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Northern Alaska Peninsula CARIBOU HERD UPDATE



Tier II Hunt to Reopen in 2016

Northern Alaska Peninsula caribou herd rallies, opens door for renewed harvest

The Northern Alaska Peninsula (NAP) caribou herd is poised for the first time in a decade to resume its place as a traditional meat source for Alaska Peninsula residents. Tier II hunts are scheduled to reopen next fall in subunits 9C and 9E, thanks to improved environmental conditions, hands-on management by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and sacrifices from local communities that weathered years of hunting closures.

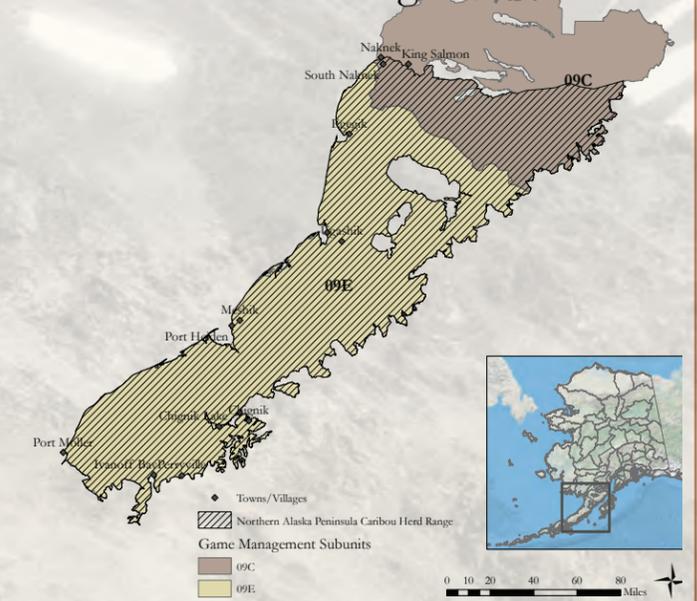
Like caribou herds everywhere, the Northern Alaska Peninsula herd has a long boom-and-bust history, fluctuating in size from 2,000 to 20,000 animals. The herd's last peak occurred in 1984 and was followed by years of steady decline. By 1999, the herd had fallen to 8,600 animals and the long-standing general hunt system was replaced with a limited Tier II program. Still, the population declined and biologists worked to learn why. By 2005, the herd declined to the point where hunting opportunities could no longer be offered. As a result, all state and federal hunts were closed.

Today, the Northern Alaska Peninsula herd is again gaining ground. Although the herd's current size of 2,700 remains below the population objective of 12,000-15,000, it has recovered sufficiently for subsistence harvests to resume. Biologists will continue to closely monitor the herd's status with an eye toward expanding hunting opportunities, while still allowing the herd to grow.

Remember to apply for a Tier II hunt permit. The application period runs from November 1 through December 15 for the 2016 hunt season.

-Dave Crowley, King Salmon Area Wildlife Biologist

Northern Alaska Peninsula Caribou Herd Range



The Northern Alaska Peninsula caribou herd is relatively small but dynamic ranging from the Naknek River drainage in the north to Port Moller in the south. The herd is important to residents of the Alaska Peninsula both for food and nonconsumptive uses, such as viewing.

Reporting helps us help you!

Reporting your harvest is important, both for biologists and for your community. Whether your hunt was successful or not, harvest report cards provide biologists with useful information, adding to the overall picture of the herd's status. With accurate information, biologists are equipped to make informed conservation decisions to provide the greatest opportunity to hunt and harvest caribou while protecting, maintaining and enhancing the herd and its habitat.

Why do we want to know about how and where you hunt?

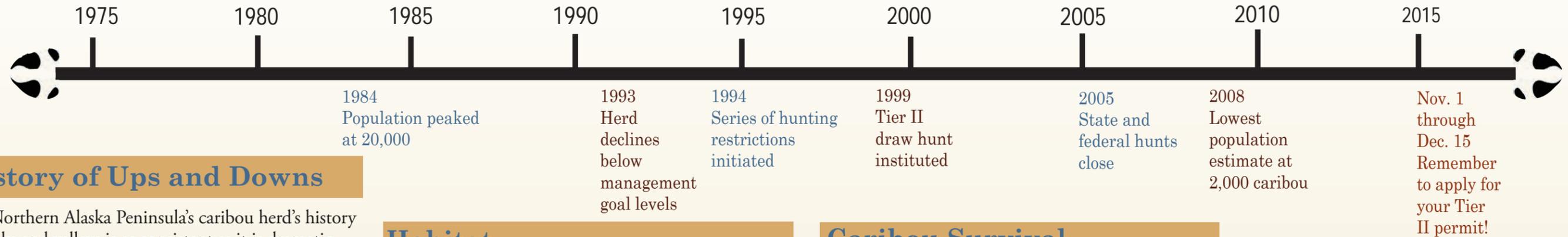
This information tells us how hard it was for you to get a caribou, and it is used to evaluate the hunt and inform future decisions that could affect hunting opportunity. If only people traveling long distances in boats are getting caribou, it may mean that the herd has changed its migration pattern and it's getting harder to find caribou. However, if lots of people are quickly getting caribou close, it means caribou are getting easier to find. All of the information can be used to design a hunt that works best for you!

The application period for Tier II hunts runs from November 1, 8 a.m. through December 15, 5 p.m. (AKST). Submit application online <http://hunt.alaska.gov> or mail to the address shown on the application form.



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Timeline for Northern Alaska Peninsula Caribou



History of Ups and Downs

The Northern Alaska Peninsula's caribou herd's history of peaks and valleys is as consistent as it is dramatic. Information dating back to the late 1800s indicate the herd peaked at around 20,000 in 1899, again at similar levels in the early 1940s, and most recently in 1984. These high points were all followed by dramatic declines. A crash succeeding the early 1940s crest dropped the herd to about 2,000 animals, while a steady decline from 20,000 in 1984 eventually reduced the herd to fewer than 2,000 by 2006. Caribou herds are naturally cyclic, yet the question concerning the Northern Alaska Peninsula herd remains: What brings on these highs and lows? The answer: Usually a combination of many things.

"A declining caribou herd probably never has just one problem," says Area Wildlife Biologist Dave Crowley, who studies the Northern Alaska Peninsula herd and other Alaska caribou herds out of ADF&G's King Salmon office.

In the case of the NAP herd's most recent decline, likely causes include predation, poor range conditions, disease and parasites. These are the factors biologists began investigating as the herd was bottoming out in 2005.



Habitat

Shortly after the Northern Alaska Peninsula caribou herd peaked in 1984, the traditional boundary began to blur between the herd's wintering grounds and that of the Mulchatna caribou herd (MCH) to the north. By 1986, portions of the Northern Alaska Peninsula herd – as many as several thousand animals – began wintering between the Naknek River and Lake Iliamna, well north of the herd's traditional wintering grounds. At the time, biologists believed excellent forage available north of the Naknek River would sustain the Northern Alaska Peninsula herd within the population objective of 15,000- 20,000.

Those beliefs changed, however, after some 50,000 Mulchatna caribou began wintering in the area. The change in both herds' winter distribution led to competition for winter forage.

Eventually, evidence indicated that forage quantity, and possibly forage quality, on the Northern Alaska Peninsula range had declined. Biologists found that lichens, a primary caribou food source, were being depleted by overgrazing. Low pregnancy rates and calf weights, and the Northern Alaska Peninsula herd's departure from traditional wintering grounds also raised habitat concerns. Further supporting evidence pointing to poor nutrition on the Northern Alaska Peninsula range included study results documenting an increase in body size in Northern Alaska Peninsula caribou transplanted to ungrazed range on the Nushagak Peninsula.

In 1998, 37 NAP calves were radio-collared by the department. Approximately two-thirds survived their first month of life, the others fell victim to predators, and environmental perils.

Caribou Survival

As signs of increased habitat use began to appear, calf recruitment into the population lessened. Calf recruitment – the number of calves that survive to become part of the overall population – relies on many factors including pregnancy rates, birth weights and calf survival. The age and nutritional status of adult female caribou in the herd can significantly influence calf recruitment and likely contributed to the recruitment decline.

Predation, disease and other factors also contributed to the decline by lowering calf survival. At the same time, annual adult survival was estimated at less than 70 percent in some years. The net result was that more adult caribou were dying each year than were being replaced by new calves, and a slow decline ensued.

Recognizing that the population was too large to be sustained by the available habitat, managers reduced the population objective to 12,000-15,000 caribou, and implemented a series of liberalized hunting seasons and bag limits to help reduce the herd's size. As hoped, the combination of increased harvest, reduced calf recruitment, and high natural mortality reduced the herd from 15,000 to 12,500 animals. As the herd reached the new population objective, hunting opportunities were progressively restricted. Still, calf recruitment and adult mortality remained high. The NAP continued on a slow population slide that would last until 2003. The herd subsequently experienced extremely poor recruitment from 2003 through 2008 – the result of low birth rates and poor survival, which kept the NAP at around 2,000 animals until 2010.



King Salmon Area Biologist David Crowley monitors a captured caribou as Region IV Supervisor Lem Butler records data.

"A declining herd probably never has just one problem," says Area Wildlife Biologist Dave Crowley. Possible causes investigated by biologists included predation, poor range condition, disease and parasites.



Managing Caribou for Our Future:

ADF&G's Management Goals for the Northern Alaska Peninsula herd:

1. Protect, maintain, and enhance the NAP caribou herd and its habitat using a suite of data collection procedures and other management activities.
2. Provide the greatest sustained opportunity to hunt and harvest caribou for human consumption.



Predation

Caribou are a food source for an array of predators, particularly brown bears and wolves. In some situations, predators can strengthen a herd by removing diseased and older individuals; however, predation can also accelerate the decline of a shrinking herd by taking young animals. During a 1998 study of the Northern Alaska Peninsula caribou herd, the department radio-collared 37 calves and discovered 35 percent died during their first month of life. Predators – primarily brown bears, eagles, and wolves – caused most of the mortality in calves less than two weeks old.

Prior to 2010, biologists evaluated intensive management options for the Northern Alaska Peninsula herd and concluded no viable solution existed to alter the herd's status. Instead, a Tier II hunting program was instituted in 1999 to restrict human harvest, and hunting was closed entirely by 2005. At this point, NAP caribou had fallen to much lower numbers and ongoing predation prevented the herd's recovery.

In March 2010, the Board of Game responded by authorizing a predator control program in Subunits 9C and 9E, but only 15 wolves were taken under the program compared to an average of 145 wolves harvested each year under regular hunting and trapping regulations during regulation years 2010-2012.



The main roadblocks to a successful intensive management plan included a lack of participation in the control program, poor winter conditions for tracking wolves, and restrictions imposed on federal lands. Yet despite the lack of success in implementing the program, recruitment has been slowly improving since 2009.

Disease

While predation is often the ultimate cause of death for caribou, other factors can contribute to a predation event, including diseases, and some diseases can cause death or starvation on their own. The first clue that disease might be contributing to the decline of the NAP herd came in the late 1990s when pneumonia caused by lungworms was discovered in several calves.

To learn more, disease profiles from collared NAP caribou were compared to 15 years of archived NAP serum samples and with other herds across the state. The work yielded a breakthrough discovery: Prior to 1999, the NAP herd appeared relatively disease-free. But beginning in 2000, blood work showed the presence of antibodies to Bovine Respiratory Viral Disease Complex. Bovine Respiratory Viral Disease can cause difficulty breathing and even death in domestic cattle but its effects on caribou are not known.

(Disease continued)

Examinations of adult caribou in 2005 and 2006 also showed the animals were heavily infested with parasites including brown stomach worm. The parasite infects caribou as well as domestic reindeer and is known to reduce pregnancy rates and calf weights.

Biologists don't know the origins of many of the NAP herd's health issues, but poor nutritional conditions likely contributed to the prevalence of disease and parasites in this herd. Improvements in the herd's status suggest that disease and parasites may not be as important of an issue as it was in the past and that nutritional limitations may be lessening.

Moving Forward

While there is still a long way to go before the Northern Alaska Peninsula herd can provide meat for every family, the outlook is very encouraging. Each year we see new indications that the herd has rounded a corner and is on its way towards recovering. The objective for the number of bulls was exceeded for the first time in 2014, and it was the best year for calf recruitment since 1996.

With these improvements come new opportunities, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game will issue 200 Tier II permits this winter for a hunt to be held in 2016. However, there is still much to do, and we need your help.

To allow the herd to grow and provide more opportunity, it is extremely important that the hunt conditions are followed and only people with hunting permits take caribou. Permit holders are encouraged to shoot bull caribou, allowing the cows to continue producing calves. With your help, the herd will continue to grow, and more permits will be issued in the future.



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Apply for a Tier II Hunt

Keep in mind:

- Only Alaska residents 10 years of age or older (by the hunt start date) may apply for Tier II permits.
- No individual may hold more than one Tier II permit for a species.
- Only three Tier II permits may be issued to a household for caribou.
- Alaska residents 15 years and younger do not need a hunting license.



Want to Hunt Northern Alaska Peninsula Caribou Next Year? Act Now!



Tier II Hunts

To be eligible to hunt Northern Alaska Peninsula caribou next hunting season, Alaska residents must apply for a Tier II hunting permit. This type of permit is issued when there is not enough game for a general hunt and the wildlife population has historically been an important source of human food. Tier II permits are used when it is anticipated that a reasonable opportunity to engage in the subsistence use cannot be provided to all eligible residents, and applications are scored to determine who is eligible for the limited number of permits. A Subsistence Supplement is available that lists species, application dates, hunt dates, game management unit and hunting specifications. Tier II applications must be filled out completely and turned in on time to be considered valid.

When and How to Apply:

To hunt caribou in Unit 9C and 9E in the state Tier II hunt in regulatory year 2016, hunters must have a valid resident hunting license and successfully apply for a TC505 permit. Tier II applications will be accepted online November 1, 8 a.m. – December 15, 5 p.m. (AKST) at <http://hunt.alaska.gov>. Tier II applications must be submitted online or mailed to the address shown on the application form. If you apply by mail, it is your responsibility to make certain the envelope is postmarked by November 30. Applications postmarked by November 30 will be accepted until December 15. Supplements and applications will be available online and at local vendors beginning November 1. Paper applications must be postmarked on or before November 30, while Internet applications will be accepted beginning November 1 through December 15, 5 p.m. (AKST).

A Word from a Naknek Elder

“Being unable to hunt caribou close to home has taken a toll not just on my family, but the whole community,” reports Allan Aspelund Sr., who lives in Naknek. He recalls the last time he was able to hunt for NAP caribou: “The caribou shifted further northward. People had to travel further up Game Management Unit 9C across Branch River in order to find the caribou. With fuel costs between \$200 and \$300 for me, it was cost prohibitive to go all that way for one caribou.”

Yet Aspelund Sr. continues to hunt today at 84 years of age despite the fact that his wife, Marylou, points out that it is often cheaper to eat beef from Anchorage. “During the caribou hunt closure, I have been moose hunting, though I’ve only been successful twice.” When asked what he enjoys most about hunting, Aspelund Sr. responded, “I enjoy the act of hunting. There is so much noise today and I like to try to find the quiet.”

Aspelund’s grandson, River John, is 14 years old and has never been hunting. “He’s getting to the age where he needs to learn. I look forward to getting him away from cell phones and teaching him about our traditional way of life.”

The news that the NAP herd is in better shape is encouraging for Aspelund Sr. who has lived in Naknek his entire life and has observed a lot of change in the herd over the years. “I sure look forward to eating caribou, something more gratifying than what I call Native steak...also known as Spam,” he laughs.



If you have any questions or need help applying for Hunt TC505, please contact the King Salmon Fish and Game office at (907) 246-3340.