



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge

*Newsletter - Spring 2005*

## Proposed Land Exchange with Doyon, Limited

Discussions regarding the proposed land exchange between the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) and Doyon, Limited have resulted in an agreement in principle. The Service has prepared an evaluation of this proposed exchange. We can send this document to interested individuals as a hard copy, or it is also available on the Refuge web site at <http://yukonflats.fws.gov/content.htm>.

In January, February, and March 2005 we conducted public meetings in all villages in the Yukon Flats, as well as in Fairbanks and Anchorage to provide information, answer questions, and listen to concerns and comments.

Meetings were conducted in Birch Creek on January 28, Beaver on February 7, Venetie on February 8, Central on February 9, Circle on February 10, Anchorage on February 22, Fairbanks on February 23, Chalkyitsik on February 28, Fort Yukon on March 1, Arctic Village on March 4, and in Stevens Village on March 28.

We received many requests to extend the public comment period. These requests came from Tribal leaders and residents of the Yukon Flats and individuals and organizations throughout the nation. We are responding to these requests by extending the comment period for an additional 120 days. The comment period will now close on July 30, 2005. If you haven't already, we encourage you to let us know what you think about the proposed land exchange.

Information about the proposed land exchange may be viewed at the web site above or obtained by contacting the Refuge office. Public comments may be submitted by e-mail to [yukonflatsrefuge@fws.gov](mailto:yukonflatsrefuge@fws.gov); by mail to Refuge Manager, Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, 101 12th Avenue, Room 264, Box 14, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701; by calling 800/531 0676 toll free; or by fax to 907/456 0447. 🐦



Bill Carter/USFWS

*One of the lakes inventoried during June 2003 in the lands proposed to be acquired by Doyon, Limited.*

## Biological Inventory Completed

A biological inventory of the Beaver Creek watershed was completed in July 2004. We examined water chemistry and estimated water depths on a number of large lakes, and conducted bird and fish surveys. The inventory was done to better describe resource values of the lands Doyon, Limited would receive in the proposed land exchange. If you would like to obtain a copy of this report, contact Refuge Wildlife Biologist Mark Bertram at 800/531 0676, or [mark\\_bertram@fws.gov](mailto:mark_bertram@fws.gov). 🐦

*Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge is pleased to bring you this newsletter. We value your feedback. If you would like to share comments or suggestions about this newsletter please call 800/531 0676 toll free, or send an e-mail to [shannon\\_nelson@fws.gov](mailto:shannon_nelson@fws.gov).*



## Fall 2004 Annual Moose Surveys in Western and Eastern Yukon Flats

25(D) West Survey – Moose surveys of areas near Stevens Village, Beaver, and Birch Creek were conducted November 8-13, 2004. The population estimate for the western Yukon Flats (2,269 square miles) was 511 moose  $\pm 25\%$  (range: 433 to 639). We estimated 41% fewer moose in 2004 compared to 1999 (862) and 25% fewer moose compared to 2001 (668). Although the numbers of bulls and calves have remained relatively stable, the number of cow moose has declined by over 50% since 1999 and by 35% since 2001. The estimated number of yearling moose also has declined since 1999. The results of the survey suggest that high mortality rates of cow and yearling moose may be limiting population growth.

25(D) East Survey – Moose surveys of areas near Fort Yukon, Chalkyitsik, Circle, and Venetie were completed by staff from the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game November 2-7, 2004. Areas near Venetie were surveyed for the first time in 2004. The moose population estimate for areas east of Fort Yukon (2,936 square miles) was 773  $\pm 17\%$  (range: 644 to 901). The 2,858 square mile Venetie survey estimated 551  $\pm 60\%$  (range: 223 to 878). The calf:cow and bull:cow ratios were relatively high in both areas, while the proportion of yearlings was relatively low, suggesting that high mortality rates for young moose are an important factor limiting population growth. In contrast to previous years, which showed a declining trend in moose numbers, the fall Fort Yukon survey indicated moose numbers were about 50% higher than in fall 2001. 🐾



A moose seen during an aerial survey of the western Yukon Flats, November 2001.

## New Sheep Study

The Refuge, in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, began a study of Dall's sheep in the White Mountains in October 2004. Researchers are collecting baseline information on sheep movements along the potential oil and gas pipeline corridor routes identified in the proposed land exchange with Doyon, Limited. Thirty-seven sheep were fitted with satellite radio collars. 🐾



Mark Bertram/USFWS

Mount Scwatka, site of the sheep capture in the White Mountains, October 2004.

## Upcoming Hen Mortality Study

The Refuge and the University of Alaska Fairbanks are cooperating on a waterfowl hen mortality study beginning this summer. Researchers will mark 60 hen shovelers, wigeon, and scaup to find out how many are successful nesters and how many die over the summer. We also hope to identify which predators take the most ducks. The study site is Long Lake, which is downstream from Beaver on the north side of the Yukon River. The study will go through the summer of 2006. 🐾

## Record 2004 Fire Season in Alaska

Of the 6.4 million acres that burned statewide in 2004, approximately one million acres were within Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. About 40 fires burned within the Refuge, the largest of which were the Winter Trail Fire, Preacher Creek Fire, Central Complex Fires, Yukon Crossing Fire, and Lower Mouth (Birch Creek) Fire. Most fires were caused by lightning. Alaska's 2004 record fire season resulted from prolonged drought conditions. Several Refuge field projects had to be cut short or canceled due to smoke and visibility problems. 🐾

## Trail and Site Easement Project

A trail and site easement project is included in the annual funding agreement between the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) and the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments (CATG). These easements were established by Section 17(b) of the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act for the public to access public land that is surrounded by Alaska Native Corporation land. As part of the annual funding agreement, CATG and Service staff have met with the villages of the Yukon Flats to share the approximate location of 17(b) easements on the Yukon Flats and explain the process to identify their exact locations. There are approximately 31 site, 30 existing trail (totaling an estimated 258 miles), and 28 proposed trail 17(b) easements identified within the boundary of Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. A team consisting of CATG, Service, and landowner representatives plan to record approximately 70-80 miles of existing trail easements using a global position system in the near future. 🐾

## Black Duck Nesting Ecology Study Completed

University of Alaska Fairbanks graduate student David Safine recently completed his third and final season of studying white-winged scoters (black ducks) on the Refuge near Birch Creek. The purpose of the study was to estimate nest survival, adult female summer survival, and duckling survival, and to better describe the areas where the hens nest. In 2004 about 36% of nests survived, 80% of females survived, and 32% of ducklings survived. Females tended to nest 200-300 feet from water. Among the many things learned from this study is that scoters are very secretive birds and they commonly nest away from water in thick brush. This is the first study of its kind in Alaska. 🐥



Ted Heuer/USFWS

*A female scoter captured during the nesting ecology study, June 2004.*

## Firearm Safety Training

Recent education and outreach feedback forms collected from residents of the Yukon Flats by Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments staff for the Refuge have one consistent message: "We would like gun safety training for our students." Based on that input, whenever invited, the Refuge is trying to offer firearm safety workshops. This can be done as part of steel shot clinics or separately on its own. Since last May, Refuge staff have held firearm safety workshops at the schools in Arctic Village, Fort Yukon, Chalkyitsik, and Venetie. To learn more contact Deputy Refuge Manager Barry Whitehill at 800/531 0676, or [barry\\_whitehill@fws.gov](mailto:barry_whitehill@fws.gov). 🐥

## Summary of the 2004 Yukon River Fish Camp Survey

The Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge Yukon River fish camp survey took place July 13-16, 2004. The survey crew included U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service employees Paul Williams, Sr., David Wiswar, and Wennona Brown. From approximately 15 miles down river of the Yukon River Bridge to Beaver, we noted 16 fish camps and one camp of a family building a cabin on a purchased allotment. We interviewed people at nine camps and also interviewed two families in Stevens Village and five families in Beaver that fished from the village. We noted whether people were fishing on the north or south bank of the Yukon; we also noted information from camps where we did not interview people if the information was easily observed from our boat (for example, a net was on the bank at a camp). We had to terminate the survey in Beaver due to increasing smoke from wildland fires that made it too dangerous to continue on the river.

To summarize the information gathered, we interviewed 17 groups regarding their fishing up through July 15. Of these, eight groups were fishing for multiple households; for a couple of groups we interviewed more than one of the fishermen (so numbers will not tally exactly). Three groups interviewed were not fishing; one camp had one group fishing and one that had not started yet. During our interviews, four groups reported that they were about 25% done, three groups reported 50% done, two groups reported 75% done, and six groups reported 100% done. Everyone we interviewed was using set nets.

People fishing below the Yukon River Bridge reported less harvest and less satisfaction with their harvest than people above the bridge. A couple of people reported catching a large number of jacks – male salmon that return a year or more early; one person reported that one third of his harvest was jacks. Most people reported that the fish were good quality and good size, but they felt the quantity was less than it was in 2003. Six people reported fish that were infected with the parasite *Ichthyophonus sp.*, but the reported numbers were low, ranging from one to five fish per report. From our observations of camp locations or interviews, we found 11 groups were fishing on the north bank of the river, and 12 were fishing on the south bank.

We plan to do a fish camp survey again in 2005, and anticipate starting the survey during the week of July 11, depending on the timing of this year's run. 🐥



Wennona Brown/USFWS

*Paul Williams, Sr. and Willie Stevens prepare fish for drying, July 2004.*

## The Alaska Federal Junior Duck Stamp Conservation and Design Program

Refuge Technician Dan Spencer has been to Fort Yukon, Chalkyitsik, Beaver, Venetie, and Circle this winter working with students to develop their art entries for the Alaska Federal Junior Duck Stamp Conservation and Design Program. The Junior Duck Stamp Program combines art and science to teach the importance of waterfowl and wetlands conservation to students throughout Alaska and the nation. Students in kindergarten through high school attending public, private or home schools in the United States and the U.S. Territories are eligible to participate in the annual Junior Duck Stamp Art Competition. Entries are judged in four grade-based categories: K-3, 4-6, 7-9, and 10-12. A total of 100 winners each year in Alaska are awarded various prizes and have their artwork shown at several different locations across the state. The annual Alaska Junior Duck Stamp Awards Ceremony is open to the public and will be held this year in Fairbanks at the Wedgewood Resort on Saturday April 30, starting at 1:00 p.m. 🦆



Paula Noel

*Elementary students at Circle School hold up their 2004 Junior Duck Stamp entries.*

## Gwich'in Gathering in Beaver

The population of Beaver more than tripled last summer when the village hosted the biennial gathering of the Gwich'in Nation. Visitors came from as far away as Old Crow, Yukon Territory, and estimates on attendance at the gathering ranged from 200+ (Gwich'in Steering Committee) to nearly 500 (Beaver Tribal Council).

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) entered into a \$7,000 cost sharing agreement with the Beaver Tribal Council. Most of this funding was used to help with the logistical expenses of getting supplies and people to Beaver. In return, the Beaver Tribal Council provided the Service with the opportunity to have an information booth directly across from the main meeting tent. Service staff from the Yukon Flats and Arctic National Wildlife Refuges and the Fairbanks Fish and Wildlife Field Office participated in the three day event, distributing informational material, conducting games and activities with the children, and attending the discussion sessions.

The opening ceremony included a welcome dance by residents of Beaver and Stevens Village and invocation by Rev. Trimble Gilbert of Arctic Village. During the days, meetings focused on topics such as the continuation of subsistence lifestyles, fish and wildlife populations, water quality in the Yukon River, and social issues. Communal potlatch meals followed cultural traditions of serving elders first. Lunch-time breaks provided opportunities for villages to feature performances of their dance groups, clad in traditional clothing. After dinner, the musicians tuned their fiddles and guitars, and participants enjoyed square dancing, two-stepping, and jigging long into the night. 🦆

## Ohtig Lake Project

Ohtig Lake, south of Chalkyitsik, is a major staging area of international significance for migrating waterfowl in the Yukon Flats region and important to people harvesting waterfowl on the Yukon Flats. This cooperative project between the Village of Chalkyitsik, Tsuk Taih School, and the Refuge is designed to study waterfowl distribution and timing on Ohtig Lake during the staging period and identify lake characteristics that define the importance of the site. In 2004 a cooperative pilot program was established at the request of the village to identify possible methods to achieve project objectives. This project may be resubmitted for funding through the Federal Tribal Wildlife Grant Program. To learn more contact Refuge Wildlife Biologist Mark Bertram at 800/531 0676, or mark\_bertram@fws.gov. 🦆

## Migratory Birds and Subsistence

The subsistence migratory bird harvest season opened in early April in Interior Alaska. The open season will close on June 15, reopen on July 16, and close on August 31. The season is closed between June 15 and July 15 to protect nesting waterfowl. Egg gathering is allowed May 1 through June 14. Hunters are reminded that they must have only non-toxic ammunition and a current, signed Federal Duck Stamp in their possession. Hunters also should have a current State of Alaska hunting license. To better understand this traditional activity, we will be conducting waterfowl harvest surveys next year. Additional information may be obtained by calling the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council toll free at 877/229 2344, or Wennona Brown, Refuge Subsistence Coordinator, toll free at 800/531 0676. 🦆



*This flying "Blue Goose" (a stylized Canada goose) was designed by renowned cartoonist and conservationist J.N. "Ding" Darling in 1935. It has become the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.*

## Porcupine River Recordable Disclaimer

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) sent comments to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) about the State's application for a Recordable Disclaimer of Interest on the Porcupine River and all of its named and unnamed interconnected sloughs. The Service stated, "The Service does not dispute the navigability of the Porcupine River for purposes of title. We agree that the lands underlying the River were not withdrawn or reserved by the United States at the time of Alaska statehood. We concur with the BLM's draft navigability report recommendation that the State's disclaimer application for beds of interconnecting sloughs of the Porcupine River not be approved. We assume the State's application for interconnecting sloughs will be 'denied' or 'rejected' in accordance with the BLM 'Recordable Disclaimers of Interest Process' directive of August 30, 2004." 🐾

## Trapping & Subsistence Cabins and Wildland Fire



Mike Vivion/USFWS

"The Yukon Flats Hilton"—one of many trapping cabins on Yukon Flats Refuge lands.

The Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge staff has issued over 30 special use permits for cabins on Refuge lands. However, some of these cabins appear to be in various levels of decay due to lack of use and maintenance. Refuge staff are in the process of identifying and evaluating the condition and level of use of all cabins on Refuge lands. You may see Refuge aircraft flying over cabins or personnel dropping in for a visit. The purpose of this inventory is to determine the appropriate level of fire protection effort needed in the event of a wildland fire threat. In the future, Refuge cabin permittees will be encouraged to be more proactive in protecting cabins from fire, such as more brush and tree thinning as specified by the Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group's *Firewise* guidelines. Last summer, Alaska Fire Service personnel were stretched to provide protection for all cabins on the Yukon Flats. In the future, fire managers need as much information as possible on existing trapping and subsistence cabins to make sound decisions in the event that fire fighting resources are limited. 🐾

## Visitor Activity

The two big game hunting guides permitted to operate on Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge reported ten clients in 2004, and a harvest of six black bears, according to Refuge Officer Gene Peltola. Two of seven permitted commercial air taxi businesses operated on the Refuge in 2004, and they reported transporting 83 recreational visitors. Over 70% of these visitors were Chena Hot Springs Resort guests enjoying an aerial tour and float plane landing on a remote lake. 🐾

## To Learn More

For more information about Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge visit the Refuge web site at <http://yukonflats.fws.gov>, call 800/531 0676 toll free, or send an e-mail to [yukonflatsrefuge@fws.gov](mailto:yukonflatsrefuge@fws.gov). To learn more about the National Wildlife Refuge System, call 800/344 9453 or visit the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service web site at <http://www.fws.gov>, or the Alaska U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service web site at <http://alaska.fws.gov>.

This newsletter may also be viewed on the Refuge web site at <http://yukonflats.fws.gov/community.htm>. 🐾

## Steel Shot Clinics in the Yukon Flats

Refuge staff, along with staff from the Alaska U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Regional Office and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game conducted waterfowl hunter steel shot clinics in Chalkyitsik and Venetie in April 2004. We had 18 participants in Chalkyitsik and 25 in Venetie. Before the shooting clinic, instructors gave a presentation on the importance of using steel shot, how lead shot poisons waterfowl, and pointers on using steel shot. At the shooting range participants could pattern their own guns to see what shot size produced the best results and practice shooting steel shot at clay targets. Steel shot clinics are planned for Beaver, Birch Creek, and Stevens Village in April and May 2005. 🐾



Barry Whitehill/USFWS

A Chalkyitsik steel shot clinic participant practices with clay targets.

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*The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.*



*An alpine forget-me-not blossoms in the White Mountains of Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge.*