

# GAME MANAGEMENT UNITS 20A, 20B, 20C, 20F AND 25C

## FAIRBANKS AREA OFFICE

**Area Biologist: Don Young**  
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### *DESCRIPTION*

The Fairbanks Area includes approximately 40,000 mi<sup>2</sup> in central Interior Alaska. The area is roughly bordered by the Yukon River and Ray Mountains on the north and the Alaska Range to the south. It includes the Tanana drainages as far east as the Salcha and Delta Rivers, and Tanana and Yukon drainages as far west as the Tozitna and Cosna Rivers. Game Management Unit 20C, and large portions of Units 20F and 25C are remote, roadless areas. Units 20A and 20B surround Fairbanks and include neighboring communities linked by the road system.

#### Communities (approximate population)

Healy–Ferry–Lignite–McKinley Park (1200)

Anderson (500)

Central (125)

Nenana (500)

Fairbanks North Star Borough (95,000)

Manly Hot Springs (75)

Rampart (50)

Minto (250)

Tanana (300)

#### Conservation Units

*Administered by Bureau of Land Management*

Steese National Conservation Area

White Mountains National Recreation Area

*Administered by the National Park Service*

Denali National Park and Preserve

*Administered by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game*

Minto Flats State Game Refuge

Creamers Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge

Active Advisory Committees (AC)  
 Tanana–Rampart–Manley  
 Fairbanks  
 Minto–Nenana  
 Middle Nenana River  
 Central

Special Areas

<b>Unit</b>	<b>Areas</b>	<b>Restriction</b>	<b>When Enacted</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Meeting Objectives</b>
20A, 20D	Delta CUA <sup>1</sup>	No motorized vehicles or pack animals for big game hunting <sup>2</sup>	1971	Provide for aesthetically pleasing hunt conditions	Yes
20A	Wood River CUA <sup>1</sup>	No motorized vehicles except aircraft for big game <sup>3</sup>	1976	Address conflicts between ATV and airplane/horse hunters	Yes
20A	Yanert CUA <sup>1</sup>	No motorized vehicles except aircraft for big game	1973	Address conflicts between ATV and airplane/horse hunters	Yes
20A	Ferry Trail MA <sup>4</sup>	Caribou hunting by permit; antler restrictions for moose hunting	1990	Address caribou/moose management issues	Yes
20A	Healy-Lignite MA <sup>4</sup>	Hunting by bow and arrow only	1990	Address safety concerns (closed 1973 – 1989)	Yes
20B	Minto Flats MA <sup>4</sup>	Moose hunting by permit; No aircraft or airboats for moose hunting; no aircraft for beaver trapping prior to March 1.	1979 1996	Address moose management and user conflict issues	Yes
20B	Fairbanks MA <sup>4</sup>	Moose hunting by bow and arrow only	1982	Address moose management issues	Yes
20B	Creamer's Field MWR <sup>6</sup>	Hunting and trapping by registration only	1966	Address management issues	Yes
20B	Lost Lake CA	Closed to taking big game w/ firearms and crossbows within ½ mi. of lake	≤1962	Address safety concerns	Yes
20B	Birch Lake CA	Closed to taking of big game within 1/2 mile of lake	≤1962	Address safety concerns	Yes
20B	Harding Lake CA	Closed to taking of big game within 1/2 mile of lake	≤1962	Address safety concerns	Yes

<sup>1</sup>CUA = Controlled Use Area

<sup>2</sup>Aug. 5–Aug. 25

<sup>3</sup>Aug. 1–Sep. 30

<sup>4</sup>MA = Management Area

<sup>5</sup>CA = Closed Area

<sup>6</sup>MWR = Migratory Waterfowl Refuge

## ***BLACK BEAR***

**STATUS:** Black bears are common in all units. Harvest peaked in the late 1990s, but has since shown moderate declines. Average annual harvest rates are below the estimated maximum sustainable harvest rate in all units, except possibly the central portion of Unit 20B. We do not believe the high harvest of black bears in central Unit 20B is of biological concern because surrounding units receive relatively little hunting pressure and provide reservoir areas that serve to repopulate potentially over-harvested areas. The continued high harvest of black bears in the heavily hunted central Unit 20B supports this hypothesis. Spring bear hunting at bait stations is especially popular in Unit 20B. High hunter effort and harvest near Fairbanks likely reduces black bears nuisance problems.

**MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:** Bait station registration, sealing, tooth aging, and responding to complaints about nuisance bears are the primary management activities. Sealing data in Unit 20B provides the sex and age composition and location of harvest, while harvest reports provides sex and harvest location for bears harvested in the remainder of the area.

**ISSUES:** Regulations requiring salvage of the hide and meat have been the subject of many proposals in recent years. Arguments generally revolve around the palatability of black bear meat during the fall when bears feed on fish. This concern does not pertain to black bears in the Interior, where they generally do not feed on fish. Another issue involves conflicts between bear baiters and the general public, particularly landowners in areas surrounding Fairbanks. Bear baiting had been an issue within the Chena Recreation Area (CRA) where the CRA Citizens Advisory Board has lobbied Fish and Game to eliminate bear baiting in the CRA due to perceived conflicts. This issue was successfully addressed through education (i.e., bear baiting clinics required prior to registering a bait station) and, within the CRA, by working cooperatively with Department of Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation Division, CRA staff.

## ***GRIZZLY BEAR***

**STATUS:** Grizzly bears are present in all units, but are most numerous in the mountainous portions of Units 20A and 20C followed by the higher elevations in Units 20B, 20F and 25C. Harvest is generally low except for portions of Units 20A and 20B. High harvests resulted in reduced numbers of bears in Unit 20A during the 1980s, but more conservative seasons resulted in population recovery by 2000. In general, grizzly bear seasons and bag limits have been liberalized over the past decade and harvests have increased.

**MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:** Sealing, tooth aging, and responding to complaints about nuisance bears are the primary management activities. Sealing data provides sex and age composition and location of the harvest.

**ISSUES:** Management issues typically relate to season length, especially in Units 20A and majority of 20B, where the seasons are shorter (September 1 – May 31) than the remainder of Unit 20 (August 10 – June 30) and where predator management remains an

issue because of Intensive Management. Generally, hunters feel that grizzly bears seasons should be further liberalized to reduce predation on ungulates.

## ***CARIBOU***

### **DELTA CARIBOU HERD**

**STATUS:** This herd declined dramatically in the early 1990s from about 11,000 to 4,000 caribou, prompting closure of a popular hunting season and implementation of a ground-based wolf control program (1993–1995). After termination of the wolf control program, the herd continued to decline slowly to an estimated 2000 caribou in 2005. Herd size is currently estimated at approximately 3000 animals. The board authorized a small drawing permit hunt (up to 100 permits) for bull caribou in 1996. Bull:cow ratios remain high and large bull:cow ratios continue to exceed objectives. Between 1996 and 2003, annual harvest averaged 35 bulls (range 22–50). In 2004 the Board authorized up to 150 permits be issued and mean harvest has since increased to 47 (25–70 during RY04–RY12). Since the early to mid 2000s, the Delta herd has been mixing with the Nelchina herd along the western Denali Highway in Unit 13. This presents difficulty in standard population and composition surveys, and puts members of the Delta herd at risk of harvest under the seasons and bag limits for the Nelchina herd.

**MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:** Standard population and composition surveys are conducted annually. A small number of radiocollared animals are maintained to facilitate surveys.

**ISSUES:** This has long been a very popular caribou hunt. Issues include the number of permits issued in the drawing hunt and the lack of intensive management efforts to increase the size of the herd. Mixing with the Nelchina herd in Unit 13 puts the Delta herd at risk of overharvest under the seasons and bag limits (State and Federal) for the Nelchina Herd.

### **WHITE MOUNTAINS CARIBOU HERD**

**STATUS:** This small herd numbers roughly 600 caribou and primarily inhabits western Unit 25C. It receives little harvest because of poor access. The general fall season is limited to bulls, while caribou of either sex may be taken during a winter registration permit hunt (Dec. 1–Mar. 31). Herd numbers appear stable. Mixing with the Fortymile herd along the Steese Highway, which was first observed in 2000, has been more frequent and has complicated harvest management.

**MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:** Standard population and composition surveys are conducted annually in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management. A small number of radiocollared animals are maintained to facilitate surveys.

**ISSUES:** Annual harvest has traditionally been within sustainable limits, and often low. About 20 caribou were taken per year during 1990–2007. Harvest rose sharply in 1999–2001 because of the presence of Fortymile herd animals in the White Mountains herd

hunt area, and because White Mountains caribou became more accessible due to their distribution. Average annual harvest for these 3 years was 47. Harvest returned to the lower historic levels in 2002–2012.

### **DENALI CARIBOU HERD**

**STATUS:** This herd currently numbers roughly 2000 animals and primarily inhabits Unit 20C within Denali National Park. The herd was closed to harvest after a decline in the early 1970s and it remains closed even under federal subsistence regulations. Intensive long-term research by the National Park Service and the U.S. Geological Survey enhance the herd's value as a control population for management and research efforts on other Interior herds.

**MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:** The National Park Service and U.S. Geological Survey annually conduct population estimation and composition surveys along with numerous research investigations.

**ISSUES:** There is local interest in opening the Denali caribou herd to limited harvest of bulls. The department has opposed such a hunt because herd numbers and bull:cow ratios are below management objectives.

### ***FURBEARER***

**STATUS:** Beaver are abundant in the Fairbanks area. Trapper reports suggest marten numbers in recent years have been low, although numbers have fluctuated wildly both temporally and spatially. Hare numbers appeared to have reached their peak in 2009 and lynx numbers are currently in decline and likely nearing the low point in their cycle. Coyotes appear to be abundant resulting in many public proposals to liberalize seasons and bag limits to reduce predation on ungulates, primarily sheep lambs. Marten, lynx, and wolf are the most commercially important species in the Interior. Trapping effort near road-accessible areas is moderately high, but trapline densities are low away from the road system.

**MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:** Sealing provides harvest data for lynx, wolf, wolverine, and otter. Beaver cache surveys are conducted annually in the lower Chena River drainage as part of a management program designed to manage beaver in this area for viewing and education opportunities while minimizing property damage.

**ISSUES:** Lack of demand for beaver pelts and high beaver survival had increased property damage caused by beaver from flooding and tree cutting along roadways and near residential areas in past years. An extended beaver season since 2004 has alleviated many of those problems and sparked more interest in harvesting beaver in the Fairbanks area.

## ***MOOSE***

**STATUS:** In Unit 20A, moose are found at moderate to high densities (2.0–2.5 moose/mi<sup>2</sup>). Liberal antlerless hunts in RY04–RY08 reduced moose densities from an estimated 3.0–3.5 moose/mi<sup>2</sup> in 2003. Research documented Unit 20A as having the lowest productivity of any wild moose population studied in North America and, despite reductions in moose density, improvements in productivity have not yet been observed. Thus, habitat conditions remain a concern as high moose densities over the last 2 decades resulted in heavy browsing. Despite the low productivity, calf survival has been relatively high, likely due to high harvest rates of predators. In Unit 20B, moose also are found at moderate to high densities (1.5–2.0 moose/mi<sup>2</sup>), but densities vary more widely than Unit 20A from as high as 4 moose/mi<sup>2</sup> in the Minto Flats Management Area to less than 1 moose/mi<sup>2</sup> in eastern Unit 20B. Moose populations in most of Units 20C, 20F, and 25C are low and no trends in population parameters are apparent from harvest data or anecdotal information.

Unit 20B is the most heavily hunted unit in the Fairbanks Area during the general hunting season with >2,500 hunters reporting, followed by Unit 20A with >1,200 hunters reporting. The Fairbanks area accounts for approximately 25% of the statewide moose harvest, with most (80%–90%) of that harvest in Units 20A and 20B. The board approved harvest of antlerless moose by drawing permit in portions of Unit 20A and 20B in the mid 1990s and these hunts have been reauthorized annually. In 2002 the board approved drawing permit hunts for calf moose in Unit 20A to help meet Intensive Management (IM) harvest objectives. In 2004 the board approved a registration hunt for antlerless moose during a September 1–December 10 season to substantially increase the harvest of female moose in order to reduce moose numbers from an estimated 16,000–18,000 to the IM population objective of 10,000–12,000 moose. The moose population was reduced to an estimated 12,000–13,000 moose by 2008 and antlerless moose hunting opportunity and harvest has been reduced accordingly. Currently the department is managing for a stable moose population in Unit 20A. In 2006, the board expanded drawing permit hunts for antlerless moose in Unit 20B to regulate moose numbers with respect to long term sustainability. Increased cow harvests during 2006–2013 appear to have reduced moose density to a level that will improve moose nutrition and productivity and guard against range deterioration.

**MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:** An intensive moose research project is ongoing in Unit 20A. Population estimation and composition surveys are conducted in Units 20A and 20B on an almost annual basis. The National Park Service periodically conducts surveys within Denali National Park in Unit 20C, and the Department completed a population estimate in the eastern half of Unit 20C in 2011. Population estimation surveys were conducted in Unit 25C in 1997 and 2007 with funding from the Bureau of Land Management. In addition, the Bureau of Land Management has radiocollared moose to investigate moose movements and habitat use in Unit 25C.

Large amounts of acreage has recently burned in Units 20A (~700,000 acres) and 20B (~600,000 acres) that should improve moose nutrition, productivity and carrying capacity. We conducted intensive moose surveys within the boundaries of the 2001 Fish

Creek and Survey Line burns (~200,000 acres) in 2003 and 2008 as the initial and early phases of monitoring the potential changes in moose density and composition over time. These intensive surveys are planned at ~5-year intervals to monitor numerical responses to the fires.

We have conducted browse surveys in various Interior units since 2000. Central Unit 20A showed the highest browse removal rate of any survey area during 2000–2010, indicating that moose in Unit 20A are heavily using their forage resources. Moose twinning rates, short-yearling calf weights, and reproductive delays and pauses during that period also show that moose in central Unit 20A are experiencing the lowest nutritional level of any moose population we know of in Alaska. Chronically low twinning rates in the central portion of Unit 20B are indicative of nutritional stress there as well.

**ISSUES:** Past regulatory changes in Unit 20A, which were designed to reduce the harvest of bulls to sustainable levels and increase the harvest of cows and calves, have been controversial, but successful. Regulatory changes included a shorter, then longer, general season, unitwide antler restrictions for resident and nonresident hunters, drawing permit hunts for “any bull” and drawing and registration hunts for antlerless moose.

Antlerless moose hunts remain controversial and divisive and public opposition tends to wax and wane. The take of calf moose and cows accompanied by calves in antlerless hunts has been a highly volatile issue and regulatory changes have ensued in Unit 20A and parts of Unit 20B. During RY04–RY13 thousands of hunters acquired registration and drawing permits and hunted antlerless moose in Units 20A and 20B. Local public sentiment has been mixed regarding antlerless hunts: the Middle Nenana AC usually opposes them; the Minto-Nenana always supports them; and the Denali Borough has written 2 resolutions opposing both antlerless hunts and IM legislation. In December 2013, Senators Bishop, Coghill and Giessel hosted a legislative inquiry soliciting concerns and opinions from local hunters regarding cow moose hunts in the Fairbanks area.

The Minto Flats Management Area in Unit 20B is unique in terms of moose management. In 2012, the Board approved a 7-day any bull season at the end of August, an 18 day spike/ fork/ 50 inch season in September, and an antlerless registration permit beginning in October. The antlerless registration permit has proven to be popular and harvest goals have been met in the area. This management regime appears to be more widely accepted than the previous which included a limited registration hunt with an either sex bag limit runs concurrent with a 15-day, antler-restricted general season. In 2004, the Board rescinded the Tier II hunt that was in place during 1996–2003 and replaced it with the limited registration hunt. The distribution of permits for the limited registration hunt was fraught with problems that the current system appears to have alleviated.

Access restrictions for moose hunting are also controversial. Aircraft and airboats are not permitted for moose hunting in the Minto Flats Management Area. Motorized vehicles other than aircraft are not permitted in the Wood River and Yanert Controlled Use Areas in Unit 20A.

Finally, entry to some military land is prohibited. This is especially controversial in those portions of Units 20A and 20B with excellent moose hunting opportunity.

## ***SHEEP***

### **ALASKA RANGE (UNIT 20A)**

**STATUS:** Sheep numbers in Unit 20A declined in the early 1990s from 5,000 to about 2,000 sheep, as estimated in an extensive survey in 1994. No clear trend in sheep population dynamics is apparent from subsequent trend area surveys. We believe that productivity has improved and that the population may be increasing. However, the 2013 survey did show a very poor lamb crop in the area likely due to the late spring. This weak cohort may be detected in future surveys and in the harvest in 8 years. Harvest data supports this hypothesis as the number of rams taken has doubled from 1992–2001 (mean=49) to 2007–2013 (mean=98).

**MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:** A small trend area is surveyed annually in the drainages of the upper West Fork of the Little Delta River, Dry Creek, and Wood River located in the central mountains of Unit 20A.

**ISSUES:** The primary issue among sheep hunters at this time seems to be the conflict between resident hunters and guides. There have been many proposals in the region to allow resident hunters to begin hunting before the non-resident hunters. Predator management to enhance sheep populations remains an issue.

### **TANANA UPLANDS AND WHITE MOUNTAINS**

**STATUS:** Approximately 600–750 sheep are found in relatively isolated areas of suitable habitat. There is no evidence that severe winters of the early 1990s affected the status of sheep in these areas.

**MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:** Trend areas encompassing a large portion of suitable sheep habitat are surveyed annually in conjunction with Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

**ISSUES:** Horn breakage found in mature rams in portions of the White Mountains is of interest and concern to hunters pursuing sheep there.

## ***WOLF***

**STATUS:** Wolf numbers increased in Unit 20A following a wolf reduction in 1993-1994, and appear to be stable at moderately high levels. Conversely, wolf numbers began to decline in Denali National Park by 1995 (Unit 20C) following an abrupt increase and peak in numbers concurrent with harsh winters in the early 1990s. Data on wolf abundance in Units 20B, 20F and 25C is lacking, but anecdotal information suggests wolf numbers are stable in these units.



**MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:** Sporadic surveys, incidental observations, and sealing constitute recent management activities. Research in Unit 20A provided considerable information on the status of wolves in that area through the late 2000s. A population survey conducted in the northern portion of Unit 20A during spring 2013 yielded and estimated wolf density of approximately 15-17 wolves/1000 km<sup>2</sup>.

**ISSUES:** Wolf harvest in Unit 20A has been declining (mean=72, 1996–2000; mean=65, 2001–2005; mean=49, 2006–2012). Wolf control continues to be controversial. The Board has identified Unit 20A for Intensive Management. A ground-based wolf control program to reverse the decline of the Delta caribou herd was implemented in 1993, but wolf control was suspended in early 1994. Since then, there have been no intensive management efforts to increase the size of the Delta caribou herd.

### ***SMALL GAME***

**STATUS:** The overall status of small game populations is largely unknown. Anecdotal information and spring hare surveys suggests hare numbers peaked in 2009. Based on drumming count surveys in the Clear/Anderson area grouse numbers are currently low and likely at or near the bottom of the cycle. Ptarmigan numbers still appear to be low and stable. Hunting small game is popular along road-accessible areas.

**MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:** Ruffed grouse drumming counts have been conducted annually in Unit 20A since 1993 (except 1998 and 2013 because of weather). Grouse wings are collected from hunters in the most popular grouse hunting areas. The wings provide an index to annual juvenile recruitment into the grouse populations and proportions of the 3 grouse species in the harvest.

**ISSUES:** None.

### ***OTHER ISSUES***

Other issues potentially affecting wildlife or wildlife users include forestry, fire management, oil and gas exploration in the Minto Flats State Game Refuge and Healy Basin, military activities, Eielson AFB to Ft. Greely railroad extension. As communities in the area grow and expand, nuisance wildlife management activities and urban wildlife issues are expected to increase.