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Porcupine Caribou Herd Grows to Record High Numbers

(Fairbanks) — A July 2017 photocensus shows the Porcupine caribou herd has grown to an estimated 218,000 animals, a record high since population monitoring of the herd first began in the 1970s.

“Caribou were aggregated well for the survey and we accounted for all of the radiocollared animals in the herd, which means we likely didn’t miss many caribou,” said Northeast Alaska Assistant Area Biologist Jason Caikoski.

Accuracy of the 2017 photocensus was improved through implementation of a newly acquired digital photography system. The system supports higher flight altitudes and larger photo footprints which allowed photography of several large caribou groups that would have otherwise not been photographable using the previous system.

The Porcupine herd last peaked in 1989 at 178,000 caribou before declining to 123,000 in 2001. Since then, photocensus surveys in 2010, 2013, and 2017 have documented steady growth.

“Since 2010, the herd has been growing at a rate of 3 to 4 percent annually, likely as a result of good calf production and high survival rates for adult cows,” said Caikoski.

The survey was conducted in Alaska and Yukon, Canada, in a cooperative effort with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the Yukon Department of Environment.

The Porcupine herd’s range is approximately 80,000 square miles and includes the northeastern part of Alaska, northern Yukon, and northwestern portions of Northwest Territory in Canada. Alaska and Canada co-manage the herd. The summer 2017 issue of “Porcupine Caribou News” contains more information about this herd and is available at: <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=caribou.resources>

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