THE TOWLINE

WINTER 2025

NORTH SLOPE BOROUGH DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

FROM THE NEW DIRECTOR

Welcome back to the North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management (NSB-DWM) newsletter! First, we wish you all a Merry Christmas during the season where we are reminded of the hope, peace, joy, and love that surrounds us. We are excited to share updates on what we have been working on with our communities across the North Slope. Congratulations to the successful whaling communities and to all the successful fall hunters and fishermen across the region that have provided for the blessed and bountiful Thanksgiving and Christmas feasts.

As the new Director of Wildlife Management, I want to offer my gratitude to our former Director, Taqulik Hepa. She started with our department in 1991 and led the department with grace as our director for 20 years. We honor Taqulik's unwavering dedication to both serve and learn from our hunters. Quyanaqpak for your exceptional leadership and all your years of service, Taqulik!

In this issue, we will brief you on our remarkably successful bowhead census this past spring. We were able to conduct both an ice-based census with a record count and an aerial survey. We're still analyzing the data, but initial results indicate that the bowhead population is healthy. We look forward to sharing the final results with you next year, but you can read more about the census and aerial survey below. Inside, you'll also find updates on wildlife health, fish counts, and our subsistence monitoring program.

As always, your Department of Wildlife Management is here to assist with any questions or concerns on the health of your harvest, whether marine mammal, terrestrial mammal, bird, or fish. We're also interested to hear whenever you have new observations as the hunters in our communities have the traditional knowledge that steward the work of our department. You can email photos, mail samples, or call us at 907-852-0350. There's also a Wildlife Observation Form on our webpage at www.north-slope.org/departments/wildlife-management.

Quyanaqpak,

Nicole Wojciechowski

2025 BOWHEAD CENSUS

The 2025 Bowhead Census was successful and should result in an estimate that will support the subsistence quota requests at the International Whaling Commission (IWC). During April and May, NSB DWM counted migrating bowheads from an observation perch at the ice edge near Utqiaġvik.

We know that whales migrate offshore where we cannot see them, so we account for whale migrating beyond our line of sight with the use of hydrophones. With multiple hydrophones, we can triangulate the location of whale calls and then use the proportion of calls outside our visual range (about 2.5 miles) to adjust the count. We worked with Cornell University to pre-position a grid of hydrophones in 2024. The hydrophones overwintered on the seafloor, under the ice, and were programmed to turn on in February 2025 and record the calls of whales for the duration of the census.

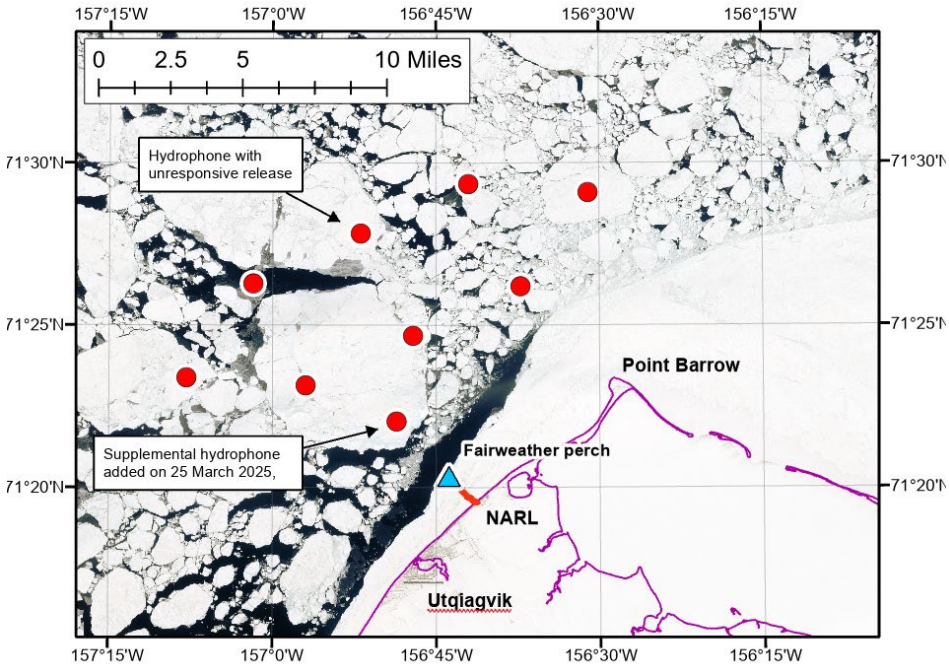
We recovered all but one hydrophone in August 2025. We worked with Global Diving and Salvage from Anchorage

to retrieve the hydrophone that did not release from the seafloor with a Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) in October 2025. Cornell University is currently working with the hydrophone data to determine how many whales migrate beyond our line of sight. We plan to have a preliminary estimate of abundance by Fall 2026 and plan to submit this estimate to the IWC for consideration in 2027.

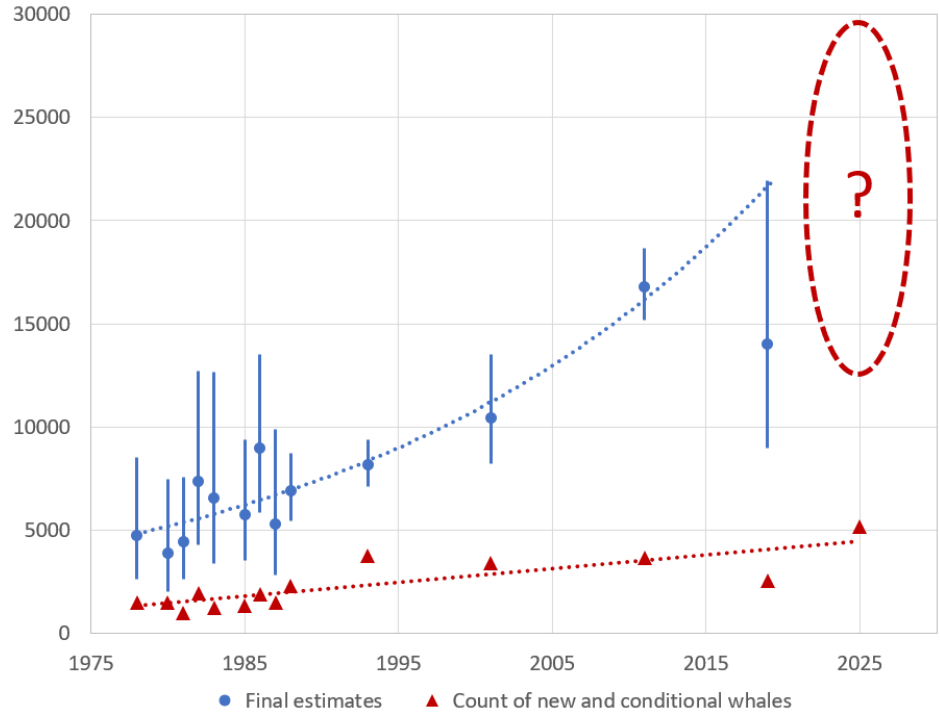
(Continued on next page)

2025 BOWHEAD CENSUS (CONTINUED)

This was a large effort, requiring the cooperation and support of many people. We thank the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission and the Barrow Whaling Captains Association for their support. We also thank Lucy Leavitt, Joe Sage, Quincy Adams, and Michael Donovan for the use of their boats while synchronizing instruments. Whaling captains Frederick Brower, Charles "Chucky" Hopson, Sr., and Alex Kaleak let us use their trails when ice conditions required us to relocate our observation perch. Captains Tommy Nageak and Harry Brower, Jr. took time to meet with our visitors from IWC. Cornell University designed and helped deploy the hydrophones. The work would not have been possible without our wonderfully competent crew and staff, too numerous to name. Funding for this effort was provided by National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska Program funds (award 23-NPRA-211) made available through the State of Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development and by NOAA (award NA25NMFX469G0093-T1-01). Thanks to Kristin Cieciel of NOAA for helping with grant management.



Location of the perch (Fairweather perch, blue triangle) and hydrophones (red circles). Ice imagery is Sentinel-2 L2A data on 24 April 2025, provided by the European Space Agency. Eight hydrophones were placed in August of 2024 and began recording on 15 February 2025. A supplemental hydrophone, placed to improve acoustic coverage, was deployed on 25 March 2025. Eight of nine hydrophones were recovered on 5 August 2025. The ninth hydrophone had an unresponsive release and retrieved with the help of Alaska Diving and Salvage using an ROV on 3 October 2025.



Raw counts of whales (red triangles) and final population estimates (blue circles), 1976-2025. The raw count in 2025 was the largest ever recorded and is more than 1,000 whales larger than counts in 1993 and 2011. These data are for the ice-based counts, only, and do not include aerial survey counts.

Kids Page

IÑUPIAQ MATCHING

Niġrutit Atiŋit - Names of Mammals

Draw a line from the Iñupiaq word to the English word

Aaġlu	Spotted seal
Aġviġluaq	Killer whale
Aġviq	Beluga whale
Aiviq	Polar bear
Nanuq	Musk ox
Natchiq/Qayaġulik	Caribou
Qasigiaq	Walrus
Qavvik	Ringed seal
Sisuaq/Qiḷalugaq	Bearded seal
Tuttu	Wolverine
Ugruk	Gray Whale
Umiŋmak	Bowhead Whale

FUN FACTS

Bowhead whales can live to be over 150 years old!

A beluga whale can eat an average of 50 pounds of fish a day.

A large adult bowhead whale heart might weigh 500 pounds!

Polar bear skin is black!

The scientific name for walrus - *odobenus rosmarus* - means "tooth-walking whale-horse."

Female polar bears usually have twins.

Beluga whales find their food with echolocation.

Bowhead whales can break through ice up to three feet thick to make a breathing hole.

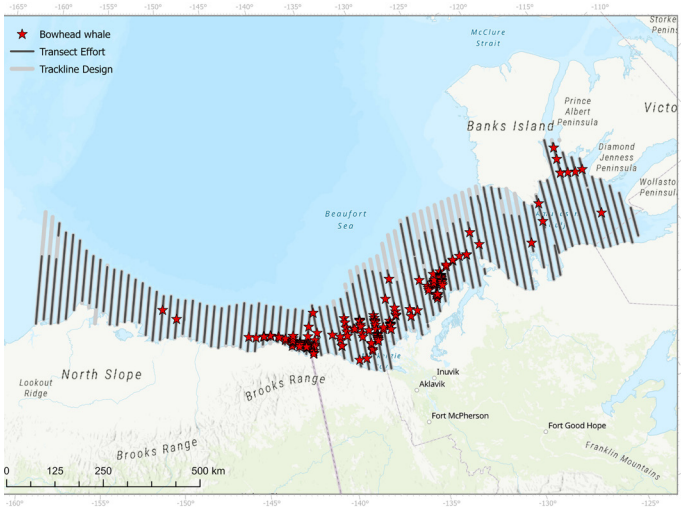
Answers: Aaglu-Killer whale; Aġviġluag-Gray whale; Aġviq-Bowhead whale; Aiviq-Walrus; Nanuq-Polar bear; Natchiq/Qayaġulik-Ringed seal; Qasigiag-Spotted seal; Qavvik-Wolverine; Sisuaq/Qilalugag-Beluga whale;Tuttu-Caribou; Ugruk-Bearded seal; Umingmak-Musk ox

2025 AERIAL SURVEY FOR BOWHEAD AND BELUGA WHALES

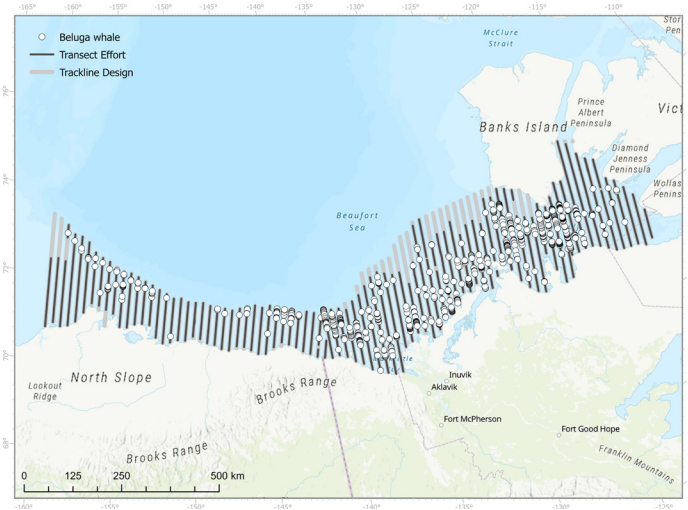
The ice-based census for counting bowhead whales is only successful in one out of two or three attempts. Because we did not know if the ice-based count would be successful, NSB DWM partnered with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Marine Mammal Laboratory (MML) to fly an aerial survey for bowhead whales. An added benefit is that the survey should also yield updated abundance estimates for Beaufort Sea population belugas.

The survey was flown from 27 July to 25 August and covered the entire Beaufort Sea. The survey was flown in Twin Otter aircraft; two aircraft flew from Inuvik, Canada, and one flew from Deadhorse or Utqiaġvik, Alaska. The survey covered less area than was originally planned due to the prevalence of sea ice in the relevant areas. Preliminary data suggest that a similar number of bowhead whales was counted in 2025 as in 2019. In 2019, the population estimate was 17,175. We expect to have an updated estimate of abundance in 2026 or 2027. See below for maps showing where both bowhead whales and beluga whales were sighted.

We thank the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission for their support in Alaska. In Canada, we thank the Inuvialuit Game Council, the Fisheries Joint Management Committee, the Hunters and Trappers Committees of Aklavik, Inuvik, Tuktoyaktuk, Paulatuk, Sachs Harbour, and Ulukhaktok, and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada. This project was co-led and co-funded by the NSB and NOAA. We thank our NOAA partners (John Bengston and Robyn Angliss) and the staff that spent long hours in aircraft, particularly field leads Kim Goetz, Millie Brower, and Cynthia Christman. Funding for NSB's portion of this effort was provided by National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska Program funds (award 23-NPRA-212) made available through the State of Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development, and by NOAA (award NA25NMFX469G0093-T1-01). Thanks to Kristin Cieciel of NOAA for helping with grant management.



Bowhead sightings *27 July – 25 August 2025. Stars are the locations of bowhead sightings and lines are flight lines. Light gray lines are parts of the planned flight lines that had too much ice to count bowheads.*



Beluga sightings *27 July – 25 August 2025. White circles are the locations of beluga sightings and lines are flight lines. Light gray lines are parts of the planned flight lines that had too much ice to count belugas.*

SUBSISTENCE RESEARCH

Subsistence Research Coordinators are stewards of our community, helping to foster healthy harvests, safe communities, and productive collaboration with local hunters, co-management groups, and researchers.

Permanent Wildlife Patrols are now active in Kaktovik, Point Hope, and Utqiaġvik. This service is provided through grant funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Patrols respond to calls reporting polar bears near town. Subsistence Research Coordinators have been working closely with the Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope and the Native Village of Barrow to keep foxes out of town to keep people and pets safe from rabies. If you see a polar bear near town or an animal acting strangely, please call the NSB Public Safety at 907-852-6111. Subsistence Research Coordinators communicate with local hunters regarding ice conditions, safe travel on the ice, harvest rates, and health of different animals that we eat.

Community surveys are a critical tool to help us continue our subsistence way of life without unnecessary outside regulation. The information collected from community surveys is used to help NSB-DWM make recommendations to state and federal agencies, industry and others, to ensure that North Slope residents can continue to hunt and gather for generations to come. The information also helps to shape NSB-DWM studies and priorities.

You can expect to be contacted by Subsistence Research Coordinators in your community once or twice a year. If you have questions or concerns, you can contact NSB-DWM any time of year at NSBWildlifeDepartment@north-slope.org or 907-852-0350, and we will make sure your concerns are heard by the appropriate DWM staff or other agency.

WILDLIFE HEALTH & SUBSISTENCE HARVEST MONITORING

Healthy People, Healthy Animals & Healthy Environment

The Iñupiaq people have always relied on the land and ocean for their food. To keep "niqipiaq" (local foods) safe, our department maintains a comprehensive wildlife health program that monitors the health and harvest of our key subsistence animals. We check for contaminants, diseases, and environmental toxins.

A major part of this work involves close partnership with the NSB Fish and Game Management Committee, hunters, and communities across the North Slope. Hunters are vital because they share information about their catches and observations while traveling the ocean and land.

To date, our long-term monitoring shows that animals are generally healthy with low levels of contaminants and chronic diseases. We're seeing new parasites (like kidney worms in whales), new infectious diseases arriving in the Arctic (such as bird flu), and new modern pollution (like microplastics). As a result of ongoing ocean warming, algal toxins (like paralytic shellfish toxin) have been showing up in the feces of harvested whales and seals since 2011. The current level of these toxins doesn't threaten the health of the animals or the communities that eat them. However, ocean warming continues, which increases algal blooms and toxin production. We can't predict what other changes we are going to see in our animals and the environment that may affect traditional food safety and security, but our department mission continues to ensure that traditional foods remain healthy and hunting is sustainable.

Looking forward, we are confident that our approach of using traditional knowledge and traditional customary practices in combination with modern veterinary health monitoring will help us quickly to spot and deal with any future health issues in our wildlife while adapting to the changing conditions. Our department is very thankful to the hunters and communities who share their knowledge and partner with us in these crucial health and harvest programs.

North Slope Borough
Department of Wildlife Management

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Deputy Director: Billy Adams

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Check out the NSB-DWM website!

Quyanaqpak to the NSB Assembly and Mayor Patkotak for their continued support!

FISH MONITORING

NSB-DWM collects information about the abundance of fish species in Elson-North Salt Lagoon using fyke nets. A fyke net is a series of hoop-shaped nets that funnel fish into ever smaller nets so that even the smallest fish can be counted.

We have tracked fish abundance intermittently since 1996, and this year we did another survey to see if the number of species or relative abundance have changed over the last thirty years.

Typically, we catch up to 15 different species at Elson-North Salt Lagoon. Curiously, we rarely catch salmon in the fyke nets, even though subsistence fishers regularly catch salmon in gill nets on North Salt Lagoon.

This summer, we counted nearly 5000 fish after 561 hours of fishing. Least cisco and fourhorn sculpin have historically been the most prevalent species, and continue to lead the count this year. We're still analyzing the data to see if there are changes that point to trends we need to monitor in the coming years. We will report again when we finish our analysis.

This study was paid for in part with the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska Program funds (Award 23-NPRA-03) made available through the State Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development.

Iñupiaq Name	English Name	# Caught
Iqalusaaq	Least cisco	2248
Kanayuq	Fourhorn sculpin	1410
Nataaġnaq	Arctic flounder	558
Uugaq	Saffron cod	554
Uqsruqtuuq	Pacific herring	94
Iłhuaġniq	Rainbow smelt	79
Qaaktaq/Tiipuq	Arctic/Bering cisco	10
Kakalisauraq	Threespine stickleback	8
Nataaġnaq	Starry flounder	3
Aanaakłiq	Broad whitefish	2
Iqalukpik	Arctic char	2
Iqalugruaq	Chum salmon	1
Amaqtuuq	Pink salmon	1