

Nelchina Caribou News



Research and management update, summer 2017
Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Wildlife Conservation

Welcome to the Nelchina Caribou News

The Nelchina caribou herd roams the high basin surrounded by the Talkeetna, Chugach, Wrangell, and Alaska ranges in Game Management Unit 13. The herd has sustained Alaskans for centuries and is managed today to ensure hunting opportunities for present and future generations.

Like all caribou herds, Nelchina caribou are prone to cyclic highs and lows. Since the 1990s, however, wildlife managers have worked to maintain the herd at sustainable levels by regulating harvest. While this strategy has proven largely successful, Nelchina caribou numbers are currently above the population objective. Biologists are concerned that continued herd growth could lead to more animals than the habitat can support, making the population vulnerable to a dramatic decline. During the 2016–2017 hunting season additional harvest opportunity was provided to help stop herd growth.

Continue reading to learn more about the Nelchina caribou herd and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game’s management approach.

Questions?

To learn more about caribou visit us online at www.adfg.alaska.gov > **Species** > **Caribou**.

For questions about this publication email sierra.doherty@alaska.gov.

Contributing ADF&G staff

Gino Del Frate

Regional Supervisor, Region IV

Todd Rinaldi

Management Coordinator, Region IV

Frank Robbins

Glennallen Area Biologist

Heidi Hatcher

Glennallen Assistant Area Biologist

Sierra Doherty

Education Specialist

Heather McFarland

Education Specialist

Ken Marsh

Information Officer

Contents

Introduction	1
Home on the range	2–3
Harvest	4
Current hunt structure	5
Counting caribou	6–7
Management	8–9
Predators	9
History of human use	10
Practice Outdoor Ethics	11
Hunting tips	12



The State of Alaska is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employer. Contact the Division of Wildlife Conservation at (907) 465-4190 for alternative formats of this publication. Hunters are important founders of the modern wildlife conservation movement. They, along with trappers and sport shooters, provided funding for this publication through payment of federal taxes on firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment, and through state hunting license and tag fees.

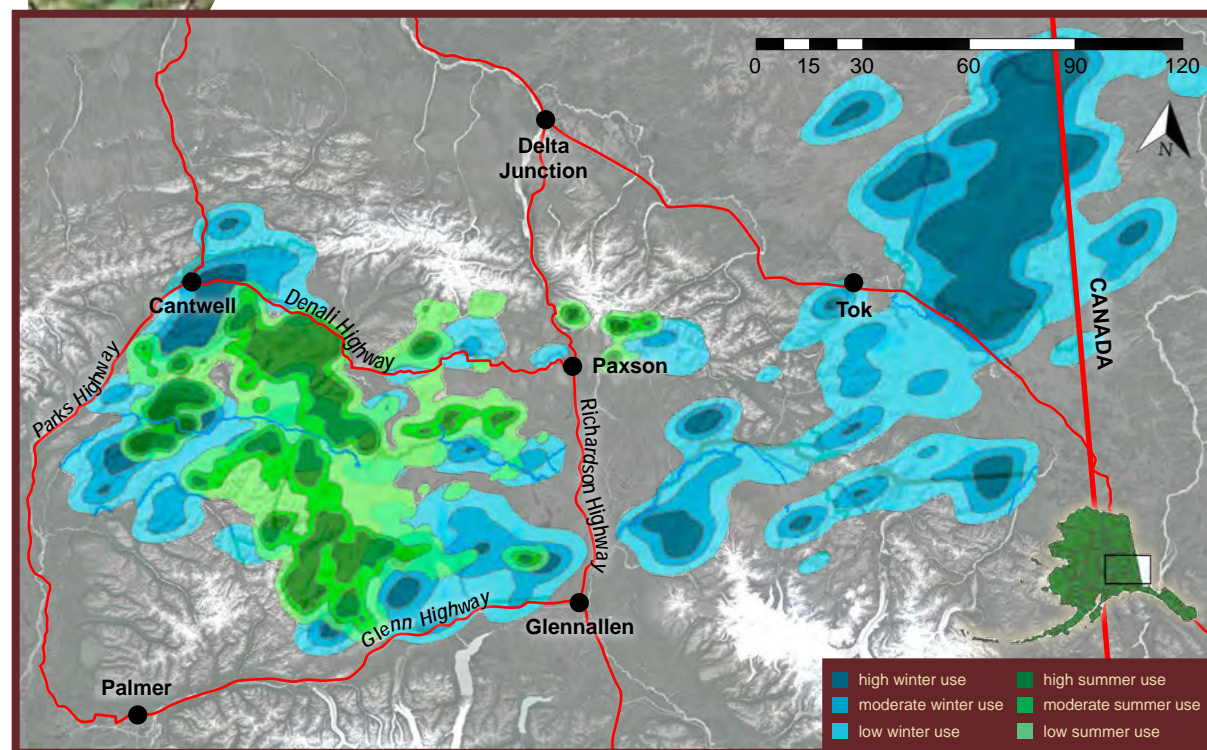
PRSR T MKTG MAIL
US POSTAGE PAID
ANCHORAGE, AK
PERMIT NO. 957

Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game
Division of Wildlife Conservation
1800 Glenn Hwy, Suite 2
Palmer, AK 99645

Home on the range

The perfect home

Caribou require several key elements in their habitat. A suitable range must be spacious and ecologically complex in order to allow caribou to find food and cover, and avoid predators. Caribou use different parts of their range at different times of the year (summer, winter, calving period). Optimally, each seasonal range provides adequate forage, both in quality and quantity, to support the herd. The herd may move to a new area when forage is depleted in their traditional seasonal range as a result of overgrazing, wildfires, feeding competition from high densities of caribou, or when forage is energetically costly to obtain (such as being covered under deep snow or ice).



Nelchina caribou herd winter (blue) and summer (green) range from 2012 to 2015. The darker colors represent areas of greater use.

Where do the caribou roam?

During much of the year, the Nelchina caribou herd occupies an area of approximately 20,000 square miles in southcentral Alaska, most of which is contained in Game Management Unit 13. The area is comprised of jagged, glacier-capped mountains, gently sloping uplands and expansive forested plains confined by the Alaska Range to the north, Wrangell Mountains to the east, Chugach Mountains to the south, and Talkeetna Mountains to the west. Alpine foothills surround the Copper River lowlands. The eastern portion is drained by the Copper and Delta rivers. The western part is drained by the Matanuska, Nenana and Susitna rivers.

Herd on the move

The timing and trajectory of Nelchina caribou herd movements can be highly variable year to year. Herd size, weather, predation, and food availability all contribute to herd movement patterns and, in turn, caribou accessibility. The following summary describes the herd's annual movements in general terms.

Fall and winter– In late September, mountains and high alpine valleys start to load with snow. Caribou of both sexes and all age classes form integrated bands in preparation for the rut, moving toward lower elevations. The rut typically lasts about two weeks. By mid-October through November, the majority of the herd is on the move again, migrating east out of Unit 13 for the winter. The caribou usually disperse during late November and early December and move to their winter range by mid-January.

The Nelchina herd's winter range varies from year to year. In recent years, animals have spent the winter as far east as the Canadian border, between Chicken and Northway.

It's not uncommon for much of the herd to winter near Tok and the Taylor Highway. In some years, small groups of Nelchina caribou avoid the long journey and spend the winter in Unit 13. For the winter of 2015–2016, virtually the entire herd left Unit 13 early and traveled relatively quickly toward the Canadian border.

During the winter of 2016–2017, many animals over-wintered in Unit 13 (subunits A, B, and E), and those that migrated east did so much later and traveled much more slowly than in 2015–2016.



Spring– As calving season approaches, scattered bands of cows, calves and some young bulls begin to congregate. They walk parallel trails across the landscape as they travel in long, single file lines heading west. Adult bulls linger a bit longer in the wintering grounds. Timing of this movement is variable, but in most years the migration begins in early April. Pregnant cows initiate the migration, possibly because they feel the urge to get to the calving grounds. The drive may also be triggered by the appearance of new plant growth in snow-free areas. In years with late spring thaws, movement to the calving grounds may be delayed. Once caribou reach the calving area, they spread out over the range in smaller groups to give birth.



Summer– Soon after calving, caribou aggregate into larger groups. At first, the groups are comprised of cows and newborn calves, but gradually they swell with outlying groups of bulls and nonpregnant cows. Usually the post-calving aggregation reaches a peak in late June or early July. Throughout this period the animals move progressively to higher elevations, taking advantage of cooler temperatures and fresh green forage exposed by thawing snow. In July, caribou normally separate into smaller groups and head to windswept ridges decorated with a patchwork of persistent snow. Here, they can find relief from swarms of biting insects and the heat of the summer sun.

What do Nelchina caribou eat?

During the spring Nelchina caribou are nourished by emerging forbs (bunchberry), grasses, sedges and equisetum (horsetail). They also forage on willow and dwarf birch leaf buds.

Late summer and fall, caribou feed on various lichens, as well as small twigs of willow, lowbush cranberry, crowberry, mushrooms and moss. As winter progresses, Nelchina caribou rely more heavily on lichens which are often found under the snow. They use their shovel-like hooves to dig through the snow, but if it is too deep or ice creates an impermeable layer, caribou are pressed to move to other areas.

What happens when caribou overgraze their range?

As caribou populations grow they may reach the carrying capacity of their habitat. Plant species that are heavily grazed by caribou lose their position in the vegetation community as they become outcompeted by species that are not heavily used. Since most lichen species grow very slowly, this can result in a real problem for caribou. Initial signs that caribou are suffering as a result of an overgrazed range include poorer body condition, lower birth rates (especially in first-time breeders), and large shifts in seasonal range(s) as animals seek better forage. Poor body condition ultimately leads to compromised immune systems, which makes caribou more susceptible to disease, parasites, weather, and predation.

The Nelchina herd currently seems to be in good condition; however recent large migratory shifts could be an early warning sign that the range is being overgrazed. During summer 2018, biologists plan to evaluate the habitat quality and quantity of the herd's summer and winter range. Winter range condition will be assessed based on cover of lowbush cranberry and several lichen species that are important to wintering caribou. Summer range use is poorly understood, so researchers will examine summer movement patterns of GPS and radiocollared caribou to identify important summer habitat types. Chemical analysis of scat will also help reveal summer diet composition.

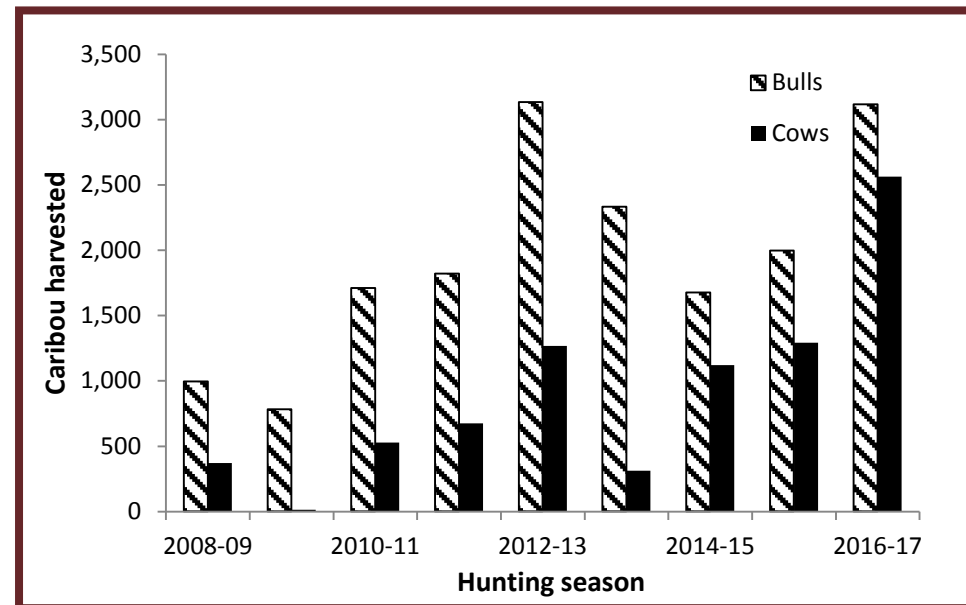


Nelchina caribou harvest

Increased harvest

Since 2010, an average of 11,800 Unit 13 caribou permits have been issued annually (approximately 29,000 people apply). During 2016–2017, the state issued almost 14,500 permits and the Bureau of Land Management issued 3,134 federal permits. The increase in state permits was the result of greater community hunt participation, more Tier I applicants, and 5,000 draw permits being issued.

Since the current hunt structure was implemented in 2009, hunters have harvested about 2,600 caribou from the Nelchina herd annually. Usually only a third of the caribou harvested each year are cows. Initial estimates from the 2016–2017 hunting season indicate that just over 6,000 Nelchina caribou were harvested. Almost half (45 percent) of the harvest were cows, in part because the department encouraged female harvest to bring the herd within population objectives.



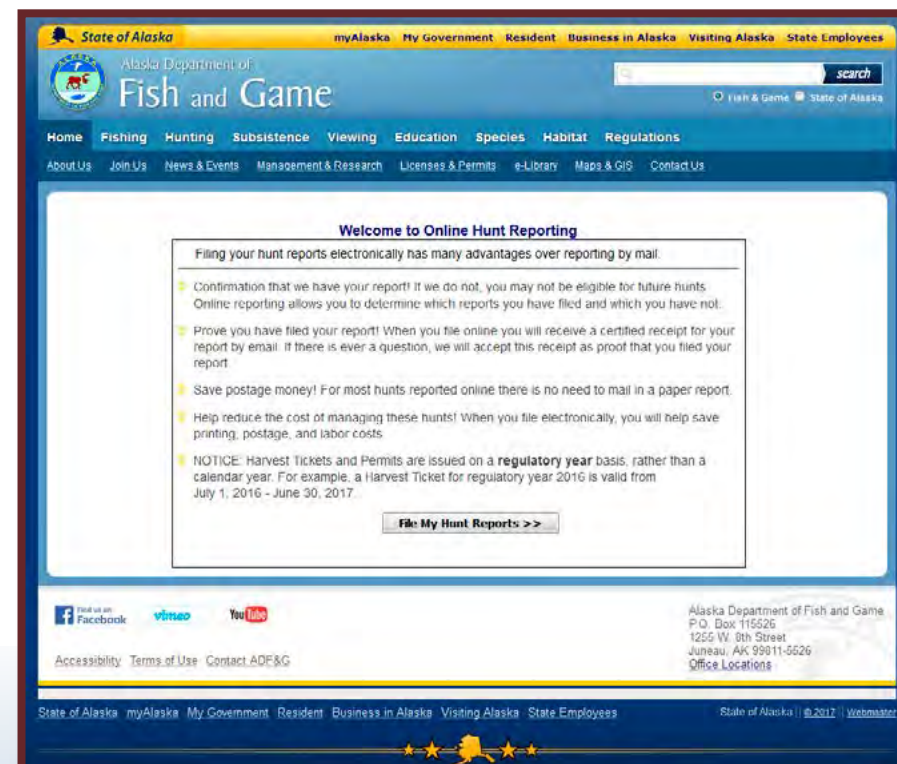
Proportion of bulls to cows harvested from the Nelchina caribou herd annually. In most years hunters take considerably more bulls than cows.

Harvest monitoring

Harvest monitoring allows biologists to track the number of animals taken. Immediate harvest reporting (three or five days) is required in all Unit 13 caribou hunts. The herd's highly accessible nature makes it susceptible to overharvest, particularly when large groups of animals are in the vicinity of roads. In these situations, hunts may close by emergency order.

Accounting for harvests in a timely manner is especially important if a quota is set for the year. In 2016, the quota was initially set at 2,000 bulls and 2,000 cows, but with a slow harvest rate in the beginning of the season, and photocensus data pointing to an inflated population, biologists relaxed the quota.

Hunters can report their harvest by bringing harvest report cards into any ADF&G office, calling the Glennallen office (907-822-3461) or, preferably, reporting online.



File your hunt report online at www.adfg.alaska.gov > Hunting > File Hunt Reports.



Ten-year-old Jordan Strausbaugh with her Unit 13 caribou

Current Unit 13 hunt structure

Tier I registration (RC566)

The Tier I hunt is a subsistence registration hunt available to Alaska residents. Only one application is allowed per household, and members of the household are not eligible for the community harvest caribou hunt or any caribou drawing permits. Each household is allowed one caribou and must hunt moose and caribou in Unit 13 only. Last year, more than 8,000 Tier I permits were issued.

Community hunt (CC001)

Community Subsistence Harvest in Unit 13 is open to Alaska residents who apply with at least 25 group members. Community hunters are allotted one caribou per household, and are limited to hunting caribou and moose in the Copper Basin Community Subsistence Hunt area. Community hunters can use designated hunters within their group to harvest caribou. They are required to salvage all edible meat, as well as the heart, liver, kidneys, and fat. Each group must file an annual report.

Drawing permit (DC485)

Unit 13 caribou drawing permits are open to Alaska residents only. Up to 5,000 permits are issued each year. The draw success rate for this permit is currently the highest in the state. Each permit holder can harvest one caribou.

Federal subsistence permit

Under the Federal Subsistence Permit residents of Delta Junction and Unit 13 can harvest two caribou per person on federal lands.

***Remember!** The application period for all state Nelchina caribou permits is November 1–December 15 of the year prior.

2017 Board of Game changes

To reduce crowding and hunter conflicts the 2017 Board of Game voted to split the Tier I registration hunt into two hunt periods. During the November application period hunters will be required to select one of the following seasons: August 10–31 and October 21–March 31, **or** September 1–20 and October 21–March 31.

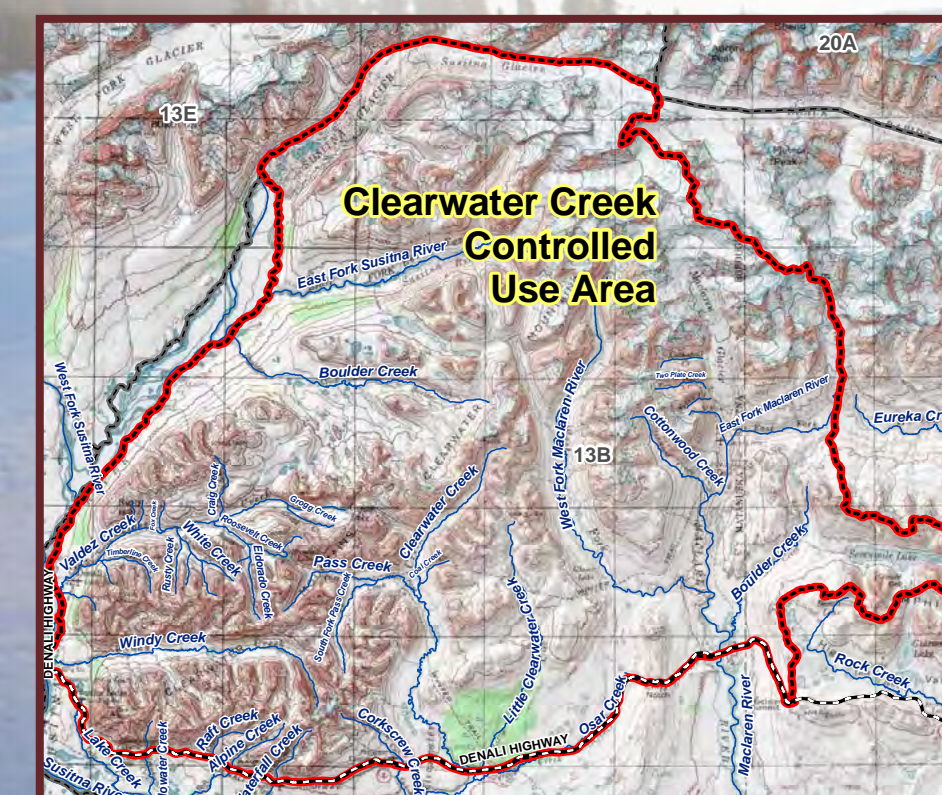
***Regulation changes go into effect July 1, 2018.**

Clearwater Controlled Use Area

The Clearwater Controlled Use Area (CCUA) is closed to hunting with motorized vehicles, regardless of trails available within the area. The area is about 894 square miles and includes the Maclaren Summit Trail which is designated as a trail for motorized use under the Tangle Lakes Archaeological District. Many hunters assume they can use this trail (and the other trails in the area) as long as they keep their motorized vehicle on the trail and hike off trail to get to caribou, or as long as they don't start hunting until the trail extends outside of the controlled use area. This is not the case. *It is illegal to use motorized vehicles to access caribou hunting from these trails.*

What area is closed?–Motorized hunting is prohibited in the area north of the Denali Highway, west of and including the Maclaren River drainage, east of and including the eastern bank drainages of the Middle Fork of the Susitna River downstream from and including the Susitna Glacier, and the eastern bank drainages of the Susitna River downstream from its confluence with the Middle Fork.

Why is vehicle access restricted?–This special use area was created to protect moose and caribou from overharvest. The area also provides walk-in hunters a chance to take animals without competition from hunters using off-road vehicles. On average, about 2,600 hunters report hunting in the CCUA each year.



Boundary of the Clearwater Creek Controlled Use Area which is closed to motorized hunting.





Counting caribou

Fall 2016 Statistics: 46,673 caribou • 56 bulls –100 cows • 48 calves –100 cows

Counting caribou and determining composition of the herd requires planning, appropriate weather, and hours of analysis. Several surveys conducted throughout the year provide information biologists need to make important management decisions, including how many permits to issue.

Spring survey

At the onset of calving season in May 2016, pilots and biologists tracked radio-collared cows from fixed-wing aircraft to determine calf production. They looked for three things: persistent antlers, distended udders, or a calf at heel. These characteristics provide an index for the proportion of adult cows that are about to or have recently given birth. Of 93 cows that were three years old or older, 77 (83 percent) were pregnant or had a calf, indicating the herd was very productive in 2016.



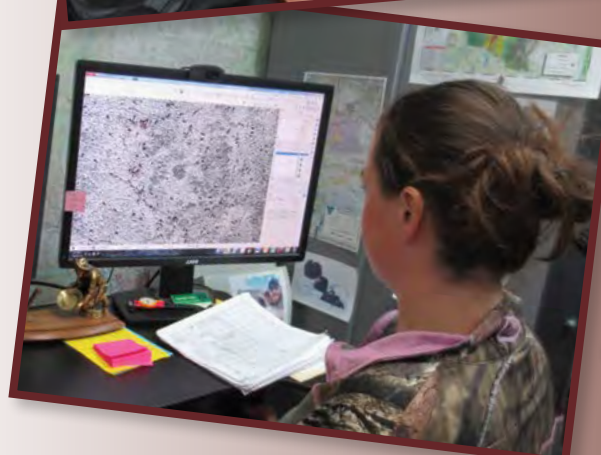
83% of Nelchina cows were pregnant or with a calf, pointing to a strong and healthy herd.



A mapping camera is mounted in the belly of the plane.



Biologists spent hours sifting through aerial photographs to mark areas of overlap.



GIS software was used to count individual caribou.

Summer count

In early- to midsummer, when harassing insects are most intense, caribou bunch up in tight groups. This is the best time to count the herd. In early July 2016, five search planes were assigned to designated areas in Game Management Unit 13. Honing in on groups of caribou, observers in the planes estimated the size of each group encountered and recorded the location. Once a large concentration of caribou was detected, a crew flying a Cessna 206 with a camera mounted to its belly was called in to take photographs.

Later, photographs were printed and areas of overlap marked to avoid double-counting caribou. After scanning the photos to a digital format, geographic information system (GIS) software was used to count each caribou.

Composition survey

Midsummer is also the time to determine how many bulls, cows and calves make up the herd. This is the summer composition survey. In 2016, biologists used a helicopter to observe bands of caribou composed of bulls, cows, cows with calves, and mixed groups. At least 10 percent of the caribou are observed to obtain a representative sample of the herd's overall composition. A critical component of this survey is determining the calf-to-cow ratio. In the summer of 2016, there were 62 calves for every 100 cows indicating good production and early summer survival of calves (the summer composition survey usually reveals about 49 calves for every 100 cows).

Fall survey

A second composition survey, generally conducted in October, reveals the number of calves that survive the summer, as well as a bull-cow ratio. In fall 2016, 48 calves were observed for every 100 cows – still a high ratio indicating good calf survival over the summer.

Biologists are also interested in the number of bulls to ensure there are enough in the herd for successful breeding and harvest. The 2016 fall composition survey indicated 56 bulls for every 100 cows. The ratio was high because many of the animals observed were one- or two-year-old bulls. An elevated ratio of young bulls in the population is likely representative of high productivity and mild winters over the past couple of years. Because the herd population estimate was above the objective and there was a high bull to cow ratio, 2016–2017 hunting season dates were extended with both sexes open to harvest allowing hunters the opportunity to take additional caribou.

The fall survey provides an opportunity for biologists to estimate the population size of the herd following fall harvest. In 2017, 46,673 caribou were estimated, which is slightly lower than the previous year's fall estimate.

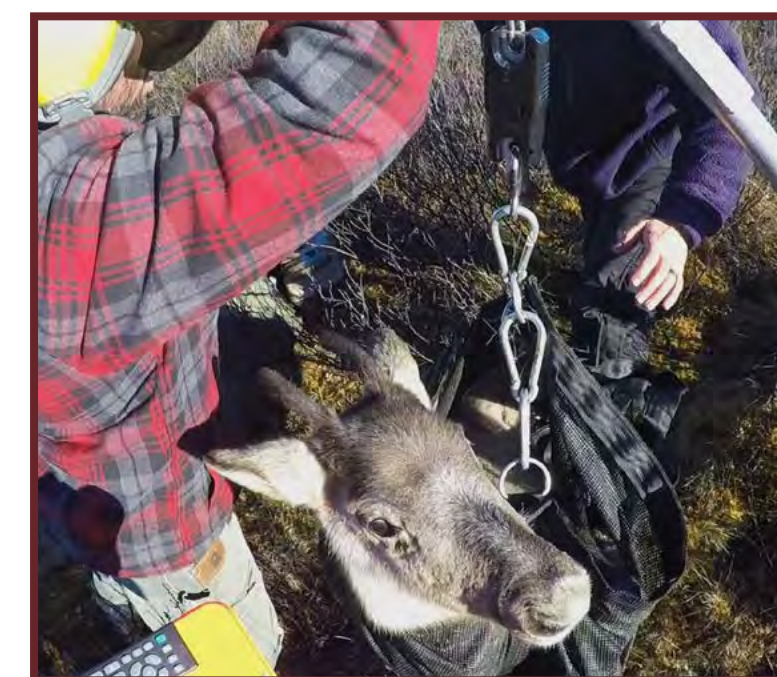


Fall management captures

In the fall of 2016, biologists also conducted captures, where a sample of caribou are selected to be monitored for the rest of their lives. Biologists used a helicopter to fly in close to groups of caribou to dart, temporarily sedate, and gather health data from 20 female calves.

The immobilization drugs took two to five minutes to take effect. Once an animal was down, biologists moved quickly to collar it and record measurements of health including weight, mandible length, body condition, and body temperature. All of this happened in approximately four minutes before the reversal drug was administered.

The 20 female calves were randomly selected and will form the 2016 cohort to be monitored over their lifetimes. Biologists will follow these animals to track mortality within the first year and to determine age of first reproduction. For some caribou herds that are in good nutritional condition, cows are two years old when they first give birth. However, Nelchina cows more typically give birth at age three, even when they show signs of good health.



Biologists capturing (top) and weighing (bottom) a female caribou so that it can be monitored over its lifetime.



Managing booms and busts



ADF&G biologists count caribou using a spotting scope.

In many ways the Nelchina caribou herd is an experiment in caribou management. Caribou herds often exhibit periods of extreme population highs followed by dramatic lows (“boom-bust cycles”). After the Nelchina herd dropped to less than 10,000 caribou in the 1970s, biologists recommended a plan designed to hold the population stable, rather than allow it to cycle through booms and busts. This plan would provide maximum harvest opportunity over time by avoiding dramatic declines. Although hunters would no longer harvest large numbers of caribou during the short herd peaks, long periods of little or no harvest during herd recovery would be avoided. The Nelchina herd, with its accessibility and close proximity to Anchorage and Fairbanks, is one of the only herds in Alaska where aggressive management through hunter harvest has been successful.

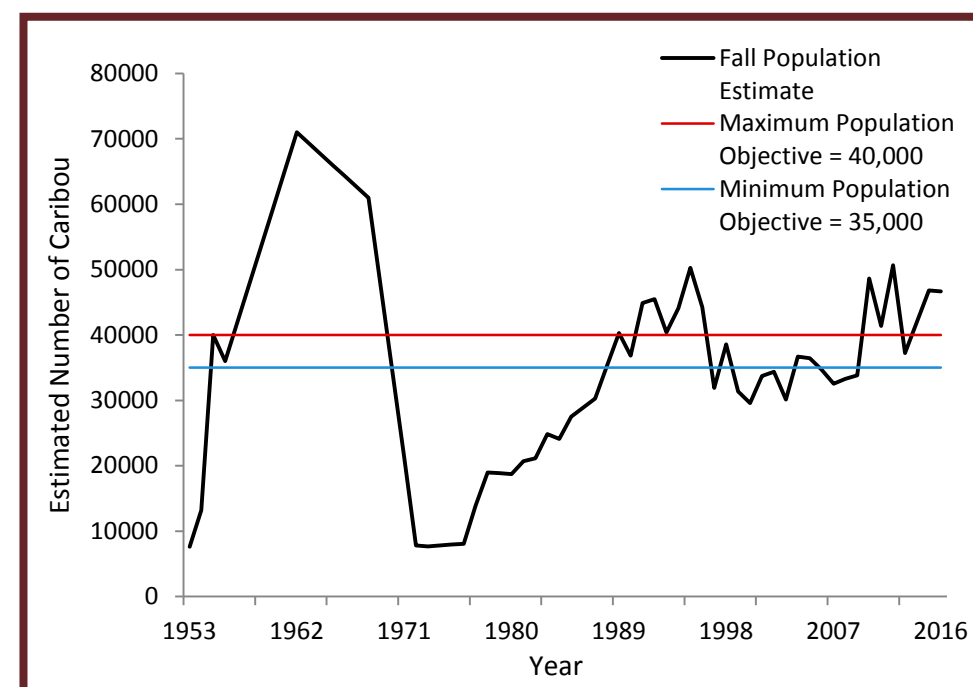
What is the optimum herd size?

Researchers and managers agree that 35,000 to 40,000 is the optimum Nelchina herd size for the available habitat in Unit 13. At this population objective, the herd can sustain a harvest of 3,000 to 6,000 caribou annually. Whenever the herd grows beyond this objective, managers increase the harvest quota and use hunter take to reduce the herd back to the desired size.

Why don't we maintain the herd at a larger size – Many people ask why we manage the herd between 35,000 and 40,000 caribou when in the past the herd had 70,000 animals. Can't the range sustain more caribou? We have no way of knowing the exact number of caribou the habitat can sustain before a decline will occur. What we do know is that keeping the herd at 35,000 to 40,000 caribou has effectively reduced herd fluctuations and no dramatic declines have occurred since the 1970s. The conservative population objective also gives us some “wiggle room” so that when the herd exceeds 40,000 caribou we have time to adjust harvest rates before the range quality is affected. Once caribou begin to over-use their range and become nutritionally stressed the herd will decline and there is virtually no management strategy to slow or reverse the trend.

Is the herd still growing?

Although the 2016 fall population estimate was still substantially above the population objective, the estimate was slightly lower than the previous year's. There were also fewer calves than last year. The increased harvest and extended season dates and bag limits during the 2016–2017 hunting season may have stopped herd growth. However, until the 2017 summer survey, we will not know for sure. Biologists expect that although there may be liberal harvest quotas again during the 2017–2018 hunting season, the season dates and bag limits will be back to normal.



This figure shows the Nelchina caribou population trend over time and demonstrates the natural boom-bust pattern (1953–1970s) that managers are trying to avoid (1980s–present). After the dramatic decline of the 1970s it took almost 20 years for the herd to recover.



Key elements to stopping herd growth

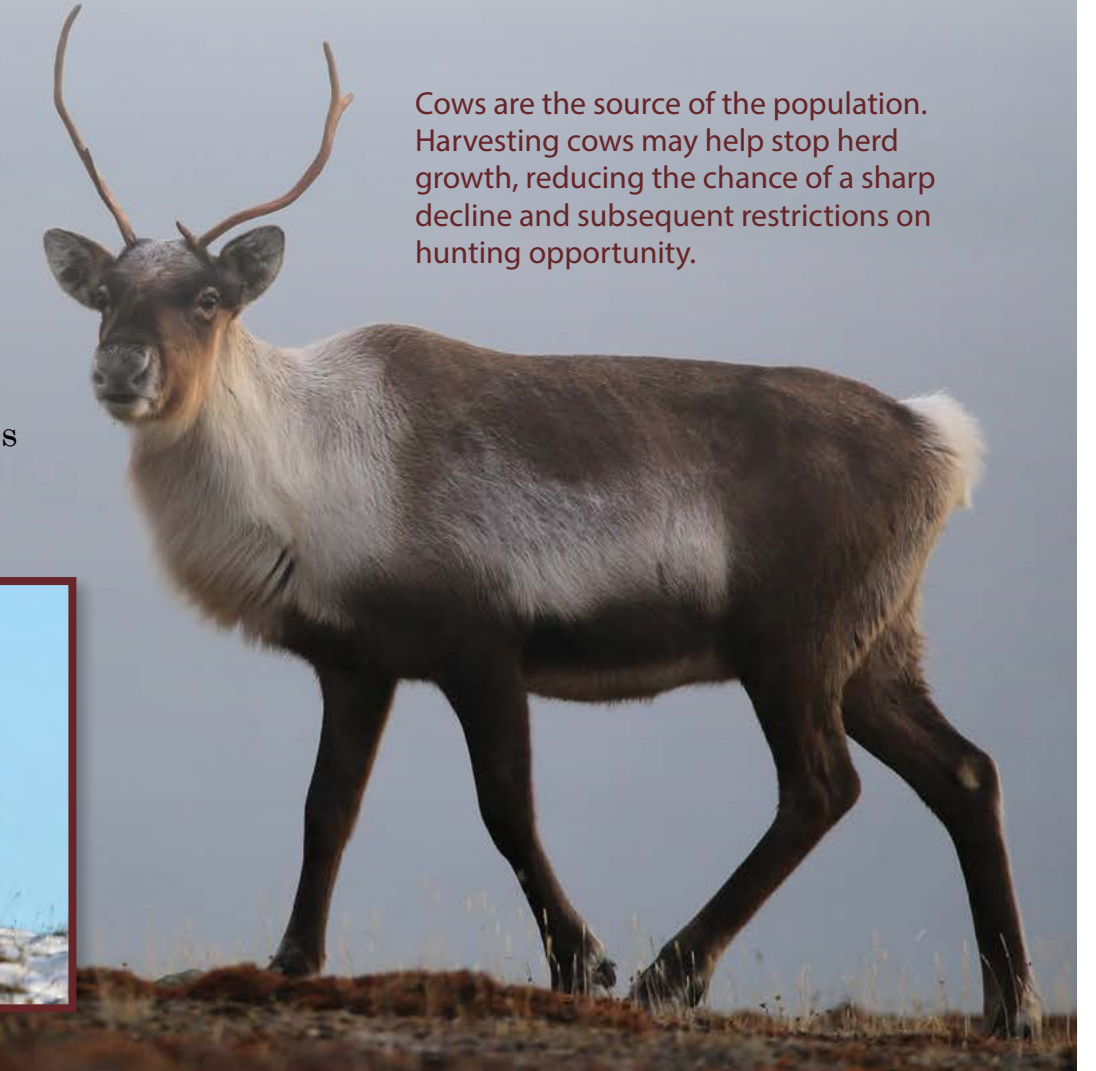
Fall 2016 Emergency Order– The 2016 fall registration hunt (RC566), community hunt (CC001), and draw hunt (DC485) were extended from September 20 to September 30. This provided more hunting opportunity for permit holders who had not yet harvested a caribou.

Spring 2017 Emergency Regulation– Since a significant number of Nelchina caribou wintered in Unit 13 in 2016–2017, additional harvest opportunity was possible. In February, ADF&G petitioned the Board of Game for emergency regulations to increase harvest from the herd. Under these emergency regulations the bag limit for RC566 and CC001 was changed from one to two caribou per household for the rest of the 2016–2017 hunting season. This provided nearly 9,500 permit holders the opportunity to harvest a second caribou. An additional 279 caribou were harvested as a result of these emergency regulations.

Maximizing fall harvest– Hunts maximizing fall harvest are key to successful management of the Nelchina herd. During the winter season the herd often moves east. Once the caribou cross the Richardson Highway they become more difficult and sometimes impossible to access.

Increasing cow harvest– Since fewer bulls are needed in the population for breeding, bull harvest is less effective than cow harvest at stopping herd growth. Cows produce calves which grow into adults and produce more calves. Thus, cow harvest is necessary to stop herd growth.

Gender Identification– The most reliable way to identify bulls and cows is by observing them from behind. Look for the a dark vulva patch on females or a penis sheath on males. Antler size is not a positive indicator of gender.



Cows are the source of the population. Harvesting cows may help stop herd growth, reducing the chance of a sharp decline and subsequent restrictions on hunting opportunity.

Female: dark vulva patch

Male: penis sheath

How do predators impact the herd?

Grizzly bears and wolves are the most common predators of Nelchina caribou. These predators take advantage of behavior and weather to target vulnerable animals. Calves (especially newborns) are generally the most susceptible. Adult predation by wolves can increase when the herd is spread out and the snow is deep. Factors such as nutritional stress on caribou and availability of other prey, like moose, also impacts predation rate. On the calving grounds, golden eagles also contribute to calf mortality.

Predator control in Unit 13

Alaska's early intensive predator control– Prior to statehood, wolf control to enhance Alaska's ungulate populations became serious business. The territory's wildlife was managed by the federal government which killed more than 200 wolves in the Nelchina caribou herd's range during 1948–1951. Bounty hunters removed an additional, but unknown, number of wolves during that time. The wolf control area included about 16,000 square miles bounded on the north by the Alaska Range, on the east by the Copper River, on the south by the Chugach Mountains, and on the west by the Talkeetna River.

Low wolf populations– The Nelchina herd was at a low point with an estimated 4,000 caribou in 1948 (the accuracy of early counts is uncertain) when wolf control was initiated. By 1953, an estimated 12 wolves remained in the range. Prey species were very abundant, and according to a 1955 survey there were about 40,000 caribou in the Nelchina herd. Caribou and moose populations continued to increase, and during 1957–1966, the entire region was closed to taking wolves.

Current intensive management (IM) strategy– Wolf control was approved during 2004–2015 for Unit 13 to help maintain moose populations at objectives established by the Alaska Board of Game. The goal of wolf control was to maintain 135 to 165 wolves in unit 13. The program has been temporarily suspended because moose populations have increased and are currently within the IM objective. Although aimed at assisting moose populations, wolf control has likely encouraged greater numbers of Nelchina caribou. In addition to reduced predator numbers, winter weather conditions and forage quality may have aided caribou herd growth. No other predator species have been targeted for control in recent years, although brown bear harvest regulations have been liberalized prior to and during wolf control.

A brief history of human use

Historic use of the herd

Throughout much of Alaska, people have long hunted caribou for food. This is certainly true in the Copper River Basin where the relationship between hunters and the Nelchina caribou herd extends back centuries, beginning with the Ahtna and Dena'ina (pronounced Deh-nine-ah) Athabascans. These early subsistence hunters caught caribou by hanging snares at openings in long brush fences, or drove the animals into lakes where they were speared from canoes.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Nelchina caribou became a staple for miners, trappers, and settlers who trickled into the country with modern rifles. Within decades, that trickle turned into a flood as the Richardson, Glenn, and Denali highways were built to traverse the Copper Basin. By the 1950s, urban caribou hunters from Anchorage, Fairbanks and other road-accessible communities appeared in increasing numbers.



Increasing demand for Nelchina caribou

After peaking at a record-high of 71,000 caribou in 1960, the Nelchina herd fell into decline with only 7,000 to 10,000 animals in the herd by 1972. In 1977, with hunter demand threatening herd sustainability (10,131 animals were taken by hunters in 1971 alone), the state reduced harvests by implementing a lottery-based system. Under this system hunters applied to receive one of a limited number of permits awarded in a random drawing.



Even under the lottery system, the Nelchina caribou hunt remained popular with hunters statewide. Previously, the largest proportion of Nelchina hunters were rural residents who had frequently hunted the herd for longer than 30 years. By 1983 this demographic changed and 42 percent of permitted users had hunted Nelchina caribou for five years or less. Hunters came from 54 Alaska cities, villages, and communities ranging from Barrow to Kodiak to Ketchikan. The majority of permits, however, went to residents of the road-connected cities of Fairbanks, Anchorage, and the Matanuska-Susitna Valley communities of Palmer and Wasilla.

In 1981, the drawing permit hunt system was accompanied by a separate state subsistence hunt. Nelchina caribou harvests today continue to be managed through subsistence and drawing permit hunts.



Practice outdoor ethics

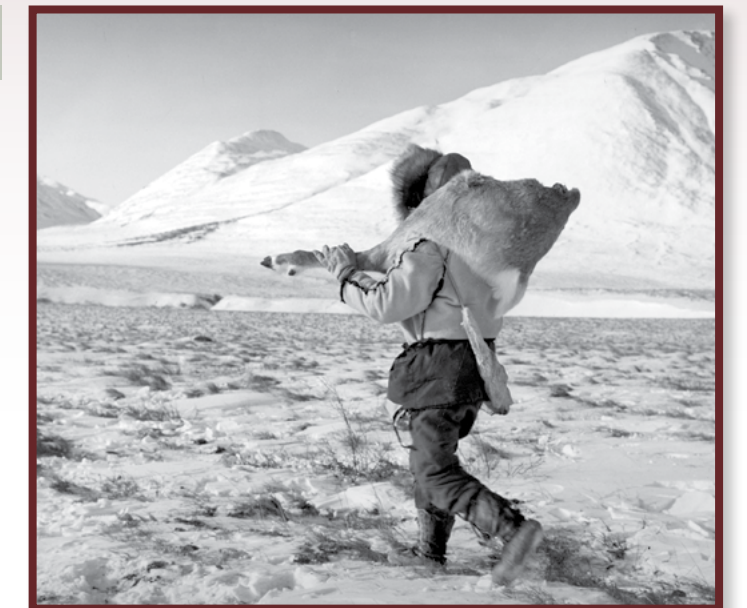
Honor the land, respect other hunters, prevent waste

One person's wilderness is another's backyard

Alaskans have been hunting, fishing and living in the Copper River Basin for years. Many people who call the area home, hunt and rely on the land to provide food. Federal and state managed lands provide opportunities to hunt, camp, fish and recreate, but users are expected to do so legally and respectfully.

First and foremost, hunters should consider the safety of others by practicing safe shooting habits. Become familiar with your weapon before going into the field, wear hunter orange so others can see you, and never shoot across a road or in the direction of other hunters.

There are many ways to reduce your impact on the land. Be respectful by leaving the area as you would like to find it.

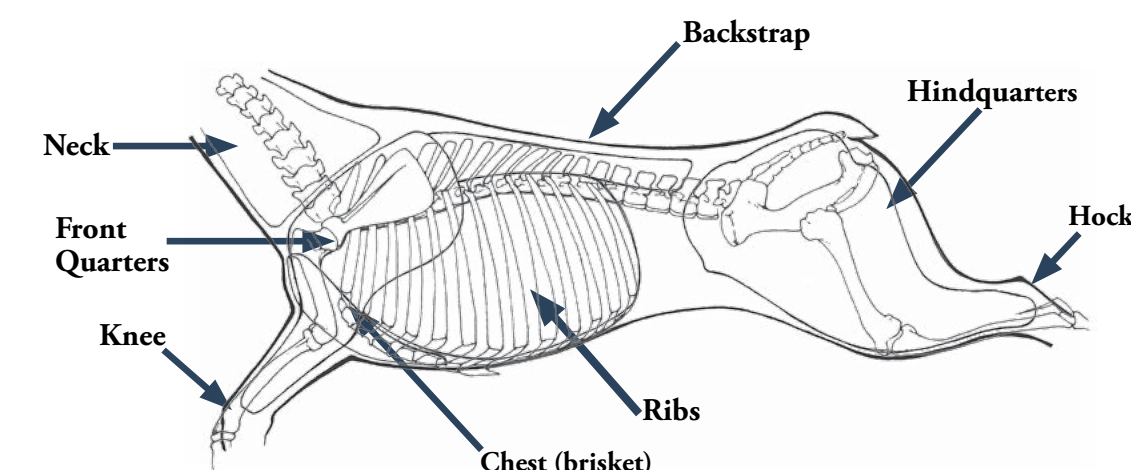


- Leave a clean camp.
- Remove all garbage.
- Burn or carry out toilet paper.
- Dismantle fire rings and minimize site modifications.
- Be considerate of other hunters.
- Don't trespass on private lands.
- Practice selective harvest— don't shoot into a group.
- Gut piles and hides left in the field should be placed out of sight of roads and trails.

Proper salvage and meat care are essential

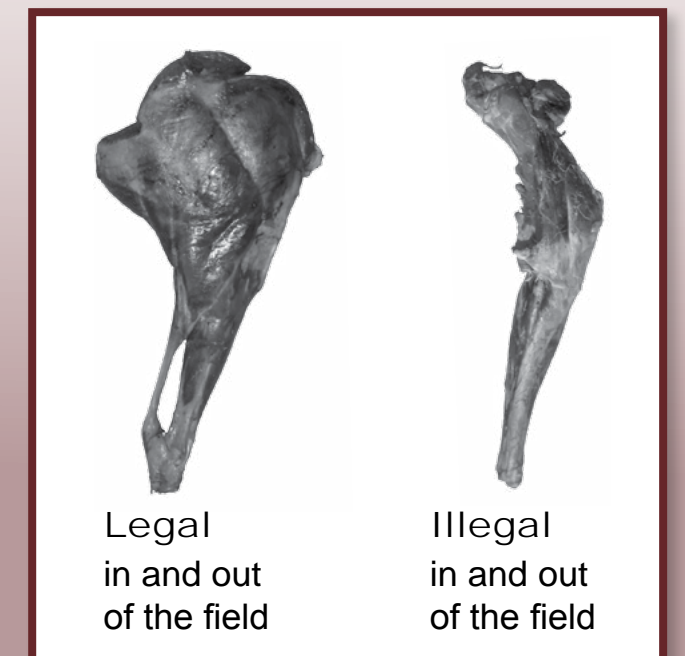
Before you begin processing your harvested animal, remember to first validate your harvest ticket. Salvage of meat means to transport the edible meat to the location where it will be processed for human consumption. Always review the hunting regulations booklet for salvage requirements. In Unit 13, hunters are required to salvage all edible caribou meat, including:

- All of the neck meat
- All of the chest meat (brisket)
- All of the meat of the ribs
- Front quarters to the knee
- Hind quarters to the hock
- All of the meat along the back bone
- Heart, liver, kidneys, fat (Community Hunt CC001)



Before October 1st in GMU 13:

For caribou taken before October, all meat of the front quarters, hindquarters, and ribs must remain naturally attached to the bone until transported from the field or processed for human consumption.



Antlers come out last

Alaska hunting regulations state that antlers may be taken out of the field only after the meat is packed out and properly cared for. Antlers can come out with the last load of meat.

Hunting tips from a wildlife biologist and hunter

So you've decided to hunt Nelchina caribou, what now? Your hunt strategy should depend on the time of year, herd size, and herd whereabouts. Call the *Nelchina Caribou Hotline (907-267-2304)* before you head out. The hotline provides the latest information available from staff and replaces the need to track down a biologist during the busiest time of year.

Hunting Nelchina caribou can be straightforward when large groups are easily accessed by driving the Denali Highway or affiliated trails. However, when the herd is as large as it is now, caribou tend to scatter across the landscape. Use the following hunt tactics to increase your chance of success.

What was hunting like last fall? The herd was broadly scattered from Cantwell to Paxson to Lake Louise. Hunters typically found groups of five to 30 animals roaming the landscape. Each access point off the Denali Highway gave equal chance of encountering animals.

**The Denali Highway is a popular area, consider wearing hunter orange especially while field dressing an animal. Placing orange flagging on antler tips of a harvested animal will ensure that other hunters do not mistake you for a caribou while packing out a kill.*

How do you find caribou?

Glass from a high spot— Find a high spot where you can glass (scan with binoculars) the surrounding landscape for small roaming bands of caribou.

- Choose an area with fresh caribou sign, where other hunters had luck, or where you observed caribou recently.
- If possible, park your vehicle and hike away from the road or trail.
- Early morning is the best time to glass, but you may get lucky any time of day.

Stop moving— Although a vehicle may provide access to a good area, your chance of success increases when you turn off your vehicle, hike to a glassing spot, sit, and wait.

- Hunting from a vehicle or ATV is noisy and fast, you'll likely miss small roaming groups of caribou. Instead, travel on foot. Move slow, be quiet, stop often, and be patient.
- If you've observed caribou passing through an area, stage yourself within range and stay put. Where one group of caribou has traveled, more will likely follow.

Be patient— Hunting caribou is not like hunting moose. Caribou are seldom stationary, especially during the fall.

- If there are no caribou in sight when you first glass an area, be patient. It may take 30 minutes to several hours, but if it is a good area, more caribou will likely travel through.
- Take your time, relax, fuel your body, enjoy being outdoors, and keep a keen eye out for roaming caribou. I've watched hunters leave a spot after 30 minutes, only to have caribou walk into view 15 minutes later.

Once you've spotted a caribou

Only take a shot in your comfort range— Get close enough to take a confident and accurate shot. You've put in the time at the shooting range to sight-in your rifle and hone your shooting skills. Make the most of that effort by only shooting an animal in your comfort zone.

- Bring a range finder if possible. Scale can be deceiving on open tundra.
- Caribou are curious. If they spook, you can often get them to stop, or come toward you, by flapping a hat in the air, or raising your arms like antlers.

- Much of Unit 13 is brushy. You may encounter caribou where you can't take a sitting or prone shot. Practice kneeling shots or carry shooting sticks.

Hunt the fall

During the winter, most hunters do day trips from Cantwell and Paxson which concentrates hunters near these access points. In the fall the

entire Denali Highway is open allowing hunters to more easily spread out across a variety of trails.

Once the caribou migrate east across the Richardson Highway, they become more difficult to access and may leave the hunt area altogether. This migration usually happens during the season closure or early in the winter season. Small bands of caribou sometimes overwinter in Unit 13 but not always. Waiting for the winter hunt can be a gamble; it is better to fill your tag when you know the caribou are in Unit 13.

Go out, be patient, and have fun!

~Heidi Hatcher, wildlife biologist

