

PROPOSAL 24

5 AAC 85.065. Hunting seasons and bag limits for small game.

Close the season for Alaska hares in Units 9 and 17 as follows:

| Units and Bag Limits | Resident Open Season (Subsistence and General Hunts) | Nonresident Open Season |
|--|---|--|
| (2) | | |
| Snowshoe and Alaska hares | | |
| ... | | |
| Units 9 and 17 Alaska hares [ONLY 1 PER DAY, 4 TOTAL] | <u>No open season</u> [NOV. 1 – JAN. 31] | <u>No open season</u> [NOV. 1 – JAN. 31] |

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why? Alaska hare, one of two species of hare found in Alaska, are an endemic species that were once abundant in western coastal areas and their range extended from Cold Bay on the Alaska Peninsula north to Kotzebue on the Baldwin Peninsula (Units 9, 17, 18, 22, and 23). Historical accounts from the 1970's described a high abundance of Alaska hares often observed in groups ranging from 50-100 individuals. Recent research and anecdotal observations indicate the population is currently at historic lows for this species across their range, including in Units 9 and 17.

In 2018, in response to the sustained low abundance, a department project was initiated to develop survey methods for this elusive species to examine population dynamics and gain insight into Alaska hare movement ecology. Genetic fecal pellet surveys with hundreds of miles of transects were conducted from 2018-2022 in Units 9, 17, 18, 22, and 23 to gain a better understanding of Alaska hare distribution and abundance. Results from this work documented extremely low numbers of individual Alaska hares, especially in areas surveyed in Units 9, 17, and 23. Larger survey efforts in Units 22 and 23 yielded similar results with low abundances or complete absences from historical ranges that were last confirmed to have Alaska hares as recently as 2006.

Specific causes of this apparent decrease in abundance remain unknown. In response to the low abundance of Alaska hares, both the State Board of Game (Unit 9 in 2018; Units 18, 22, 23 in 2020 and Unit 17 in 2022) and the Federal Subsistence Board (Units 9, 17, 18, 22, and 23 in 2022) changed harvest regulations limiting harvest via bag limits, season restrictions, and salvage requirements.

Hunting seasons in Units 9 and 17 should be closed to address the low abundance and conservation concern for Alaska hare. Snowshoe hare hunting would remain open and unchanged in the area. A closed hunting season in the southern Alaska Peninsula may protect localized populations for quicker

recovery and recolonization. It remains unclear if human harvest is one of the factors preventing a recovery of the species but closing the hunting season is the first step in a conservation effort. Considering the extremely low abundances in this area eliminating the hunting season may be necessary to protect vulnerable Alaska hare populations.

There is a positive customary and traditional use finding for Alaska hares in Units 9 and 17. Any take is inconsistent with sustained yield and could jeopardize future harvest opportunity for subsistence and other harvest.

Did you develop your proposal in coordination with others, or with your local fish and game advisory committee?

PROPOSED BY: Alaska Department of Fish and Game

(HQ-F24-075)
