



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park/Preserve

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Summary of June 1998 Mentasta Caribou Herd count and composition surveys.

Each year, the Mentasta Caribou Herd (MCH) is subject to several surveys. In June, post-calving aggregation and composition counts are conducted to determine herd size and early production rates. In September, an additional composition survey is conducted to determine the ratios of bulls, cows and calves during the rut. These surveys allow managers to monitor population trends, and determine summer calf survival rates and bull:cow ratios during the rut. These data are used to determine if fall hunting seasons may be held (National Park Service. 1995. Mentasta Caribou Herd Cooperative Management Plan. Wrangell-St. Elias NP/P, Copper Center, AK.), support research on herd ecology (e.g. K. Jenkins. 1995. Population dynamics of the Mentasta Caribou Herd, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve: Progress Report and Preliminary Assessment. WRST Res. and Resource Manage. Rep. 95-01. Copper Center, AK.) and support an overall understanding of caribou ecology in the National Park and Preserve.

The post-calving aggregation count was conducted on 25 June 1998 by two fixed wing aircraft. (Normally three or four are used but we did not have access to additional planes this year.) The flight had been delayed for several days due to poor weather, but conditions on 25 June were very good, with light winds, clear skies and cool temperatures. Counts were made in the area from the large Sanford Glacier (running generally east-west at 62° 17' N), south to the Nadina River by Bob Tobey (ADF&G) piloted by Jerry Lee (Basin Air Taxi). The area north of the large Sanford Glacier to West Glacier and the upper Copper River was surveyed by Carl Mitchell (WRST) piloted by Harley McMahan (McMahan Flying Service).

Caribou were located in small groups (1-46) between 3300 and 6600 feet elevation. We did see one cow at 2500 feet in spruce forest. About 60% of the caribou observed were on ice or snow patches. We located only 19 of 36 radiocollars. (Of those 36, 3 have not been heard in many months, and one is now thought to be dead). Thus, 13 radiocollared animals were either not in or near the count area, or were not heard/seen. No caribou were found when the area south to the upper Chetaslina was searched this year. Several radiocollared cows may be in the upper Copper River/Copper Glacier area, though we did not hear their collars when flying over the ridges immediately to the west.

We counted a total of 416 caribou, consisting of 375 adults (including 28 known bulls) and 41 calves. (This total includes one tightly packed group estimated at 45 cows and 3 calves, but determined by photograph to contain 42 cows and 4 calves.) We assume that 13 radio-collared cows were not counted, bringing the total to 429± caribou. Clearly, these are minimum counts.

In 1997 and 1996 we counted 600 and 638 caribou, respectively. The population continues to decline.

A flight to determine herd composition was conducted on 22 June by Layne Adams (USGS-BRD), Carl Mitchell and Rick Swisher in an R-44 helicopter found 261 cows, 35 calves and 27 bulls, (total 323) for a ratio of 10:100:13. 80.8% of the caribou counted were cows, 8.3% bulls and 10.8% calves.

In June 1997 we classified 377 caribou. That composition count found 72% cows and 11% calves.

In summary, we computed a total of 388 adults and 41 calves (=429) present. Herd size continues to decline. Although absolute numbers obviously decreased, the percentage of adult cows in the summer herd increased slightly over 1997, as did the percentage of calves. The changes are not biologically significant.

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