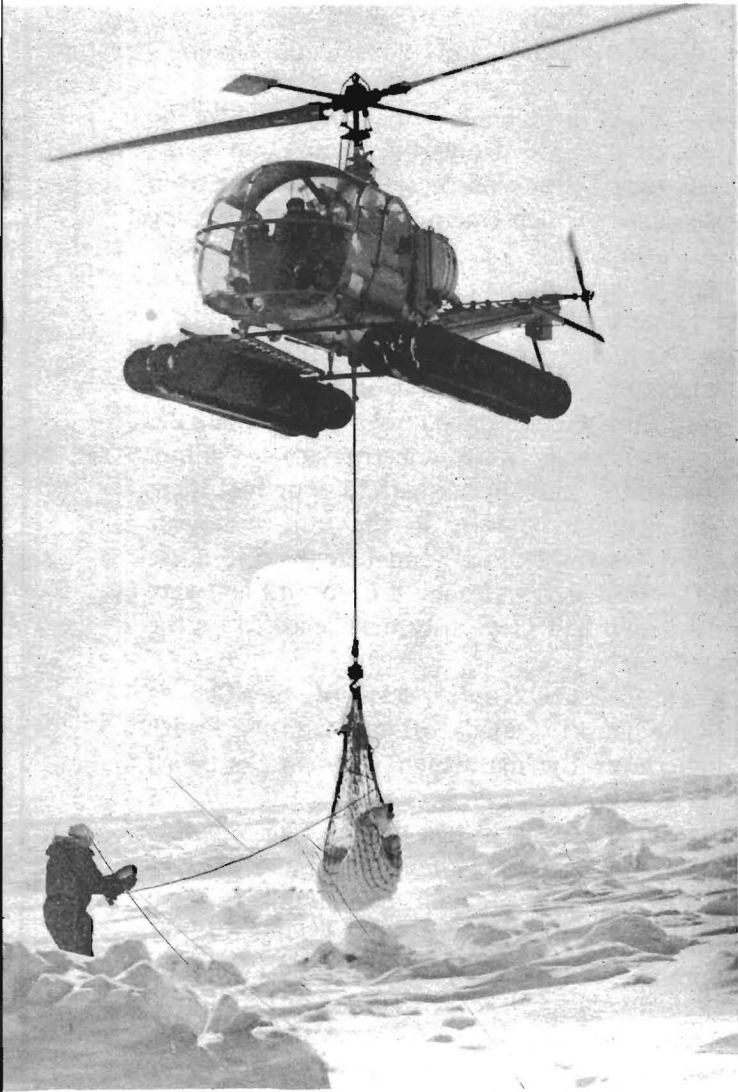


POLAR BEAR RESEARCH

By Jack W. Lentfer
Game Biologist
Barrow



Jack Lentfer

COPTER CARRY--Method of moving tranquilized bear by helicopter is one of many innovations developed by Fish and Game Department biologists during research projects.

This year, for the first time, a limited number of permits are being issued for trophy hunting of Alaskan polar bears in a plan designed to regulate the harvest of this unique species.

A permit system for polar bear hunting was first proposed in 1966 when it became evident that hunting pressure, mostly by guided airplane hunters, was increasing each year and that restrictions other than by season and bag limit would be needed. Alaska guides, who realize a considerable economic gain from polar bear hunting, strongly opposed a permit system on the grounds that it would make it difficult for them to book hunters. A compromise measure was adopted, which included restricting each guide to six hunters and, because most guides work in pairs, restricting each guide to participation in 12 hunts per season. Also, an unlimited number of permits were issued up until a cutoff date, usually March 31 of the current hunting year.

These regulations were quite satisfactory in 1967 and 1968, the first two years they were in effect, and the harvest stayed below 300, a figure which was thought to be an upper safe limit from a biological standpoint. By 1969, more guides had been licensed and were taking out hunters. During the five or six years preceding 1969, there were 25 or 26 guide teams working each year. In 1969 the number had increased to 32 and there were violations by a few guides who participated in the taking of more than 12 bears. Guides often work with more than one other guide or assistant guide, and it was extremely difficult from an enforcement standpoint to obtain evidence which would allow a conviction.

The shortcomings of the regulations which became evident in 1969 were more pronounced in 1970. An emergency closure was considered when it appeared that the 468 permit holders might harvest well over 300 bears. However, a period of poor hunting weather and an unusually low native kill resulted in a reported harvest of only slightly more than 300. It is believed, however, that a number of skins were shipped from the state without first having been presented to Fish and Game Department personnel for the required sealing. Examination of hides and skulls and information obtained at time of sealing allows an accurate assessment of the harvest.

Another factor prompting the limit on permits was the increase in airplane hunting by unguided resident hunters. This was negligible prior to 1968. In 1968, 26 bears were taken in this

manner, and in 1969, 22 bears were taken. In some cases it appeared that residents who were guided said they were not, so that their bears would not count against a guide's quota.

The new regulations with a limit on the number of permits should eliminate the possibility of an excessive harvest and halt some of the violations which have occurred in the past.

Under the permit system, the Department of Fish and Game will issue 90 permits for the area north and east of a line extending northwest from Point Lay on the Arctic coast and 210 permits for the area west and south of this line.

Two management areas have been established because it appears that there may be two different populations of bears off the Alaska coast. Bears taken west of Alaska out of Teller, Kotzebue, and Point Hope appear to be larger than animals of the same age taken north of Alaska out of Barrow. Females and younger animals form a proportionately larger part of the harvest north of Alaska than west of Alaska. This is probably because population structures in the two areas are different, although hunter selectivity may also have some effect.

A tagging study is providing information on movements and discreteness of populations in the two areas. Recaptures of marked animals are beginning to indicate that there may not be too much interchange of animals between the two regions. With two management areas it will be possible to modify regulations by area from year to year as changes in composition of the harvest and other findings indicate the need for changes in regulations.

Other regulations pertaining to trophy hunting include a season length of Feb. 1 through April 30, a bag limit of one bear every four regulatory years, protection for cubs and females with cubs and the need for a non-resident to be accompanied by a licensed guide. Guides are still limited to taking out six hunters and participating in 12 hunts.

Residents utilizing bears for food may take them at any time and without limit provided that cubs and females with cubs are not taken and an airplane is not used.

In the past, most trophy hunters have employed guides with airplanes, but it is also possible to hunt with Eskimo guides using snowmachines or dog teams. This is more strenuous than the airplane hunt and there is a much smaller chance of bagging a bear.

For some, however, the snowmachine or dog team hunt could be more enjoyable and rewarding. Hunts of this type may be arranged through the council of a village where polar bears are taken.

The villages of Wainwright and Point Hope traditionally have taken the most bears. □



Jack Lentfer

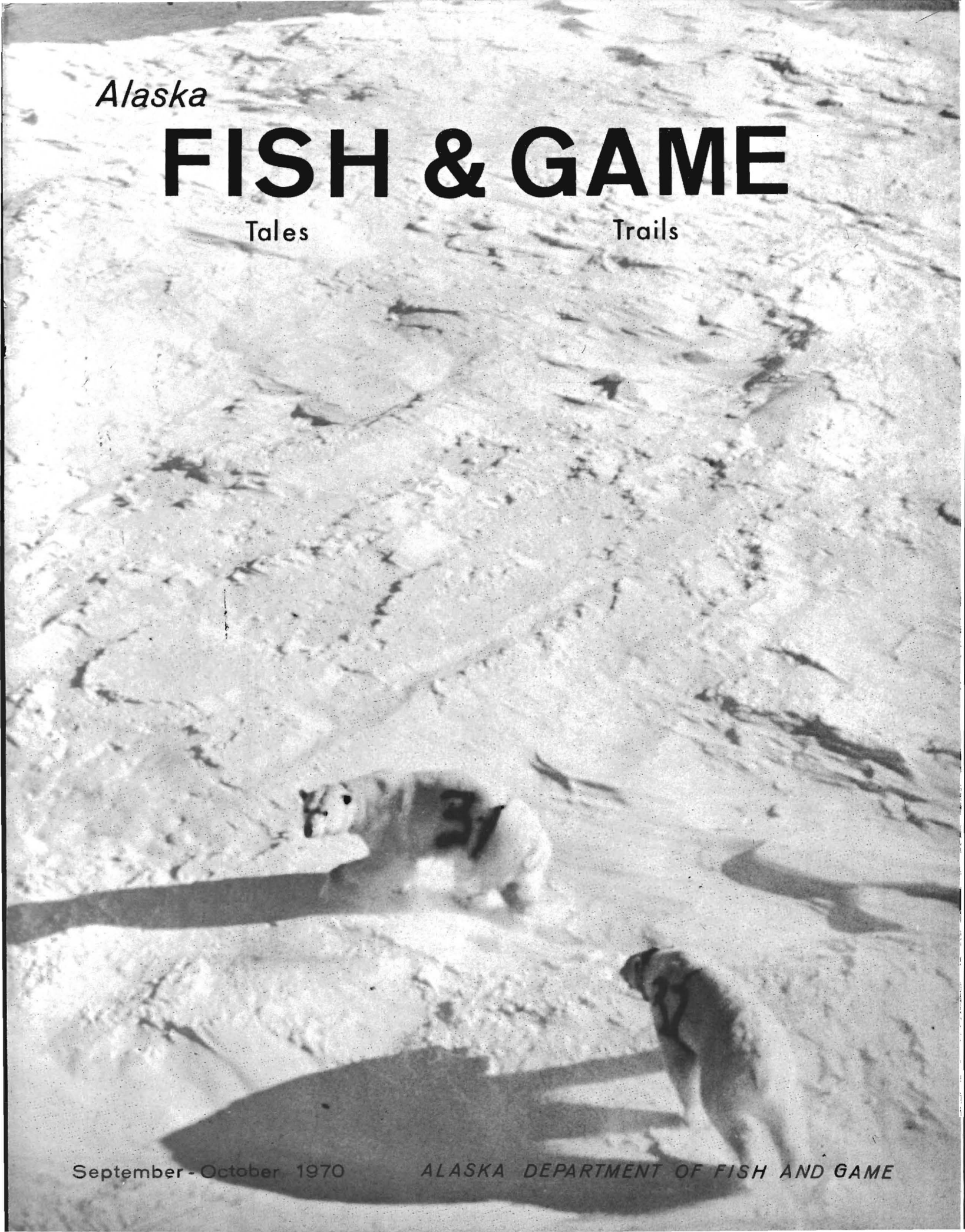
MARKED BEAR--Biologist watches as tagged and marked bear recovers from tranquilizing drug. Bears are marked as part of project to study habits, mobility.

Alaska

FISH & GAME

Tales

Trails



September - October 1970

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME