



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge

Newsletter - Winter 2005

Update of Potential Land Exchange with Doyon, Limited

At the request of Doyon, residents of the Yukon Flats, and other interested individuals and groups, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) on the proposed land exchange. Although not legally required for this land exchange, the EIS will provide:

- 1) a detailed look at the potential environmental impacts of the exchange and of oil and gas development on the Yukon Flats;
- 2) a description of potential damage to the environment if the land exchange takes place;
- 3) some alternatives to the exchange;
- 4) the relationship between the short-term uses of the land and the maintenance of long-term health of the environment, and
- 5) any irreversible and irretrievable commitment of public resources resulting from the exchange and subsequent oil and gas development.

Refuge staff will visit all villages in the Yukon Flats early next year to gather input and ideas on what should be addressed in the EIS. We hope to have the EIS drafted by December 2006, at which time we will make copies available and invite public comments. After that we will have another series of meetings in the spring of 2007 before deciding to pursue or not to pursue the land exchange.

While the EIS is being prepared we will keep the public informed through newsletters, newspaper articles, and radio announcements. For more information call Refuge Manager Ted Heuer at 800/531-0676, or e-mail <yukonflatsrefuge@fws.gov>. 🐦



Corey VanStratt/USFWS

A researcher releases a newly banded duck on Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge.

Waterfowl Study Begins at Long Lake

This past summer, Refuge staff and the University of Alaska Fairbanks worked together on a new waterfowl research project near Long Lake, just north of Marten Island. The purpose of the study is to find out how many nesting female ducks live through the breeding season. We also want to know how many hens successfully nest and raise ducklings. This information will help us understand why the number of ducks changes each year. The project is focused on American Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, and Lesser Scaup, which are found in great numbers on the Yukon Flats in the summer.

The research team banded about 300 ducks, and put radio transmitters on 57 female birds. These markers allow biologists to track the hens and find out their success at nesting. They also give information on the causes of death for the ducks. Leg bands remain on ducks for life while transmitters fall off within a few months. If you take a banded bird during hunting season (it's OK, these are legal to shoot) please call 800/327-BAND to report the number to the Bird Banding Laboratory. You may keep the band. This will help all of us learn more about the ducks that nest on the Yukon Flats. 🐦

Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge is pleased to bring you this newsletter. We value your feedback. If you have comments or suggestions about this newsletter please call Education Specialist Shannon Nelson at 800/531-0676 toll free, or e-mail <shannon_nelson@fws.gov>.



In My Words - by Paul Williams, Sr.



Barry Whitehill/USFWS

Paul Williams, Sr. checking on the condition of salmon in his smokehouse.

My name is Paul Williams, Sr. I live in Beaver and I've been employed with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service as a Refuge Information Technician for the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge for the past ten years. I have been wanting to share this information with you the people of the Yukon Flats for some time now. I know in the past that my people had bad experiences with state and federal wildlife agencies, back in the days when we would be called poachers and game law breakers. We subsisted off the land and had language and cultural differences that clashed a lot of times, and we would end up in jail as a result. Because of this long history of misunderstanding our people had bad feelings toward the game managers. I just want to say this so everyone understands we lived off this country for thousands of years and have established game laws to preserve what we have.

This has changed for the better, and now we have a major role in working with these agencies to make regulations that are more suitable to the way we have always lived. Now that we can speak and understand English, we have the opportunity to be involved with the decisions being made in regards to our natural resources. The whole attitude of the state and federal management people has changed as a result of our leadership effort to make government understand that we are here to stay and we have at our disposal through the elders a vast source of historical information that could be of benefit to modern people. When the Europeans arrived on this land this country was pristine and clean and through careful management we, the aboriginal inhabitants, have kept it clean as intended by the Creator, even though we had to hunt hard to live.

At present, I sincerely believe we could work together through management agreements with other resource managers since we are in the same business of managing and protecting fish and game. Although we have submitted proposals for federal tribal fish and wildlife grants in the past years to start our own management of natural resources, the requests were never funded. We must not give up our efforts to build our capacity to involve ourselves in this area if we are to co-manage. It is more important than ever that we manage our resources and increase the abundance of moose and other animals so we can have a more reliable supply of traditional food, especially with the cost of fuel going up. I believe one part of this that is important is that we need to voluntarily follow the laws like protecting cow moose as much as we can, and also try to take bears and wolves to help the moose numbers come up. Then we would not have to travel so far to get food and spend so much for gas. This is something many people in our community recognized when we put together the Yukon Flats Moose Management Plan. The Yukon Flats can support a lot more animals than we have now, and our people will benefit if we work with state and federal governments to increase the number of moose and other animals we have traditionally used. 🐾

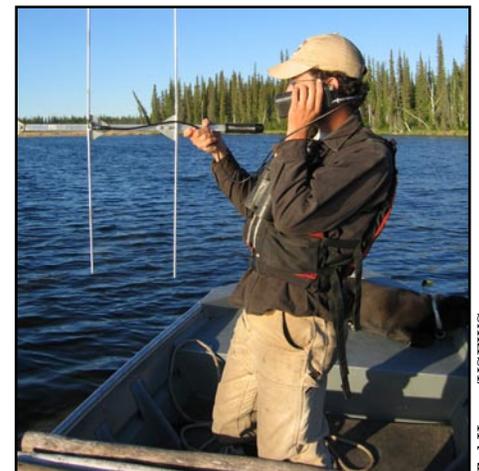
Learning More About Birds

Three research projects were recently completed on the Yukon Flats. Brief descriptions of these studies appear below, and full project reports are available on the web at: <http://alaska.fws.gov/nwr/yukonflats/bioprojects.htm>.

Timing of Breeding and Reproductive Success in a Subarctic Population of Yellow Warblers, 1997-2000. Graduate Student Kristine Sowl tracked the activities of over 200 Yellow Warbler pairs during her study. On average, Yellow Warblers hatched one brood each year and successfully reared one to two chicks.

Lesser Scaup Breeding Ecology on Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska, 2001-2003. Graduate student Robin Corcoran monitored 177 scaup nests and found that 12% of nests survived to the end of the summer season. In comparison, scaup nest success in other northern forests averaged 57%. A decrease in some critical scaup foods was noted when compared to similar food collections on the Yukon Flats from the mid-1980s.

Breeding Ecology of White-winged Scoters (black ducks) on Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, 2002-2004. Because scoters are experiencing a national decline and are an important food for local residents on the Yukon Flats, the Refuge is interested in learning more about scoters. Graduate Student David Safine located nest sites and monitored scoter young for two summers on "Scoter Lake," about 12 miles west of the village of Birch Creek. The findings indicate that scoters in this region have lower nest survival but higher duckling survival than other scoter nesting areas in Canada. 🦆



Ted Heuer/USFWS

Graduate student David Safine radio-tracks black ducks on "Scoter Lake."

Why the Service Purchases Allotments

From 1997 through September 2005, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) has purchased 18 Native allotments totaling 2,160 acres within the boundaries of the Refuge.

Refuge staff have heard concerns from local residents about Alaska Native lands going out of Native ownership, and some have asked, "Why does the Service buy these?"

One of the main goals of the Refuge is to provide long-term protection for valuable fish and wildlife habitat. We buy land that contains good quality wildlife habitat to protect those for wildlife, and for present and future generations of Americans. We do not buy land with the intent of building public use cabins or developing the land in any way.

The Service only buys land from people who have expressed interest in selling. We do not offer to purchase land unless the owner first asks the Service to buy their property, nor do we have funding available to purchase all lands that are offered for sale.

We only buy Alaska Native allotments that are surrounded or bordered by Refuge lands. We are not interested in buying allotments that would become federal inholdings within Doyon, village corporation, or tribal lands.

Under federal ownership, local rural residents, which often include the seller(s) of an allotment, can continue to use the purchased land for hunting, fishing, trapping, and other subsistence activities. The main difference is that under federal ownership these become public lands (like other Refuge land) and no one has exclusive use or access. Also, subsistence activities on federally-purchased lands are governed by federal subsistence regulations rather than state regulations that govern activities on private lands.

If you have questions about the sale and purchase of allotments within the Refuge, please call Refuge Manager Ted Heuer at 800/531-0676 or Steve Shuck in our Regional Realty Office in Anchorage at 907/786-3426. 🐦

2005 Yukon River Fish Camp Survey

The Refuge staff conducted an in-season Yukon River fish camp and salmon survey again this year. Survey crew members were Refuge Information Technician Paul Williams, Sr., Refuge Subsistence Coordinator Wennona Brown, and Fairbanks Fish and Wildlife Field Office Fisheries Biologist Gerald Maschmann. This year we traveled about 300 miles on the Yukon River. We began the survey on July 11, starting at the Dalton Highway Bridge, and traveled down river about 40 miles, before turning upstream, ending about 15 miles above Circle on July 16. Along the way we stopped and visited with fishermen in camps and villages to learn more about fishing activity along the river and how the fish were running. On July 17 we returned to Fort Yukon and interviewed additional fishermen for two days, completing our survey on July 18, 2005.

This year we interviewed a total of 56 people. Eleven people were not fishing this year, 21 were in fish camps, 23 were fishing from their village, and one fished from the village then moved to camp. Of the people who were fishing, 28 were using set nets alone, 12 were using fish wheels alone, and 5 were using both. Also of the people who were fishing, 28 were fishing for single families, and 17 were fishing for multiple families. Most people started fishing between June 30 and July 5, but a few had started as late as July 12. At the time of the interview, seven people said they had 10% or less of the fish they needed; seven had 25%, 13 had 50%, five had 75%, 11 had 90-100% of what they needed, and two did not respond. Twenty-three people talked about whether they had seen any sick fish. Of these, nine had seen no sick fish and 14 had caught one or more sick fish.

Comparing the amount of time and effort to meet subsistence fish needs this year to last year, 41% of the people interviewed this year said the fishing was poorer and they were spending more time fishing; 9% said it was the same, 4% said they were spending less time fishing and 7% said the fishing was better. The rest of the people did not respond to the question. When asked about fish size, 36% said nothing about size; 30% said fish were small, 9% said the fish were medium size, and only 2% claimed the fish were large. The remaining 23% of people interviewed said fish were either "good size" or gave an estimated weight ranging from 18 to 25 pounds. Overall, the people we interviewed felt that the fish were good quality this year but most felt that fishing was poorer because the fish were small.

We appreciate the willingness of village fishermen to discuss their fishing experience with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service staff during this summer's survey. Information gathered provides valuable insights to fisheries managers on the condition and timing of the salmon run that will help sustain this important resource into the future. To learn more about the 2005 Yukon River fish camp survey, please contact Refuge Subsistence Coordinator Wennona Brown at 800/531-0676 or <wennona_brown@fws.gov>. 🐦



Circle resident Larry Nathaniel talks with Service staff during the fish camp survey.

Alaska's Third Largest Fire Season



Alaska Fire Service

Suppression efforts successfully protected Fort Yukon during the 2005 Sheenjek fire.

About 4.6 million acres burned statewide in 2005, making it Alaska's third largest recorded fire season. In 2005, 17 fires totaling about half a million acres burned on the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. The largest fires were the Salmon Fork fire, the Nelson Mountain fire, the Sheenjek River fire, and the Hodzana River fire. Most were caused by lightning. The Sheenjek River fire burned near Fort Yukon in June. This fire was held from moving farther south, toward Fort Yukon, by fire crews from all over Alaska. The rest of the fires were backcountry fires in limited suppression zones, and were monitored.

Alaska's 2005 fire season resulted from a second consecutive year of very dry conditions. Most of the fires started in mid-June. Fire is a natural event on the Refuge, and the fire return interval (how often a given area will burn) is estimated to be between 70 and 150 years on the Yukon Flats. All lands within the Refuge are classified into critical, full, modified, or limited suppression categories called zones. Fires in critical or full zones, near villages or on lands with economic values, are immediately acted upon. Fires in modified zones are generally put out until about July 15th. Late summer fires in modified zones and those in limited zones are monitored, with site protection of cabins and allotments. Before 1984, the statewide policy of attacking all fires was never fully successful and was also very expensive. This policy also may have postponed bigger fires because it led to the buildup of fire fuels. It also denied ecological benefits of fire, such as improving wildlife habitat. After 1984, fires in limited suppression zones caused by lightning were allowed to burn in order to improve habitat for plants and animals. If you have questions about how fires are managed on the Refuge, please call Refuge Fire Management Officer Sam Patten at 800/531-0676 toll free, or e-mail <sam_patten@fws.gov>. 🐦

Annual Funding Agreement with CATG

In 2006, as in 2005, the Refuge staff and the Natural Resource Office of the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments (CATG) will be working together on a number of cooperative projects. This is a continuation of the first annual funding agreement that was signed by CATG and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in April 2004. During 2006, CATG will again be assisting Refuge staff with environmental education projects; helping locate and mark public access easements within the Refuge boundary; providing maintenance and upkeep of Refuge equipment and facilities in Fort Yukon; conducting subsistence harvest surveys; and conducting a moose survey (in cooperation with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game) in the eastern half of the Refuge. One of the products developed cooperatively by CATG and Refuge staff during 2005 was an English/Gwich'in guide to waterfowl of the Yukon Flats. Copies of this brochure are available from the CATG Natural Resource Office or the Refuge Office. 🐦

Hunting for BAER

BAER is not the large black or brown animal familiar to many on the Yukon Flats. BAER means Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation and refers to the emergency repair of burned areas and the damage caused by wildfires. BAER work only occurs where necessary and is done under very strict conditions. During the Alaska record fire year of 2004, over a million acres burned on the Yukon Flats. Several BAER projects resulting from these fires were worked on this year, including tree removal from trails, looking at the severity of burns, checking to see if invasive plants were moving into areas disturbed by fire suppression activities, and inspecting damage to potential historic sites. This and other BAER work may continue in 2006, given that the 2005 fire season was the third largest ever recorded in Alaska. 🐦

Refuge Pilot Mike Vivion Retires



Mark Bertram/USFWS

Refuge Pilot and Wildlife Biologist Mike Vivion holding baby black bears.

After more than 39 years of government service, including almost 20 years as a Pilot and Wildlife Biologist for the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, Mike Vivion has accepted a position teaching natural resource aviation at the University of Minnesota, Crookston. A skilled pilot, Mike recently received recognition from the Department of the Interior for 25 years of accident-free flying. While performing wildlife surveys and supporting other Refuge projects, Mike has flown more than 7,000 hours over the Yukon Flats. In addition to flying, Mike has helped oversee biological studies of bears, moose, and waterfowl on the Yukon Flats. Mike's last day with the Refuge is December 2, 2005. The staff wishes Mike all the best! 🐦

Frank Yasuda and the Caro Trail

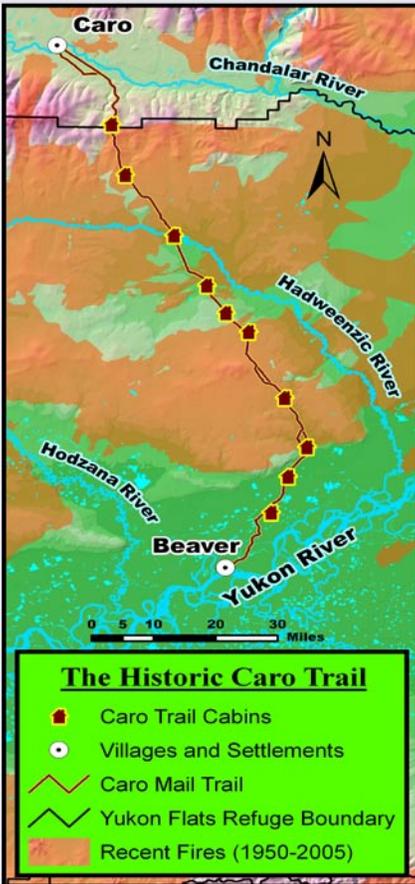
Frank Yasuda, “the Japanese Moses,” is regarded as the founder of the village of Beaver, Alaska, which is located on the north bank of the Yukon River between Fort Yukon and Stevens Village. He also played a major role in the Chandalar region gold rush era and in the establishment of the historic Caro Trail.

According to various books and newspaper articles, Frank Yasuda was born Kyosuke Yasuda in 1868 in Japan. As a teenager, he became a sailor for the Mitsubishi shipping company, and in 1887 he landed in San Francisco where he got a job as a cabin boy on the U.S. Cutter “Bear” sailing to Alaska. The ship was on patrol for illegal seal and whale hunting. Frank became a weather observer and a purser on the ship. On one trip in 1893 the “Bear” got stuck in the sea ice north of Barrow. Frank volunteered to walk ashore across the ice and his actions helped save the ship. He decided to stay in Barrow where he became a trader and married Nevelo, a local Inupiaq woman. He expanded his business by leading trade expeditions along the Arctic coast. In 1905 Frank started prospecting for gold in the Brooks Range and in 1907 his wife Nevelo discovered gold in the upper Chandalar region south of the Brooks Range near Caro. This led to a gold rush in the Chandalar region, and later to the founding of Beaver.

The Caro gold rush area on the Chandalar River lies 90 miles north of the Yukon River. The closest point steamboats could supply Caro was from a point due south, on the north side of the Yukon River. Frank Yasuda led a dozen families of North Slope Inupiaq on an epic journey 800 miles on foot southward across the Brooks Range to establish a supply point for the Caro gold fields. It took two years to reach the Yukon River, the nearest riverboat supply line. Frank arrived in 1911 and his house was the first building built in Beaver. For several years Beaver, named for the abundance of these animals in the area, served as the supply point for the Caro gold fields.

At the time, the U.S. Government was very interested in supporting Alaska gold mining. The Alaska Road Commission was formed in 1906 and one of its first projects was to support a trail from the Yukon River to the Chandalar gold fields. Construction began on the Caro Trail, also referred to as the Caro Mail Trail or “Government Road,” in 1911. Interestingly, this was not to be a dog sled trail, but a horse road. A number of cabins with horse corrals were built. These cabins were spaced one day’s travel apart. The 75 mile road was not used during the summer, but was used when conditions dried out during the fall and after freeze up. This road was in service through the 1920s, but during the depression of the 1930s gold mining ceased in the Chandalar district.

Some of the cabins are identified on U.S. Geological Survey maps of the 1950s. Since then, fires have burned in the area north of Beaver. Refuge staff conducted aerial surveys along the Caro Trail in the summer of 2005 and only two of the old cabins were located on Refuge lands: the 41 Mile Cabin, and the 56 Mile Cabin. The other cabins are presumed burned. The 41 Mile Cabin was disassembled some years ago, but the cabin logs are still there. The roof of the 56 Mile Cabin has collapsed, and the wall logs have decayed. Like many other Japanese Americans, Frank Yasuda was sent to an internment camp during World War II. He returned to Alaska after the war and spent the rest of his life in Beaver as a banker, shopkeeper, advisor and entrepreneur. He died in 1958 and is buried in Beaver. 🐾



The 56 Mile Caro Trail Cabin today.

Barry Whitehill/USFWS



To learn more about the Refuge visit our web site at <http://yukonflats.fws.gov/>, call 800/531-0676, or e-mail yukonflats@fws.gov. This newsletter may also be viewed at <http://yukonflats.fws.gov/community.htm>.

Willows of Interior Alaska Guidebook

Willows of Interior Alaska



Dominique M. Collet

Have you ever wondered what kind of willows grow on the Yukon Flats? There are many different kinds of willows and they are important plants for a variety of animals including moose, songbirds, insects, and snowshoe hares. These animals use willows for food, cover, and nesting habitat. The Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, with the help of other federal and state partners, developed and printed the *Willows of Interior Alaska* plant guide. The guide, written by Dominique Collet, is informative and beautifully illustrated, and includes identification descriptions for both summer and winter willows. If you would like a free copy of this plant guide, call Refuge Wildlife Biologist Delia Vargas Kretsinger at 800/531-0676 toll free, or e-mail delia_vargas_kretsinger@fws.gov. 🐾

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Lowbush cranberries, or “Natt’at” in Gwich’in, are usually picked in the early fall after the first frost. While most often harvested for food, lowbush cranberries are also used as a natural dye and to treat certain ailments.



Forming jewel-encrusted carpets, lowbush cranberry and bearberry are common across Alaska.