



Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge

Newsletter - Winter 2006/2007

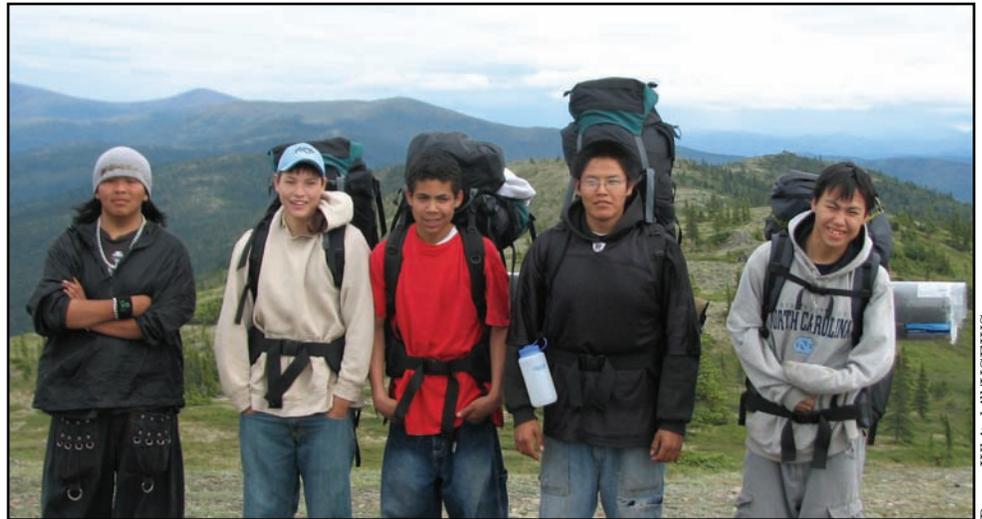
Bird Flu Update

Refuge staff captured, banded, and released 449 ducks on the Yukon Flats during summer 2006. Samples collected from the captured ducks were tested for H5N1, the avian influenza virus that causes bird flu. None of these ducks tested positive for H5N1. In fact, more than 26,000 birds were tested nationwide last summer (more than 17,000 in Alaska alone) and the highly pathogenic strain of H5N1 avian influenza has not yet been found in North America.

However, this doesn't mean we should let our guard down. There is still concern that H5N1 will reach North America, and that it could eventually mutate into a form that passes easily from person to person. So, if you're going to be hunting or handling birds this spring, the National Wildlife Health Center recommends that you follow these guidelines:

- Do not handle or eat sick birds.
- Wear rubber or latex gloves while handling and cleaning birds.
- Wash hands with soap and water, or with alcohol-based hand products if your hands are not visibly soiled.
- Disinfect tools, gloves, and thoroughly clean knives, equipment, and surfaces that come in contact with birds.
- Do not eat, drink, or smoke while handling birds.
- Place uncooked meat in a plastic bag or container for transport.
- Cooking all meat to above 165° F kills the virus.

Plans are underway for another nationwide interagency monitoring effort this coming summer. For more information go to <http://alaska.fws.gov/media/avian_influenza/>, <www.avianflu.alaska.gov>, or <www.pandemicflu.gov>. 🐦



Barry Whitehill/USFWS

Earth Work Quest participants Peter Tritt, Wesley James, Karlas Norman, Brian John, and Albert Gilbert, Jr. backpacking to Chena Hot Springs Resort.

Proposed Land Exchange Update

Refuge staff continue to work with our Regional Office in Anchorage and ENSR, an environmental consulting firm, to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) on the proposed land exchange with Doyon, Limited. Discussions between the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) and Doyon, Limited about a potential land exchange extend back to 1993, when Doyon, Limited approached the Service about their interest in exploring for oil and gas in the Yukon Flats. The EIS process is the result of recent discussions and will serve as a tool that allows the public, tribal governments, and others to provide input and influence the final decision. We plan to have the draft EIS ready for public review in fall 2007. Once the draft is published, there will be a formal public comment period and a series of public hearings. The Service will not make a final decision on whether or not to proceed with the exchange until we have considered all comments.

To help ensure better communications with tribal governments on this issue, the Service has invited tribal leaders within the Yukon Flats to identify formal or informal contacts for the tribe. We encourage all tribes to share their thoughts, concerns, questions, or positions with us. A government-to-government consultation meeting was held with the Gwichyaa Zhee Gwich'in Tribal Council on October 17, 2006. For more information contact Refuge Manager Ted Heuer at 800/531-0676 or EIS Project Coordinator Cyndie Wolfe at 907/786-3463. For more information go to <<http://yukonflatseis.ensr.com>>. 🐦

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 contact Wildlife Refuge Specialist Nicole Gustine at 800/531-0676 or <nicole_gustine@fws.gov>.



In My Words - by Paul Williams, Sr.

It's widely accepted that moose numbers are low in the Yukon Flats, and that we want to increase moose numbers. There are other factors to consider too, like the health of the herd, food abundance, predation, hunting pressure and the traditional harvest of cow moose for funeral potlucks. We also have to consider that today, it is easier to harvest moose than it was in the early days when we had to hunt on snowshoes, because today we have hi-powered Ski-Doos.

Because we have a concern about the low moose population, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) initiated meetings in villages within the Yukon Flats. In these village meetings we developed ideas through public participation. We came up with a lot of good ideas and other suggestions that are good, but some are against current regulations. We also have to deal with different patterns of land ownership.

In recent years we found the Federal Tribal Wildlife Grant Program was available for wildlife management on tribal lands. The Beaver Village Council applied for this grant with a proposal to increase moose in the Beaver area by focusing on legally reducing predator numbers. The grant was funded this year, and it will start with meetings with the trappers to increase the harvest of predators with the help of experienced trappers and hunters from different areas. There will also be seminars to teach hunters about the results of taking moose out of season, particularly cow and calf moose.

This grant to increase moose in the Beaver area is for a two-year period and will start a wildlife management program by building technical and grant management skills of the Beaver Village Council, who could then assist other nearby villages. The ADF&G, the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments, and the Service will be involved with the implementation of this grant to insure the goals and objectives are met. If you would like more information, call me at 907/628-6213. 🐾

Paul Williams, Sr. is a resident of Beaver and is employed as an Interpreter for the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge.

Waterfowl Harvest Surveys

Refuge Interpreter Paul Williams, Sr. and former Operations Specialist Jetta Minerva conducted waterfowl harvest surveys in Arctic Village, Beaver, Central, Chalkyitsik, Circle, Fort Yukon, and Venetie during 2006. The purpose was to record how many birds and eggs are taken for subsistence use. This information helps the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council (Council) cooperatively manage the Alaska subsistence spring/summer migratory bird harvest. Participating in the survey helps document the importance of migratory birds to the subsistence way of life.

From June 20-27 more than 200 households were visited to complete the spring questionnaires. Villages and households were revisited from October 6-12 to complete the summer/fall questionnaires. The survey data will be forwarded to the Council for analysis. No names appear on the survey forms. The results will be available once the data have been reviewed and approved by the Council. Thank you to everyone who participated in the surveys. 🐾

Learning About "Big Lake"

In 2006, three students from the Tsuk Taih School in Chalkyitsik worked with Refuge Biologists to learn more about "Big Lake" just south of the village. "Big Lake" (Ohtig Lake) is a major feeding area for migrating ducks in northern Alaska. Rebecca Druck, Logan Fields, and Clifton Jonas, Jr. assisted with the work. These students inventoried the lake for the presence of fish, measured water depths, collected insects, and counted ducks.

From August 8-10 the students observed more than 6,000 ducks daily including black ducks (white-winged scoters), canvasbacks, common goldeneyes, and northern shovelers. Water depths ranged from four to seven feet and no fish were found. The lake was teeming with insects which explains why so many ducks are attracted to this particular lake in the fall to feed as they fly south. We appreciate the cooperation and support of Chalkyitsik residents Chief Paul Edwin, William Salmon, and Jeff Wright. The project was funded by a Challenge Cost Share Grant between the Refuge and the Chalkyitsik Traditional Council. 🐾

Beaver Creek Water Quality Study



Biologist Keith Mueller from the Fairbanks Fish and Wildlife Field Office collecting data from lower Beaver Creek.

In response to potential oil and gas development in the southern Yukon Flats, three water meters were installed on Beaver Creek to gather baseline information on water quality. Each meter measured temperature, acidity, conductivity, turbidity, and dissolved oxygen in the water each hour. A meter was installed at the confluence of Victoria Creek to represent waters least likely to be affected by future development. Two meters were placed approximately 16 and 90 miles downstream to measure waters most likely to be affected by development. Collectively, all three meters recorded over 25,000 measurements from June-September 2006. Long-term monitoring will be necessary to document any changes that might affect water quality in the drainage. 🐾

Working Together on Kiosk in Circle



Sheila Dufford/USFWS

Refuge Assistant Manager Jimmy Fox, Albert Carroll, Jr. and Interpreter Paul Williams, Sr. (left to right).

Refuge staff partnered with the village of Circle and National Park Service staff from Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve to complete an information kiosk near the Yukon River boat ramp in Circle. The Refuge provided pre-cut materials and plans which the Park Service delivered to Circle. A village carpentry class assembled the materials and erected the kiosk in summer 2006.

The panels and posters were developed by Refuge staff to convey important information on hunting, fishing, camping, boating, and exploring the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve and the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. The kiosk also includes a poster discussing problems and issues related to shooting lead shot during waterfowl hunting, and the benefits to wildlife and the environment from using steel shot instead.

Former First Chief of Circle, Albert Carroll, Jr. was pleased to see the project completed, and is proud of the working relationship this project inspired between the village and the two agencies. 🐾

Beaver Village Prescribed Fires

The Beaver village emergency firefighter (EFF) crew, the Bureau of Land management Alaska Fire Service, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service staff successfully conducted three prescribed fire burns of grassy lake beds north of the village airport runway in May 2006. Approximately 100 acres were burned. The burns were coordinated with the Beaver Village Council, the local Beaver village EFF crew and the National Weather Service. Also, local residents assisted in developing a Community Wildland Fire Protection Plan. 🐾

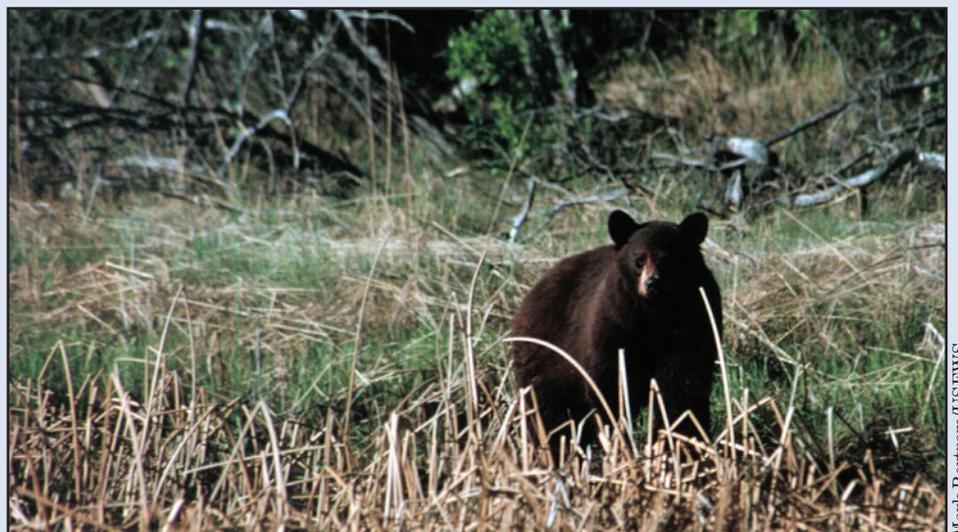
Moose, Bears, Wolves, and People on the Yukon Flats

Moose are an important resource to people living on the Yukon Flats. Staff from the Refuge, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and more recently the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments (CATG) have been studying moose, bear, and wolf populations and their habitats on the Yukon Flats for nearly 25 years. So what do we know? The moose population is currently three moose for every 10 square miles, which is considered low compared to some other places in interior Alaska. Recent surveys indicate the population in the eastern Yukon Flats is slightly higher and possibly increasing compared to areas in the west. However, the overall moose population across the whole of the Yukon Flats has changed little. The number of wolves is also low compared to other areas in interior Alaska with about one wolf for every 85 square miles, or one wolf for every 19 moose. We do not have good methods to estimate bears, but based on observations and reports from hunters, black and grizzly bear sightings are common throughout the Yukon Flats.

Harvest information is improving thanks to the surveys being conducted by CATG. Local residents report taking at least 150 moose annually and 9 to 23 percent of this harvest is cow moose. Wolf harvest has remained steady (45 annually), and the bear harvest has doubled in the past two years (176 total bears were harvested in 2005). We do not know where moose and bears are being harvested or the sex and age of the bears being taken. While we do not know how many moose the habitat can support, we do think the moose habitat is good and likely under-used because many moose give birth to twins and the body size of cows and calves is large.

So, what limits the growth of the Yukon Flats moose population? We think it is a combination of predators: bears, wolves and people. A study of moose calves showed that 20 percent survive their first year and 84 percent of calves that died were killed by black and grizzly bears. We also learned that cow moose have a high annual survival rate of 88 percent. Wolves may have an impact on adult moose during the winter but we have not conducted a study to measure the impact. About one in five moose harvested on the Yukon Flats are cow moose. This is significant when you consider that most cows on the Yukon Flats are healthy, have the ability to produce twins, and have a high annual survival rate. Did you know that over the course of 14 years a cow on the Yukon Flats could produce at least 14 offspring and her offspring would be responsible for giving birth to another 36 calves? That means that every cow harvested, 50 potential new moose are being removed from the population.

Are you wondering what can be done to help the moose population grow? Hunters should continue to harvest bears and wolves, only harvest bull moose, decrease or eliminate cow harvest, and continue to accurately report wildlife harvests. For more information contact Wildlife Biologist Mark Bertram at 800/531-0676 or <mark_bertram@fws.gov>. 🐾



A black bear looks out from a marsh in the Yukon Flats.

Mark Bertram/USFWS

Fall Moose Hunting Report

Refuge staff wish to better understand moose harvest on the Yukon Flats and how it affects the population. Reports from Fort Yukon residents indicate many sport and subsistence hunters come through the village during the fall moose hunting season. In an effort to assess moose harvest effort and success, Refuge Officers Mike Hinkes, Heather Knudsen, and Allen Miller monitored Fort Yukon airport and boat ramps as well as several traditional hunting areas by Refuge aircraft, including the following creeks and rivers: Beaver, Birch, Black, Chandalar, Colleen, Dall, Little Black, Porcupine, Sheenjek and the Yukon.

Based on this work, Service Officers concluded that fewer than 12 local residents and no non-residents were moose hunting from September 18-21, 2006 in Game Management Unit 25(D) East and West, and no moose harvests were reported during that time. Refuge Officers will monitor moose hunting efforts in Fort Yukon during the fall 2007 hunting season to better manage this important resource.

In addition to gathering information about moose harvest, the reduction of illegal cow moose harvests has become the highest priority for Refuge law enforcement priority. In the Yukon Flats Cooperative Moose Management Plan that was developed in 2002, village residents recognized that the harvest of cow moose has to stop for the population to have a chance to increase. Because the illegal take of cow moose is so harmful, a conviction can result in significant fines, loss of hunting privileges and confiscation of firearms, vehicles, and any equipment used in the illegal harvest.

Other priorities include stopping ineligible hunter from participating in subsistence hunts and enforcing harvest reporting. Accurate harvest information is important to making good management decisions. To learn more about moose hunting season or how to obtain a valid hunting license contact Refuge Officer Mike Hinkes at 800/531-0676. 🐾



Refuge Officers Mike Hinkes, Allen Miller, and Heather Knudsen during a law enforcement patrol near Fort Yukon (left to right).

Yukon River Fish Camp Surveys



Mary Beth Solomon cutting a salmon.

Refuge staff conducted fish camp surveys along the Yukon River from July 21-28, 2006. Refuge Subsistence Coordinator Wennona Brown, Interpreter Paul Williams, Sr., Assistant Manager Jimmy Fox, and Technician Katie Mohrmann of the Fairbanks Fish and Wildlife Field Office visited with 48 subsistence users during the survey. Early results from the information showed fishing success varied widely by area. Of those interviewed, 35 percent (mostly near Beaver and Fort Yukon) had all the fish they needed while 19 percent of people fishing reported meeting 10 percent or less of their needs, and 15 percent met 75 percent of their needs (mostly near Stevens Village and Circle). Most people reported Chinook salmon as small to medium but fish quality was good. Few people fishing reported catching any fish showing signs of disease. We appreciate the information provided by everyone we visited. 🐾

New Cabin Protection Policy

On October 1, 2006 the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) revised its cabin protection policy. The Service no longer guarantees protection of structures or their contents in the event of a wildland fire. Existing cabin permit holders will be authorized to establish defensible space around their structures using FireWise standards. The Refuge Manager may issue new permits without authorizing FireWise standards due to other resource concerns. Any cabin known to be occupied will receive fire protection consistent with firefighter safety. For more information contact Refuge Manager Ted Heuer at 800/531-0676. 🐾



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 be viewed at <http://yukonflats.fws.gov/community.htm>.

Old Fuel Drums Removed



Jimmy Fox/USFWS

A few of the abandoned fuel drums that were found near Beaver Creek.

In 1999, staff from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service discovered 18 abandoned fuel drums on the Refuge approximately 22 miles southwest of the village of Birch Creek. The drums were not leaking and the ownership of the drums was unknown.

Assistant Refuge Manager Jimmy Fox, members of the Alaska Fire Service, and ANCOR, a contractor from Anchorage, worked together to characterize drum contents, take soil samples, and remove all materials from the site. The assessment revealed that a few of the drums contained diesel, unleaded, or jet fuel, but most were empty. Soil sample test results fortunately showed that no ground contamination had occurred. The drums and liquid were transported to Fairbanks for proper recycling and disposal. 🐦

Earth Work Quest Internship Program

The Earth Work Quest Internship Program was created in 2006 with the help of a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) Challenge Cost Share Grant. A host of organizations were involved, ranging from agencies like the Alaska Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys, the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments, the National Park Service, and the Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC).

All of these groups worked together to help fulfill the mission of the Earth Work Quest Internship Program which is to:

- Inspire student interest in a natural resource careers
- Build a natural resource workforce from northern Alaska rural communities
- Bridge the gap between rural communities and natural resource professionals

Students applied for an Earth Work Quest internship by submitting applications to TCC. At the end of April, a selection team interviewed candidates to find possible fits between students and identified internships. Internships came in many forms. Some were paid internships through TCC if they were a student from a TCC-supported village and met income qualifications. Other internships were paid through federal programs like the Youth Conservation Corps or the Student Temporary Experience Program. Finally, some were purely volunteer experiences that provided the students a small daily stipend.

The Service provided funds to support interns for various projects. A total of 12 students from the communities of Arctic Village, Eagle, Fairbanks, Fort Yukon, Nome, and Stevens Village participated in the Earth Work Quest Program. Their internship experiences included banding birds, building trails, collecting salmon DNA samples, working with field geologists, working with computers, monitoring peregrine falcon nest sites, and staffing visitor centers.

The individual internship experiences ended with a gathering of the interns from July 31-August 4. It was based out of the Chena River State Recreation Area, some 30 miles from Fairbanks. Presenters included elders, representatives from various government agencies, and the University of Alaska Fairbanks Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program. The interns also engaged in team building activities and took part in a challenging eight-mile overnight backpacking trip. The final event was an evening banquet at Chena Hot Springs Resort where interns gave a presentation on their individual internship experience and interacted with assembled natural resource professionals. For more information contact Deputy Refuge Manager Barry Whitehill at 800/531-0676 or <barry_whitehill@fws.gov>. 🐦

Two Gwich'in/ English Bird Guides Now Available



Staff from the Refuge and the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments (CATG) worked together to complete "A Guide to Common Birds of the Yukon Flats." The colorful six-page guide includes detailed illustrations of birds common to the Yukon Flats along with their names in both the Gwich'in Athabaskan and English languages. The 18 species of commonly seen birds featured in this publication include songbirds, raptors, upland game birds, and the sandhill crane. The guide can also be unfolded and used as a poster.

Education Specialist Shannon Nelson and CATG Education Coordinator Joy Shockley co-coordinated the project. Park Ranger Joanne Ahlfs from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge helped provide many of the Gwich'in translations. The project was funded by a Challenge Cost Share Grant and is the second bilingual bird guide of its kind. In 2005, staff from the Refuge and CATG produced the Gwich'in/English "A Guide to Waterfowl of the Yukon Flats." The birds in each guide are considered culturally significant to the region, biologically significant, or both.

To request copies of either guide or for a school or community visit contact Education Specialist Shannon Nelson at 800/531-0676 or <shannon_nelson@fws.gov>. 🐦

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The wood frog or “Neeghahii” in Gwich’in, is one of only two frogs found in Alaska and the only one found in the Interior. During the winter, wood frogs hibernate in the dead and decaying material, known as duff on the forest floor.



Wood frogs are common in wetlands throughout the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge.