

News from the Selawik National Wildlife Refuge, a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service office in Kotzebue, AK



Caribou management news – updates from recent Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group and Alaska Board of Game meetings.

Caribou Herd Update

Western Arctic Caribou Herd

January 2017

As most people know by now, the number of caribou in our region's herd, the Western Arctic Herd, is dropping. It's down to 201,000 in the most recent count (as of summer 2016); when the decline started in 2003, there were 490,000 caribou in the herd. Alaska Department of Fish & Game plans to do another population count in 2017.

Recent surveys show improved survival for cows and calves. While this might mean better times are coming for caribou, hunters and managers are preparing in case the decline continues. Discussions about reducing caribou harvest and about improved harvest reporting are taking place now.

Getting Close to Further Harvest Reductions

Now that the herd has dropped by over 50%, human harvest has the potential to keep caribou numbers low or even drive numbers down further. This is the reason caribou hunting regulations have changed recently, and why more changes may be coming.

Total caribou harvests by communities in the range of the Western Arctic herd have averaged about 13,000 caribou per year. The Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group's management plan states that if herd drops below 200,000 animals, harvest should be reduced to 8,000-12,000 animals. Harvesting fewer animals is one way to help the herd recover.

At the December 2016 Working Group meeting, a main topic was how to reduce harvest, if this becomes necessary, in the most reasonable way: Reduce daily bag limits? Shorten seasons? Create an annual bag limit? Working Group members felt that caribou hunting regulation changes that went into place in 2015 might already have helped to reduce harvests. But without more up-to-date harvest information it's hard to know what difference those changes have made.

Harvest Reporting Changes For 2017

Knowing how many animals are killed by hunters is important information when the herd is declining. Without up-to-date numbers on caribou harvest, it's hard for managers to know the impact of regulation changes, or exactly when further changes may be needed. Not having this information means managers sometimes have to be more conservative in their actions and regulations to make sure harvest isn't too high. Good harvest information can help hunters and managers alike.

Currently, the most detailed harvest data come from ADFG Subsistence Division community surveys. These surveys are expensive and time consuming, with

only a few communities surveyed each year. After much discussion, including the challenges of instituting a paper-based system in remote villages, the Working Group voted in December to support increased harvest reporting by all hunters.

At their January 2017 meeting, the State Board of Game restructured the caribou hunt in Unit 23 to a registration permit hunt, starting in July 2017. This change from the current registration system will provide managers additional information on harvest levels, timing and sex of harvest. Hunters will be required to register for a caribou permit with Alaska Department of Fish & Game or license vendors, and to have the registration permit in their possession when hunting caribou. At the end of the season, hunters will be required to submit hunt reports. Expect to hear more details from the Alaska Department of Fish & Game in coming months. The board did not change any season dates or bag limits for caribou hunting in Unit 23.

Caribou Count: How is it done?

Alaska Department of Fish & Game biologists count the caribou in the herd through aerial surveys and photography. Surveys are done in July, after calving, when caribou are tightly grouped together to avoid mosquitoes. Biologists track caribou that have satellite and radio collars to know when the herd is grouped together and to find all groups. They fly over the groups in small planes equipped with cameras and take many photos. Then the caribou in each photo are carefully counted by ADFG staff. The next count (or "photocensus") is planned for summer 2017.

We've heard people ask "What happened to all the caribou we used to have? Why don't we see carcasses?" Keep in mind, this decline didn't happen all at once, but over 13 years. Each year the total number of caribou in the herd changes with births and deaths. When more caribou die

(due to weather, predation, and harvest) than are born, the population goes down. The number of caribou lost in the decline is not just made up of caribou that died, but also caribou that were never born in the first place. During the years of decline, there was a high death rate for females (cows) and a low number of calves surviving. There were also some die-off events due to icing. Bodies of any dead caribou are spread across a huge area and are eaten by other wildlife.



More Information:

1. [Western Arctic Caribou Herd Management Plan](#) from the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group
2. [Caribou hunting regulations fact sheet](#) from Selawik NWR website
3. [FAQs about caribou hunting closure on federal lands, July 2016-June 2017](#) from Selawik NWR website

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