



# Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge

*Newsletter - Winter 2007/2008*

## New Refuge Manager

Refuge staff recently welcomed Rob Jess as the new Manager of the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. Rob is filling Ted Heuer's former position. He graduated from Utah State University in 1993 with a Bachelor of Science in wildlife management with an emphasis on big game animals.

Rob comes to Alaska from J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge in Sanibel, Florida. He previously worked for Refuges in Montana, South Carolina, Utah, and Wyoming as well as the Southeast Regional Office in Atlanta, Georgia.

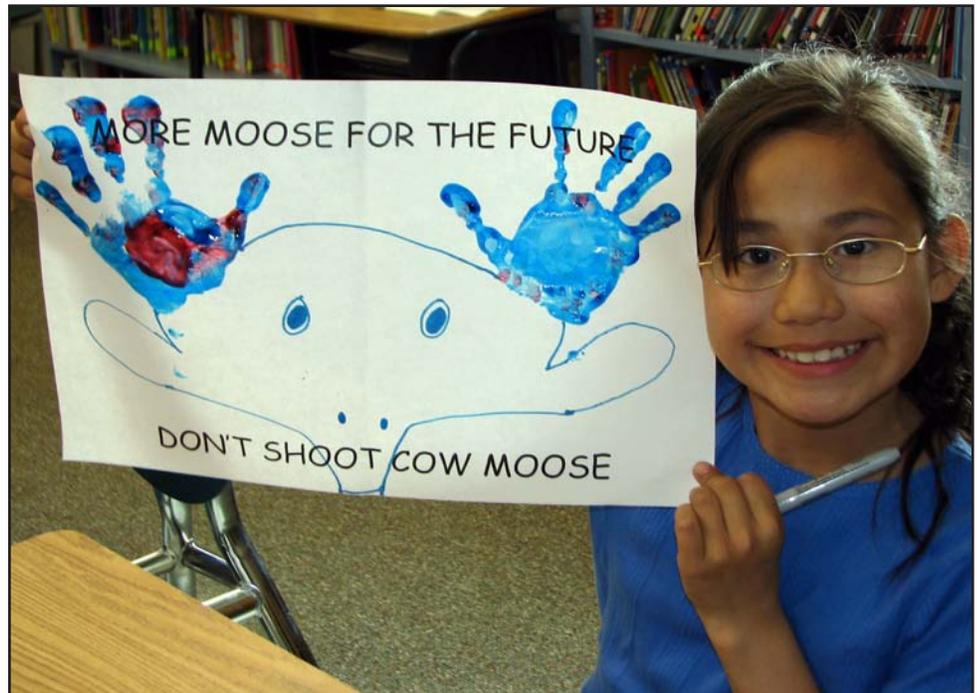
Rob was born on Cherokee lands in Oklahoma. He has moved many times in his life because his father was in the army and he shares an adventurous spirit with his wife, Liz.

Rob, Liz, and three of their five children are looking forward to experiencing all that Alaska has to offer. If you would like to discuss concerns or simply welcome Rob contact him at 800/531-0676 or <robert\_jess@fws.gov>. 🐦



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Rob Jess, Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge's new Manager.



Barry Whitehill/USFWS

*Johanna Hunter in Circle learns how the harvest of cow moose can reduce the population during a school visit. More information on page 5.*

## Proposed Land Exchange Update

The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on the proposed land exchange with Doyon, Limited is proceeding. The draft EIS will be available for public review this January for a 45-day public comment period. We expect public meetings on the draft EIS to be held in February 2008.

The schedule for public meetings has not yet been determined, but meetings will be held in all Yukon Flats villages, Fairbanks, and Anchorage. These meetings are an opportunity for you to ask questions, discuss concerns, and provide comments on the EIS. We encourage you to attend one of these meetings for an overview of this document. Comments are welcome by e-mail, mail, phone or fax.

For more information or to find out when a meeting will occur in your community contact Refuge Manager Rob Jess 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](mailto:nicole_gustine@fws.gov)>.*



## In My Words - by Paul Williams, Sr.

For a long time now people have known moose numbers were low in the Yukon Flats. When I was young, I heard chiefs and elders talk of moose and other species of animals that the local people depended on for food and other necessities. They talked a long time to determine what type of management they could use to bring back the moose, including a moratorium.

There have been numerous meetings with each village on the Yukon Flats and also with federal and state agencies to determine what we can do to increase the moose population on the Flats. There have been studies on predators such as bears, wolves and people; there was a study to determine what is causing the numbers to be so low; there was a study of habitat with a comparison to other areas where the moose numbers were high; there was a study on the different types of willows and their nutritional values.

Now we are at a point where we are concerned where to go from here. There has been talk of a predator control program. People talk a lot about not harvesting cow moose and calves. So in developing the Yukon Flats Cooperative Moose Management Plan in 2002, all of the above was put on paper so we could follow the plan and we all agreed to it. However, moose are still being harvested out of season and people continue to illegally harvest cow moose when management is not looking. There is increased patrolling with airplanes and enforcement officers and today we are at a point that patrol planes are starting to investigate moose kills and reported cow moose harvest. With all we have learned it is important for us to remember that we all have a role in protecting the moose population. 🐦

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

## Ted Heuer Retires



Barry Whitehill/USFWS

*Ted Heuer displays a special gift made by Lois Williams of Beaver.*

Where's Ted? After a successful and rewarding 30-year career with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Ted Heuer retired on June 3, 2007 from his position as Manager of the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge.

Ted graduated from Louisiana State University in 1976 with a Masters degree in wildlife management. His career began at Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge in Mississippi, where he served as Assistant Manager. Ted and his wife, Beth, then relocated to a remote area in southern Louisiana where he managed Breton National Wildlife Refuge. From there his career led him north. As the Assistant Refuge Supervisor in the Alaska Regional Office in Anchorage he assisted with establishing nine new Refuges associated with the landmark Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980.

In 1991, Ted became the fourth Manager of the nation's third largest Refuge; the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. In the 15 years he was Manager of the Refuge Ted oversaw many accomplishments, ranging from developing a strong biological program to the first annual funding agreement with the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments. The Refuge staff would like to thank Ted for his hard work and wish him a joyful retirement! 🐦

## 2007 Yukon River Fish Camp Survey



Wennona Brown/USFWS

*Service Fisheries Biologist Russ Holder explaining the run strength to Two Rivers residents Eric and Shirley Bussdieker at their Yukon River fish camp.*

Refuge staff members Paul Williams, Sr. and Wennona Brown, accompanied by Russ Holder and Gerald Maschmann of the Fairbanks Fish and Wildlife Field Office, conducted the annual Yukon River fish camp survey July 13-19. They interviewed about 56 fishermen along 300 miles of the Yukon River. Most fishermen reported that they were having to put in more time and effort to meet their subsistence needs than last year. Also, most fishermen categorized fish as small to medium size, with only a few considering their catch to be mostly big fish. Only a few fish were infected with the parasite *Ichthyophonus sp.*, and the Chinook, or king, salmon were reported as good quality fish. A full report of this year's survey will be available later this winter. For more information contact Subsistence Coordinator Wennona Brown at 800/531-0676 or <wennona\_brown@fws.gov>. 🐦

## Bird Flu Monitoring

This past summer thousands of migratory birds all across Alaska were sampled for “bird flu” or avian influenza. Approximately 350 birds from the Yukon Flats were sampled. Results for 2007 will be available later this winter. In 2006, over 15,000 migratory birds were sampled across Alaska and all tests were negative for the bird flu H5N1 virus. It has not been determined if monitoring will continue in 2008. For updates go to <[http://alaska.fws.gov/media/avian\\_influenza/](http://alaska.fws.gov/media/avian_influenza/)>. 🐦

## Successful “Big Lake” Monitoring



Mark Bertram/USFWS

*Chalkyitsik student, Logan Fields checking a fish trap.*

Three students from the Tsuk Taih School in Chalkyitsik, Alaska worked with Refuge staff to continue a baseline study on “Big Lake” (Ohtig Lake). This lake is just south of the village and is a major staging area for migrating waterfowl in northern Alaska.

From July 31-August 3, students Logan Fields, Marty Jonas, and Roy Waldrup observed over 2,000 ducks daily including canvasback, common goldeneye, northern shoveler, and white-winged scoter.

On August 2, Refuge staff presented the results at the Elder Youth Camp in Chalkyitsik. Special thanks to the Chalkyitsik Tribal Council for helping coordinate this project which is now in its third year. 🐦

## Spring Waterfowl Hunting

Subsistence regulations for migratory birds were developed in 2003 under a new co-management process through the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council (Council). The Council includes representatives from the Alaska Native community, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service as equal partners. This process recognizes the customary and traditional uses of migratory birds, and develops annual regulations with conservation being the key consideration for management. Common questions asked include:

- *Can I hunt in the spring if I only live in the village part of the year?* No, only permanent residents of a village within an included harvest area are considered eligible and can harvest migratory birds and their eggs. A permanent resident is someone who has resided in an included area during the preceding 12 months. Residents of the Fairbanks-North Star Borough, Delta Junction, Big Delta, Fort Greely, Healy, McKinley Park/Village and Ferry are excluded from participating in the harvest. To determine if you live in an included area go to <<http://alaska.fws.gov/ambcc/index.htm>>.
- *When can I hunt birds or harvest eggs?* The open season is April 2-June 14 and July 16-August 31. Egg gathering is only open May 1-June 14 and no subsistence harvest is allowed June 15-July 15.
- *Can I ship a duck to a friend in Fairbanks?* No, you may not ship birds harvested in the harvest area to a non-eligible person. A non-eligible person may not receive any portion of a migratory bird.
- *Can I sell the ducks I harvest?* You may not sell, purchase, or offer for purchase migratory birds, their parts or eggs. Birds may only be taken for human consumption and no taxidermy is allowed.
- *Am I able to use my boat to flush birds?* No, you may not use the following devices or methods: recorded bird calls; any type of vehicle to concentrate, drive, or stir up migratory birds; an air boat or jet ski; hunt with the aid of bait; shoot from an aircraft; or possess or use lead shot.
- *Do I need a license to hunt?* Yes, you must possess any licenses and stamps required by Federal and State regulations when hunting migratory birds.

Many people wonder what licenses they need and where to get them. To hunt for waterfowl you must have a current State and Federal Duck Stamp. Federal Duck Stamps can be purchased at any U.S. Post Office, the AC store in Fort Yukon, or from certain law enforcement officers. For more information contact Refuge Officer Michael Hinkes at 800/531-0676, or Mike Smith, the Regional Council Representative at 907/452-8251 extension 3256. 🐦



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*An American Wigeon or “Chalvii” in Gwich’in is one of the many types of waterfowl harvested in the spring/summer migratory bird harvest.*

## 2007 Duck Hunting Survey



Nicole Gustine/USFWS

*Interpreter Paul Williams, Sr. and Eddie James of Birch Creek discuss waterfowl hunting areas.*

Did you participate in the duck hunting survey this year? You might have even seen Interpreter Paul Williams, Sr. and Wildlife Refuge Specialist Nicole Gustine visiting your village this year. In June and October, many Yukon Flats village residents were interviewed to learn about the number and type of birds and eggs taken for subsistence use. Reporting an accurate harvest is important because the information is used to help manage birds throughout the United States.

A total of 137 households in June and 125 households in October participated in the survey. The survey is voluntary. No names are used on the form, and the information gathered is only for management purposes and never for law enforcement.

We would like to thank the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments for surveying Fort Yukon and Chalkyitsik in the spring and to all residents for their participation. The information gathered is forwarded to the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council (Council) for analysis. The Council includes village, state, and federal employees. A report will be released once the data is reviewed and approved by the Council. For more information go to <<http://alaska.fws.gov/ambce/index.htm>>. 🐦

## Connecting Rural Students with Natural Resource Internships

What does counting chum salmon, trail building, bird banding, and answering questions at visitor centers have in common? They were some of the projects that 14 student interns were involved with through the Earth Work Quest Internship Program (Earth Work Quest) during the summer of 2007. This year's program was funded through a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Challenge Cost Share grant. The interns aged 14-21 have ties to the rural communities of Arctic Village, Beaver, Eagle, Fort Yukon, Grayling, Stevens Village, and Tok.

After a busy summer, the interns gathered at the Chena River State Recreation Area from July 30-August 3. They met people in the natural resource field representing a variety of state, federal, and private natural resource organizations. These organizations ranged from groups like the Alaska Bird Observatory, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, the Bureau of Land Management, the Fairbanks Public Lands Information Center, the National Park Service, and the Tanana Chiefs Conference. Many of the representatives grew up in Alaska villages, and shared challenges and successes in their own career paths. Interns and partners tackled an eight-mile long overnight backpacking trip. This adventure ended at the Chena Hot Springs Resort where warm waters and an evening dinner awaited all the participants. 🐦

## Reducing Fire Threats to Villages



Sam Patten/USFWS

*Interagency fire crews conducting prescribed fires to reduce the risk of wildland fire on dried lakebeds near the village of Beaver.*

The Refuge staff recently coordinated brush removal using chainsaws as part of a continuing effort to protect Beaver from wildland fires. Previously in May 2006, three dried lakebeds near the village covering 145 acres were burned in prescribed fires by staff from the Alaska Fire Service, local emergency firefighters crews, and the Refuge. Crews have cleared woody vegetation between previously burned areas to create a semicircle of protection north of the village. Vegetation removed will be burned during future prescribed fires by Refuge staff. For more information or to learn how to involve your village with a similar project contact Fire Management Specialist Sam Patten at 800/531-0676. 🐦

## Annual Funding Agreement

The Refuge and the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments signed the fourth annual funding agreement (AFA) this summer. The AFA will become effective January 1, 2008.

Tasks covered by this year's agreement are continuing the 17b easement mapping, conducting hunting regulations workshops, conducting a moose population survey in the eastern part of the Refuge, maintaining the Refuge facility in Fort Yukon, and collecting wildlife harvest data. A summary of the 2006/2007 harvest data will be available in January 2008. 🐦

## Bluebill Study



Christy Bowersox / USFWS

*UAF Researcher Kristin DeGroot and Associate Professor Perry Barboza taking a blood sample from a bluebill.*

The Refuge continues to investigate reasons for the national decline of lesser scaup or "bluebill" ducks. Are certain hen scaup more likely to breed, nest, and raise a brood of young?

In an attempt to answer this question, University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) graduate student Kristin DeGroot is looking at the body condition of scaup hens as they arrive on their breeding grounds in the Yukon Flats. Kristin is using a technique to measure the fat in a duck by taking a small sample of blood. Field work will continue in 2008. 🐦

## Education a Cornerstone of Moose Management

Staff from the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) is working closely with the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments (CATG) and local residents to address low moose numbers in the area. Moose density within the Yukon Flats Refuge is low compared with similar habitats in interior Alaska. In response to concerns from local residents about the availability of this important subsistence resource, Refuge and CATG staff are delivering messages about the probable causes of low moose numbers and encouraging actions to stop the trend. While predators such as bears and wolves are one cause of moose mortality, the illegal harvest of cow moose is likely a significant factor in limiting the growth of the moose population. The goal of education efforts is to reduce the harvest of cows by improving public understanding of moose ecology, population dynamics, traditional hunting practices, predator-prey relationships, and the complex set of state and federal hunting regulations.

Various outreach efforts are aimed at residents of eight Yukon Flats communities through presentations to schools, participation in local radio programs, discussions with hunters and community leaders, and helping youth design a permanent mural in the Fort Yukon School about the cultural importance of moose and consequences of harvesting cows. Community workshops are planned this spring to teach hunters about state and federal regulations. In addition, the Refuge staff is developing an innovative moose education unit for use by the Yukon Flats School District.

Along with education, the success of the Refuge's broader moose management strategy relies on efforts in its biological and law enforcement programs. Refuge biologists are researching local bear and wolf populations and their impacts on moose. Increased law enforcement on the Yukon Flats is a reminder that compliance with regulations is essential for the moose population to grow. Through the cornerstones of education, community collaboration, research, and law enforcement, the Refuge staff is using all its expertise to support a healthy moose population and provide opportunities to local residents for continued subsistence use. To request a school or community visit or for more information contact Education Specialist Shannon Nelson at 800/531-0676 or <shannon\_nelson@fws.gov>. 🐦



Mark Bertram/USFWS

*Education Specialist Shannon Nelson being interviewed about moose management and education by CATG Acting Director Ben Stevens during a KZPA-broadcast radio show in Fort Yukon.*

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*A moose calf or “Ditsik” in Gwich’in, are born in late May. In winter, they gather in the Yukon River valley to find shelter and food. In summer, they are found throughout the Refuge, typically near ponds and marshes.*



*Moose calves seek shelter in brush to avoid predators.*