

Caribou Trails

Tuttu Tumai Tuntut Tumait Bedzeyh Tene



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Herd declines to critical level

The Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group voted to assign the herd to the “critical declining” level at its annual meeting in December 2025. Herd status is derived from the *Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group Cooperative Management Plan*. Herd size, population trend (stable, increasing or decreasing), adult cow survival, and calf recruitment are used to recommend a management level. The management levels are color coded, and the “critical declining” level is code red, reflecting the crucial need to stop the decline in the Western Arctic caribou herd (WAH) numbers. “Critical declining” is the most urgent level in the plan.

A 2025 Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) photo census revealed 121,000 caribou remain in the herd, continuing a decline that began more than two decades ago. When the department last completed a photo census in 2023, there was an estimated 152,000 caribou; this means the herd declined by 20% (~30,000 animals) in two years. Noting that 123,000 caribou have been lost since 2019, Working Group member Morris Nassuk observed that another five to six years of similar declines would result in nothing left of the herd. ADF&G caribou biologist Alex Hansen echoed Nassuk’s concern about the long-term viability of the herd and advised that temporarily closing the harvest of WAH cows was the best thing that could be done to preserve the herd for future generations. (For more about the importance of cows, see pages 6-7.)

Because the Working Group serves in an advisory capacity, its vote to change the management status of the herd does not change hunting regulations but serves as a starting point for discussions about specific actions and recommendations to federal and state regulatory bodies. Although all Working Group members expressed heightened concern over the dwindling number of caribou in the herd, some were reluctant to recommend further restrictions on caribou harvest because of the disproportionate impact more harvest restrictions would have on families in their region, especially if regulations prohibit the harvest of cows in communities such as Anaktuvuk Pass and the upper Kobuk River villages

**WAH Health Stats**

Population Size:	121,000*
Population Trend:	Declining*
Calving Rate:	77%^
Calf Recruitment:	17 Calves:100 adults^
Cow Survival Rate:	79%*
Bull-to-Cow Ratio:	44 bulls:100 cows^

Red* = Cause for Concern

Green^ = Above management goal

of Ambler, Shungnak, and Kobuk, where it is harder to access marine mammals and other sources of meat. Another major concern for Working Group members was wolf predation on the herd and an increase in wolf sightings, including the presence of wolves in some Upper Kobuk villages.

Ultimately, a majority of Working Group members voted to submit proposals to the Alaska Board of Game and a Wildlife Special Action Request to the Federal Subsistence Board to 1) limit resident hunter harvests to four caribou per year per hunter, one of which can be a cow in Units 22, 23 and the southwest portion of Unit 26A; 2) support aerial shooting and local incentives for predator control; 3) allow for zero nonresident caribou hunting permits to be issued in Unit 23; and 4) amend the existing management plan to include recommending a moratorium on all hunting if the population falls below 75,000 caribou, which would remain in effect until the population exceeds 100,000.

In late May 2026, due to concerns over the declining population, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) issued an emergency order (EO) closing the cow season for the Western Arctic Herd (WAH) for regulatory year 2027 (July 1, 2026-June 30, 2027). Federal regulations were updated to mirror this cow closure on federal lands as well.

The Working Group recognizes these recommendations and the current regulations will have major consequences for users of the herd, but as the late Tom Gray said at the meeting, "decisions needed to be made" because “the resource is crying.”

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Updates from the Working Group Meeting

Message from the Chair



I know that caribou numbers dropped this low earlier in my lifetime, but I never imagined the herd would be this low again. 121,000 is not a lot of caribou for the Western Arctic caribou herd. When this happened before, hunters were harassed by

game wardens. Hunters during that time weren't worrying about counts or reporting what they were harvesting because they didn't know about them and how they could help. Things are better now. Hunters are more cautious. We have learned from the past.

After our meeting, I went to a tribal council meeting, and I think they understood where the Working Group is coming from. We need to get situated. We are in a critical situation, a situation that has happened before, and we need to do what we can to help get out of it. I am asking my people to leave the females and report harvest because that will help us know what is going on.

A lot of knowledge left us since our meeting. I met Tom Gray at the Working Group. He was always vocal. He could not be quiet. He represented reindeer herders but always

knew we all were there to help the caribou. I am going to miss that guy.

Working Group members come from all over the state, and we have different problems in some of our areas. Sometimes it might be difficult, we might not agree, but we do the work we came to the group to do. It is important to have Working Group members in all the seats, so we are working to have every seat filled, and we are working together to preserve the caribou herd for the future.

We would like to send our condolences to the family of Steve Oomittuk. Taikuu for his service! He will be missed.

Vern Cleveland
Noorvik, Alaska

NANA Region

More caribou in Shungnak than for many years. Upper Kobuk and other villages report seeing lots of wolves and late migration.

Seward Peninsula

People have to travel great distances to hunt caribou, and beaver dams impeding waterways creating challenges for hunting by boat. Reports of increased wolf sighting in southern portion of peninsula.



North Slope

Caribou came to Anaktuvuk Pass late with a few stragglers. Lots of wolves in Atkasuk, Utqiagvik, and Wainwright. Coast still getting caribou.

Koyukuk & Middle Yukon

Lots of concern about lack of caribou because of the lack of fish. Also concerns about wolf predation.

Each year members of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group share their observations during the “Caribou Round Table.” Above is a summary of the December 2025 discussion.

Guest Elder: Samson Henry



Samson Henry, guest elder at the 2025 Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group meeting, shared memories of the stories that shaped him. A Vietnam veteran and former barge pilot from Allakaket, he reflected, “I am almost 82 years old, not too many of us left to remember the stories.” Even as a child, he said, he was drawn to elders and their knowledge: “I didn’t understand it, but I was happy when I talked to them.”

He spoke of teachings from his grandmother Bessie Henry, who lived through years when people survived on whatever the land offered. “My grandmother Bessie Henry used to say there’s medicine in those bones,” he said. “No moose, only thing they had were a few caribou, rabbits, ptarmigans, and beaver. They piled up bones — that is a really old tradition. I believe it is our first source of medicine, because

it saved people who were starving.” As a barge pilot on the Yukon River, he met elders whose memories echoed the same themes. “Over the years I talked to some people... I met some old people who told me old stories... all the stories are similar about survival.” Whenever there was no food, he said, people boiled bones.

Henry also remembered the lessons from his grandmother Dora Johnson. “My late grandmother Dora Johnson told me there was nothing, but they had caribou and they got some fat — some seal oil from the coast that they eat with the caribou.” He has shared that knowledge with his daughters. “I told my girls their great grandmother used to survive on fat. Beaver was one of the survival foods because it had a lot of fat — used to have 5–6 inches of fat, now maybe 3–4 inches of fat in fall.”

He noted that it’s easy to forget that many traditions began as simple common sense, shaped by doing what was needed to live. Even today, he said, it remains important not to disturb the animals and to remember to say thank you.

Updates from the Working Group Meeting

A 50-year cycle? Declining herd brings up memories from 1976.

When the news was shared of the latest caribou count – 121,000 animals as of July 2025 – Working Group member Charlie Lean said, “I was afraid we’d get here. I was in college the last time this herd hit a low like this, and I remember what a terrible feeling that was.”

Charlie Lean, now in his 70s, is a lifetime Alaskan who first came to the Northwest Arctic as a child. His dad worked as a prospector on the Salmon and Squirrel rivers of the Kobuk valley. After that, the family moved to Nome, where Charlie has continued to live for most of his life.

In the 1950s, when Charlie’s dad was a miner outside Kiana, the Western Arctic caribou herd was doing well. The work crews fed themselves by harvesting caribou and other game. By 1976, when Charlie was a senior at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, that same Western Arctic caribou herd had plummeted to only 75,000 animals.

Charlie was in the audience of the Alaska Board of Game meeting in Fairbanks that year, at the suggestion of a respected professor. The meeting was held at the Tanana Valley Sportsmen’s Association – “hardly an unbiased venue,” Charlie thought. He didn’t know what to expect, and his initial reaction was “Holy mackerel!” Over the next three days Charlie heard testimony from Fairbanks, Kotzebue, and Anaktuvuk Pass hunters, among others. He recalls there were “very strong opinions on both sides, and accusations all around” about how to address the caribou decline. In particular, Charlie recalls the impact of the Anaktuvuk group. “They told emotional stories but weren’t blustering. They swayed the board... they swayed me,” Charlie recalls. Charlie says that meeting “was a light bulb moment on what I was getting into. You can’t manage a population without working with people.”

Returning to Nome in 1981, Charlie hired on as a fish biologist for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. A western Alaska salmon crash soon followed, and Charlie found himself as “the manager in the hot seat.” Although working in fisheries, Charlie remained aware of the Western Arctic Herd’s status and, like many, brought home caribou as part of his family’s diet. Now, he says, “My son-in-law and the other young guys do the work...I’m very grateful that my time as a hunter (happened) during the peak of the herd – a good time to be a caribou hunter.”

When asked to reflect on the similarities and differences between the 1976 and

current declines, Charlie offered, “In the 1970s, [luckily] the herd rebounded quickly. Now we need to do our best to allow for that to happen if it’s possible.” Charlie was working at ADF&G during the time when the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group took shape. He recalls that collaborative management was “a radical concept at that time,” but one



Courtesy of Charlie Lean, photo by Jim Magdanz

he was enthused about, understanding the importance of recognizing Alaska Native culture and food security in the crafting of regulations.

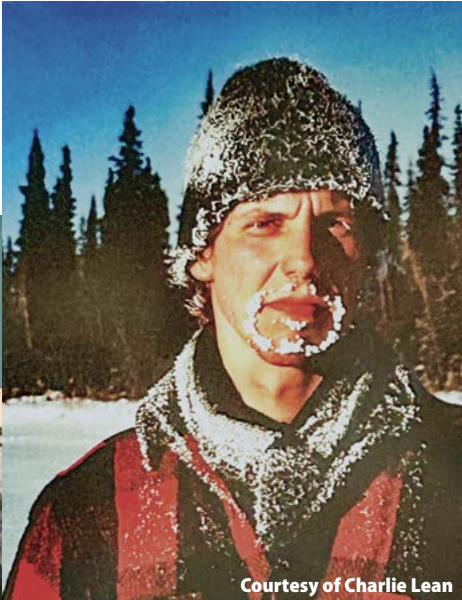
Serving on this Working Group since 2015, Charlie draws on many experiences (biologist, hunter, fishing deckhand, trapper, and grandfather among them) when discussing caribou issues. “As a manager,” he says, “my best successes were when I was able to bring stakeholders into the process and give them a feeling of ownership.” He hopes people will continue to work together, adding, “Now I’m the old guy and I worry about repeating the errors of the past.”

Charlie reflected on how much technology has changed in recent decades: “Fifty years ago, the Elans we had could hit about 30 mph at most...wow.” Now, with bigger boats,

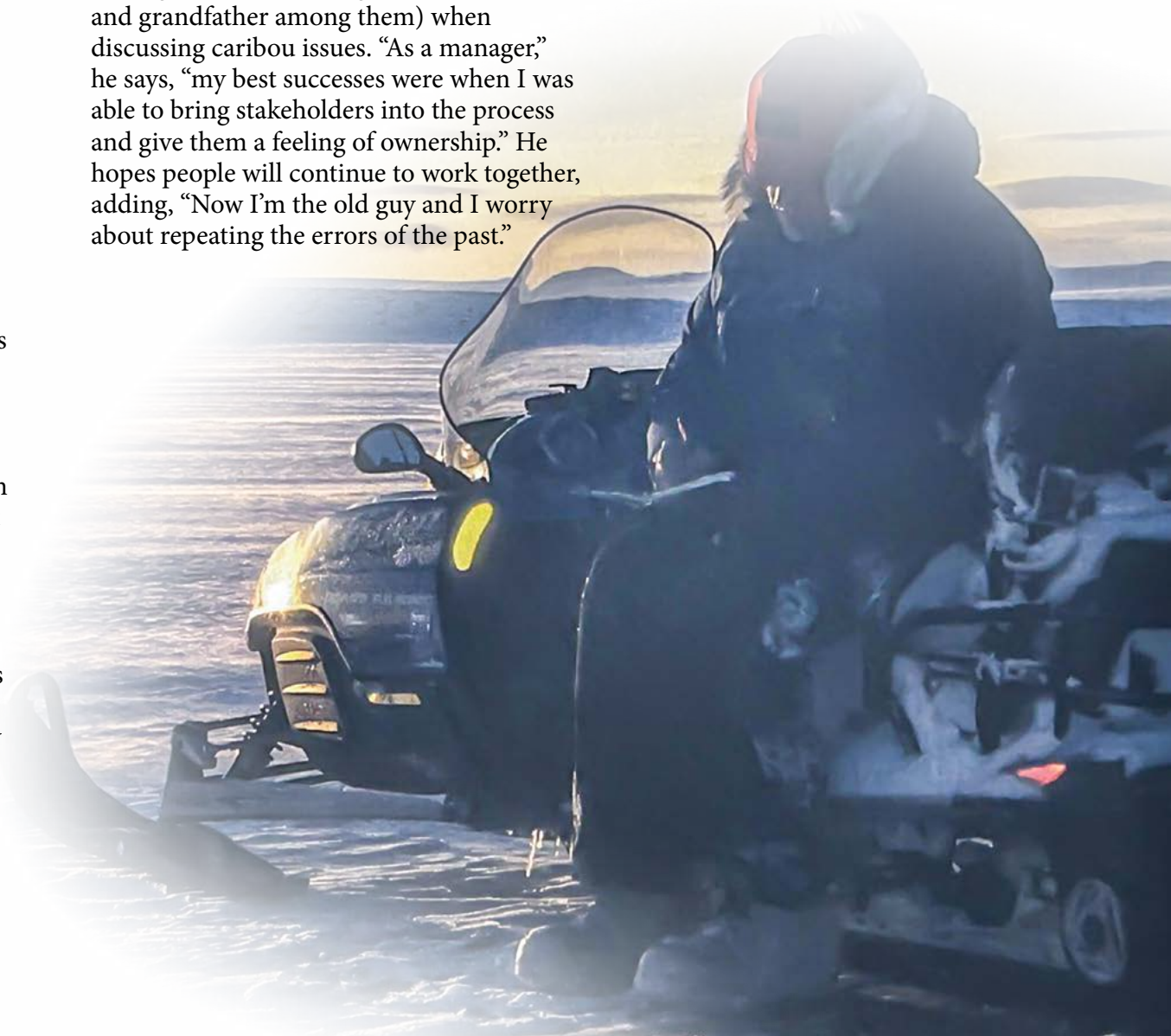
faster machines, and different firearms there’s “more of a temptation to run down caribou. We have the capability now to hose this population.” Now that we can travel further and haul heavy loads, those that “really need a caribou can probably find one,” but the flip side of that is “the animals don’t get any rest.” One thing that hasn’t changed:

“Human nature is still there. It’s easier to blame other people and say those guys are the problem.”

Charlie hopes that a sense of good hunting ethics also continues: “Make every shot count, respect the animal. Be purposeful, don’t drive the herd crazy. Keep in mind the herd and other people, those that don’t have caribou in their backyard.” Lastly, he cautions about trying to outsmart nature or engineer the ecosystem, musing “caribou have their highs and lows and we have to accept that and roll with it.”



Courtesy of Charlie Lean



Background Courtesy of Charlie Lean

Federal Land Status & Development Terms

Defining terms for understanding land status and development in Alaska

National Petroleum Reserve – Alaska

The NPR-A is the largest unit of federal public lands and contains important habitat for the Western Arctic and Teshekpuk caribou herds. The area was originally set aside after World War I to protect fuel reserves for the U.S. Navy. NPR-A was transferred by Congress to the U.S. Department of the Interior in 1977 to promote energy development and integrate land management. Congress required the Secretary of the Interior to consider important values and resources, such as Native livelihoods and subsistence, wilderness values, cultural resources, and important fish and wildlife habitat, while at the same time creating an opportunity for oil and gas production.

Integrated Activity Plan & Special Areas

How conservation and development are carried out in the NPR-A is determined by an Integrated Activity Plan that specifies which areas are open for oil and gas development and which are set aside to protect important species, habitat, subsistence, and other values. The strongest protections occur within federally designated “Special Areas,” including the Utukok River Uplands Special Area that protects much of the WAH calving grounds and the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area that covers much of the calving grounds for the Teshekpuk Caribou herd.

D1 Lands

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act Section 17(d)(1) directed the Secretary of the Interior to review public lands in Alaska and determine which should be withdrawn and held by the Federal government for future land use planning. In a series of Public Land Orders in the 1970s, the Secretary withdrew about 158 million acres of these “D1 lands.” While some have since been opened to leasing and development, many remain withdrawn, including areas overlapping a substantial portion of the WAH calving grounds, summer range, insect relief habitat, migratory areas, and winter range.

Public Land Orders 5150 & 5180

Public Land Orders (PLOs) are issued by the Department of the Interior (DOI) to guide use of some federal lands. PLO 5150 was issued in 1971 to establish a transportation and utility corridor to support building of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline and the Dalton Highway. In 1972 PLO 5180 withdrew 47.1 million acres for the public interest. These PLOs prohibited the conveyance of State land selections, Native land selections, mining, and mineral leasing. If the withdrawals are revoked by the DOI, these lands are open to selection. Under ANILCA Section 906(e) the State of Alaska has filed future selection applications on nearly all the lands within the Dalton Highway Corridor, also known as "top-files". Top-filing is a contingent land selection by the State of Alaska allowed by ANILCA, that allows the state to select lands within PLO areas contingent upon the revocation of the PLO.

National Environmental Policy Act

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is a law that requires federal agencies to assess the environmental effects of proposed actions before making decisions, with a goal of pursuing conditions for productive harmony between people and nature. NEPA fosters informed decision making by federal agencies and meaningful public participation in those decisions. This includes decisions about building infrastructure, land management, and oil, gas, and mineral leasing. Agencies are required to take a hard look at how their actions may affect the human and natural environment and if there are ways to minimize effects. Under NEPA, if a proposed action could significantly affect the quality of the human environment, federal agencies produce detailed statements about the reasonably foreseeable impacts. The public then has opportunities to review and comment on these documents.

Environmental Impact Statements & Environmental Assessments

Two of the main documents produced under NEPA are Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) and Environmental Assessments (EAs). Both analyze the expected impacts of the proposed action and a reasonable range of alternatives. If a proposed action seems likely to have significant impacts, a more comprehensive EIS is developed, with more opportunities for public comment or involvement. If it seems unlikely that a proposed action will have a significant effect on the environment, the agency will prepare a shorter EA. If the EA indicates the proposed action will not have a significant effect on the environment, the agency issues a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). If the EA analysis shows that the proposed action will have a significant effect on the environment, then the agency will complete a full EIS. The EIS process results in a Record of Decision (ROD), which describes how the agency will or will not move forward with a proposed action and what requirements and stipulations will be used to mitigate impacts.



Development Updates in the WAH Range

1 Ambler Road Project

The Ambler Road project has gone back and forth over the past few years. Last year, the U.S. President approved the Ambler Road to cross federal lands, reversing a 2024 decision by the Bureau of Land Management to deny the right-of-way connecting to the Dalton Highway, due in large part to the road’s expected impacts on subsistence. This only applies to federal lands; the State of Alaska and Native Corporations with lands along the proposed route will make their own permitting decisions. As of July 2026, NANA and Doyon had allowed exploratory activities, and had agreed to open discussions about the Ambler Road, but had not announced a decision about allowing a road on their lands. If constructed, the road would cover over 200 miles across state, federal, and Native Corporation lands between the proposed Ambler Mining District and the Dalton Highway, crossing WAH migration and winter areas. The Working Group opposes the road out of concerns for the impacts it would have on the herd and subsistence.

2 PLO 5150/5180 Revocation

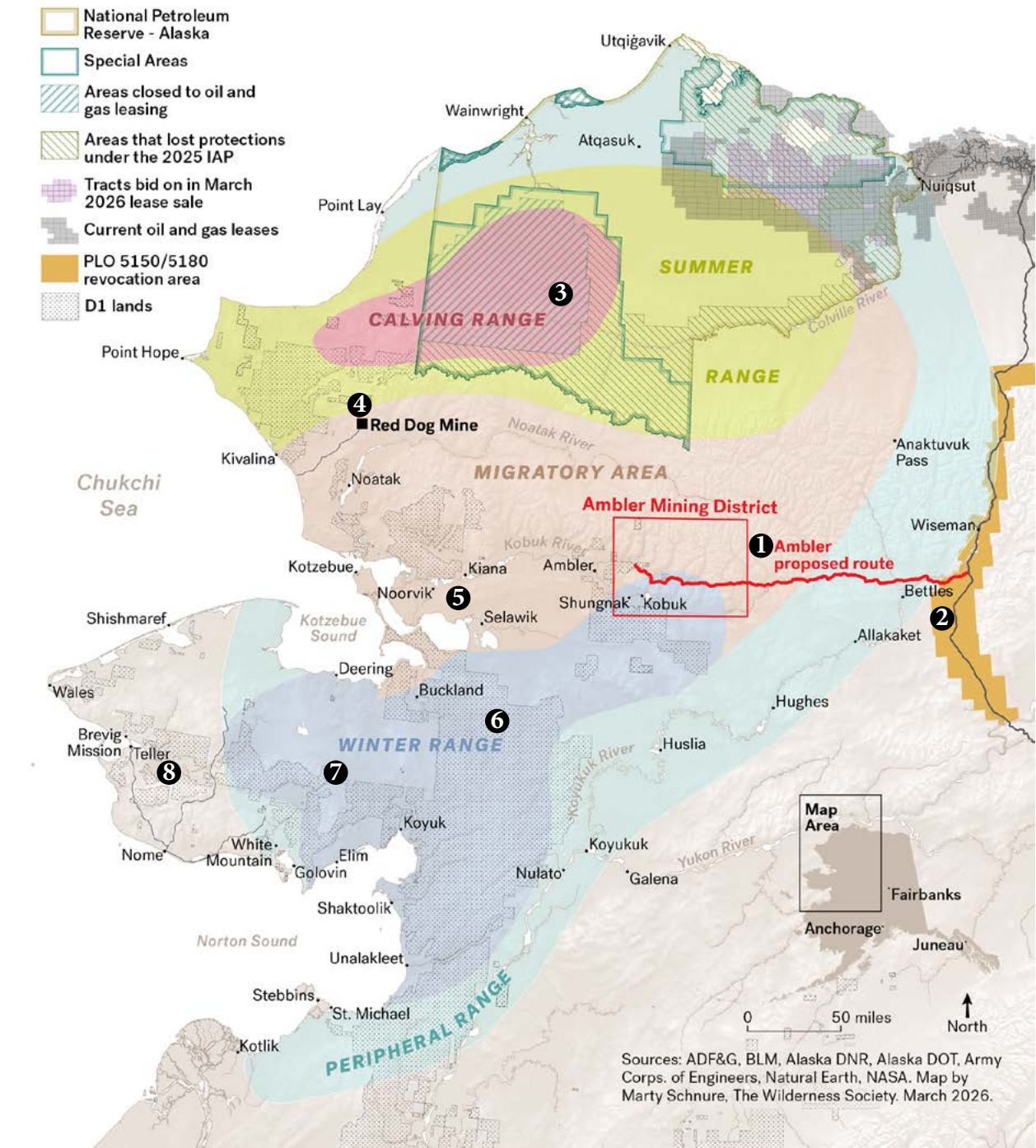
In the spring of 2026, the federal government issued PLO 7966 that revoked withdrawals on lands along the Dalton Highway Corridor that were withdrawn under Public Land Orders 5150 and 5180, opening 2.1 million acres north of the Yukon River to state selection. Following these actions, the State requested title to 1.4 million acres in the corridor which BLM conveyed to the State in May. The transfer of lands to the State means the federal subsistence priority no longer applies on the transferred lands. The State held public meetings from March through June 2026 on these topics.

3 National Petroleum Reserve – Alaska

In 2025, the Bureau of Land Management replaced a 2022 Integrated Activity Plan that made 52% of the land, and 75% of the estimated oil, available for development. The new IAP allows leasing on 82% of the land, reducing protections around WAH and Teshekpuk Caribou herd calving grounds and other habitat. A lease sale under the new plan was held in March 2026. Bids were received for 187 tracts, though some overlapped areas prohibited in a March court case. The government also rescinded a 2024 rule that provided stronger protections for caribou and other species, as well as opportunities to strengthen or expand federal Special Areas. The Working Group has repeatedly requested that BLM protect caribou calving grounds and other critical habitat in the NPR-A.

4 Red Dog Mine Expansion

Current mining at Red Dog is set to run out in 2031 but the Anarraaq-Aktigiruk mineral deposits, about 8 miles north of the current Red Dog Mine, could extend operations. In 2024, the Army Corps of Engineers approved a permit to build about 12 miles of roads and other infrastructure that would allow exploration



to proceed. The State of Alaska approved the Plan of Operations and Reclamation Plan in December 2025 for expanded exploration at the Anarraaq-Aktigiruk deposit. The Working Group commented on earlier applications for exploration, encouraging protections for caribou and subsistence, but took no formal position on the project.

5 NANA Broadband

NANA is seeking to construct a regional broadband network project that would lay fiber optic cable across northwestern Alaska to provide high-speed internet access to 10 communities. Proposed work includes helicopter and ground-based construction and maintenance in areas that overlap WAH range. Some cable would be laid directly on the tundra, other portions would be bored under rivers and seabed, while some sections would be elevated over rivers on poles. A draft Environmental Assessment was released in October 2025 and the Working Group submitted comments requesting additional details about proposed mitigation measures and raising concerns about impacts of aerial crossing structures. In January 2026 BLM released a final Decision Record allowing the project to proceed.

6 D1 Lands

D1 lands were withdrawn following the Alaska Native Claims Settlement

Act to be unavailable for mineral and energy development and protect the public interest. In 2020 and 2021 the U.S. Department of the Interior attempted to revoke 28 million acres of D1 withdrawals, but deficiencies in the decision-making process led to withdrawal protections being maintained in a 2024 decision. There are current efforts by the federal government to overturn them. Out of concern for the effects of D1 revocation on caribou and subsistence, the Working Group submitted comments in 2024 and 2026 requesting that D1 land protections be maintained.

7 Boulder Creek Mine

Boulder Creek is a uranium exploration project located about 30 miles north of Elim on the Seward Peninsula. After receiving an exploration permit in 2024, Panther Minerals announced in July 2025 that they were not moving forward with the project. The claim owner is now seeking other companies to take over the project.

8 Graphite One Mine

Graphite One is a proposed graphite mine on the Seward Peninsula. The project completed a feasibility study in 2025 and is currently undergoing federal permitting, which is projected to be completed by the end of September 2026. Opportunities for public comments are expected.

**The views expressed here are those of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group and do not necessarily represent those of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game or other agencies who support the Working Group.*

Importance of Cow Caribou

Much like the land and weather, caribou populations change over time. These shifts guide adjustments to both management strategies and hunting practices. Individuals concerned about the herd often ask how biologists determine population numbers and make management recommendations. The following article provides answers to those questions. As the Western Arctic caribou herd continues to decline, it will take both wildlife managers and local communities working together to rebuild the herd and preserve it for future generations.

What are the current numbers for the Western Arctic caribou herd and why is it cause for concern?

Last summer the Western Arctic caribou herd (WAH) was photographed, and Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) counted 121,000 caribou. Biologists caution that based on this count; the estimated harvestable surplus (the portion of a population that can be sustainably harvested without reducing the overall number of breeding animals) is approximately 5,800 caribou, none of which should be cows. Based on this data, at the 2025 meeting, the Working Group lowered the management level of the herd to critical declining.

Although exact harvest numbers are unclear, historical harvest estimates indicate the harvestable surplus is in danger of being exceeded. Hunters should be confident they are targeting bulls as the WAH has no cows to spare. Hunters are encouraged to visit adfg.alaska.gov and search “bull or cow” to find resources on sex identification or scan the **QR code** below. Each living cow can add to the population for many years to come.

How do we know how many caribou there are?

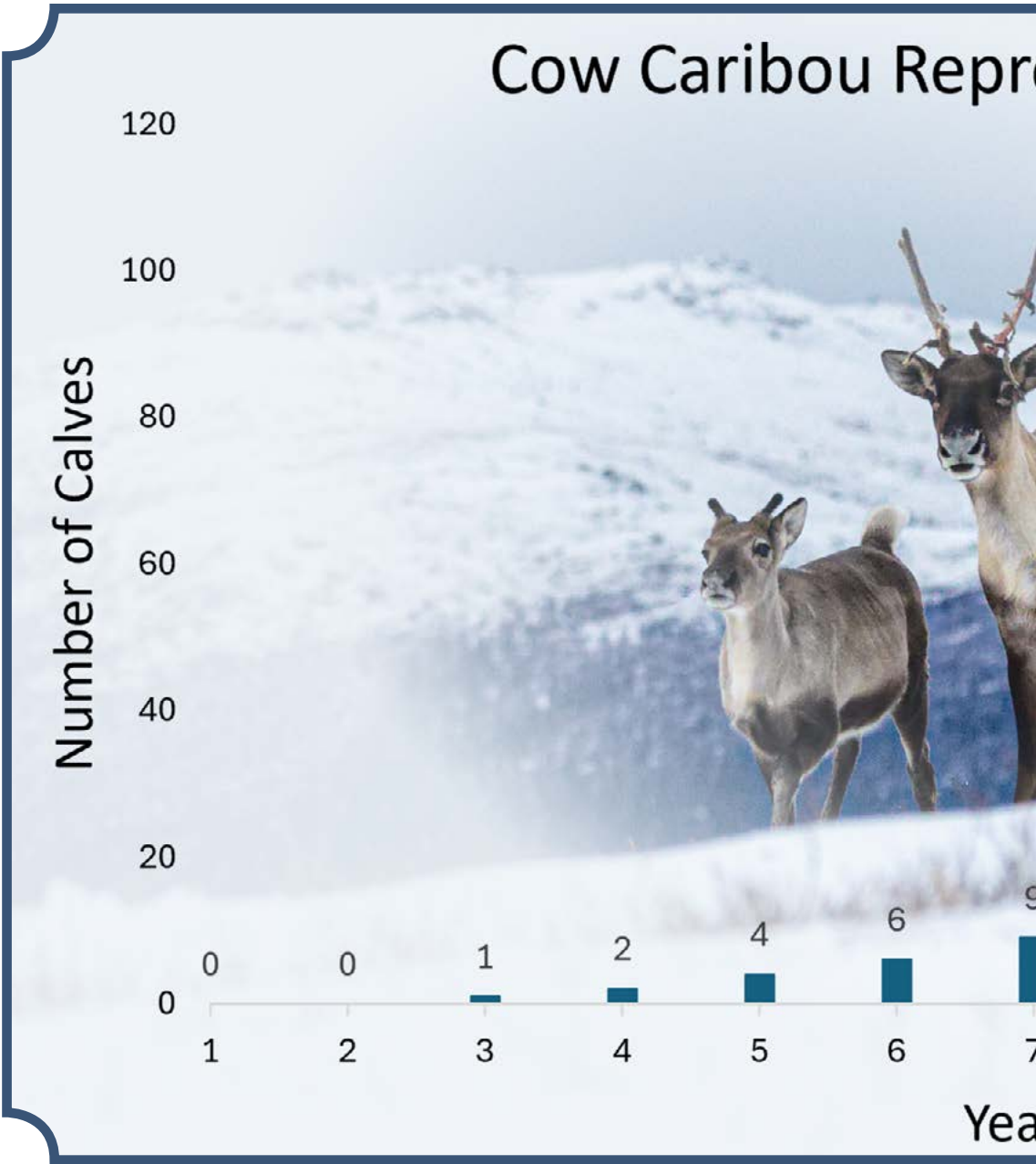
Biologists watch for caribou to aggregate, or group together, when the weather becomes warm and the bugs are thick. The caribou come together to find relief from the bugs and crowd together on remaining snowpack, windy hilltops, and coastal areas. This grouping enables biologists to take aerial photos of large groups of animals. The caribou in these photos are meticulously counted and then the number is reported to the public, working groups, boards, and other policy makers, who in turn make proposals or regulation changes based on the data. To see this process check out the Working for Wildlife video using the **QR code** below.

What is critical declining and what does it mean for harvest?

The critical declining status is the lowest tier from Table 1 of the Working Group’s *Western Arctic Caribou Herd Cooperative Management Plan* (see **QR code** below to view the plan and table 1). The plan, which can be found on the Working Group's website, was created to guide population management of the WAH. Managing the herd involves key factors including the size of the herd (how many caribou there are), the survival rate of adult cows (how many cows survive that year), calf recruitment (how many calves survive to one year old), and whether the herd is growing, stable, or declining. When herd numbers dip below 130,000 animals, the management plan calls for the most intensive monitoring and restrictive management of harvest. Out of concern for the declining population the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) issued an emergency order (EO) to close the cow season (July 1, 2026- June 30, 2027) for the WAH. The Federal Subsistence Board (FSB) aligned federal regulations to mirror the cow closure on federal lands as well.

Why did the cow (female) season close?

Adult cow survival in the WAH is below average (see page 1). This means that unless the cow survival rate increases, the herd will continue to decline. The average cow survival rate for the past 5 years was 75 %; this is well below the 88 %, where growth occurs. Adult cow survival is the primary concern related to the recent population decline “Every cow that dies is one that cannot contribute to next year’s calf crop and having fewer cows available to produce calves means the growth rate will be lower into the future,” said ADF&G caribou biologist Alex Hansen.



Bull or Cow Guide

Counting Caribou

Working for Wildlife

Meat Salvage Requirements

WACH WG Cooperative Management Plan

Reproductive potential- why cows matter!

Stopping the harvest of cows is the single best thing we can do to help the herd – cows produce calves, and their calves grow into adults and produce more calves. Caribou cows generally begin reproducing at 3 years old. Collar data shows that collared cows have been tracked for 12 plus years. This implies that if a cow can live 12 years she has the potential to continue reproducing during that time and she, and her offspring have the potential to add another 53 caribou to the herd during her lifetime.

If human harvest removes 4,000 cows per year, those animals will not be able to contribute to the population. The potential loss of 4,000 cows is staggering when we look at what it means over time. If each of those 4,000 cows were left to live and contribute a calf each year over a period of 12 years, and if each of her offspring survived and added calves to the population, the potential contribution would be somewhere around 200,000 caribou. Now think about what the potential loss to the population would be if 4,000 cows were removed every year for 5 years–or 15 years? Dead cows don't produce calves. Halting the decline and turning loss into growth will take everyone's participation. There are many things we cannot control in a natural system but following regulations and allowing cows to live is one thing we can control.



Traditional practices guide hunting today.

Many elders were born and raised during the last major caribou decline. Guest elders have shared experiences that teach about preserving resources and describe patience as part of hunting practices.

Larry Westlake of Kiana: “We had a traditional council that controlled the village in those days. And they came back to the hunters for us to wait two days when the caribou came to the shoreline, the north shorelines of the Kobuk. And told us that if we let the caribou cross without hunting them for two days, we’ll have caribou for the rest of our lives. And they were so right. All through the years we had enough caribou. They get to the shoreline of the Kobuk and they, no hesitation, they crossed. We respected the elders, we respected their guidelines, and we did what we were told. You know it’s hard to sit there in those days to watch the caribou herd just migrating over to that point, but the respect was there.”

Roland Booth of Noatak: “There are many factors – I’m one of the factors. I go out hunting them and my way of hunting might be a little different than the way that my fathers and forefathers were accustomed to hunting... Over the years we learn some of us are patient and some are not. Some of us are trigger-happy, some of us try not to be. So, it varies again, if you happen to know and understand the caribou, if you cut them off before they cross somewhere they always go somewhere else. So if you hunt the first ones that show up, so it’s going to be pretty hard for the next bunch of groups that shows up to try to hunt in the same area.”

Minnie Gray of Shungnak: “When the caribou start arriving Inupiat culture said don’t block the caribou that is about to cross or coming in because the migration is not to be interrupted. The first one cross and then after the first one cross then it’s okay to hunt. When the caribou finally arrive nobody wastes anything.”

What can communities do to help?

In addition to following the admonitions of our elders, community members can take advantage of the opportunities they have to responsibly harvest only bull caribou, salvage meat appropriately (QR code left) and report those harvests so that wildlife managers can get up to date and accurate herd numbers. For those who want to do more there are councils and committees where public input is key. To see how the process works view the Working for Wildlife video featuring the Board of Game process (QR code left). Reach out to your local Fish and Game Advisory Committee, Regional Advisory Council, or the Western Arctic caribou herd Working Group. The Working Group currently has vacancies for the following voting positions: the combined communities of Atqasuk, Uqiagvik, and Wainwright, and a representative from the Reindeer Herders Association. In addition, alternate positions are open for the communities of Lower Kobuk River, Upper Kobuk River, and the combined communities of Kivalina and Noatak, as well as a representative from the Anchorage Fish and Game Advisory Committee. Contacts are listed on page 12 or may be found on the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group’s web page.

Habitat & Nutrition

Wildfire, lichens & caribou

The winds picked up and dark storm clouds formed along the horizon. In the midst of the storm, lightning ignited nine wildfires along the Kobuk River between Kiana and Ambler in early July, 2025. Known as the Goldrun Complex, the fires grew rapidly across very dry habitat, burning over 30,000 acres, before rains eventually stopped them. Wildfires, including the Goldrun Complex, can and do burn through spruce forests but also tundra habitats. After the fires, many people are now wondering how these, and other fires, might affect caribou.

Lichens, also known as reindeer moss, are the main food source for caribou during winter, often making up 70-80% of their diet in northwestern Alaska. Lichens are a unique form of life in which algae (which form the structure) and bacteria (which create the energy) join together. After being depleted the lichens caribou prefer to eat can take 50 years or longer to grow to their former abundance. Some lichen species can take 100 years or more. Traditional knowledge and western science have documented that wintering caribou tend to avoid burned areas for about as long as it takes for lichens to regrow. In other words, once fire has consumed their food (lichens), caribou winter in other areas where there is more food.

Wildfires are a natural part of the ecosystem, and lichens and caribou have evolved to exist with them. Lichens gradually recolonize burned areas, while caribou shift to different wintering areas. Such shifts are a natural part of caribou ecology and occur regularly, however changes in where caribou appear in winter can make hunting them less predictable from year to year. Tundra habitats are also prone to re-burning. For example, the Aniralik Fire (located about 150 miles northeast of the village of Noatak) burned the same landscape for the third time in just the past 25 years. With repeated burns, caribou lichens have little opportunity to reestablish and thus it is likely poor caribou winter range.

Fire can also change what type of vegetation regrows in an area. In many places, shrubs tend to come back thicker and taller after a burn. During the fall migration, caribou tend to avoid tall, dense shrub patches because they are difficult to get through and can hide predators like wolves and bears. During winter the leaves of the shrubs also tend to smother lichen and reduce their abundance. More shrubs could also mean more moose in some areas.

Wildfires will continue to affect lichens, caribou, and the people who depend on caribou in northwest Alaska. Given fire’s potential impacts on the safety of people, important

subsistence camps along river corridors, and other infrastructure, fires need to be monitored and managed. Strengthening communication between fire managers and local communities will further support effective wildfire management.



Want to learn more about lichens?
Scan the QR code or use the following link in any browser to download a guide to lichens:
<https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/Reference/Profile/2311572>



Research

New research looks at the impact of roads on caribou

As development proposals increase in the range of the Western Arctic caribou herd (WAH), it is important to understand how caribou could be affected. One new scientific study may give us insight into how caribou respond to roads.

The Wilderness Society recently led a study that used 15 years of GPS movement data from over 350 female WAH caribou to compare their behavior near roads and in road-free areas. They found that even though the five roads and the surrounding study areas made up just 5% of the herd’s range, more than 60% of the collared caribou entered those study areas. Some caribou that encountered roads appeared unaffected while others showed altered movement—including moving back away from roads, tracing along them, or bunching up near a road. These altered movements were seen throughout the year and were documented for every road and year included in the study. Altered movements led caribou to spend about three times longer near roads. Over 25% of the road encounters led to altered movements. For caribou that encountered roads multiple times, these effects accumulated, and over time the likelihood of a caribou that encountered roads showing altered movement exceeded 60%. (Fullman et al. 2025)

As development and the WAH intersect, the hope is, understanding how caribou respond to human actions and infrastructure can help guide future projects and suggest ways to reduce impacts to caribou. To find the full study scan the **QR code** below.

Resources:

Fullman, T. J., K. Joly, D. D. Gustine, and M. Cameron. 2025. Behavioral responses of migratory caribou to semi-permeable roads in Arctic Alaska. Scientific Reports 15(24712). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-10216-6>

Behavioral responses of migratory caribou to semi-permeable roads in Arctic Alaska



Caribou across North America

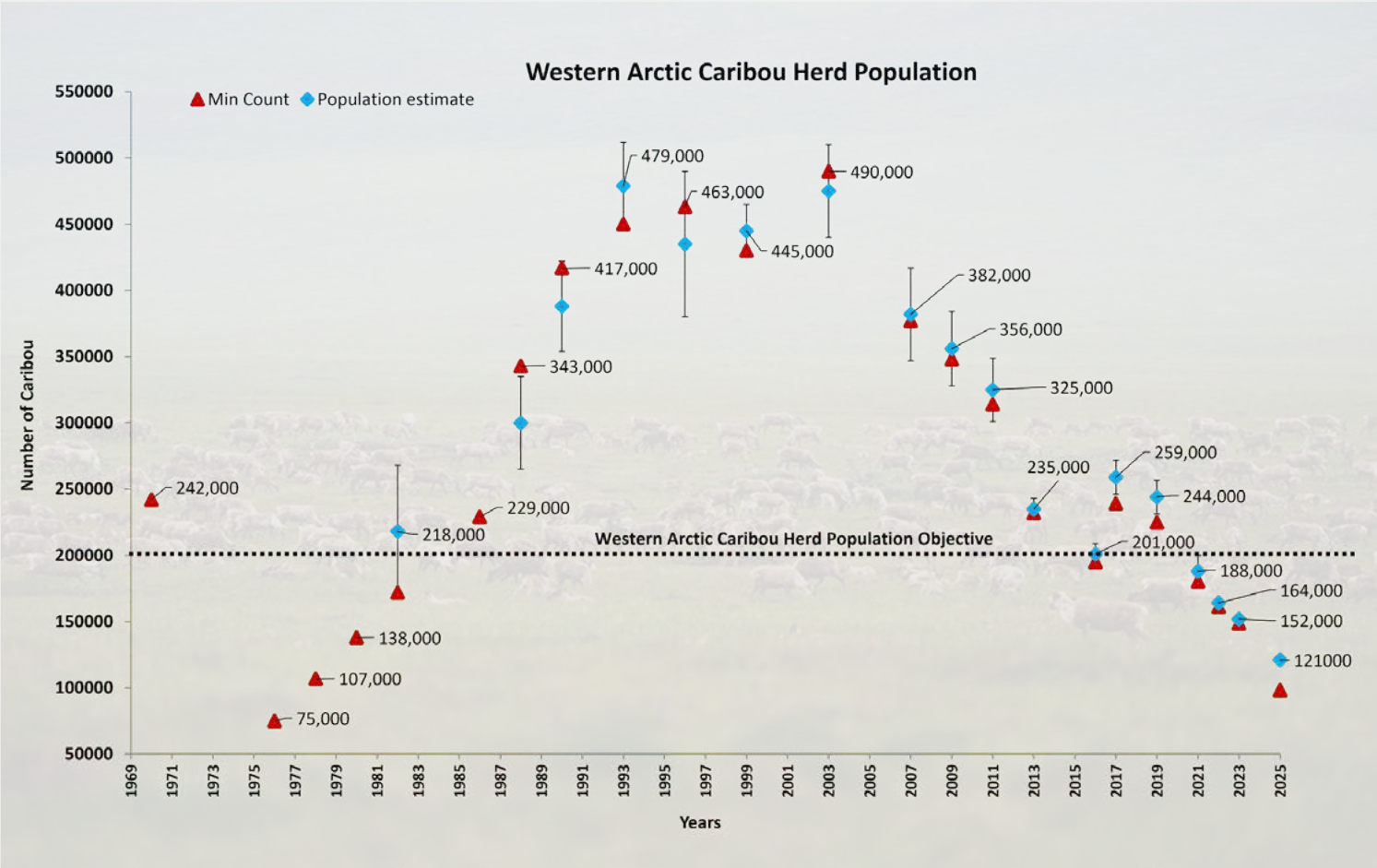
With the decline in the Western Arctic caribou herd (WAH), many people are wondering how caribou in other parts of Alaska and North America are doing. Unfortunately, the WAH’s decline is not unique. While not all herds are declining, many are, including several that were once among the largest.

In southwest Alaska, the Mulchatna caribou herd (MCH) numbered around 190,000 caribou in 1997 but by 2019 its population had declined by more than 90 percent to about 13,000 caribou. The MCH has been closed to hunting since 2021; in 2025 the herd had an estimated 16,276 caribou. The Porcupine herd, in northeastern Alaska and northwestern Canada, reached 218,000 caribou in 2017 and became Alaska’s largest herd as the WAH declined. Its latest census in 2025 revealed its numbers had dropped by 34% to 143,000 caribou. Located between the Porcupine herd and the WAH on Alaska’s North Slope are the Teshekpuk herd and Central Arctic herd. A census was not completed for the Teshekpuk herd in 2025, but the 2025 Central Arctic herd census showed a decline of more than 23% since 2022.

To the east, in Canada, researchers and wildlife managers, report a similar pattern. Many, but not all, herds have declined. The once very large Qaminiaraq, Beverly, and Bathurst herds in northcentral Canada have seen significant declines since the 1990s. At nearly 800,000 in the early 1990s, the George River herd in eastern Canada was the world’s largest herd. Since that peak, it has suffered about a 99% decline, with an estimated population of aproximately 8,000 caribou in 2020. In 2013 Labrador issued a hunting ban in hopes of boosting the herd’s recovery. Unfortunately, more than a decade later, the herd is still considered to be around 1% of its previous size and the hunting ban is still in place (Polar Knowledge Canada, Aqhaliat Vol. 4; BQCMB Caribou Management Plan; Government of Newfoundland & Labrador, 2026–27 Hunting & Trapping Guide).

Large, herds of caribou normally go up and down in size, which is known as oscillating. The time, or period, of these oscillations often runs 30-50 years and is thought to be linked to climate and range conditions. Under favorable weather and range conditions, caribou herds can expand rapidly. For example, the WAH grew from 75,000 to 490,000 caribou between the late 1970’s and early 2000’s.

The WAH reached its lowest size 50 years ago, in 1976. While we hope the herd will rebound soon, some other herds, like the George River herd, has not experienced the naturally-occurring recovery at this time-something no one wants for the WAH. We can control what we as individuals do, and everyone needs to do their part to help the herd. Take only what you need, use as much as you can from every caribou that is harvested, and avoid harvesting cows because they are the drivers of population recovery.



Farewells

In Memoriam



Courtesy of BeeJay Gray

The Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group mourns the passing of Tom Gray, Iñupiaq from White Mountain and Nome, and a long-serving member whose insight and steady voice strengthened the group for many years. As Morris Nassuk shared, “This is a big loss. I would like to thank Tom Gray for everything he participated in over the years because he was insightful, and having his perspective on the Working Group was good for the caribou in the Western Arctic Herd.”

Tom was known across the region for his honesty, fairness, and the practical experience he brought from a lifetime of guiding, reindeer herding, and subsistence. Fellow member Justin Horton reflected, “Tom was a man who wore many hats... fair, honest, and reasonable. We disagreed on some things over the six years I knew him, but we became friends, and I valued his perspective. He had a genuine smile and upbeat attitude. Without a doubt, his passing has left a void.”

Although he did not come from a herding family, Tom spent decades building a reindeer herd near White Mountain and advocating for subsistence rights across the Seward Peninsula. He served 21 years on the Seward Peninsula Subsistence Regional Advisory Council and held leadership roles with the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee, including serving as Chair until his passing. His early work tagging belugas in Norton Sound helped shape modern understanding of beluga movements—done not with large teams or research vessels, but with deep knowledge and determination.

Tom and his wife BeeJay owned and operated Alaskan Northwest Adventures on the Niukluk River, welcoming visitors and sharing the land he cared for so deeply.

The Working Group extends its sincere condolences to BeeJay, his family, and all who knew him. Tom’s steady presence, practical wisdom, and commitment to community-based stewardship will be long remembered.

Happy Trails



The Working Group would like to say “Happy Trails” to Working Group member, Neil DeWitt, who recently stepped down.

Neil, a longtime resident, was born in Wisconsin and moved to Alaska in the 1980’s. He recalls “The United States Air Force brought me here in January of 1986; just in time to end my career and retire here.”

Neil served around 10 years on the working group, giving a voice to those he represented. He reflected that he sat in a position that required him to change hats often “I did my best in the role I represented.” During his tenure on the working group, Neil served on the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working

Group Technical Committee helping to decide herd management actions and helping to rewrite the management plan.

Neil enjoyed his time with the Working Group and the associations he formed “You all made it a great experience for me.” He concluded, noting that while he valued his time with the group, a few members made a significant impact on his service, including Charlie, Bob, Enock, Cyrus and Vern. “Through it all, I learned a lot, and I truly appreciated the time we spent working together. I’ll say once more thank you all. GOD BLESS you all and PRAYERS the herd starts to recover. Goodbye till we meet again!”

The Working Group sends its best wishes and gives heartfelt thanks to Neil for his years of service. Thank you Neil!

The Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group would like to say QUAYANAQ to those who take time to fill out RC907 (Units 23 and 26A) and RC800 (Unit 22) caribou registration permits. Permit reporting provides valuable information on harvest, behavior, and caribou distribution. By providing this information you are helping biologists better understand the caribou to support hunting now and for future generations.

Outreach & Education

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@NorthwestArctic HeritageCenter
@GatesOfTheArcticNPS
@BeringLandNPS

Caribou Kid’s Corner

Look, kids! That cow has two hearts!

Art is one way to learn about the world around us! In this artwork, called *Let Cows Live*, we see a picture of a cow (female) caribou. She has two hearts. The big heart is the mother caribou’s heart. The small heart represents her calf (baby caribou) growing inside her.

When calves are born, they help the whole herd grow. Right now, the Western Arctic caribou herd is getting smaller. One way we can help is by **not hunting cow caribou**, so they can have their calves and make more caribou for the future.

What kids can do to help:

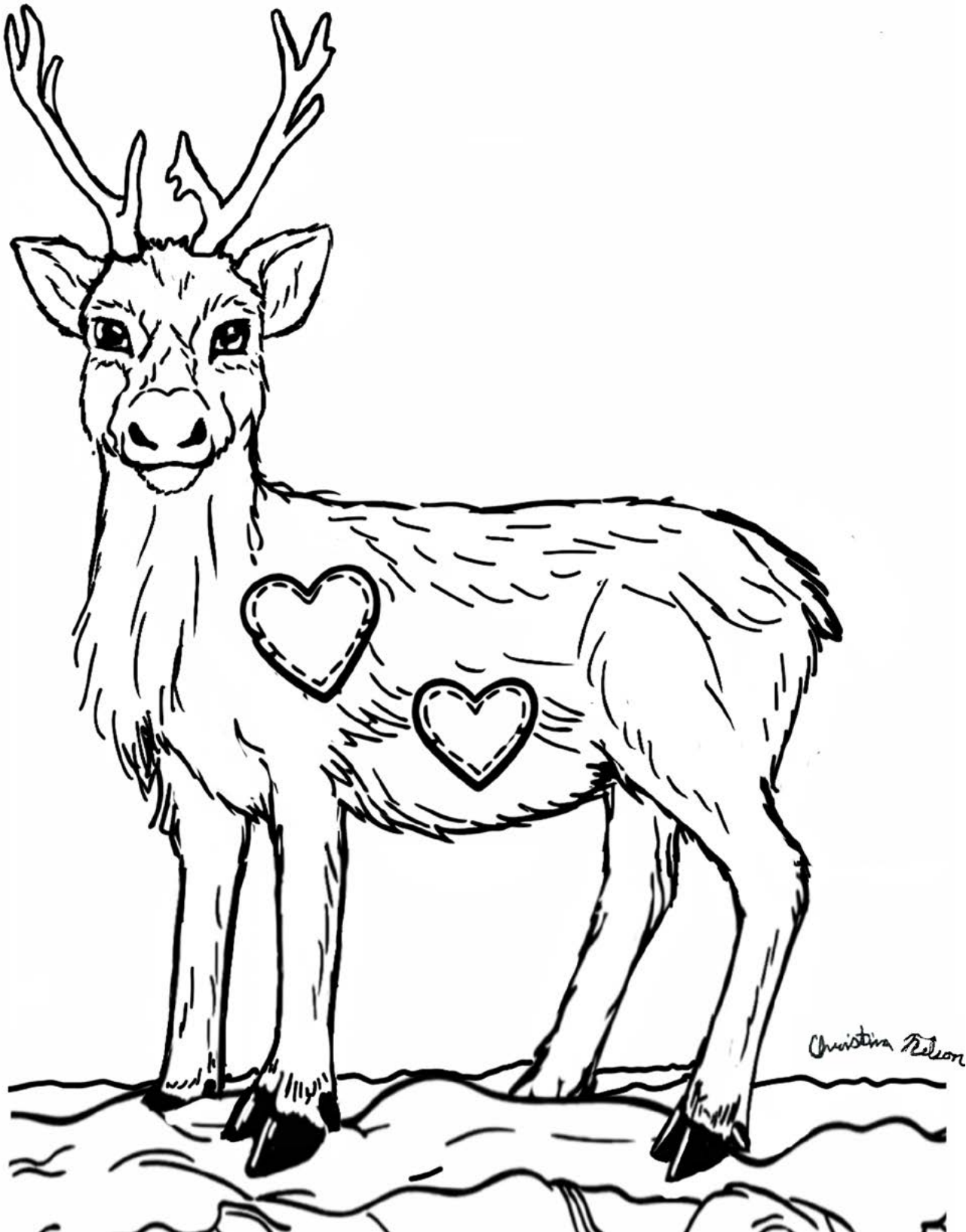
- Learn how to tell the difference between a bull (male) and a cow (female).
- Remind family and friends why cow caribou are important.
- Help share the message that protecting cow caribou helps the herd grow.

Caribou Quiz Time!
Bull or Cow?



Scan to Start

Color the
TUTTU



Artwork: Christina Nelson NPS

Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group



Front Row L-R: Daniel Foster, Bill Bernhardt, Mary Hugo, John Wisniewski, Cyrus Harris, Morris Nassuk, Charlie Lean, Vida Coaltrain, Back Row L-R: Vern Cleveland, Michael Stickman, Tim Fullman, Tom Gray, Darrell Vent, Joseph Leavitt, Johnson Eningowuk, Matt Moore, Kiva McCarthy, Justin Horton- Photo: ©2025 ADF&G

About the Working Group

The Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group is made up of members who represent those with an interest in this herd. Members include subsistence users from communities in the range of the herd, other Alaskan hunters, guides, transporters, conservationists, and the reindeer herding industry. Management agencies participate in meetings and support the group but are not voting members.

If you have questions, concerns, or you would like to get involved, contact your local Working Group representative or one of the agencies.

WACH WG Voting Members	Representatives	Alternates
Anchorage Fish & Game Advisory Committee	Matt Moore	<i>vacant</i>
Buckland, Deering, Selawik	Vida Coaltrain	Raymond Lee, Jr
Anaktuvuk Pass & Nuiqsut	Eli Nukapigak	Mary Hugo
Elim, Golovin, White Mountain	Dean Peterson	Charlie Brown
Fairbanks Hunters	John Wisniewski	John Siegfried
Hunting Guides	Justin Horton	John (Thor) Stacey
Kivalina & Noatak	Daniel Foster, Sr.	<i>vacant</i>
Kotzebue	Cyrus Harris (Vice-Chair)	Thomas Baker
Koyukuk River (Huslia, Hughes, Allakaket, Bettles, Wiseman)	Darrell Vent, Sr.	Jack Reakoff
Lower Kobuk River (Noorvik & Kiana)	Vern Cleveland Sr. (Chairman)	<i>vacant</i>
Middle Yukon River (Galena, Koyukuk, Nulato, Kaltag)	Michael Stickman	Arnold Demoski
Point Hope & Point Lay	Leonard Barger	Caroline Cannon
Nome	Charlie Lean	Jacob Martin
Conservationists	Tim Fullman	Ben Sullender
N. Seward Peninsula (Teller, Brevig, Wales, Shishmaref)	Alfred Weyiouanna	Nora Iyatunguk
Reindeer Herders Association	<i>vacant</i>	Harry Karmun
S. Seward Peninsula (Koyuk, Shaktoolik, Unalakleet, Stebbins, St. Michael, Kotlik)	Morris Nassuk	Leo Charles, Sr.
Transporters	Kiva McCarthy	Ben Child
Upper Kobuk River (Ambler, Shungnak, Kobuk)	Bill Bernhardt	<i>vacant</i>
Atqasuk, Utqiagvik & Wainwright	<i>vacant</i>	Joseph Leavitt

The following agencies support the Working Group, but are not voting members:

- Alaska Department of Fish & Game, Arctic/ Western Region, Nome Regional Supervisor - Alex Hansen**
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- U.S. National Park Service, Western Arctic National Parklands Cultural Anthropologist/ Subsistence Coordinator - Emily Creek**
(907) 412-0229, emily_creek@nps.gov
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife, Selawik National Wildlife Refuge, Kotzebue Refuge Manager - Wil Wiese**
1-800-492-8848 or (907) 442-5065, wilhelm_wiese@fws.gov

To report violations call:
1-800-478-3377



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The Alaska Department of Fish and Game complies with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. This summary is available in alternative communication formats. If you need assistance, please contact the Department ADA Coordinator at (907) 465-6078

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- Facilitator, Holly Spoth-Torres**
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Please send questions regarding Caribou Trails to:

Alaska Department of Fish & Game
Katie Hansen - katie.hansen@alaska.gov



Upcoming Meeting

Dec. 9 -10, 2026
Anchorage, AK

Check the website for details:
westernarcticaribou.net