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Division of Wildlife Conservation

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Effects of weather on Caribou Forage Productivity and Nutrition within the range of the Chisana Herd

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RESEARCH PROGRESS REPORT

STATE: Alaska **STUDY NO:** 3.41

GRANT NO.: W-24-3 and W-24-4

STUDY TITLE: Effects of Weather on Caribou Forage Productivity and Nutrition Within the Range of the Chisana Herd

PERIOD: 1 January 1995-31 December 1995

SUMMARY

Progress this period focused on plant and fecal collection and completion of lab analyses to study the effects of weather on caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) forage productivity and nutrition within the range of the Chisana Herd. The second field season was successfully completed 31 May 1995 through 20 August 1995. All clipped vegetation from tundra habitat was sorted into the following forage classes: dead matter, live forbs, live deciduous shrubs, live sedges and grasses, lichen, and oven dried at 60°C for 48 hours to estimate aboveground biomass. Biomass and percent cover (estimated during clipping) was entered into a database to be analyzed statistically. All tundra vegetation samples from 1994 and 1995 have been ground to determine in vitro dry matter digestibility and nitrogen content. Analyses of in vitro dry matter digestibility and nitrogen should be completed by 30 June 1996 at University of Alaska Fairbanks. All shoots clipped from the *Salix pulchra* plots have been air dried. Caribou fecal pellets collected during summer 1994 and 1995 were sent to Washington State University to determine diet composition through microhistological analyses.

Key words: Alaska, caribou, Chisana, digestibility, forage productivity, forage quality, nitrogen, weather.

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BACKGROUND

The Chisana Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) Herd ranges in the Nutzotin and north Wrangell Mountains from the Nabesna River east into the Yukon Territory, Canada (Kelleyhouse 1990). In the early 1960s, Skoog (1968) thought the Chisana Herd numbered approximately 3000 caribou. During the late 1970s, however, the herd was estimated to be < 1000 animals (Kelleyhouse 1980). Between 1981 and 1988, the herd increased to 1900 caribou; calf:cow ratios in October ranged from 34:100 to 43:100. Recently, the Chisana Caribou Herd declined in both size and productivity. The herd decreased from 1900 animals in 1989 to 1300 in 1992; calf:cow ratios in autumn declined from 31:100 in 1988 to < 1:100 in 1992, the lowest recorded for any caribou herd in Alaska. During 1992 adult mortality increased substantially and the bull:cow ratio approached the minimum management objective of 30:100 established by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (Gardner 1993).

From 1984 through 1989, the average annual harvest of the Chisana Caribou Herd was 44 bulls; 50% to 60% of this harvest was taken by nonresidents guided by local outfitters and 9% to 12% by local residents. Beginning in 1990, a voluntary harvest restriction initiated by local guides and outfitters in response to the herd's decline resulted in an average take of 22 bulls. In 1993 the Alaska Board of Game established a registration permit system

allowing a maximum harvest of 20 bulls (Craig Gardner, pers commun). It is unlikely this small harvest influenced the decline of the herd.

Staff biologists studying the Delta and Fortymile caribou herds (in Interior Alaska) reported high adult mortality, low calf recruitment, and significantly lower body weights of calves from 1989 through 1992 (Valkenburg 1992). They hypothesized that warm, dry summers and heavy snow in winter in the last few years may have depressed forage quality, quantity, or availability and, hence, body condition of caribou in Interior Alaska (Pat Valkenburg, pers commun). Factors limiting productivity in the Delta and Fortymile caribou herds also may be affecting the Chisana Caribou Herd.

GOAL

My goal is to investigate the effects of summer temperature, precipitation, and variable sunlight on forage production and nutrient content within the summer range of the Chisana Caribou Herd. In addition, I will examine relationships between historical weather patterns and parameters of the caribou population. This study may increase our understanding of how weather influences forage quality and availability in Interior Alaska and, in particular, the Chisana caribou range. In conjunction with other studies, a knowledge of weather effects may help explain the widespread decline of Interior Alaska caribou herds. Thus, weather data may become useful in predicting or explaining variations in productivity of caribou populations.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

PLANT RESPONSE TO TREATMENT EFFECTS

To determine the effects of simulated variation in sunlight intensity, precipitation, temperature on nutrient quality, biomass, and digestibility of forages within the summer range of the Chisana caribou, I will test the following null hypotheses:

- Changes in available sunlight do not affect forage nutrient quality, biomass, and digestibility.
- Changes in amount of precipitation do not affect forage nutrient quality, biomass, and digestibility.
- Changes in temperature do not affect forage nutrient quality, biomass, and digestibility.
- Changes in temperature and precipitation combined do not affect forage nutrient quality, biomass, and digestibility.

- Changes in sunlight availability and precipitation combined do not affect nutrient quality, biomass, and digestibility.

HISTORICAL WEATHER PATTERNS AND CARIBOU POPULATION PARAMETERS

To determine relationships between calf production and survival and weather patterns in the Chisana caribou range, I will test the following null hypotheses:

- During the period of caribou decline (1989-1993), patterns of summer rainfall, summer temperature, and winter snowfall were not different from previous years when the herd appeared stable or increasing.

- There is no significant relationship between climatic variables and recruitment rate.

PROCEDURES

TUNDRA-MAT EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

A 48 m by 60 m grid consisting of 30 treatment plots was established in a traditional postcalving area of the Chisana Herd. Each plot contained 8 subplots, making a total of 240 vegetation subplots, each 0.25 m^2. Five replicates of 6 treatments (including controls) were applied to simulate a cloudy summer; a cloudy, wet summer; a warm, dry summer; and a warm, wet summer. The 6 treatments included: 1) unaltered control, 2) control with supplemental watering, 3) clear plastic only (to increase temperature by 3° to 4°C and decrease precipitation), 4) clear plastic with supplemental watering (to increase temperature by 3° to 4°C), 5) shade only (50% shade tarp), and 6) shade with supplemental watering (50% shade tarp). Temperature, precipitation, and amounts of supplemental watering under control, shaded, and clear plastic plots were recorded. In addition, a local weather station recording ambient temperature, sunlight availability, and rainfall was established.

The clear tarps and shade tarps are 1.8 m by 3.6 m. One 0.25 m^2 subplot was clipped during the 4 time periods (9 Jun, 26 Jun, 20 Jul, 9 Aug) in 1994 and 1995. Beginning 22 June 1994 through 8 August 1994 and 20 June 1995 through 5 August 1995, 30 liters of water was added once a week to those treatments requiring water. From 14 June 1994 through 8 August 1994 and 10 June 1995 through 10 August 1995, a data logger, recording temperature every 1.6 hour, and a rain gauge were placed at 1 of the 5 replicates for each of the 6 treatments. On 16 July 1994 and 15 July 1995, soil core samples were collected from each plot. This design allows me to look at plant response to 2 seasons of treatment.

SHRUB HABITAT EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

Five replicates of 3 treatments (including controls) were applied to plots in a community consisting mainly of *Salix pulchra*. These plots were not treated until 10 July 1994 due to weather and time constraints. Treatments were removed 5 August 1994 and reestablished 25 June 1995 through 6 August 1995. The treatments included: 1) unaltered control,

2) clear plastic tarp, and 3) 50% shade tarp. The tarps are 3.6 m by 3.6 m and cover 4 to 5 willow plants or the clonal plant. A data logger and rain gauge were placed at 1 of the 5 replicates for each of the 3 treatments. Approximately 25 annual shoots were clipped from each site on 2 August 1994, 12 July 1995, and 8 August 1995.

PLANT ANALYSES

Biomass, nutrient quality, and digestibility will be determined for all vegetation clipped. Forage vegetation samples will be analyzed for nitrogen, in vitro dry matter digestibility, and tannin concentration (in willows) at University of Alaska Fairbanks.

DIET COMPOSITION AND FECAL SAMPLES

Fecal pellets were collected from nearby caribou groups throughout summer 1994 and summer 1995. Pellets have been sent to Washington State University Laboratory to identify forage fragments from microhistological characteristics, determine diet composition (Dearden et al. 1975), and analyze fecal nitrogen to determine when forage nutrient quality is highest.

HISTORICAL DATA

Historical weather data (e.g., annual averages for summer temperature, summer precipitation, snow depth, and snow-free days) is currently being collected from the Nabesna weather station to assess the influence of weather patterns on the Chisana caribou population (e.g., calf:cow ratios, population abundance). Data will be analyzed using multiple regression modeling and correlation analyses.

RESULTS

VEGETATION ANALYSES

All clipped vegetation from the tundra community habitat has been air dried and sorted into the following forage classes: dead matter, live forbs, live deciduous shrubs, live sedges and grasses, and lichen; oven-dried at 60°C for 48 hours and weighed (biomass estimate). All biomass and percent cover (estimated during clipping) have been entered in a database and are being analyzed statistically. All tundra vegetation samples have been ground for nitrogen, tannin, and in vitro dry matter digestibility (Person et al. 1980) analyses to be completed at University of Alaska Fairbanks. Nitrogen content has been determined for 1994 tundra samples. One hundred ninety-four tundra samples from 1994 have been analyzed for in vitro digestibility. All lab analysis will be completed by 30 June 1996. In accordance with the experimental design, I will perform a repeated measure of analysis of variance on biomass, nitrogen, tannin, and in vitro dry matter digestibility data.

FECAL ANALYSES

Caribou fecal samples have been sent to Washington State University to determine diet composition through microhistological analyses and fecal nitrogen.

PRESENTATIONS

A poster paper was presented at the annual Alaska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit meeting on 1 March 1995 and the Second International Arctic Ungulate Conference on 13-17 August 1995. During the next year, I will attend an international meeting to give an oral presentation on my project.

CONCLUSIONS

There are no conclusions at this time.

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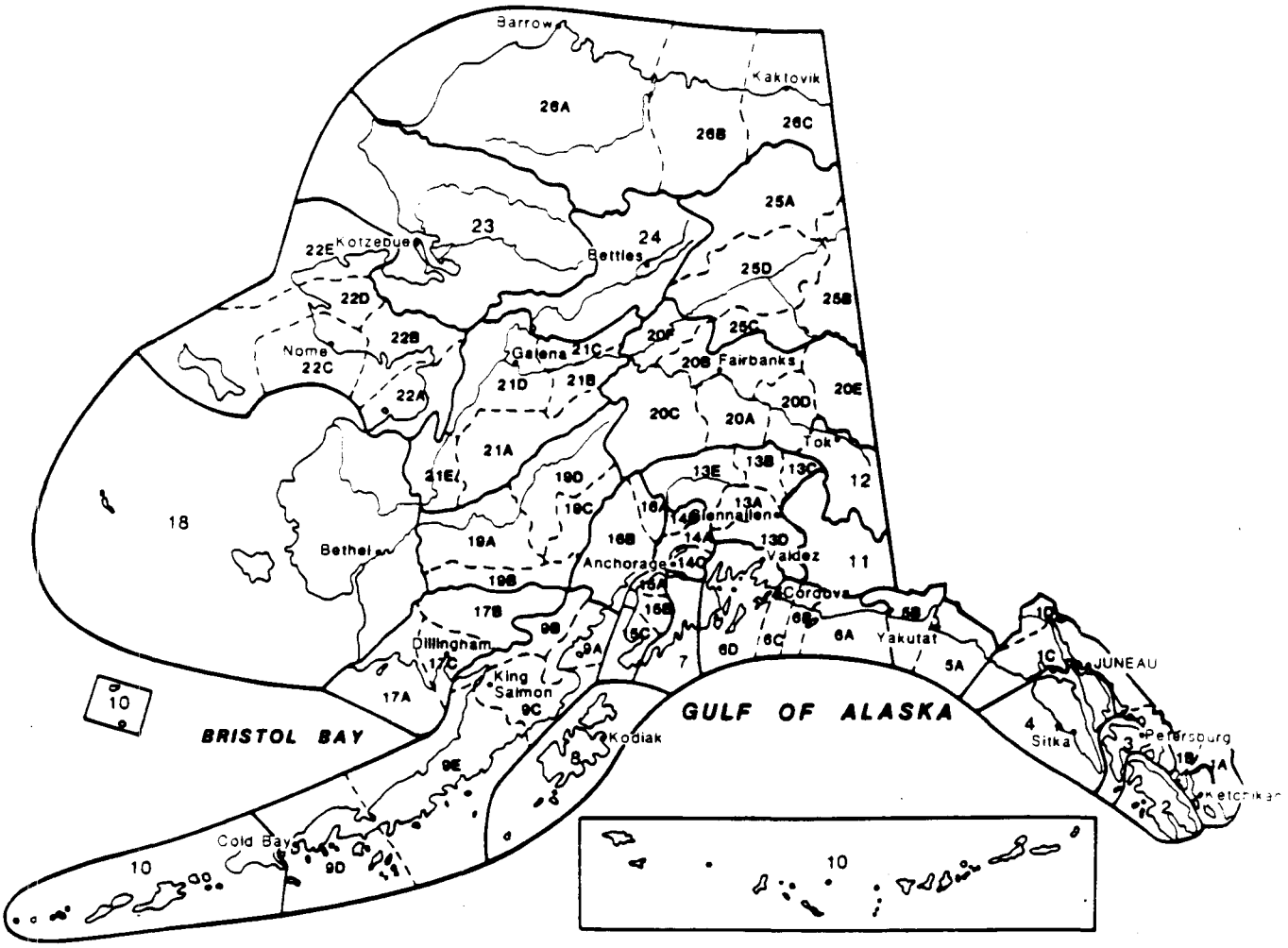
NOTES

Alaska's Game Management Units



The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program consists of funds from a 10% to 11% manufacturer's excise tax collected from the sales of handguns, sporting rifles, shotguns, ammunition, and archery equipment. The Federal Aid program allots funds back to states through a formula based on each state's geographic area and number of paid hunting license holders. Alaska receives a maximum 5% of revenues collected each year. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game uses federal aid funds to help restore, conserve, and manage wild birds and mammals to benefit the public. These funds are also used to educate hunters to develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes for responsible hunting. Seventy-five percent of the funds for this report are from Federal Aid.

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