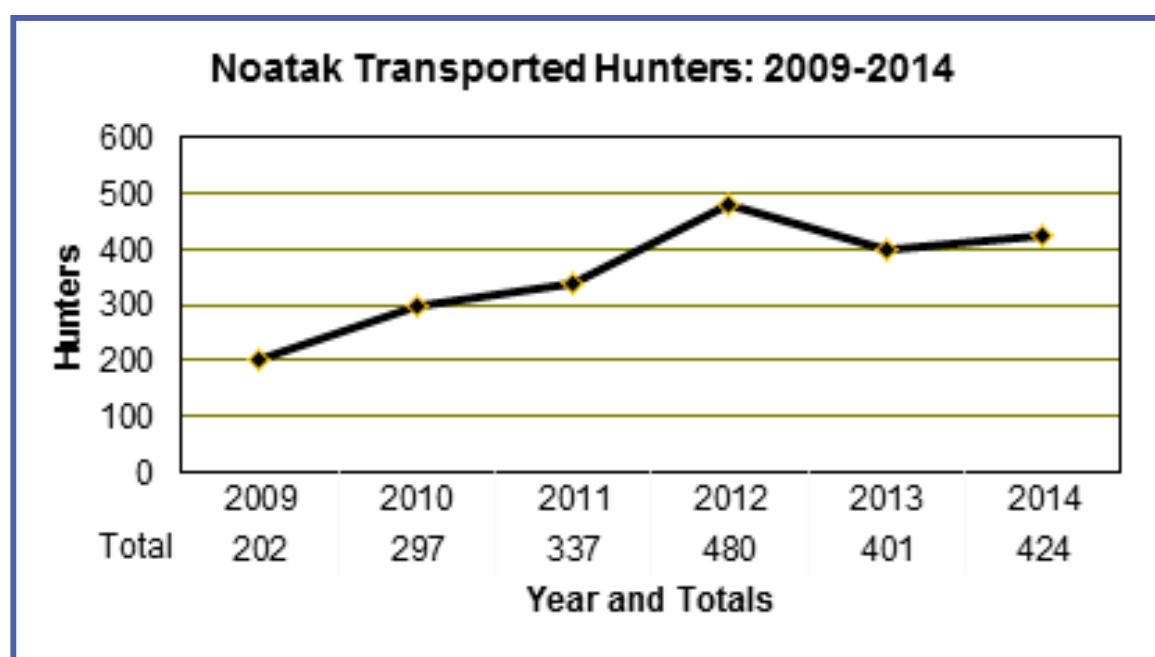
Figure 1

The NPS study used landing locations of transporter aircraft to identify areas with the highest concentration of activity (Figure 1). These are also areas with high probability of concentrated human-wildlife and hunter group interactions (i.e., potential user conflict). Transporter activity data allow us to track annual trends in total use (Figure 2).

In addition to nonlocal hunting pressures, an ADF&G Subsistence Division study found there were 59 Noatak households hunting caribou along the Noatak River inside the preserve during the fall of 2007. While the hunting activity and the harvest amounts on the Noatak are consistent with management objectives and unlikely to negatively impact the herd health, these hunting pressures and motorized boat activity must be considered as cumulative factors affecting both the quality of the fall hunting and recreational experiences, as well as the status of the caribou herd. Harvest data from the same study show 68% of subsistence caribou harvested by Noatak residents in or adjacent to Noatak Preserve in 2007 occurred in the month of September. Therefore, a more accurate assessment of the level of impact to visiting groups, as well as migrating caribou, is needed to determine whether the conditions during the month of September on the upper Noatak River are at or below conditions for which the Preserve was established and hunters expect. Trends in activity levels are also important. Numbers of nonlocal hunters have steadily increased over the last six years, with each of the last three years exceeding 400 hunters transported during the fall season (Figure 2).

Caribou collar tracking data from the last three years suggest that the highest concentrations of caribou are crossing the Noatak River to the east of Sapun Creek in September. Therefore locals are likely forced to extend their trips further upriver and outside of the Controlled Use Area, increasing their likelihood of interacting with transporter aircraft and/or nonlocal hunters.

On the surface, recent levels of use and harvest do not appear to exceed the capacity of the 6 million acre Preserve and reflect relatively minor impacts on the caribou herd estimated at 235,000 animals. However, cumulative summary data show 1,450 round trip fixed-wing flights were associated with the 2,150 hunters over the study period—with almost all of the activity occurring in one month—September.



This project has helped managers refine their understanding of where, and when impacts from aircraft and sport hunting are occurring in the Noatak area. It helps managers understand recent hunter experiences, knowledge levels, sources of information, as well as their individual preferences. NPS managers and researchers have already begun to reach out to affected users in the region and plan to share the final results with many more groups in the future.

For more details on this study, please contact Andrew Ackerman, Social Scientist, Western Arctic National Parklands, 907-455-0643 or andrew_ackerman@nps.gov

Figure 2

Sharing caribou knowledge



Evelyn Ballot carefully preparing caribou and sharing her knowledge with students.



Students learn to properly cut caribou under the watchful eye of their elders.



With teamwork students skin a caribou at the Selawik Science and Culture Camp.

Northwest Alaska has had an abundant caribou population for the past several decades. People who have grown up in the region during this time haven't experienced a caribou decline until recently, and may not realize that it is fairly normal for caribou herd populations to go up and down in size. Our region's elders have lived through several declines and recoveries of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd.

Caribou were not present in much of the NANA region or the Seward Peninsula during the 1930s. Many elders who have spoken to the Working Group have told of the great distances that people had to travel to harvest caribou during their younger years.

"Before caribou came to Selawik, the people walked and backpacked over to the Noatak River, to the headwaters," said Laura Smith of Selawik. "The first caribou came back around in 1944."

During this time period local residents were more dependent on other resources such as fish, birds, and small game. In the 1940s and 50s more caribou moved into the Kobuk River and Selawik River areas.

Mildred Black from Shungnak recalled that as a child, she heard elders talk about caribou, but they were scarce at that time, and she didn't see a caribou until she was about six.

In the 1970s the caribou population declined again. Biologists documented 243,000 caribou in 1970 which then dropped rapidly to 75,000 animals in 1975. Restrictions were placed on caribou hunting and the herd was able to increase again, rising throughout the 1980s and 1990s to a peak of 490,000 caribou in the Western Arctic Caribou Herd photocensus of 2003. The last census shows about 235,000 in this herd, close to where it was in 1970.

Although the herd has declined in recent years, prompting changes in hunting rules and management decisions, hearing the stories of our elders can help us all realize that caribou populations have changed over time and will continue to do so in the future. Hopefully, we can fulfill the Working Group's mission of working together to ensure the long term conservation of the herd, as those who came before us passed on healthy resources for today's residents.



Pauline Ramoth processing caribou.

Know before you go!

Good hunters are safe, smart and prepared.

1 I have told someone responsible where I am going and when I plan to return.

2 I have warm clothing on and I am taking extra with me.

3 I have survival equipment: fire starter, shelter, food, and water.

4 I have hunting tools: knife, sharpening tool, tarps or meat bags, pack or sled.

5 I have my hunting license and permit with me.

6 I am equipped with navigation skills and navigation equipment.

7 I have checked the regulations and I know what is legal to harvest.

Raymond Woods,
courtesy of Selawik
National Wildlife
Refuge.

Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group



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 Fairbanks Hunters
 Hunting Guides
 Kivalina, Noatak
 Kotzebue
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 Lower Kobuk River (Noorvik, Kiana)
 Middle Yukon River (Galena, Koyukuk, Nulato, Kaltag)
 Point Hope and Point Lay
 Nome
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 Reindeer Herders Association
 Southern Seward Peninsula (Koyuk, Shaktoolik, Unalakleet, Stebbins, St. Michael, Kotlik)
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 Atqasuk, Barrow, Wainwright

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WE'LL SEE YOU AT THE NEXT CARIBOU MEETING:

December 16 & 17, 2015

Anchorage, Alaska

Check the website for details!

www.westernarcticcaribou.org

❖ To Report Violations call:
 ❖ 1-800-478-3377



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