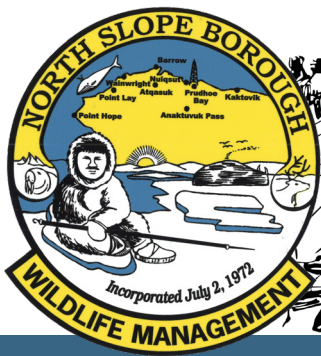




NORTH SLOPE BOROUGH DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

FROM THE DIRECTOR



Congratulations to all of the whaling communities who celebrated nalukataq across the North Slope and those who weathered a challenging spring season. I hope everyone enjoyed hunting migratory birds this spring and are enjoying the long summer days.

At the Department of Wildlife Management, we have been working hard to ensure our hunters are engaged and informed of one of the most important issues facing our region right now which is the continued decline of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd. We have traveled to the affected communities, participated in the North Slope Advisory Committee (AC) meetings, North Slope Regional Advisory Council (RAC) meetings and provided comments to the Federal Subsistence Board on proposed changes to regulations. In this newsletter, you'll find a full update on the herd's status, including the latest developments regarding harvest regulations on both state and federal

lands. As always, we encourage everyone to do their part by avoiding the harvest of cows and calves, regardless of which herd you believe you are harvesting from. Your efforts now will help ensure healthy caribou populations for future generations.

We are pleased to welcome three summer interns and subsistence research specialists to the Department. They will be assisting with a variety of projects throughout the season. Thank you to everyone who has already participated in a subsistence survey with them. Participating in these surveys is used to help our Department in making recommendations to state and federal agencies, industry, and others, to help ensure our residents can continue to hunt and gather as they have traditionally done into the future.

As we move into the summer season, please know that we are always available to answer questions or discuss concerns related to your harvests or any wildlife issues. Don't hesitate to contact our office at 852-0350.

Wishing everyone a safe, productive, and enjoyable summer.

— Nicole Wojciechowski, Director

UPDATE ON THE WESTERN ARCTIC CARIBOU HERD

The Western Arctic Caribou Herd (WAH) has experienced a dramatic population decline, falling from a peak of nearly 490,000 animals in 2003 to just 121,000 according to the 2025 census. Once Alaska's largest caribou herd, the WAH has long provided an essential subsistence resource for at least 40 communities, stretching from south of Stebbins to north of Wainwright.

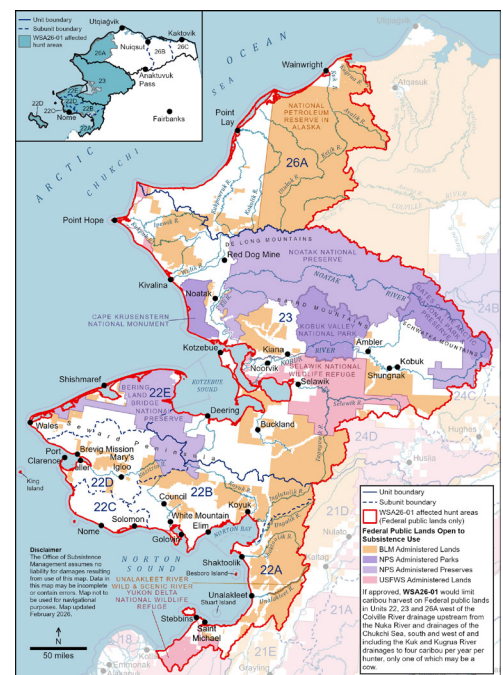
In response to the continued decline, both state and federal managers have taken significant conservation measures. Effective July 1, 2026, the harvest of female caribou (cows) is prohibited on state and federal lands within Game Management Units (GMUs) 22, 23, and the southwestern portion of 26A (see map). The Alaska Department of Fish and Game issued an Emergency Order in late May, and the Federal Subsistence Board adopted a matching closure during its public meeting in early June.

Current regulations in these GMUs allow hunters to harvest up to 15 caribou per year, but all harvested animals must be bulls. These regulations apply to the North Slope communities of Wainwright, Point Lay, and Point Hope.

Protecting cows is widely recognized as the single most effective action

Right: a map of the affected areas in Game Management Units 22, 23, and 26A.

Map produced by the Office of Subsistence Management. Questions about the map should be directed to OSM at 907-786-3888 or subsistence@ios.doi.gov.



UPDATE ON THE WESTERN ARCTIC CARIBOU HERD (con't)

hunters can take to help the herd recover. Female caribou are the reproductive foundation of the population. During her lifetime, a cow may produce six or seven calves, many of which will become breeding females themselves, supporting future generations of the herd.

Federal public lands within the affected area have also been closed to non-federally qualified users, ending the opportunity for most sport hunters to harvest WAH caribou on federal lands. The Federal Subsistence Board adopted proposals submitted by both the North Slope Regional Advisory Committee and the Northwest Regional Advisory Committee to close the hunt to non-federally qualified users.

State and federal wildlife managers will also consider additional measures in January, including intensive predator management to reduce predation by brown bears and wolves.

According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the minimum population objective for the Western Arctic Herd is 200,000 animals. At that level, an annual harvest of approximately 10,000 to 12,000 caribou can be sustained (this has been the average WAH harvest even for years with a lower population). If the herd declines to approximately 75,000 animals, it will reach a critical

threshold that could trigger Tier II subsistence hunting regulations. Under a Tier II system, hunters would be required to apply for limited permits rather than hunting under general harvest regulations.

Hunters from Wainwright, Point Lay, and Point Hope harvest almost exclusively from the Western Arctic Herd. Based on telemetry data, an estimated 71% of the caribou harvested by Wainwright hunters, 95% by Point Lay hunters, and 99% by Point Hope hunters came from the WAH. Together, harvests from these three communities accounted for approximately 32% of the allowable harvest from the herd. Because hunters cannot distinguish between caribou herds in the field, wildlife managers recommend avoiding the harvest of cows throughout the region.

Limiting harvests to bulls may create short-term challenges for many families, but these measures are intended to help the herd recover and preserve future subsistence hunting opportunities. Further, by protecting breeding females today, hunters can help reduce the likelihood of even stricter regulations in the near future. When mature bulls are in rut, younger bulls that have not yet entered the breeding season may provide a suitable harvest opportunity.

NSB CARIBOU HERD DISTRIBUTION

Four caribou herds have calving grounds on the North Slope. Managers and researchers name a herd by the general location where they calve because caribou return to their calving grounds where they were born. These herds are not genetically distinct from one another because their fall and wintering ranges overlap and shift among years.

Western Arctic Herd

Population: 120,000 in 2025, critically declining
Harvested by: Wainwright, Point Lay and Point Hope, and 40-plus communities in northwestern Alaska.
Calves in the Utikok uplands NW of Point Hope.

Teshekpuk Herd

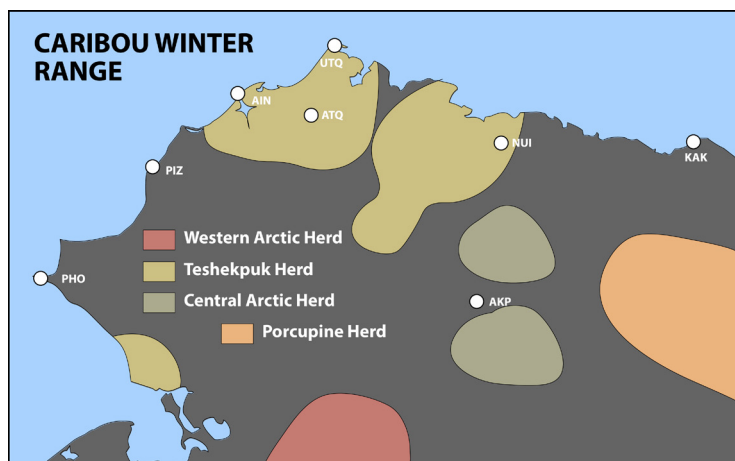
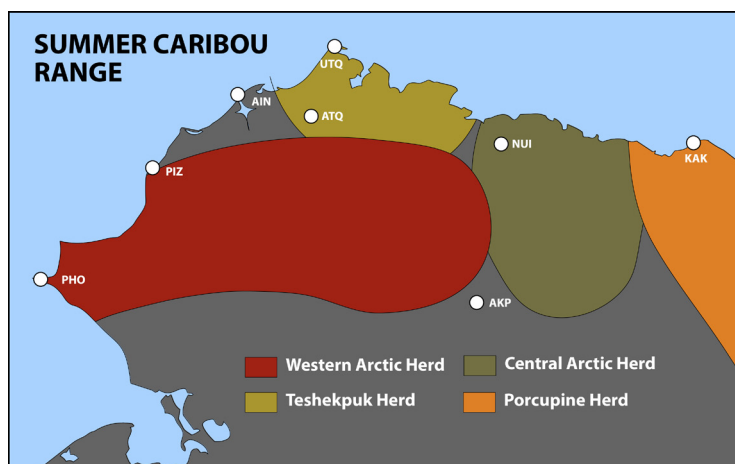
Population: 60,000 (2022), stable
Harvested by: Barrow, Atkasuk, Wainwright, Anaktuvuk Pass and Nuiqsut.
Calves near Teshekpuk Lake.

The Central Arctic Herd

Population: 26,000 (2025), declining
Harvested by: Nuiqsut, Kaktovik, and Anaktuvuk Pass
Calves near Prudhoe Bay, in two areas east and west of the Sgavanirktok River

Porcupine Herd

Population: 143,000 (2025), declining
Harvested by: Kaktovik
Calves on the Alaska-Yukon border.



Right: Maps of the summer and winter ranges for the four North Slope caribou herds. The outer ranges of all herds extend past the summer and winter ranges.

Kids Page

IÑUPIAQ MATCHING

Tinmiat Atinıt - Names of Birds

Draw a line from the Iñupiaq word to the English word

Amaullik

Amautłigaaluk

Aqargiq

Igñiqauqtuq

Isunñaq

Kaṇuq

Nauyaq

Nigliq

Qaugak

Qugruk

Tulugaq

Ukpik

Raven

Snow Goose

Snowbird

Jaeger

Common Eider

Snowy Owl

Duck

Seagull

Tundra Swan

Willow Ptarmigan

Steller's Eider

Goose

FUN FACTS

Arctic terns hold the record for the farthest migration. One trip from their breeding grounds in the Arctic to their winter territory in Antarctica is about 29,000 miles.

Ravens recognize people.

Common eiders can fly up to 70 miles per hour.

King eiders are the largest sea ducks in the Northern Hemisphere, and may form flocks of up to 100,000 birds.

Snowbirds (snow buntings) are the northernmost breeder among land-based birds.

Both ptarmigans and snowy owls have feathers on their feet.

Answers: amaullik/common eider; amautłigaaluk/snowbird; aqargiq/duck; qugruk/tundra swan; tulugaq/raven; ukpik/snowy owl; nauyaq/seagull; nigliq/goose; qaugak/duck; qugruk/tundra swan; tulugaq/raven; ukpik/snowy owl

INNOVATIVE TOOLS FOR MONITORING ALASKA'S SPOTTED SEALS

Spotted seals play an important role in the Arctic marine ecosystem, but surprisingly little is known about the status of Alaska's population. Current abundance estimates rely on surveys that are more than a decade old, and traditional monitoring methods using boats and aircraft can be costly, logistically challenging, and disruptive to seals resting at coastal haul-out sites.

To address these challenges, the Wildlife Department has partnered with the University of Alaska Fairbanks and Alaska Arctic Observatory and Knowledge Hub to use trail cameras and drones to study how spotted seals interact with their environment during the summer and fall open-water season.

From 2018–2020, researchers deployed time-lapse trail cameras at spotted seal haul-outs in Dease Inlet, approximately 35 miles southeast of Utqiagvik. The cameras captured thousands of images, allowing the team to examine how environmental conditions influence seal presence. Temperature, season, wind speed, and wind direction all affected the behavior of the seals, with wind conditions emerging as a particularly important factor in determining where seals chose to haul out. These findings closely matched observations shared by local seal hunters.

More recently, we have expanded our efforts by using

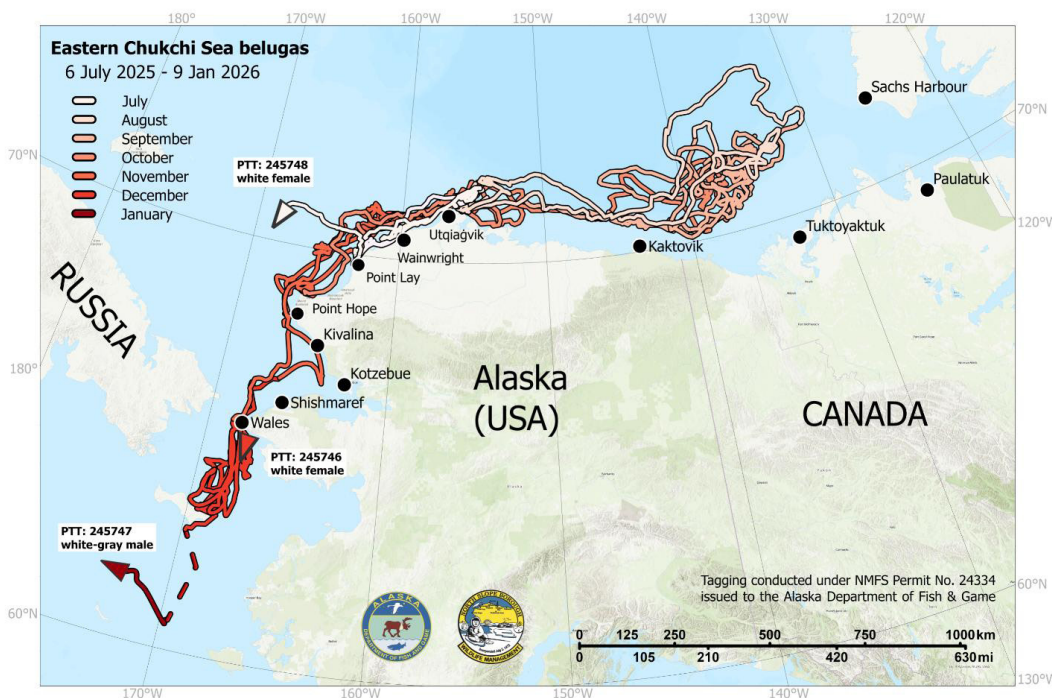


Drone image of spotted seals hauled out on the shoreline of Pittalukruak Lake, Dease Inlet.

drones to monitor coastal haul-out sites. Drone imagery provides valuable information on the number of seals, body condition, and habitat use. Testing conducted in 2024–2025 demonstrated that small drones flying above 115 feet do not disturb resting seals, providing proof of concept for a non-invasive monitoring approach.

Building on these results, the team is developing standardized drone survey protocols designed to minimize disturbance while improving data collection. These advances will support long-term monitoring efforts and help ensure Alaska's spotted seal populations remain healthy and sustainable for years to come, and we can apply what we learn to other management work.

UPDATE ON BELUGA MOVEMENTS



NSB DWM collaborates with the Native Village of Point Lay and its beluga hunters to conduct studies on belugas health and population status. In 2025, Point Lay had a successful hunt and harvested 23 beluga whales. Congratulations! The samples we collect are used to confirm that belugas are healthy and safe to eat, and that the harvest is sustainable. In 2025, we captured and tagged

(Continued on next page)

Left: Movements of two belugas tagged in Point Lay, Alaska in the summer of 2025. Tagging was conducted under NMFS ESA/MMPA Permit No. 24334.

POLAR BEAR DNA SAMPLING

The North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management has been developing and applying several innovative non-invasive methods to collect polar bear DNA for research and monitoring. By identifying individual polar bears and their sex over time and across the North Slope, genetic samples can be used to estimate population size, evaluate movement patterns, and characterize population structure. It is even possible to estimate the age of a polar bear based on genetic information through a process called DNA methylation.

Although aircraft-based live-capture on the sea ice has long been the primary method for studying polar bears, it is expensive, dangerous, logistically challenging, and highly invasive. Non-invasive sampling methods reduce costs and disturbance of the bears, while also allowing researchers to collect samples at times and in places where it would not be otherwise possible using traditional capture-based techniques. For example, in the warming Arctic, sea ice is becoming a less reliable and safe platform on which to work with captured polar bears.

Genetic methods can be conducted on safer ice, and even if there is no ice. One approach involves collecting environmental DNA (eDNA) from polar bear tracks. As bears walk across the snow, they leave behind skin cells in their footprints. Snow collected from fresh tracks can be melted and processed to extract the DNA, providing genetic information without any direct interaction with the bear.

Hair samples can be collected using scented hair traps. Polar bears are naturally curious and have an exceptional sense of smell, which they use to investigate new and unfamiliar scents and objects. A simple plywood box containing a scent attractant can be fitted with small clips that pluck a few hairs when a bear places its head or paw



Large adult male polar bear donating a saliva sample. The box in front is for sampling hair.

inside. The hair sample can then be analyzed for DNA within the hair follicle.

Finally, DNA can be sampled from a polar bear's saliva. Saliva is collected using a scented post that has a replaceable plastic saliva collecting tube on top. Curious bears frequently investigate these devices with their mouths, leaving behind saliva that can be collected and analyzed genetically. This method provides an additional source of DNA without requiring the animal to be captured or handled.

Regardless of the method, the use of trail cameras to document all visits to the sampling stations helps researchers determine whether multiple bears visited a site, identify age-classes such as cubs, yearlings, subadults, and adults, document body-condition, and record behaviors that may provide additional ecological insights.

UPDATE ON BELUGA MOVEMENTS (con't)

three beluga whales, two adult females and one subadult male, with the help of local hunters Brian and Maxwell Anniskett. The batteries quickly failed on one tag, but the other two tags transmitted into December of 2025 and January of 2026.

The tags collected data on whale location and dive behavior. The dive data will be used to help correct the aerial surveys for the number of whales that are not available to be counted because they are diving. The location data will be used to determine how the ranges and timing of movements may be shifting with changes in sea ice, to see how whales overlap with and respond to ship traffic, and to identify areas important for belugas.

We thank the Native Village of Point Lay and its beluga hunters for their support and collaboration, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game for the use of their permits for tagging (NMFS Permit No. 24334).



A team tags a beluga in Point Lay in 2025 under NMFS ESA/MMPA Permit No. 24334.



**North Slope Borough
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Check out the
NSB-DWM
website and follow
us on Facebook!



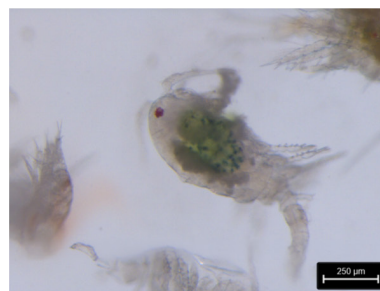
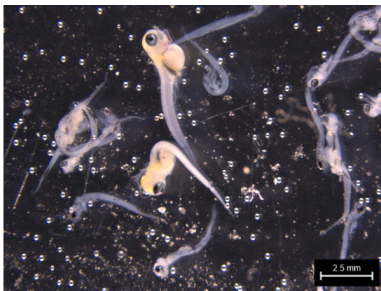
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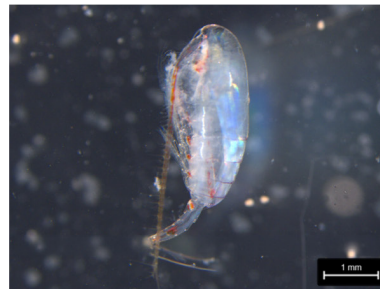
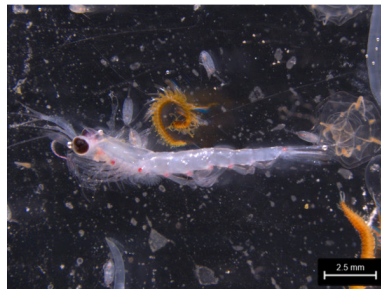
*Quyanaqpak to the NSB Assembly,
Mayor Patkotak, and our
co-management partners for their
continued support!*

UNDER ICE SAMPLING



*Top left to bottom
right: Larval fish,
jellyfish, copepod with
algae in its stomach,
larval fish, krill,
copepod.*

*(Photos NSB-DWM -
Leandra de Sousa)*



What lives beneath the sea ice during the Arctic winter? Are fish active under the ice? Do plankton survive the long, dark season?

While scientists have conducted extensive research on marine life in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas during the summer months, much less has been known about what happens beneath the ice in winter.

For the past five years, Wildlife Department staff have been collecting seawater samples from the channel connecting Elson Lagoon to the ocean to better understand this hidden ecosystem. One early hypothesis was that Arctic Cod—a key species in the Arctic marine food web—might spawn in ice-associated habitats during the winter and early spring.

Although adult Arctic Cod were not present in our

samples, the waters beneath the ice were far from empty. We found an abundance of plankton, including copepods, krill, jelly fish, and larval fish. These tiny organisms play an outsized role in the Arctic ecosystem. Marine plankton include both phytoplankton (microscopic plants) and zooplankton (small animals), which form the foundation of the marine food web.

Even some of the Arctic's largest animals depend on them. Bowhead whales, which can grow to more than 60 feet in length and weigh up to 100 tons, feed primarily on zooplankton such as krill and copepods.

By building a clearer picture of winter life beneath the ice, we can better understand the health of the Arctic marine ecosystem and help ensure it continues to support the fish, marine mammals, and other subsistence species that local communities depend on.