

THE COMEBACK TRAIL

NEWS OF THE FORTY MILE CARIBOU HERD

Division of Wildlife Conservation, Alaska Department of Fish and Game

September, 2008

The Plan For The Future - 2006-2012

In 2005 and 2006 Advisory Committees from Central, Delta Junction, Eagle, Fairbanks and Upper Tanana/Fortymile worked together with members of the Alaska Eastern Interior Regional Advisory Council (EIRAC), the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board, Yukon Department of Environment and the T'rondeĭk Hwëchîn First Nation to develop a new Harvest Plan for the Fortymile Caribou Herd for 2006-2012. Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Divisions of Wildlife Conservation and Subsistence, the Bureau of Land Management, the Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge and the National Park Service provided technical support for this effort. The plan was endorsed by the Alaska Board of Game (BOG) and Federal Subsistence Board during their spring 2006 meetings and has guided harvest management of the herd since the fall 2006 hunting season.

How It All Got Started

Efforts to rebuild the Fortymile Herd began in 1995, with the development of the Fortymile Caribou Herd Management Plan. This plan guided harvest from 1995-2000 and provided for a conservative harvest of 150 bulls annually. The primary goal of this Plan was herd growth. In 1999, with the herd increasing in size and the Management Plan soon to expire, several state fish and game advisory committees began a cooperative effort to develop a new Harvest Plan for the herd. The 2001-2006 Fortymile Herd Harvest Plan was developed to provide for additional harvest opportunity, while retaining the primary goal of herd growth. The harvest quota with the new plan ranged between 850 and 950 caribou annually.

Growth and Increased Harvest

Under the current Harvest Plan, **herd growth** is still a priority to meet intensive management population and harvest objectives and restore the herd to its historic range in both Alaska and Yukon. The current Intensive Management Population and Harvest Objectives for the Fortymile Caribou Herd call for a population size of 50,000-100,000 caribou, with an annual harvest of 1,000-15,000 caribou.

The Secondary Goal of the current Harvest Plan is to **increase the allowable harvest** when the herd grows. Under the current Harvest Plan, the annual Alaska Quota is 850 caribou annually, with up to 25% cows, until the herd exceeds 50,000 caribou. Once the herd exceeds 50,000, the Alaska harvest quota will be increased to 1,000 caribou annually, with up to 25% cows.

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Expect similar conditions as last year for 2008-2009 Hunting Season

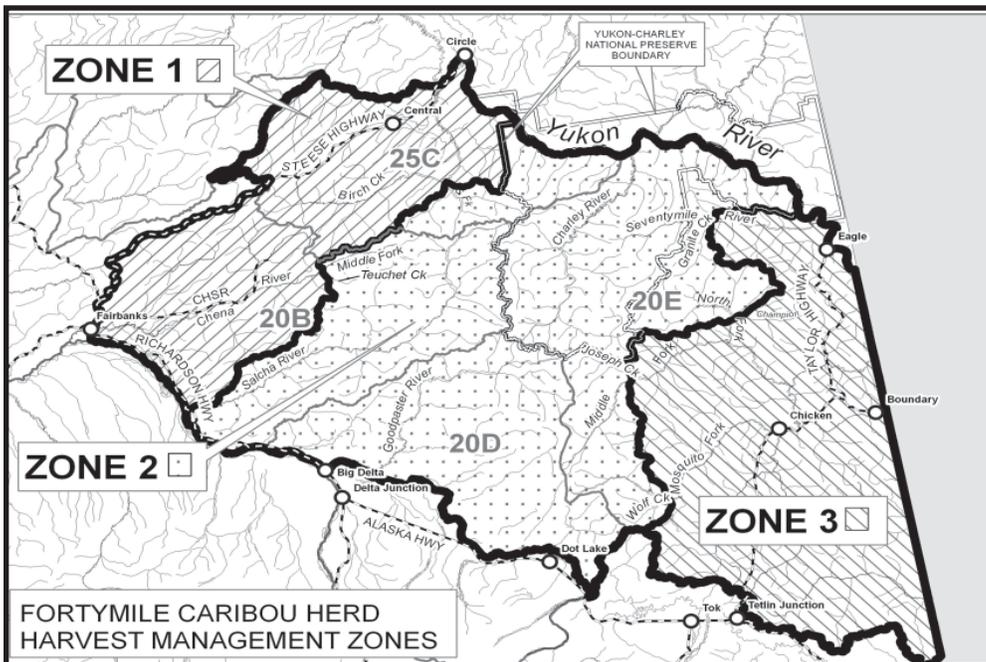
At the 2008 Board of Game Meeting several proposals were submitted to change the Fortymile Caribou Hunting season. No changes were implemented by the BOG, who expressed their continued support of the 2006-2012 Harvest Plan.

FORTY MILE CARIBOU HARVEST				
	2006 Fall	2006 Winter	2007 Fall	2007 Winter
Residents	398	370	501	417
Nonresidents	95	n/a	121	n/a
Totals	493	370	622	417

* Preliminary harvest numbers for the 2008 season show a total of 714 caribou harvested during the fall RC860 permit hunt and a total of 2554 permits issued.

Season dates and bag limits for both the fall and winter hunts will remain the same for fall of 2008 and winter of 2008-2009. The quota will continue to be divided among the fall and winter seasons, with 75% of the Alaska quota allocated to the fall season and 25% to the winter season.

To allow for hunters in different parts of the herd’s range to all have hunting opportunity, the fall and winter quotas will continue to be divided among the 3 traditional areas (the Steese Highway, Taylor Highway and road-less areas) within the herds range. Under the current Harvest Plan, these areas are divided into 3 zones to allow for easier reporting and harvest tracking.



Zone 1: The road and trail accessible portion of the herd’s range in the vicinity of the Steese Highway and Chena Hot Springs Road.

Zone 2: Generally, the portion of the herd’s range that has few roads and trails and access is more difficult. This zone extends down to the Richardson Highway.

Zone 3: The road and trail accessible portion of the herd’s range. In the vicinity of the Taylor Highway.

Predator Control Program. What’s going On?

During a special meeting in May of 2006 in Anchorage, the Board of Game (Board) voted unanimously to expand the Unit 12/20E Predator Control Program to include wolf control within most of the Fortymile Caribou Herd’s range. The program was renamed the Upper Yukon/Tanana Predator Control Program (Control Program). This revision was in response to a recommendation in the new 2006-2012 Fortymile Herd Harvest Management Plan (Harvest Plan), which was endorsed by the Board in 2006. The Harvest Plan recommended that a wolf control program be implemented to reduce mortality on the herd and allow it to increase toward its Intensive Management Goal of 50,000-100,000 caribou.

Since the early 1990s, ADF&G research has consistently shown that wolf predation is the primary source of mortality on the Fortymile Herd. Between May of 2005 and May of 2006, prior to the Control Program, 41% of all annual calf mortality and 62% of all adult mortality, was caused by wolf predation.

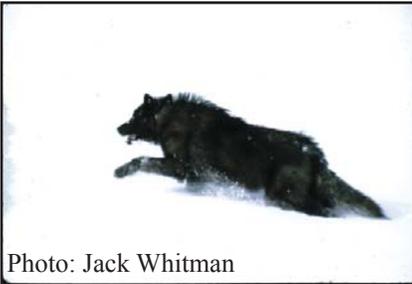


Photo: Jack Whitman

The wolf reduction objective, outlined in the Control Program, is expected to reduce mortality on the herd and allow for a moderate herd growth rate of 5-15% annually. The first winter the Fortymile Herd was included in the Control Program was during 2006-2007.

During the first 2 winters (2006-2007 and 2007-2008) poor snow conditions made tracking and retrieval of wolves very difficult for Control Permittees, resulting in control objectives not being achieved. However, a combination of wolves killed by control permittees and trappers in southwest Unit 20E have resulted in reductions in wolf densities in this portion of the herds range.

For more information on Wolf Control in Alaska, you can visit the ADF&G website at:

<http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=wolf.control>

Is It Illegal To Shoot A Radio Collared Caribou?

No, shooting a collared caribou is not illegal but if you do shoot it we would like the collar back and the location of the kill. We need the data!

Although ADF&G does not encourage harvesting caribou with radio collars, it's not illegal to harvest an animal with a radio collar. However, a hunter is required to turn in all radio collars on animals they harvest. So by trying to destroy a collar and hide it, a hunter can put themselves in a position to get in trouble. Area Biologist, Jeff Gross, found one such collar destroyed and hidden under the tundra last season. A perfectly legal action turned into an illegal one by the hunters.

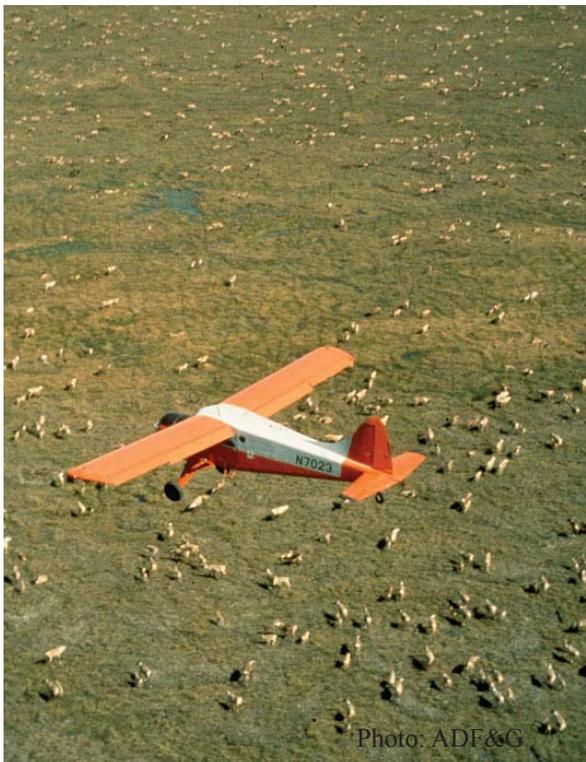


Photo: ADF&G

More than just getting the collar back, biologists use the information about the location and time of the kill, as well as other details collected while talking to the hunter, such as the condition of the animal, to help better manage the herd. So, if any of you walk up and find a radio collar, tag or other marking, such as a tattoo, on an animal you've just harvested, make sure to report it to the Department upon returning from the field.

In addition, keep in mind that the price to buy and deploy a radio collar on a caribou runs about \$1000 per caribou. So by passing up a radio collared caribou, or taking a caribou without a radio collar, you are helping too keep the price of managing this herd down. It's important to remember that all hunters are managers of the Fortymile Herd. It's up to all of us to work together to ensure the herd is healthy and productive. Good hunting!

Counting the Caribou



The 2007 census used eight aircraft to find and photograph or count all the caribou in the Fortymile herd while they were grouped up in the Wallcutt Mountain area on the 21st of June. All 80 radio collared caribou in the herd were located and all large groups of caribou were photographed from Fish and Game's de Havilland Beaver mounted with a large format camera. Six spotter planes were used to search for any groups of caribou not associated with the radio collared animals. These small groups and scattered caribou were then either counted from the air or photographed.

Timing and weather conditions for a successful photo census are critical. During late June hot weather and intense harassment by mosquitoes, bot flies, and warble flies, generally causes the herd to bunch up on windy ridges and mountaintops, making it possible to photograph the entire herd. Weather conditions were good on June 21st, and except for about 6,000 caribou in upper Paldo and Stone Boy Creeks and 1,800 caribou in the upper Goodpaster River drainage, all caribou were photographed/counted by about 11:00 AM. Remaining groups located in the morning were all

successfully photographed or visually counted that afternoon. A total of 19 distinct groups were photographed.

The hundreds of 9x 9 inch photographs were counted by at least 2 Fish and Game staff members to ensure reliability. The total number of caribou counted on photos was added to the independent groups counted by people in spotter planes. **The total count was 38,364 caribou.**

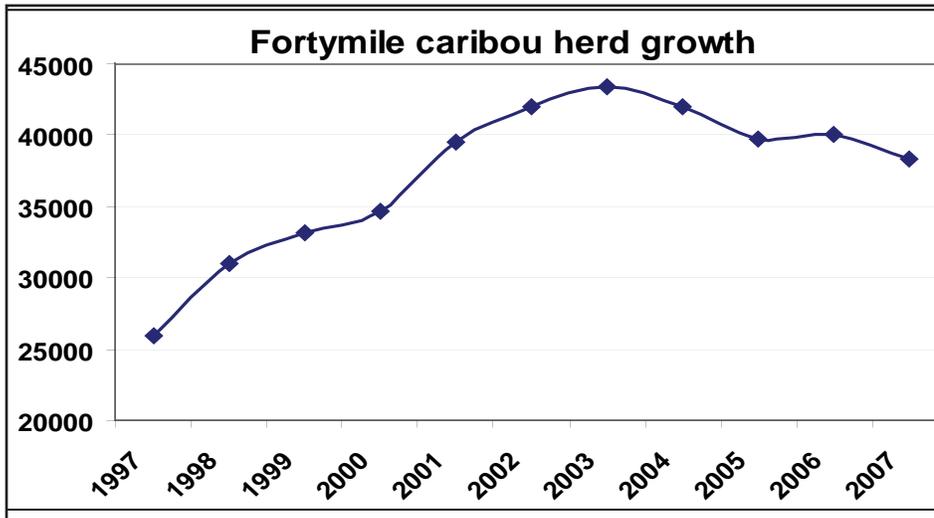
Herd Status Report Through Summer 2008

The herd has been relatively stable following heavy calf predation during the winters of 2004 and 2005 which caused small declines in the herd. ADF&G has concluded that the herd size has likely stabilized and is expected to remain relatively stable unless mortality associated with predation is reduced.

Despite being unable to obtain a good census of the Fortymile herd in 2008, we have continued to closely monitor movements, productivity and survival. Adult and calf survival are good and the 2007 a fall calf:cow ratio of 37:100 is indicative of a growing population. The number of large bulls (33% of total bulls) in the herd is impressive. Under the new 2006-2012 Fortymile Harvest Management Plan, harvest is limited to about 2% of the herd. This should allow the number of large bulls to remain relatively high.

Following the ideal summer conditions of 2007, the cows went into the winter in excellent condition and 90% of the sexually mature cows gave birth in spring 2008. This was a large improvement from the low birthrates of 69% and 80% seen in 2003 and 2006 and indicates a very productive herd. Calf weights and deaths have been monitored continuously since fall 1990. Of the 15 five-month-old female calves fitted with radio collars the average weight of 118.8 lbs. was very close to the 10 year average of 119.1 lbs., and most calves appeared to be in very good health. Of the 5-month old calves radio collared in October of 2007, 60% survived to 1-year which was a slight decrease from previous years. However, with the large number of young animals entering the herd and the possible reduction in predation pressure, the herd still has excellent potential for continued growth in the coming years.

We had a good hunting season this August with a large proportion of bulls to cows harvested and high hunter success rates in some areas. Despite few caribou taken on the Chicken Ridge trial system in the first few day of the season, the harvest quota of 290 caribou on the Taylor Highway (Zone 3) was reached in seven days and the hunt closed on August 16th with a total reported harvest of 308 caribou in that area. Zone 1, which includes the areas accessible from the Steese Highway and Chena Hotsprings road, closed on August 14th. Harvest total for this area was 199. Additionally, the hunt in the roadless area in the center of the Fortymile caribou herds range was open till the harvest quota of 160 caribou was reached on September 22nd. This allowed an extended window of opportunity for may caribou hunters.



Remember, you can help in the recovery effort by staying involved in the active management of this herd and participating in Fortymile Caribou Management planning efforts and your local Fish and Game advisory committee.

All Terrain Vehicles and Trails

Hunters using the vast network of trails in Alaska during the fall hunting season need to be aware of state and federal land use rules regarding ATV's in the areas they will be hunting. Much of the land in the Fortymile caribou herds range falls under state or federal ownership. Generally allowed uses for state land as provided in 11 AAC 96.020, include using a recreational type vehicle, off road or all terrain vehicle with a curb weight of up to 1,500 pounds, including a snowmobile and four wheeler, on or off an established road easement, if use off the road easement does not cause or contribute to water quality degradation, alteration of drainage systems, significant rutting, ground disturbance or thermal erosion. An authorization is required from the Office of Habitat Management and Permitting for any motorized travel in fish bearing streams. Generally allowed uses include the following conditions:

- (1) activities using wheeled or tracked vehicles must be conducted in a manner that minimizes surface damage;
- (2) vehicles must use existing roads and trails whenever possible;
- (3) activities must be conducted in a manner that minimizes
 - (A) disturbance of vegetation, soil stability, or drainage systems;
 - (B) changing the character of, polluting, or introducing silt and sediment into streams, lakes, ponds, water holes, seeps, and marshes.



Photo: ADF&G

On Bureau of Land Management lands in the Fortymile Wild and Scenic River corridor, use of motorized vehicles exceeding 1500 lbs. gross vehicle weight is prohibited without written authorization. Pioneering new trails with any motorized vehicle is prohibited and no vehicular travel is allowed off established trails. Be aware of land ownership and required permits. Proper use of these trails preserves this privilege for all.

Shoot Bulls Only to Help the Herd Grow!

The Fortymile Caribou herd was possibly the largest herd in North America, with approximately 500,000 animals in the 1920's. By 1975 their range had shrunk and numbers reduced to about 6000 to 8000 animals. Through intensive management and hunter and trapper participation the herd has increased to about 40,000, but it has stopped growing due to calf mortality and predation. The current harvest quota allows for up to a 25% harvest of cows but if hunters can harvest bulls rather than cows the herd will grow faster and other hunt restrictions may not need to be implemented in the future.



There is no reliable way to distinguish young male and cow caribou by looking at their antlers. Cows may have larger antlers than young bulls. Most bulls lose their antlers by mid-winter, but most cows retain antlers through April. Some cows may not grow antlers at all and some smaller bulls will not lose their antlers until April. Also, many mature cows have grey to white neck manes. There are often young bulls in cow/calf groups during the fall and winter. **Only the white rump without a vulva patch, or the presence of a penis sheath should be use for positive identification of a male caribou.** If you see an animal urinate, note the direction. Cows urine comes out behind the animal, bulls urinate forward. Take the time to positively identify bulls before shooting. Not sure. Don't shoot. This herd has great potential but they need your help!

New Tok Biologist

Hello, I am Torsten Bentzen. Some of you may have already noticed me working at the Fish and Game office in Tok. I was hired in May as the assistant area biologist and I am excited to get started.

After years in Fairbanks, my wife and I look forward to being part of this community. I am an avid hunter and outdoorsman and this is a part of Alaska I have not yet explored. Previously I worked for the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game in Fairbanks studying grizzly bear ecology and effective management in response to oil field development on Alaska's North Slope. I have also conducted research on the diet of Beaufort Sea polar bears with USGS while completing a graduate degree in Wildlife biology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.



I am the first person to recognize the contributions of all who have worked so hard to bring this herd back to their historic numbers. I am now learning about caribou management here in Eastern Interior and look forward to working with all of you in a determined effort to manage this herd for the future. I hope both long-time residents of the area and visitors will be able to see, hunt, and eat caribou and utilize this resource to its full potential. With the Fortymile caribou hunt coming up again in December I hope to see many of you out on the trail!

Reporting Your Hunt Good for You; Good for the Herd

Hunt reports are an important tool for hunt managers to help ensure hunting opportunities for future generations of hunters. In an attempt to get more accurate data and encourage hunters to report in a timely fashion, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game began enforcing the existing reporting policy for the Fortymile Registration hunt in 2005. Hunters who have not reported on their hunt within the required time period will be put on a "Failure to Report" list and will be unable to participate in any drawing or registration hunts during the following regulatory year and may also be issued a citation by the Alaska Wildlife Troopers. When a hunter acquires a Fortymile Caribou registration permit they are required to read and sign the permit, indicating that they understand all of the hunt conditions, including reporting on their hunt within the specified time period and the consequences of failing to report. The information gathered from these hunt reports is invaluable to Fish and Game. Hunt quotas, conditions and seasons are all established using information from hunter reports. Incomplete information on these hunts affects all hunters. Reporting can be done in two easy ways, either online, or by calling in your report to Fish and Game and filling out your report card and dropping it in the mail. Please report your hunt results!

The image shows a sample of a "State of Alaska Department of Fish and Game Caribou Registration Permit - REPORT" form. The permit number is RC867. The form includes fields for the hunter's name, address, and contact information. It also has sections for reporting requirements, including whether the hunter was in the field, what commercial services were used, and whether the hunter was in a registered guide or lodge/camp. The form is dated 2008-2009 and includes a signature line for the hunter.

Share your Hunting Stories?

We are looking for stories or photos of your Fortymile Caribou hunt! Hunters, if you would like to share an interesting anecdote, tip or photo from your caribou hunt, we would be glad to publish it in the next *Comeback Trail*. Just send us your article and/or photo along with your name and address and permission to use your info to Alaska Department of Fish and Game PO Box 641 Tok, Alaska 99780.

Visit Us Online:

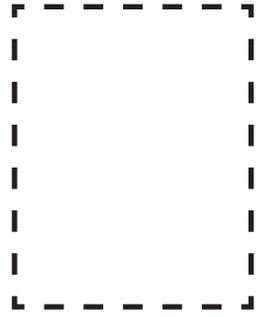
<http://wildlife.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=hunting.40milecaribou>

Call the 40mile Caribou Hotline @ 907-267-2310

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Meat Care in the Field

After the kill, the work begins. It is your responsibility to salvage all of the edible meat. Hunters should know how to field dress and care for meat before going afield. There are several good methods of field dressing. You will be successful with any method as long as you remember these keys to meat care: *keep the meat cool, clean, and dry.*

Heat is the greatest threat to game meat. Remove the hide as quickly as possible and get the meat away from internal organs. In weather over 60 degrees, it may be necessary to place the meat in cool water for 30 to 45 minutes to cool it. If this is done, the meat must be dried immediately after removing it from the water.

Boned out meat reduces weight but it spoils faster. In some management units in Alaska it is illegal to “bone” the meat because of a history of wasted meat. Used cotton meat bags to keep the meat clean and allow air to circulate to the meat and create a protective crust. They must be strong enough to hold heavy loads. Hang the bagged meat off the ground to help keep the meat clean and cool.

For expert advice check out ADF&G's *Field Care of Big Game* instructional video. This video will show you a step-by-step method to field dress a moose. It includes, *Is This Moose Legal?* Available together on VHS or DVD for \$15, including shipping. To order call the Anchorage ADF&G wildlife information office at (907) 267-2137 or (907) 267-2344. These can also be viewed online at <http://www.multimedia.adfg.alaska.gov>

