

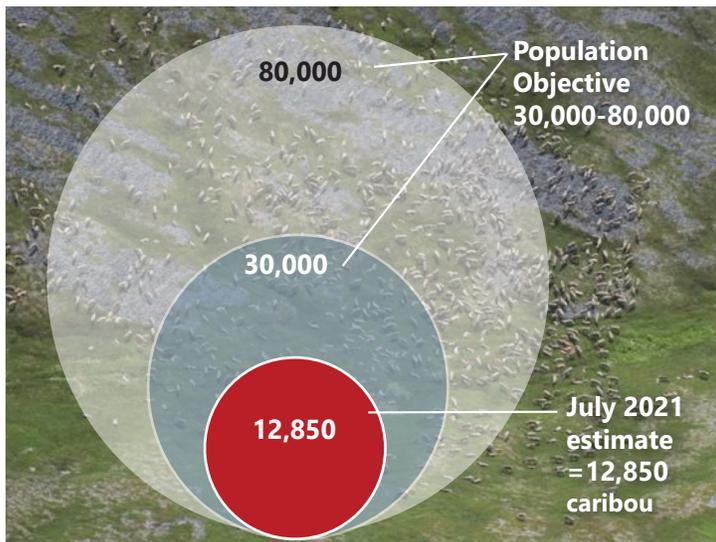
MULCHATNA CARIBOU TRAILS

Conservation for a comeback



For generations, hunters harvesting Mulchatna caribou have celebrated successful hunts by sharing meat with family and friends. Year by year, the timing of caribou movements and migration routes vary, keeping hunters on their toes. Given the Mulchatna caribou's range and population history, managers aim to keep the herd between 30,000 and 80,000 animals. In recent years, the population has dropped below this objective. The population estimate was 13,500 caribou in 2019 and 2020 and 12,850 caribou in 2021. Researchers are collecting information to better understand reasons for the decline (see page 3).

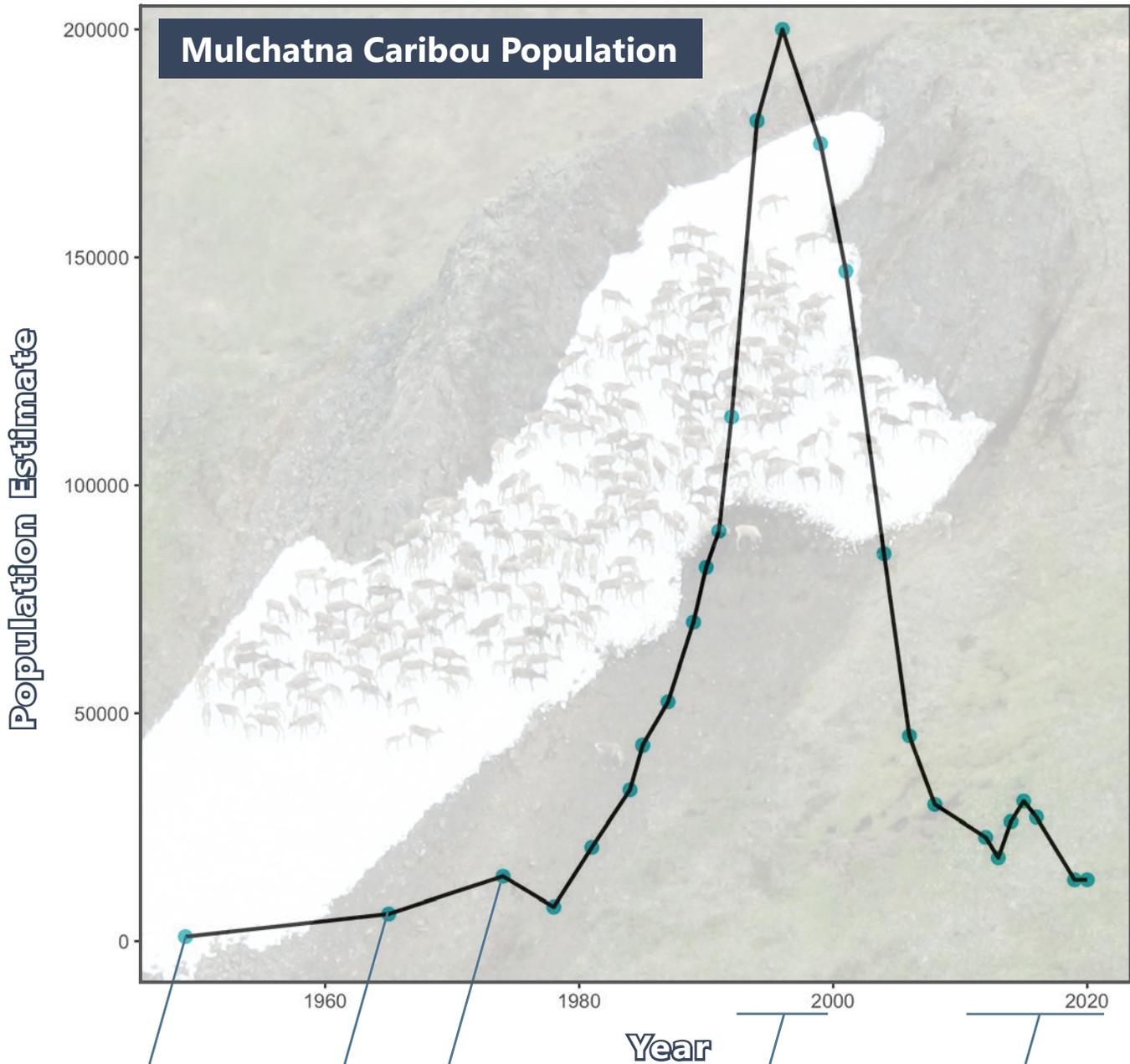
As biologists work to uncover the factors that influence the herd, one thing is clear: herd managers are facing some difficult decisions. In 2020, managers reduced the bag limit to one bull and shortened the winter season by Emergency Order, hoping to balance herd growth and hunting opportunity. Unfortunately, the herd remains at a lower population level today. Another season of hunting could mean a delayed recovery.



An interagency management group has formed and meets regularly to discuss the Mulchatna caribou herd (MCH) and the needs of the people who depend on this resource. The group consists of research, management, and education staff from Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and Togiak and Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuges. Group members agree: closing the Mulchatna caribou hunt (permit RC503) for the 2021/2022 season is a necessary step to help the herd recover. "We must collectively pause hunting to give the herd a chance to recover," said Dillingham Area Wildlife Biologist, Bryan Reiley. This summer and fall, Reiley and other staff will be reaching out to community members within the Mulchatna caribou range to share information, listen to concerns, and gather input on possible management strategies going forward. Reiley recognizes that closing the hunt means many families will have to adjust their traditional diet. "That's a real sacrifice," he says. "To conserve the herd, we need to work together, and we want to express our appreciation for everyone's understanding and patience."

MULCHATNA CARIBOU: THEN & NOW

The Mulchatna caribou herd was named for its traditional calving grounds in the upper Mulchatna River region in Alaska Game Management Unit (GMU) 17B. Historical records suggest the herd reached a peak in the 1860s followed by a 60-year decline¹. During the latter half of the 20th century (see figure below), the population grew substantially, and became an accessible resource for residents of the Stony River, Lake Clark, Nushagak River, Iliamna Lake, and Bristol Bay areas. In the 1990s the herd expanded its range into Game Management Unit 18. The population peaked again in the mid-1990s, and has experienced a steep decline since that time.



The first aerial surveys were conducted in 1949 and the population was estimated to be at 1,000 animals.

By 1965 the population was estimated to be 6,000 caribou showing a growing herd.

Intensive surveys in 1974 showed a population estimate of approximately 13,000.

In the mid-1990s, the population peaked at about 200,000 animals. As the herd began to decline, it also expanded its range north and west.

The population dropped to 18,000 animals by 2013. Surveys showed that the herd grew in 2014 and 2015, but unfortunately, the increase was only temporary. The current population is estimated to be roughly 12,850 animals.

¹James M. Van Lanen; Gayle Neufeld; Chris McDevitt. 2018. Traditional Ecological Knowledge of the Mulchatna Caribou Herd: Phenology, Habitat Change, Subsistence Use, and Related Species Interactions in Game Management Units 9B-C, 17, 18, and 19A-C, Alaska. ADF&G Division of Subsistence, Technical Paper No. 441.

UNDERSTANDING THE DECLINE

Alaska Department of Fish and Game research biologists, Nick Demma and Renae Sattler, are working to understand the herd's decline through a large-scale study that includes past and present assessment of caribou survival in adults and calves and changes in pregnancy rates. This summer, Demma completed the last field season of his 10-year study aimed at estimating caribou calf survival. Estimates of survival fell within ranges observed in other North American caribou herds. Predation by brown bears and wolves was the leading cause of death during calves' first few weeks of life, which is similar to other Interior and Southwest Alaska herds. Starvation and drowning were the most common non-predator related causes of death. Calf survival data will be considered along with the launch of the recent study on adult Mulchatna cows, described below.

In the fall of 2020, department staff captured, collared, and collected biological samples from 60 adult female caribou—the first of three sampling events planned to take place over the next two years. Samples will be used to evaluate female body condition (i.e. body fat), spring/summer diet, disease, and genetics. Collar data will aid in the study of caribou movement patterns and causes of mortality. While data continues to come in over the next couple of years, current results and observations have raised concerns about caribou body condition, disease (including a bacterial disease called brucellosis), and illegal caribou harvest.



SUBSISTENCE WAY OF LIFE

Unfortunately, the 2021/2022 hunting season for Mulchatna caribou is closed. We all have a part in helping the herd recover. Caribou are a part of Alaska's heritage. When they thrive, people thrive too. While caribou meat is a staple food for many families, there may be other ways to make the most of the current situation.

- Try for other game available in your area, whether it is moose, waterfowl, ptarmigan, hare, or other traditional meats. Hunting opportunities and information can be found at hunt.alaska.gov.
- Optimize time spent fishing and collecting wild edibles.
- Share the bounty of stored foods that may be left from previous years.
- Keep in mind that state and federal agencies, hunters, and communities have a common goal: to support the health of Mulchatna caribou so that hunting can be resumed when the herd is more abundant and at a sustainable level.

Contact a wildlife biologist near you:

Dillingham ADF&G: (907) 842-2334
 King Salmon ADF&G: (907) 246-3340
 Bethel ADF&G: (907) 543-2979
 McGrath ADF&G: (907) 524-3323
 Togiak National Wildlife Refuge: (907) 842-1063
 Yukon National Wildlife Refuge: (907) 543-3151



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HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Do you have thoughts about regulations surrounding Mulchatna caribou hunting? Agencies, organizations, tribes, and individuals have many options for expressing concerns and engaging in wildlife management decisions. Alaska has a strong tradition of public involvement in wildlife management. The **Alaska Board of Game (BOG)** is the state's authority regulating the conservation of Alaska's wildlife resources. It relies on public input and local knowledge to help guide its decision-making process. **Advisory committees** are local groups that meet to discuss fish and wildlife issues, provide a local forum for those issues, and make recommendations to the Alaska Board of Game. Advisory Committees are always open to the public. Locate your wildlife Advisory Committee, find a schedule of meetings, and learn how to get involved at: boardofgame.adfg.alaska.gov.



What about federal lands?



A similar public involvement process exists for establishing hunting regulations on federal lands. Title VIII of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) established ten **Regional Advisory Councils (RACs)** to provide people throughout rural Alaska an opportunity to contribute to the management of subsistence resources in a meaningful way. Each Council meets at least twice a year to develop and submit proposals to the Federal Subsistence Board which sets subsistence hunting regulations on federal lands. Regional Advisory Councils provide an open forum for public expressions, opinions, and concerns regarding any matter related to subsistence. Comment and offer input on Mulchatna caribou or other subsistence issues at a Council meeting.

Learn more by visiting: doi.gov/subsistence/regions