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## **CHAPTER 1: CARIBOU MANAGEMENT REPORT**

From: 1 July 2012

To: 30 June 2014

### **LOCATION**

**GAME MANAGEMENT UNITS:** 7 and 15 (8,397 mi<sup>2</sup>)

**HERDS:** Kenai Mountains, Kenai Lowlands, Killey River, and Fox River

**GEOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION:** Kenai Peninsula

### **BACKGROUND**

Historical reports say caribou were abundant on the Kenai Peninsula before a series of large fires in the late 1800s, including a massive fire in 1883 (Sherwood 1974). This large-scale disturbance may have destroyed much of the lichen forage used by caribou and, due to long regeneration times for this important winter forage, may have influenced their population decline. Additionally, Allen (1901) reported that caribou "...are already very scarce on the Kenai Peninsula, and will doubtless soon be exterminated....native hunters kill the Moose and Caribou for their heads, disposing of them at good prices for shipment to San Francisco." It is likely that large-scale fires coupled with unregulated hunting caused caribou to be extirpated from the Kenai Peninsula by the early twentieth century.

Currently there are 4 recognized herds on the Peninsula, which were established through reintroduction efforts. Reintroductions in 1965 and 1966 established the Kenai Mountain (KMCH) and Kenai Lowlands (KLCH) herds. Additional introductions in 1985 and 1986 established the Killey River (KRCH) and Fox River (FRCH) herds.

KMCH in Unit 7 ranges over 1,400 km<sup>2</sup> primarily in the drainages of Chickaloon River, Big Indian Creek, and Resurrection Creek. The herd grew to more than 200 animals 7 years after the 1965 reintroduction (Alaska Department of Fish and Game et al. 1994) and numbered more than 400 by the mid-1980s (Selinger 2003). The population declined twice after it exceeded 400 animals (Alaska Department of Fish and Game et al. 1994, Selinger 2003). In recent years, it has declined to around 130 animals that have become more dispersed in their distribution (Table 1). The herd has been hunted since 1972. From 1972 to 1976, the department issued an unlimited number of registration permits, and the season was closed by emergency order when the harvest exceeded sustainable limits (Alaska Department of Fish and Game et al. 1994, Spraker 2001). In 1977 a limited drawing permit system was implemented and remains in place. Past fluctuations in population size suggest the carrying capacity for this herd is 200–400 caribou, due to limited winter range.

KLCH summers north of the Kenai airport toward the Swanson River in Subunit 15A and in the extreme northwestern portion of Subunit 15B. The population winters from the headwaters of the Moose River to the outlet of Skilak Lake and in the area around Browns Lake. Its range encompasses about 1,200 km<sup>2</sup>, and animals can often be found in and around the communities of Soldotna, Kenai, and Sterling. Numbers slowly increased to what was previously considered a harvestable number in 1981 (Holdermann 1981). Presently the herd numbers about 125–130 individuals. Growth in this population has likely been limited by predation. Free-ranging domestic dogs, coyotes, and wolves are the primary predators. Hunts were held in 1981, 1989, 1990, 1991, and 1992, but no permits have been issued since (Selinger 2005). This is the most visible herd on the Kenai and animals are frequently seen near the towns of Kenai and Soldotna during the summer. While establishing a huntable population remains the primary objective for this herd, it has also become valued for providing viewing opportunities for residents and visitors.

KRCH inhabits over 600 km<sup>2</sup> including the upper drainages of the Funny and Killey Rivers and north to the Skilak River in Subunit 15B. KRCH now numbers around 375–400 individuals. This herd grew steadily to more than 700 animals until 2001, when avalanches killed over a quarter of the population (Selinger 2003). Due to the nature of the habitat, avalanches may be a significant limiting factor for KRCH. KRCH has been hunted since 1994 under a limited drawing or registration permit system.

FRCH has the smallest range of all Kenai herds at about 120 km<sup>2</sup> south of the Tustumena Glacier between upper Fox River and Truuli Creek in Subunit 15C. FRCH peaked in 1998 (Spraker 2001) and again in 2012 at around 100 caribou. Recent surveys in 2014 counted 90 caribou in the herd. A limited number of drawing permits were issued for this herd from 1995 to 2003 when the population could sustain a harvest (Spraker 2001, Selinger 2005). From 2004 to 2010, no hunting permits were issued due to the low number of caribou counted, but numbers increased sufficiently and we have issued 10 drawing permits to hunt this herd each year since 2011. It is possible there is occasional interchange of animals between KRCH and FRCH. None of the radiocollared caribou have shown this type of movement, but the collar sample is low. If interchange did occur, it would help to explain some of the population fluctuations noted in FRCH. The 2 herds are separated by a narrow (2 miles wide) glacial flat and caribou tracks have been observed in that area.

## **MANAGEMENT DIRECTION**

### **MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES**

#### *Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd*

- Maintain a post hunt population of 300–400 animals.

#### *Kenai Lowlands Caribou Herd*

- Increase the herd to a minimum of 150 animals. Hunting will be allowed once this objective is reached.

#### *Killey River and Fox River Caribou Herds*

- Maintain viable caribou populations throughout suitable habitat and to provide for opportunities to hunt these herds when deemed sustainable.

## METHODS

We attempt to conduct aerial surveys in fixed-winged aircraft each year to determine the number, distribution, and composition of caribou herds. Surveys for KMCH, KRCH, and FRCH typically occur in the fall. Unfortunately, there are years where we have been unable to conduct flights due to other priorities or inclement weather. KLCH surveys typically occur postcalving in the spring but minimum counts are periodically conducted in the fall. Additionally, we capture animals from the separate herds periodically to maintain a sample of collared animals to assist with our management efforts. In October 2013, we collared 21 animals distributed among the herds (FRCH = 2, KLCH = 7, KMCH = 6, KRCH = 6). Collars were distributed to try to maintain collared animals in each herd for monitoring. Harvest data are collected through a mandatory reporting requirement for the drawing permit hunts.

### POPULATION STATUS AND TREND

#### *Population Size and Composition*

Kenai Mountains Herd. The herd currently numbers around 130 animals based on our last minimum count (Table 1). No composition counts were conducted during the reporting period.

Kenai Lowlands Herd. The current herd size is about 120 caribou based on a minimum count of 114 animals conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS); 25% calves were tallied during the 2013 spring composition survey (Table 2).

Killey River Herd. The herd appears to have increased since the last reporting period when it was estimated at about 250 caribou in 2008 (Selinger 2013). It is now estimated to be between 375 and 400 animals based on a minimum count of 374 conducted by the USFWS (Table 3). No composition counts were conducted during the reporting period.

Fox River Herd. This herd has also increased since the last reporting period to around 100 animals based on our last minimum count (Table 4). No composition counts were conducted during the reporting period.

### MORTALITY

#### *Harvest*

#### Season, Bag Limits, and Harvest.

*Kenai Mountains Herd* — The season for resident and nonresident hunters in Unit 7 north of the Sterling Highway and west of the Seward Highway has been 10 August–31 December since 1999. The bag limit has been 1 caribou by drawing permit (DC001) with 250 permits issued each year since 1996 with an average annual harvest of 21 caribou. The harvest for this reporting period and for the past 5 years was slightly higher at 22 caribou (Table 5). In 2010, the federal subsistence hunt was established, which has had an average annual harvest of 1 caribou.

*Kenai Lowlands Herd* — The season has been closed since 1993.

*Killey River Herd* — The season for resident and nonresident hunters in Subunit 15B south and west of Killey River in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge was 10 August–20 September.

Since 2004, the bag limit has been 1 bull by drawing permit (DC608) with 25 permits issued. There has been an average annual harvest of 6 bulls (Table 6) with little change over the last decade (Selinger 2009, McDonough 2011).

*Fox River Herd* — The season for resident and nonresident hunters in a portion of Subunit 15C south of Tustumena Glacier is 10 August–20 September. Drawing permits (DC618) were issued for the 2011 season for the first time since 2003 and the hunt has remained open with a bag limit of one caribou. Ten permits have been issued each year with a harvest of 1–3 caribou annually (Table 7).

Alaska Board of Game Actions and Emergency Orders. There were no Board of Game actions regarding Kenai Peninsula caribou during this report period.

Hunter Residency and Success. Residency and success rates for the KMCH, KRCH, and FRCH caribou hunts are shown in Tables 8, 9, and 10. Resident hunters account for the majority of harvest in these populations. The average success rate for hunters is 22% for KMCH, 47% for KRCH, and 67% for FRCH.

Harvest Chronology. Harvest chronologies for the KMCH, KRCH, and FRCH caribou hunts are shown in Tables 11, 12 and 13. The majority of harvest within these herds occurs during the month of August and tapers off towards the end of each areas respective season.

Transport Methods. Transport methods for the KMCH, KRCH, and FRCH caribou hunts are shown in Tables 14, 15, and 16. Caribou in these populations are well off the road system and in areas with restricted access methods. Therefore, access to the hunting grounds requires long hikes, horseback trips, or access via floatplane on limited lakes. KMCH hunters primarily accessed their hunt area by highway vehicle, KRCH hunters by floatplane or boat, and FRCH hunters by boat.

## **HABITAT AND DISTRIBUTION CHANGES**

No recent habitat assessment work has been conducted for Kenai caribou herds. Habitat was last assessed in 2002 indirectly through measurements of 10-month-old calf weights for KMCH and KRCH (Spraker et al. 2002). Department and Kenai National Wildlife Refuge biologists conducted preliminary habitat assessments for KRCH and FRCH before reintroduction in the mid-1980s. These results indicated the KRCH caribou winter range (516 km<sup>2</sup>) should sustain a herd of 400–500 caribou, and the FRCH caribou winter range (85 km<sup>2</sup>) could sustain approximately 80 animals. KRCH and FRCH are at or above these estimated capacities.

Caribou were reported east of the Harding Icefield near Seward in the mid-2000s and remained there for a few years, but have not been reported since 2009. These animals likely dispersed from FRCH or KRCH. Although caribou inhabited the Seward area more than 100 years ago (Porter 1893), it doesn't appear that a herd will become established at this time.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Caribou studies on the Kenai have been conducted through cooperative efforts of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and the U.S. Forest Service. Each herd has unique limiting factors impacting its growth. Basic monitoring and research

decreased due to other work obligations and limited staffing. We no longer conduct annual composition surveys on the herds due to the lack of an available local helicopter. We plan to look into future options however, and, if feasible, we will try to increase efforts to obtain herd composition data.

In 2010 the Federal Subsistence Board determined customary and traditional use of KMCH by residents of Hope (and Sunrise) and established a federal season. This determination was made even though over 80% of the caribou taken by Hope hunters since 1980 were harvested outside of the Kenai Peninsula. Furthermore, the “long-term use” determination for customary and traditional use was given to Hope residents despite caribou being extirpated from the Peninsula from 1915 to 1965 with limited hunting starting only in 1972. The Federal Subsistence Board determined that the extirpation of caribou was “beyond the control of the community” even though historical accounts suggest that uncontrolled hunting pressure would likely lead to the extirpation of caribou (Allen 1901). This determination was extended to the community of Cooper Landing in 2014. Similar to Hope, 92% of caribou taken by Cooper Landing hunters since 1980 occurred outside of the Kenai Peninsula. Federal seasons may challenge the successful management of the small caribou herds on the Kenai Peninsula if subsistence harvest increases to the point it represents a significant portion of the harvest. A combined management system for KMCH caribou will challenge managers to maintain this herd at sustainable levels.

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Table 1. Kenai Mountains Herd composition counts and estimated population size, Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Bulls:100 cows	Calves:100 cows	% Calves	Composition sample size	Minimum count	Estimated herd size
2009				n/a	264	300
2010 <sup>b</sup>						
2011				n/a	200	200–250
2012 <sup>b</sup>						
2013				n/a	130	130–150

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

<sup>b</sup> No surveys conducted.

Table 2. Kenai Lowlands Herd composition counts and estimated population size, Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Bulls:100 cows	Calves:100 cows	% Calves	Composition sample size	Minimum count	Estimated herd size
2009	n/a	n/a	23	102	102	135
2010 <sup>b</sup>						
2011 <sup>b</sup>						
2012	2	34	25	123	123	125–130
2013				n/a	114	120

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

<sup>b</sup> No surveys conducted.

Table 3. Killey River Herd composition counts and estimated population size, Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Bulls:100 cows	Calves:100 cows	% Calves	Composition sample size	Minimum count	Estimated herd size
2009 <sup>b</sup>						
2010 <sup>b</sup>						
2011 <sup>b</sup>						
2012				n/a	340	350
2013				n/a	374	375–400

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

<sup>b</sup> No surveys conducted.

Table 4. Fox River Herd fall composition counts and estimated population size, Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Bulls:100 cows	Calves:100 cows	% Calves	Composition sample size	Minimum count	Estimated herd size
2009				n/a	47	50–75
2010				n/a	75	75–100
2011				n/a	46	50–75
2012				n/a	105	105–110
2013				n/a	90	90–100

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).



Table 5. Kenai Mountains Herd harvest (DC001, either sex), Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	State				Federal Subsistence				Total harvest
	Permits issued	Permittees who hunted	Harvest		Permits issued	Permittees who hunted	Harvest		
			Bulls	Cows			Bulls	Cows	
2009 <sup>b</sup>	250	111	13	5					18
2010	250	86	13	6	17	11	1	1	21
2011	250	47	21	5	28	9	0	0	26
2012	250	89	12	12	19	12	2	0	26
2013	250	118	13	6	19	13	0	0	19

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

<sup>b</sup> No subsistence season.

Table 6. Killey River Herd harvest (DC608, bull only), Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Permits issued	Permittees who hunted	Total harvest
2009	25	12	6
2010	25	15	5
2011	25	12	6
2012	25	18	6
2013	25	9	6

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

Table 7. Fox River Herd harvest (DC618, either sex), Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Permits issued	Permittees who hunted	Harvest		Total harvest
			Bulls	Cows	
2009 <sup>b</sup>					
2010 <sup>b</sup>					
2011	10	2	1	0	1
2012	10	3	2	1	3
2013	10	2	1	0	1

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

<sup>b</sup> No season.

Table 8. Kenai Mountains Herd, state harvest hunter residency and success (DC001), Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Successful					Unsuccessful				Total hunters
	Local <sup>b</sup> resident	Nonlocal resident	Nonresident	Total	Percent success	Local <sup>b</sup> resident	Nonlocal resident	Nonresident	Total	
2009	4	14	0	18	16	1	89	3	93	111
2010	2	17	0	19	22	5	62	0	67	86
2011	3	23	0	26	28	6	59	1	66	92
2012	0	23	1	24	27	4	59	1	64	88
2013	1	18	0	19	16	4	92	4	100	119

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

<sup>b</sup> Local = Residents of Unit 7.

Table 9. Killey River Herd, hunter residency and success (DC608), Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Successful					Unsuccessful				Total hunters
	Local <sup>b</sup> resident	Nonlocal resident	Nonresident	Total	Percent success	Local <sup>b</sup> resident	Nonlocal resident	Nonresident	Total	
2009	3	2	1	6	50	1	5	0	6	12
2010	1	4	0	5	33	4	6	0	10	15
2011	2	3	1	6	50	2	4	0	6	12
2012	3	3	0	6	33	6	4	2	12	18
2013	5	1	0	6	67	1	1	1	3	9

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

<sup>b</sup> Local = residents of Unit 15.

Table 10. Fox River Herd, hunter residency and success (DC618), Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Successful					Unsuccessful				Total hunters
	Local <sup>b</sup> resident	Nonlocal resident	Nonresident	Total	Percent success	Local <sup>b</sup> resident	Nonlocal resident	Nonresident	Total	
2009 <sup>c</sup>										
2010 <sup>c</sup>										
2011	1	0	0	1	50	0	0	1	1	2
2012	0	3	0	3	100	0	0	0	0	3
2013	0	1	0	1	50	0	0	1	1	2

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

<sup>b</sup> Local = residents of Unit 15.

<sup>c</sup> No season.

Table 11. Kenai Mountains Herd, state harvest chronology (DC001), Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Harvest periods				Total harvest
	8/10–8/31	9/01–9/30	10/01–10/31	11/01–12/31	
2009	10	6	2	0	18
2010	10	6	2	1	19
2011	13	11	2	0	26
2012	18	4	2	0	24
2013	14	3	1	1	19

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

Table 12. Killey River Herd, harvest chronology (DC608), Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Harvest periods					Total harvest
	8/10–8/15	8/16–8/31	9/01–9/15	9/16–9/30	Unknown	
2009	1	2	3	0	0	6
2010	1	2	0	1	1	5
2011	1	1	4	0	0	6
2012	2	3	1	0	0	6
2013	2	0	1	3	0	6

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

Table 13. Fox River Herd, harvest chronology (DC618), Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Harvest periods				Total harvest
	8/10–8/15	8/16–8/31	9/01–9/15	9/16–9/30	
2009 <sup>b</sup>					
2010 <sup>b</sup>					
2011	0	1	0	0	1
2012	2	0	1	0	3
2013	0	0	1	0	1

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

<sup>b</sup> No season.

Table 14. Kenai Mountains Herd, state harvest (DC001) by transport method, Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Transport method								Harvest
	Airplane	Horse	Boat	3–4 wheel ATV/ORV	Highway vehicle	Snowmachine	Other/Unknown	Foot	
2009	2	3	0	1	10	0	2	0	18
2010	1	5	0	0	11	0	2	0	19
2011	3	3	0	0	18	0	1	1	26
2012	1	2	0	0	13	0	8	0	24
2013	0	3	0	0	13	0	3	0	19

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

Table 15. Killey River Herd, harvest (DC608) by transport method, Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Transport method								Harvest
	Airplane	Horse	Boat	3–4 wheel ATV/ORV	Highway vehicle	Snowmachine	Other/Unknown	Foot	
2009	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	6
2010	4	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	5
2011	4	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	6
2012	4	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	6
2013	2	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	6

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

Table 16. Fox River Herd, harvest (DC618) by transport method, Alaska, regulatory years<sup>a</sup> 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Transport method								Harvest
	Airplane	Horse	Boat	3–4 wheel ATV/ORV	Highway vehicle	Snowmachine	Other/Unknown	Foot	
2009 <sup>b</sup>									
2010 <sup>b</sup>									
2011	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
2012	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
2013	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

<sup>a</sup> Regulatory year begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., regulatory year 2009 = 1 July 2009–30 June 2010).

<sup>b</sup> No season.