

GAME MANAGEMENT UNITS 20A, 20B, 20C, 20F AND 25C

FAIRBANKS AREA OFFICE

Area Biologist: Don Young
Assistant Area Biologist: Tony Hollis

DESCRIPTION

The Fairbanks Area includes approximately 40,000 mi² in central Interior Alaska. The area is roughly bordered by the Yukon River and Ray Mountains on the north and the Alaska Range to the south. It includes the Tanana drainages as far east as the Salcha and Delta Rivers, and Tanana and Yukon drainages as far west as the Tozitna and Cosna Rivers. Game Management Unit 20C, and large portions of Units 20F and 25C are remote, roadless areas. Units 20A and 20B surround Fairbanks and include neighboring communities linked by the road system.

Communities (approximate population)

Healy–Ferry–Lignite–McKinley Park (1,200)

Anderson (500)

Central (125)

Nenana (500)

Fairbanks North Star Borough (95,000)

Manly Hot Springs (75)

Rampart (50)

Minto (250)

Tanana (300)

Conservation Units

Administered by Bureau of Land Management

Steese National Conservation Area

White Mountains National Recreation Area

Administered by the National Park Service

Denali National Park and Preserve

Administered by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game

Minto Flats State Game Refuge

Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge

Active Advisory Committees (ACs)

Tanana–Rampart–Manley

Fairbanks

Minto–Nenana

Middle Nenana River

Central

Special Areas

Unit	Areas	Restriction	When Enacted	Purpose	Meeting Objectives
20A, 20D	Delta CUA ¹	No motorized vehicles or pack animals for big game hunting ²	1971	Provide for aesthetically pleasing hunt conditions	Yes
20A	Wood River CUA ¹	No motorized vehicles except aircraft for big game ³	1976	Address conflicts between ATV and airplane/horse hunters	Yes
20A	Yanert CUA ¹	No motorized vehicles except aircraft for big game	1973	Address conflicts between ATV and airplane/horse hunters	Yes
20A	Ferry Trail MA ⁴	Caribou hunting by permit; antler restrictions for moose hunting	1990	Address caribou/moose management issues	Yes
20A	Healy-Lignite MA ⁴	Hunting by bow and arrow only	1990	Address safety concerns (closed 1973 – 1989)	Yes
20B	Minto Flats MA ⁴	Moose hunting by permit; No aircraft or airboats for moose hunting; no aircraft for beaver trapping prior to March 1.	1979 1996	Address moose management and user conflict issues	Yes
20B	Fairbanks MA ⁴	Moose hunting by bow and arrow only	1982	Address moose management issues	Yes
20B	Creamer's Field MWR ⁶	Hunting and trapping by registration only	1966	Address management issues	Yes
20B	Lost Lake CA	Closed to taking big game w/ firearms and crossbows within ½ mi. of lake	≤1962	Address safety concerns	Yes
20B	Birch Lake CA	Closed to taking of big game within 1/2 mile of lake	≤1962	Address safety concerns	Yes
20B	Harding Lake CA	Closed to taking of big game within 1/2 mile of lake	≤1962	Address safety concerns	Yes

¹CUA = Controlled Use Area

²Aug. 5–Aug. 25

³Aug. 1–Sep. 30

⁴MA = Management Area

⁵CA = Closed Area

⁶MWR = Migratory Waterfowl Refuge

BLACK BEAR

STATUS: Black bears are common in all units. Harvest peaked in the late 1990s, but has since shown moderate declines. Average annual harvest rates are below the estimated maximum sustainable harvest rate in all units, except possibly the central portion of Unit 20B. We do not believe the high harvest of black bears in central Unit 20B is of biological concern because surrounding units receive relatively little hunting pressure and provide reservoir areas that serve to repopulate potentially over-harvested areas. The continued high harvest of black bears in the heavily hunted central Unit 20B supports this hypothesis. Spring bear hunting at bait stations is especially popular in Unit 20B. High hunter effort and harvest near Fairbanks likely reduces black bears nuisance problems.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: Bait station registration, sealing, tooth aging, and responding to complaints about nuisance bears are the primary management activities. Sealing data in Unit 20B provides the sex and age composition and location of harvest, while harvest reports provides sex and harvest location for bears harvested in the remainder of the area.

ISSUES: No issues have surfaced regarding black bears in the Fairbanks area. Black bear populations appear stable and the department currently has no concerns about population levels. Black bear baiting continues to be a popular hunting activity in the spring time. Three of the five games units in the Fairbanks area allow the taking of brown bears over black bear bait stations and many hunters are happy about that (20A, 20B and 20C). The department receives very few nuisance black bear reports each year from this area.

GRIZZLY BEAR

STATUS: Grizzly bears are present in all units, but are most numerous in the mountainous portions of Units 20A and 20C followed by the higher elevations in Units 20B, 20F and 25C. Harvest is generally low except for portions of Units 20A and 20B. High harvests resulted in reduced numbers of bears in Unit 20A during the 1980s, but more conservative seasons resulted in population recovery by 2000. In general, grizzly bear seasons and bag limits have been liberalized over the past decade and harvests have increased.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: Sealing, tooth aging, and responding to complaints about nuisance bears are the primary management activities. Sealing data provides sex and age composition and location of the harvest.

ISSUES: Management issues typically relate to season length, especially in Units 20A and majority of 20B, where the seasons are shorter (September 1–May 31) than the remainder of Unit 20 (August 10–June 30) and where predator management remains an issue because of Intensive Management. Generally, hunters feel that grizzly bears seasons should be further liberalized to reduce predation on ungulates.

CARIBOU

DELTA CARIBOU HERD

STATUS: This herd declined dramatically in the early 1990s from about 11,000 to 4,000 caribou, prompting closure of a popular hunting season and implementation of a ground-based wolf control program (1993–1995). After termination of the wolf control program, the herd continued to decline slowly to an estimated 2000 caribou in 2005. Herd size is currently estimated at approximately 3000 animals. The board authorized a small drawing permit hunt (up to 100 permits) for bull caribou in 1996. Bull:cow ratios remain high and large bull:cow ratios continue to exceed objectives. Between 1996 and 2003, annual harvest averaged 35 bulls (range 22–50). In 2004 the Board authorized up to 150 permits be issued and mean harvest has since increased to 49 (25–70 during RY04–RY16). Since the early to mid 2000s, the Delta herd has been mixing with the Nelchina herd along the western Denali Highway in Unit 13. This presents difficulty in standard population and composition surveys, and puts members of the Delta herd at risk of harvest under the seasons and bag limits for the Nelchina herd.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: Standard population and composition surveys are conducted annually. A small number of radiocollared animals are maintained to facilitate surveys.

ISSUES: This has long been a very popular caribou hunt. Intensive management population and harvest objectives have not been met in the last 20 years. Issues include the number of permits issued in the drawing hunt and the lack of intensive management efforts to increase the size of the herd. Mixing with the Nelchina herd in Unit 13 puts the Delta herd at risk of overharvest under the seasons and bag limits (State and Federal) for the Nelchina Herd and also makes it hard to obtain an accurate population estimate.

WHITE MOUNTAINS CARIBOU HERD

STATUS: This small herd numbers roughly 300 caribou and primarily inhabits western Unit 25C. It receives little harvest because of poor access. The general fall season is limited to bulls, while caribou of either sex may be taken during a winter registration permit hunt (Dec. 1–Mar. 31). Herd numbers appear stable. Mixing with the Fortymile herd along the Steese Highway, which was first observed in 2000, has been more frequent and has complicated harvest management.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: Standard population and composition surveys are conducted annually in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management. A small number of radiocollared animals are maintained to facilitate surveys.

ISSUES: Annual harvest has traditionally been within sustainable limits, and often low. About 20 caribou were taken per year during 1990–2007. Harvest rises sharply when the presence of Fortymile herd animals moves into the White Mountains herd hunt area. The decline of the White Mountain herd is likely due to animals emigrating to the Fortymile

herd. Many of the White Mountain caribou equipped with radio collars have travelled east, into the heart of the Fortymile herds range.

DENALI CARIBOU HERD

STATUS: This herd currently numbers roughly 2,000 animals and primarily inhabits Unit 20C within Denali National Park. The herd was closed to harvest after a decline in the early 1970s and it remains closed even under federal subsistence regulations. Intensive long-term research by the National Park Service and the U.S. Geological Survey enhance the herd's value as a control population for management and research efforts on other Interior herds.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: The National Park Service and U.S. Geological Survey annually conduct population estimation and composition surveys along with numerous research investigations.

ISSUES: There is local interest in opening the Denali caribou herd to limited harvest of bulls. The department has opposed such a hunt because herd numbers and bull:cow ratios are below management objectives.

FURBEARER

STATUS: Beaver are abundant in the Fairbanks area. Trapper reports suggest marten numbers in recent years have been low, although numbers have fluctuated wildly both temporally and spatially. Hare numbers appeared to have reached their low point in there cycle in 2012 and 2013 and lynx numbers were likely nearing the low point in there cycle at the same time. During 2015 and 2016 the hare population appears to be increasing. Coyotes appear to be stable although possibly at a lower level than during the last high in the hare cycle. Marten, lynx, and wolf are the most commercially important species in the Interior. Trapping effort near road-accessible areas is moderately high, but trapline densities are low away from the road system.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: Sealing provides harvest data for lynx, wolf, wolverine, and otter. Beaver cache surveys are conducted annually in the lower Chena River drainage as part of a management program designed to manage beaver in this area for viewing and education opportunities while minimizing property damage.

ISSUES: Lack of demand for beaver pelts and high beaver survival had increased property damage caused by beaver from flooding and tree cutting along roadways and near residential areas in past years. An extended beaver season since 2004 has alleviated many of those problems and sparked more interest in harvesting beaver in the Fairbanks area.

MOOSE

STATUS: In Unit 20A, moose are found at moderate to high densities (2.0–2.5 moose/mi²). Liberal antlerless hunts in RY04–RY08 reduced moose densities from an

estimated 3.0–3.5 moose/mi² in 2003. Research documented Unit 20A as having the lowest productivity of any wild moose population studied in North America and, despite reductions in moose density, improvements in productivity have not yet been observed. Thus, habitat conditions remain a concern as high moose densities over the last 2 decades resulted in heavy browsing. Despite the low productivity, calf survival has been relatively high, likely due to high harvest rates of predators. In Unit 20B, moose also are found at moderate to high densities (1.5–2.0 moose/mi²), but densities vary more widely than Unit 20A from as high as 4 moose/mi² in the Minto Flats Management Area to less than 1 moose/mi² in eastern Unit 20B. Moose populations in most of Units 20C, 20F, and 25C are at low densities and no trends in population parameters are apparent from harvest data or anecdotal information.

Unit 20B is the most heavily hunted unit in the Fairbanks Area during the general hunting season with >2,500 hunters reporting, followed by Unit 20A with >1,200 hunters reporting. The Fairbanks area accounts for approximately 25% of the statewide moose harvest, with most (80%–90%) of that harvest in Units 20A and 20B. The board approved harvest of antlerless moose by drawing permit in portions of Unit 20A and 20B in the mid 1990s and these hunts have been reauthorized annually. In 2002 the board approved drawing permit hunts for calf moose in Unit 20A to help meet Intensive Management (IM) harvest objectives. In 2004 the board approved a registration hunt for antlerless moose during a September 1–December 10 season to substantially increase the harvest of female moose in order to reduce moose numbers from an estimated 16,000–18,000 to the IM population objective of 10,000–15,000 moose. The moose population was reduced to an estimated 12,000–13,000 moose by 2008 and antlerless moose hunting opportunity and harvest has been reduced accordingly. Currently the department is managing for a stable moose population in Unit 20A. In 2006, the board expanded drawing permit hunts for antlerless moose in Unit 20B to regulate moose numbers with respect to long term sustainability. Increased cow harvests during 2006–2013 appear to have reduced moose density to a level that will improve moose nutrition and productivity and guard against range deterioration. Antlerless moose harvest still occurs in Unit 20B, but at a much lower level with the goal of maintaining the population at its current level.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: Population estimation and composition surveys are conducted in Units 20A and 20B on an almost annual basis if the weather condition allow. The National Park Service periodically conducts surveys within Denali National Park in Unit 20C, and the Department completed a population estimate in the eastern half of Unit 20C in 2011. Population estimation surveys were conducted in Unit 25C in 1997 and 2007 with funding from the Bureau of Land Management. In addition, the Bureau of Land Management has radiocollared moose to investigate moose movements and habitat use in Unit 25C.

Large amounts of acreage have burned in Units 20A (~700,000 acres) and 20B (~600,000 acres) that should improve moose nutrition, productivity and carrying capacity. We conducted intensive moose surveys within the boundaries of the 2001 Fish Creek and Survey Line burns (~200,000 acres) in 2003 and 2008 as the initial and early phases of monitoring the potential changes in moose density and composition over time.

We have conducted browse surveys in various Interior units since 2000. Central Unit 20A showed the highest browse removal rate of any survey area during 2000–2010, indicating that moose in Unit 20A are heavily using their forage resources. Moose twinning rates, short-yearling calf weights, and reproductive delays and pauses during also show that moose in central Unit 20A are experiencing the lowest nutritional level of any moose population we know of in Alaska. Chronically low twinning rates in the central portion of Unit 20B are indicative of nutritional stress there as well.

ISSUES: Past regulatory changes in Unit 20A, which were designed to reduce the harvest of bulls to sustainable levels and increase the harvest of cows and calves, have been controversial, but successful. Regulatory changes included a shorter, then longer, general season, unitwide antler restrictions for resident and nonresident hunters, drawing permit hunts for “any bull” and drawing and registration hunts for antlerless moose.

Antlerless moose hunts remain controversial and divisive and public opposition tends to wax and wane. The take of calf moose and cows accompanied by calves in antlerless hunts has been a highly volatile issue and regulatory changes have ensued in Unit 20A and parts of Unit 20B. During RY04–RY13 thousands of hunters acquired registration and drawing permits and hunted antlerless moose in Units 20A and 20B. Local public sentiment has been mixed regarding antlerless hunts: the Middle Nenana AC usually opposes them; the Minto-Nenana usually supports them; and the Denali Borough has written 2 resolutions opposing both antlerless hunts and IM legislation. In December 2013, Senators Bishop, Coghill and Giessel hosted a legislative inquiry soliciting concerns and opinions from local hunters regarding cow moose hunts in the Fairbanks area.

The Minto Flats Management Area in Unit 20B is unique in terms of moose management. In 2004, the Board rescinded the fall and winter Tier II hunts that were in place during 1996–2003 and replaced them with limited registration hunts. The fall limited registration hunt had an either-sex bag limit running concurrent with a 15-day, antler-restricted general bull season, and the winter registration hunt was an antlerless moose season that ran until the end of February. These registration hunt were popular, but fraught with problems including long lines and competition for permits. In 2012, the Board approved a 7-day any bull season at the end of August, an 18-day spike/fork/50-inch season bull in September, and an unlimited antlerless registration permit beginning in October. The October antlerless registration permit has proven to be popular and harvest goals have been met in the area. This management regime appears to be more widely excepted than the limited registration permit hunts. The current system appears to have alleviated problems associated with the limited registration permits.

Aircraft and airboats are not permitted for moose hunting in the Minto Flats Management Area. Motorized vehicles other than aircraft are not permitted in the Wood River and Yanert Controlled Use Areas in Unit 20A.

Finally, entry to some military land is prohibited. This is especially controversial in those portions of Units 20A and 20B with excellent moose hunting opportunity.

SHEEP

ALASKA RANGE (UNIT 20A)

STATUS: Sheep numbers in Unit 20A appear to be stable or increasing. Surveys conducted in a trend area show that lamb production has been good during 2015 and 2016 which was an improvement to the poor lamb crops of 2013 and 2014 which were probably caused by a late spring in each year. We were also seeing high numbers of legal rams in the surveys, which also was evident in the 2016 harvest (135 rams). The average harvest of rams in Unit 20A was 102 rams annually during 2012-2016. This is more than double the annual harvest of 49 during 1992-2001.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: A small trend area is surveyed annually in the drainages of the upper West Fork of the Little Delta River, Dry Creek, and Wood River located in the central mountains of Unit 20A.

ISSUES: The primary issue among sheep hunters at this time seems to be the conflict between resident hunters and guides. There have been many proposals in the region to allow resident hunters to begin hunting before the nonresident hunters. Predator management to enhance sheep populations remains an issue.

TANANA UPLANDS AND WHITE MOUNTAINS

STATUS: Approximately 450-600 sheep are found in relatively isolated areas of suitable habitat.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: Trend areas encompassing a large portion of suitable sheep habitat are surveyed annually in conjunction with Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

ISSUES: Horn breakage found in mature rams in portions of the White Mountains is of interest and concern to hunters pursuing sheep there.

WOLF

STATUS: Wolf numbers increased in Unit 20A following a wolf reduction in 1993-1994, and appear to be stable at moderately high levels. Conversely, wolf numbers began to decline in Denali National Park by 1995 (Unit 20C) following an abrupt increase and peak in numbers concurrent with harsh winters in the early 1990s. Data on wolf abundance in Units 20B, 20F and 25C is lacking, but anecdotal information suggests wolf numbers are stable in these units.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: Sporadic surveys, incidental observations, and sealing constitute recent management activities. Research in Unit 20A provided considerable information on the status of wolves in that area through the late 2000s. A population survey conducted in the northern portion of Unit 20A during spring 2015 yielded and estimated wolf density of approximately 22.3 wolves/1000 mi². A population

survey was also conducted in Unit 20C in 2012 which estimated a density of 10.7 wolves/1000 mi².

ISSUES: Wolf harvest in Unit 20A has been declining (mean=72, 1996–2000; mean=65, 2001–2005; mean=44, 2010–2015). Wolf control continues to be controversial. The Board has identified Unit 20A for Intensive Management. A ground-based wolf control program to reverse the decline of the Delta caribou herd was implemented in 1993, but wolf control was suspended in early 1994. Since then, there have been no intensive management efforts to increase the size of the Delta caribou herd.

SMALL GAME

STATUS: Anecdotal information suggest that the snowshoe hare population reached a low in 2013 and 2014 and is now beginning to increase. Based on drumming count surveys in the Clear-Anderson area and other anecdotal information, ruffed grouse numbers are currently increasing. Sharp-tailed grouse numbers appear to be high and the status of spruce grouse is thought to be stable. Ptarmigan numbers still appear to be stable. Hunting small game is popular along road-accessible areas.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: Ruffed grouse drumming counts have been conducted annually in Unit 20A since 1993 (except 1998 and 2013 because of weather). Grouse wings are collected from hunters in the most popular grouse hunting areas. The wings provide an index to annual juvenile recruitment into the grouse populations and proportions of the 3 grouse species in the harvest. Research is also being conducted on ptarmigan in Unit 25C

ISSUES: None.

OTHER ISSUES

Other issues potentially affecting wildlife or wildlife users include forestry, fire management, oil and gas exploration in the Minto Flats State Game Refuge and Healy Basin, military activities, Eielson Air Force Base to Ft. Greely railroad extension. As communities in the area grow and expand, nuisance wildlife management activities and urban wildlife issues are expected to increase.