



# The Alaskan Wildlifer

Newsletter of the Alaska Chapter of the Wildlife Society

Fall Issue - September 2017



## Message from President Scott Brainerd

Let's talk about where we are going as a Chapter. In that context, I invite our members to take a look at our Strategic Plan, which was updated last year. You can find it [here](#) on the TWS website. As you can see, we are the only professional organization for wildlife biologists in the state. As of this month, we are 167 members strong. I would like to see the Chapter grow, both in terms of membership and impact in the arena of wildlife conservation and management.

There are a few things I would like to address with regard to our Chapter. These include: 1) encourage and promote student activities, 2) recruitment of the next generation of wildlife professionals, with an emphasis on fostering diversity, 3) renewed engagement in important conservation policy matters, and 4) documenting our history. In addition, I would like to also address the need for better coordination with our sister chapters (and Canadian provinces) where possible and relevant, particularly with regard to 1 and 3 above.

Students represent the next generation of wildlife professionals, and many that choose to study in Alaska want to stay and continue their careers here. Increasingly, more and more of these students were born here in Alaska. Forty years ago, when I was a student, most of us were born and raised outside the state. The University of Alaska Fairbanks has had a student chapter for over forty years. I was a member from 1976-1981 when I attended UAF. The chapter continues to be quite active and engaged. Many UAF chapter members attended and volunteered

at the recent State Chapter meeting in Fairbanks last spring. There are other University of Alaska campuses with wildlife students although the number of students interested in pursuing a career as a wildlife professional are decidedly smaller at these campuses. Nonetheless, there is still potential for the formation of more student chapters and UAA is discussing this possibility.

One event the State Chapter could facilitate to encourage student involvement would be a wildlife quiz bowl at our upcoming meeting in Anchorage. I recently attended the Montana Chapter annual meeting, and this was a highlight of the evening banquet. There are two big state schools with wildlife programs in Montana, so there were many students in attendance. Rather than facing off, one school against the other, mixed teams of students and professionals at each banquet table competed against each other. It was great fun.

The Chapter board has also discussed the possibility of sending Alaskan students to wildlife student conclaves in the lower 48 or even Canada. We currently offer travel grants to support students attending our annual meetings, but at present we do not have a clear strategy on how to support students that wish to attend such outside activities. I do hope in the future that the Alaska Chapter can be a catalyst for such activities. Like me, many professionals have fond memories of their student days, and the Wildlife Society activities they were engaged in as undergraduates or graduate students. We need to explore ways to subsidize such activities,

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## President's Message - Continued

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in cooperation with student chapter(s) and perhaps the Northwest Section.

Recalling our last annual meeting, with emphasis on cross-cultural communications, it strikes me that Alaska Natives are seriously underrepresented in our profession. The same goes for other ethnic groups that are well-represented in our society. How can we change that? This was a topic when I was a young student, and continues to be four decades later. We have made great strides in gender diversity, with more female students and professionals in our ranks. However, we still have work to do in recruiting and retaining minorities of both sexes into our ranks. Alaska Natives in particular have an ancient connection to the land and the resources that could benefit wildlife conservation and management in our state. We need to develop a strategy on how to promote diversity in our ranks here in Alaska.

Our chapter has addressed several wildlife-related policy issues over the years; however, it's been four years since we issued our last position statement, on sheep disease risk. This is still a hot topic, as Becky Schwanke's article in this issue illustrates. As a prominent, science-based organization committed to promoting excellence in wildlife stewardship I would like to see renewed engagement in policy issues from the State Chapter. In addition, The Wildlife Society has a new initiative called the **Conservation Affairs Network** (CAN), launched in 2014. From the TWS website: CAN "engages and unifies the efforts of The Wildlife Society, its 200+ units, and nearly 10,000 members to advance wildlife conservation policy issues at the national, regional, and local levels. CAN operates through Conservation Affairs Committees (CAC) established within TWS Sections and Chapters. These committees are charged with identifying and addressing policy priorities within their region, and communicating their activities and needs with other CACs and TWS Staff. CACs and TWS Staff support each other in their policy activities, lending experience and expertise to enhance efforts." Each chapter should have a Conservation Affairs Committee, chaired by a volunteer coordinator. The Northwest Section just appointed Rebecca Much as their Section CAN coordinator and the other NW Section chapters (Montana, Washington, Oregon and Idaho) already have CAN coordinators;

however, we lack a CAN coordinator for our chapter at this time.

The generation of wildlife biologists that were trailblazers during the territorial days and early statehood made a significant impact on wildlife conservation in our state. Through the COWCH program, we have been able to interview and record some of their histories during the past few years. TWS has uploaded COWCH interviews, including some from Alaska, on its **COWCH** website. Unfortunately, in the future, I have been informed that TWS will no longer be hosting interviews on this website. So, it is incumbent upon the Chapter to find a solution for archiving and making available video and/or audio interviews going forward. The University of Alaska is a resource and an asset in this context. I have reached a handshake agreement with the Oral History unit at UAF to archive our video and audio material in a permanent repository. Dr. Todd Brinkman and his students at UAF will be conducting interviews this fall. We need to identify potential candidates to interview, identify resources needed to do this, and we need folks that are willing to conduct and record the interviews. Video cameras can be rented or loaned for this effort. Agencies may be able to provide resources in this context, particularly when retired agency personnel are being interviewed. We need volunteers to help with this work throughout the state including someone to coordinate this effort.

If you are interested in helping out with any of the efforts mentioned above, please contact me. Possible working groups or committees include: 1) student affairs, 2) professional diversity, 3) CAN, and 4) COWCH. I would love to hear from you!

Enjoy the fall!

### Join or renew memberships

New memberships and renewals are available on-line at The Wildlife Society ([www.wildlife.org/alaska/](http://www.wildlife.org/alaska/)). Click on membership to obtain membership forms.



# Regional News

## Northern

Kerry Nicholson, Northern Representative

### Personnel Changes

**Dr. Cory Williams** will be joining the Department of Biology and Wildlife at the University of Alaska Fairbanks as an Assistant Professor of Integrative Physiology. Cory's research explores the links between nutritional state, physiological stress, and population-level processes in wildlife with the goal of understanding how physiological and behavioral plasticity corresponds with population resilience to environmental change. Cory has been working in Alaska since 2002. He obtained his PhD from the University of Alaska Fairbanks studying foraging ecology and nutritional stress of seabirds breeding near Kodiak Island. He subsequently shifted his research focus to terrestrial mammals and completed postdocs at the University of Alaska and the University of Alberta, prior to spending the last two years as a research faculty at Northern Arizona University.

**Dr. Todd Brinkman** welcomes new MS graduate student, **Scott Leorna**, to his lab. With funding from NSF, Scott will be using citizen science approach to explore changes in caribou distribution and movement on the North Slope.

### Tetlin Lynx Ecology Update



Large male lynx captured in March exiting a log box trap. Photo provided by Nathan Berg, USFWS.



TWS-Alaska Chapter Regions: Northern, Southcentral, and Southeast.

Between October 2016 and April 2017 staff at Tetlin NWR captured and placed satellite collars on 25 lynx. Tetlin NWR staff documented 3 lynx dens this spring. This is the 3rd year of the lynx capturing and collaring project at Tetlin NWR. This past winter, capture/collaring efforts also took place at Yukon Flats NWR, Koyuk/Nowitna/Innoko NWR, Bonanza Creek LTER, Gates of the Arctic NP, and near Kluane Lake in Yukon, Canada. These efforts are part of our joint research on lynx ecology and long distance movements in relation to the 10-year snowshoe hare cycle.



Seven 1-week old lynx kittens found at a den site in early June. Photo provided by Nathan Berg, USFWS



Often times in our profession we find that the money follows not the most significant biological issue of the day but the one with the most public interest. Thanks in large part to the Alaska Chapter's interest in reducing disease risk to Dall's sheep and mountain goats, as well as continued efforts by the WAFWA Wild Sheep Working Group, disease surveillance programs are up and running from Alaska through the Yukon and British Columbia for thinhorn sheep and beginning for mountain goats as well. Agency staff are now working disease monitoring protocol into nearly every capture opportunity, building an invaluable baseline dataset.



As the Alaska representative on the WAFWA Wild Sheep Working group for several years I had the pleasure of meeting some of the most dedicated wildlife biologists and veterinarians on the front lines of sheep management. They all shared one strong recommendation when it comes to sheep health: collect baseline data now. I am pleased to report that the Alaska Department of Fish & Game has stepped up in this capacity, and has quietly made this effort a priority.

New this fall is a trial effort by the Department to collect disease and other health data from hunter harvested Dall rams.

Central to these efforts is testing for *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (*M. ovi*), a primary causative agent driving epidemic respiratory disease (i.e., pneumonia) in wild sheep across western North America. The new WAFWA Disease Management Venture (DMV) Strategy describes initial spillover of *M. ovi* via contact with domestic sheep or goats, and subsequent circulation within and between populations. The outcome for bighorn populations has ranged from little to no impact on health to epizootic pneumonia followed by years of lamb deaths caused by pneumonia. The group is working to fully understand the pathways of *M. ovi* and how best to fight the pathogen. Their final objective is most telling: summarize outcomes of management

actions and identify those that have the most promise of improving herd performance (following *M. ovi* infection).

While Alaska is involved in the DMV group, we are uniquely positioned at a crossroads. While every western bighorn jurisdiction reacts to the spread of *M. ovi* through their wild populations, we have yet to find the pathogen in our state. The opportunity to be proactive is now upon us.

The next step is critical for the future of our wild sheep and goats. Alaskan agencies have banned the use of domestic sheep and goats in national parks and preserves and for hunting purposes across the state, and position statements have been written, but the issue has not gone away.

For this reason, the Alaska Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF) has developed a Disease Prevention Initiative. Through this effort the Foundation has two main objectives: to protect Alaskan wild sheep, mountain goats, and muskoxen from the transmission of the disease causing pathogen *M. ovi* and to achieve consensus to move towards a "Disease-Free" state for wild and domestic sheep, goats, and muskoxen.

The Alaska WSF has spent the past 18 months working collaboratively with domestic producers, ADF&G and ADEC representatives to find a way forward. Significant recognition has been given to the fact that *M. ovi* in western states has originated from



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## Dall Sheep Disease - Continued

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domestic sheep and goats. While the prevalence of *M. ovi* varies amongst domestics across the west, Alaska's producers at the table have agreed to work towards determining the prevalence of *M. ovi* in our domestics. As a first step, Dr. Maggie Highland with the USDA along with State veterinarian Dr. Bob Gerlach have initiated a research effort to help identify the prevalence of and exposure to *M. ovi* as well as *M. conjunctivae* (infectious keratoconjunctivitis, IKC or pink eye) in Alaskan domestics. Working group members are encouraging statewide participation in this testing effort.

While this is a great first step in addressing *M. ovi* in Alaska's domestics, there is more to be done. At this point, we don't know if *M. ovi* is here, though we believe it is likely the pathogen exists within the state and we must continue to be vigilant. The Alaska WSF has made a significant commitment to this effort thus far, and would like to see support for a comprehensive solution to this problem in Alaska protecting wild sheep, goats and muskoxen while having a minimal impact on domestic owners/producers.

- After considerable thought and a thorough scientific review of the topic, Alaska WSF would like to see adoption of the following steps to ensure a long-term solution to this problem:
- PCR and ELISA testing of all domestic sheep and goats (*M. ovi*)
- Replacement or quarantine of infected animals
- Changing rules on import of domestic sheep and goats to *M. ovi*-Free
- Establishment of an *M. ovi* monitoring program by the State veterinarian
- Compensation to owners/producers to off-set expenses (Alaska WSF)

Given our unique position concerning this pathogen, you will notice that separation (of wild and domestic sheep and goats) is not a highlighted objective for the Foundation. While it is recognized as a primary solution battling the widespread nature of *M. ovi* in Lower 48 states, separation would likely be a costly and ineffective short-term solution for Alaska as it has been in British Columbia.

This has been a key issue for the Foundation's Disease Prevention Initiative, how much emphasis should be placed on a solution that was developed in other areas as an after-thought. It's important to recognize the lack of agreement on what constitutes appropriate separation by different western agencies, as well as their concern for random foray behavior exhibited by wild sheep and goats. Given current knowledge, Dr. Tom Besser from Washington State University recommends that clinically ill *M. ovi* infected animals be kept over 100ft away from non-infected animals to avoid transmission. Defining and implementing an adequate separation policy to account for this reality would be very difficult to say the least.

When it comes to the small number of privately owned domestic sheep and goats in Alaska and the as of yet unknown prevalence of the pathogen, statewide testing followed by replacement of infected animals could go a long way towards solving this problem. With the significant financial commitment offered by Alaska WSF to reach an *M. ovi*-Free state, and changes to import requirements, we can make some real headway towards keeping our state's wild sheep, goats, and muskoxen safe from this pathogen.

By working together on a comprehensive long-term solution, we can be pro-active and prevent potentially catastrophic losses to our wild populations. In the end, by working towards an *M. ovi*-Free end game, as Alaskan residents we all maintain our freedom to own and use domestic sheep and goats, while knowing we helped protect our wild sheep and goats at the same time.

As an ongoing part of the Alaska WSF Disease Prevention Initiative, Dr. Tom Besser has agreed to come to Alaska later this fall to meet with professionals in an attempt to further the exchange of knowledge pertaining to this emerging pathogen and how we can best avoid widespread respiratory disease in the north.

-Becky Schwanke is a TWS member, Alaska Wild Sheep Foundation representative and former Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game wildlife biologist





## ALASKA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

### SHIRT DESIGN CONTEST

**Extended Deadline  
November 1, 2017**



The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society is dedicated to excellence in wildlife stewardship through science and education.

The contest's purpose is to solicit original designs to promote our organization and the work we do. We are a creative bunch, but we would like to give our community the distinct honor of helping to design the t-shirt. We're hoping to find something creative and fresh to excite our membership and local community.

The top 5 design submissions will be voted on by the Alaska Chapter Membership. The winning artist must be open to making modifications recommended by the committee and will receive \$50 and 2 t-shirts in the size of their choice.

#### *To participate in the contest you must:*

**HOW TO ENTER:** Submit your design by email to [twsalaska@gmail.com](mailto:twsalaska@gmail.com). In a subject write "T-shirt Contest" and in the body please include your name and phone number. Your submission should be a .jpeg file for viewing and should be no more than 2MB. If your design is selected, you will need to provide your design in a ".eps" or ".ai" file with higher resolution file for printing. Unlimited entries per person.

Each file must have uniform name: t-shirt\_YOURLASTNAME\_YOURFIRSTNAME.(file extension)

#### *Design guidelines*

**DESIGN:** The Alaskan Wildlife design should fit on the back of a t-shirt. The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society Logo will be on the front pocket.

**NUMBER OF COLORS:** Please submit design as black on white, color may change when printed depending on shirt color. Hand drawn designs should be with a black pen or black sharpie on white paper, minimize shading as it may be lost when transferred to electronic format for print.

**SUGGESTIONS:** Working with the theme of "Alaskan wildlife", look at our website <http://wildlife.org/alaska/> to get a feel for what we are all about. We are not looking for another logo. Please avoid using borders. Simple stylized designs with sharp edges come out better.

#### *Official rules*

**ELIGIBILITY:** The T-shirt Contest is open to anyone (members and non-members alike). Contestants under age 18 must include a consent letter from their parent/guardian.

**CONTEST PERIOD:** The Contest is open through November 1, 2017. Entries submitted after the deadline will not be considered or judged.



**WINNING:** The chapter board members will select up to 5 submissions for voting to be done by the chapter membership. Chapter members will have until December 1<sup>st</sup> to vote. The winning design will be announced on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

**SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS:** All submissions must be the contestant's original creation. All ideas for any design submitted must be solely the contestant's. Your submission may not have been previously published or distributed in any media. The submission must be suitable for a general audience and may not be offensive or otherwise unsuitable for use. The content of the submission must not be subject to the rights of any third parties. Submission may not promote third party products or services, or incorporate third party intellectual property. By submitting a design you are guaranteeing that you hold rights to everything in it, and that it does not contain any copyright material. Copyrighted material includes items found on the internet, unless clearly marked as published under a creative commons (cc) license. A contestant may terminate participation in the contest upon written notice to the Alaska Chapter prior to the end date.

**OWNERSHIP AND RIGHTS:** The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society will have first printing rights to the winning design. By submitting you agree that if your design wins, it can be used by the Alaska Chapter on a t-shirt and other promotional items, including Alaska Chapter's website and newsletters, or any other use the Alaska Chapter would like. The winning design will become the sole property of the Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society and cannot be used elsewhere without our express permission.

**PRIVACY:** Contact information will not be passed on to any other companies without your expressed permission.

**NOTE:** We reserve the right to make adjustments to the winning design. Winners will be notified via the e-mail address or phone number provided at time of submission. Participating contestants must agree to all contest rules.

Front



Back



# Mule Deer Found Dead Raises Questions

by Ken Marsh

A mule deer carcass found in mid-May near the highway bridge over the Chena River Flood Control area is getting a close look by the Division of Wildlife Conservation.

“The deer was definitely killed in a vehicle collision and died very quickly,” said Wildlife Veterinarian Dr. Kimberlee Beckmen. “When it happened is difficult to pin down.”

Turns out, the question of timing could be important. Mule deer are not native to Alaska, but occasional sightings have been reported in the eastern Interior since at least the 1970s. All have likely immigrated from within the species’ current range in Yukon, Canada. Alaska wildlife officials are concerned that parasites and diseases mule deer carry could spread to Alaska’s moose and caribou.

Introduction of moose winter tick is Beckmen’s greatest fear. “This parasite has been detected in over 50 percent of the mule deer examined by wildlife officials in the Whitehorse area and is also found on moose, caribou, and elk in the Yukon,” Beckmen said. “It is a parasite that kills young moose and can devastate moose populations.”

Beckmen performed a necropsy on the deer and said the buck was in good health prior to being struck. Judging by the state of decomposition, the deer might have died a week earlier, or over the winter and recently thawed.

“There was no hair loss, so if it died anytime from January on, we can say it wasn’t infected with moose winter tick,” Beckmen said. “However, if it died last fall or early winter, there would not be adult ticks or classic hair loss patterns visible yet.”



*Buck mule deer sniffing the air at Nash Wash Wildlife Management Area in Utah. Mule deer are found across much of western North America, but are not native to Alaska. Occasional sightings have been reported in the eastern Interior since at least the 1970s. All have likely immigrated from the Yukon. Photo by Brent Stettler, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.*

Mule deer are larger “cousins” of the Sitka black-tailed deer found in the Southeast Panhandle, Prince William Sound, and Kodiak. Reports of sightings in Interior Alaska have grown more frequent in recent years, suggesting their presence is part of the species’ natural movement. In 2013, three were reported north of Delta Junction. Last year, a fawn was photographed in a North Pole driveway. In addition to winter tick, mule deer may also carry other pathogens potentially fatal to moose and caribou including liver flukes, deer adenovirus, and brain worm.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game is interested in documenting Interior mule deer sightings. The public is asked to report any sightings of live or dead mule deer immediately to the department or the Alaska Wildlife Troopers.



*Byron Hatley photographed this mule deer in July of 2016 near the Fort Knox mine near Fairbanks.*

Email [dfg.dwc.vet@alaska.gov](mailto:dfg.dwc.vet@alaska.gov) to report sick or dead wildlife, or call the Wildlife Health Reporting and Information Line: 907-328-8354. To learn more about **wildlife diseases**, visit the department’s webpage.





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# White Bison Calf Born in Farewell Herd

By Riley Woodford, ADF&G

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Josh Peirce has seen a lot of bison in his career as a state wildlife biologist. On June 8, 2017, he saw something new – a bison calf with a coat that was white instead of the usual reddish color.

Peirce is based in McGrath, a community about 225 miles northwest of Anchorage on the Kuskokwim River. The white calf was born into the Farewell Bison Herd, one of four herds of plains bison in Alaska. The Farewell area is the general home range of the herd, about 60 miles southeast of McGrath.

Peirce said the state wildlife troopers emailed him on May 9 with a report of the white calf, so he was looking for it in early June when he flew a spring survey of the herd. Peirce pilots the department's Super Cub out of McGrath, and also owns his own airplane. He returned to the area in July for a family camping trip and his wife Kellie Peirce took several pictures of the calf.

At that time, he guessed the calf to be about three months old. "It was born this spring, and we know it was born prior to May 9," he said. "The herd has a fairly extended calving season, generally early April to late May."

Albinism and leucism are both conditions that can cause an animal to have white fur, hair, skin, or feathers. Both are caused by a reduction of pigments at the cellular level, and are usually genetic. Leucism can affect an entire animal, or just patches (animals with partial leucism are referred to as "peid" or "piebald") and a leucistic animal will have normal-looking eyes. Leucistic lions are white, but have normal eyes and lips. Animals with albinism have pink eyes. Peirce suspects the white bison is leucistic. In the photos, the calf appears to have a dark ring around its eyes and a light brown "cap" on its head.

Plains bison, smaller cousins to the giant wood bison, were first introduced to Alaska in 1928 when 23 animals from Montana were brought to Delta Junction. Three died within a few months, so all of



*Kellie Peirce photographed this white colored bison calf in early July about 60 miles south of McGrath. The calf is with a group of normal-colored calves of the year and adults. ©Kellie Peirce, photo used with permission.*

the bison in Alaska's four herds are descendants of 20 animals. It is noteworthy that the bison were obtained from the National Bison Range in Montana before the introgression of cattle genes into the herd. So Alaska plains bison are among the relatively small number of genetically pure plains bison.

Peirce said that ranchers introduced cattle genes to bison in the Lower 48 in attempts to cultivate domestic qualities in bison for agricultural purposes. "That was a deliberate thing. A lot of bison today have cattle genes, and the introduction of those genes did cause some color variations in bison," he said. "We've done quite a bit of genetic work on the Farewell herd, and there is no indication of any cattle genes in these animals, which is significant for bison conservation. That's a big deal." The Farewell herd is the result of two separate transplants. In August of 1965, 18 bison from the Delta Herd were flown to the Farewell airstrip; in August of 1968, 20 more animals were brought in. By 1972 the herd had grown to about 80 bison, and the first hunt was authorized.



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## White Bison Calf - Continued

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The herd grew to about 350 animals in 1999, but a spring survey in 2006 revealed only 94 animals. A number of factors, including habitat quality, high harvest, and predation, could explain the apparent decline, but the herd has rebounded substantially in recent years. “It’s fair to say the herd is at a record high now,” Peirce said. “There are 395 adults, 115 calves, a total of 510 animals.”

Wood bison were reintroduced to Alaska in 2015 and are geographically distinct from the Farewell herd. The wood bison herd is about 200 miles west on the other side of the Kuskokwim Mountain range.

White bison are well-documented, although they are rare. White bison calves have been born in both wild and domestic herds. National Bison Association statistics indicate there are about 380,000 plains bison in North America, most in private herds. There are about 22,000 bison in public herds in national parks, state parks, and county parks in the U.S.; and about 2,000 in Canada. There are about 15,000 in tribal herds, and about 190,000 in private herds in the U.S. and about 150,000 on Canadian ranches.

Jim Matheson, the assistant director of the National Bison Association, said he doesn’t have statistics on white bison. “We hear about one or two white bison being born every year somewhere in North America,” he said. Matheson knows of one white bison in a herd at the National Buffalo Museum in Jamestown, North Dakota.

Ilana Xinos is the director of that museum. Until recently, they had two white bison in their herd of 30 animals, White Cloud and her son, Dakota Miracle. “White cloud died in November (2016), she was 20 years old,” she said. “She had 13 calves in her life, including a white bull. He lives with our herd now. I don’t believe he’s albino, he has normal eyes.” Xinos said the museum has exhibits featuring white bison, including a picture from the mid-1930s of a white bull with a brown cap named Big Medicine, from the herd at the National Bison Range in Montana. U.S. Fish and



*Bison in the Farewell area. The white calf is in the center surrounded by adults. ©Kellie Peirce, photo used with permission.*

Wildlife Service records indicate that Big Medicine, born in 1933, sired numerous offspring in his 26 year life, including an albino calf.

Alaska’s bison herds are descendants of animals from the National Bison Range in Montana. Xinos said she’s heard of people breeding bison with Charolais cattle in a deliberate attempt to create white-colored offspring. “They don’t look normal, like normal bison,” she said. She added that such offspring tend to darken as they mature. “All bison calves change color,” she said. “They’re born a cinnamon brown, and they become really brown.” She said tourism and marketing outfits will tout statistics on the occurrence of white bison that are not reliable. “They’ll say one in a million, or one in ten million, but we don’t have a million bison in North America.”

A Wikipedia search provides a number of historical records of white bison in North America, and indicates there are about two dozen white bison now living in North America in public and private herds. Peirce said he heard of one other white bison born in Alaska. “As far as I know, there was one other white bison that occurred in Delta Junction, but I don’t know what year that was or what its fate was either,” Peirce said.

*Continued on page 13.*



# Giant Tundra “Bunnies”- Alaska’s “Other” Native Hare

By Rick Merizon, ADF&G

Not many Alaskans are aware that we have two species of hare native to our state. Most Alaskans are familiar with the snowshoe hare and may enjoy hunting them throughout the state. However, residents of western and southwestern Alaska may also know about the Alaska hare (*Lepus othus*) aka arctic hare, tundra hare, or jack rabbit. The most distinguishing characteristic of the Alaska versus the snowshoe hare is their large size. They weigh between six and 12 pounds compared to the two-to-three pound snowshoe hare. They also have black-tipped ears, further helping distinguish them from their closely related cousins. They occur throughout western Alaska from Kotzebue in the northwest to Cold Bay on the Alaska Peninsula in the south.

There are three high latitude hare species in the world; the mountain hare in Scandinavia and Russia, Eastern Canada’s arctic hare, and the Alaska hare found only in western Alaska. All three share many traits including large body size, habitat, and general life history. Alaska hares have been hunted and admired by countless generations of western Alaska residents. In fact their fur coats are a prized liner to traditional parkas, and they are fine table fare.



*The Alaska hare’s white winter coat serves as excellent camo in winter, but the black-tipped ears provide a clue. Weighing as much as 12 pounds (close to three times the size of a snowshoe hare) they are one of the largest hare species in the world.*



*The range of the tundra hare.*

Despite their large size and charismatic features there is very little known about our Alaska hare. Interestingly enough, recent research by Michele Cason and her colleagues through the Museums of the North and ADF&G found evidence of Alaska and mountain hares on several islands in the Bering Sea. This raises the question to whether there is movement between Alaska and eastern Siberia over the seasonal ice-pack connecting the two continents. Alaska hare appear to occur at lower density than snowshoe hares, however the magnitude of their natural population fluctuations is also unknown.

Therefore, ADF&G has recently embarked on a two-part effort to learn more about this interesting species. First, recently my colleagues and I have been trying to determine how to capture Alaska hares. This effort will assist the deployment of radio collars for future studies. We’ve been fortunate enough to talk with several researchers in Finland and Canada about methodologies they’ve found successful for their equivalent species. However, the Alaska hare’s nocturnal behavioral pattern, density, and remote locations have proven to be challenging. We have evaluated various bait, trap configurations, and netting techniques. Once snow returns to the western Alaska landscape this fall we plan to visit several remote locations to attempt the capture of several individuals.



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## Tundra Hares - Continued

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*Found only in Alaska, tundra hares favor the open landscape of Western Alaska.*

Those individuals will be fitted with a small radio collar placed around their neck that will collect up to four GPS waypoints per day. We stand to learn a great deal through even a few individuals about daily movement patterns, mortality, feeding habits, and habitat use.

The second component to learning more about Alaska hare is hearing from you. ADF&G would like to hear about your observations, traditional hare hunting techniques, and your experience with this unique species. Have you observed them in the wild? If so, where and how long ago? What time of day have you observed them? Are they on ridgetops or in shrub thickets? Are they more or less abundant now than in



*A motion-triggered trail camera captures an image of an Alaska tundra hare.*

03.16.2017 03:16:13 019 -16°C 004°F



the past? If you're interested in helping ADF&G learn more about Alaska hare habits, movements, and patterns that you've observed, we'd be extremely grateful for your insight.

Between your insight and our field efforts to deploy radio collars we can gain tremendous insight about this poorly understood species. ADF&G wants to not only ensure this species long-term viability but also ensure that hunters in western and

southwestern Alaska can continue to enjoy this highly valued game species.

Despite the best efforts to learn more about this valuable high latitude species, ADF&G needs your help. You can be at the forefront of learning about this species by providing tissue samples from your harvested Alaska hare, field observations, or other interesting stories you may have about this species. If you're interested in providing tissue samples please call one of the contacts below about the details.

Rick Merizon (907.746.6333) [Richard.merizon@alaska.gov](mailto:Richard.merizon@alaska.gov) or,

Cameron Carroll (907.459.7237) [Cameron.carroll@alaska.gov](mailto:Cameron.carroll@alaska.gov)

We also have free postage paid return shipping envelopes for any tissue samples. Also, look for recent Facebook posts and Sounds Wild Radio broadcasts for more information about this species and what ADF&G is hoping to learn about them.

*Rick Merizon coordinates the small game program for the Division of Wildlife Conservation. In addition to hares, he conducts research on grouse and ptarmigan.*

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## Regional News - Continued

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### Southcentral

John Trent, Southcentral Representative

#### Personnel Changes

After two great careers with the State of Alaska and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, **Pete Probasco** retired from the Service's Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program in June.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service wildlife biologist and pilot, **Dom Watts**, has moved from Alaska Peninsula National Wildlife Refuge in King Salmon and started a new position at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in Soldotna.

### Southeast

Kevin White, Southeast Representative

*See the next issue of The Alaska Wildlifer for news from the Southeast region.*

### Follow us on Facebook!

You can "like" us on Facebook! On our Facebook page, we are posting information on scientific publications relevant to Alaska's wildlife, announcements of upcoming meetings, and job openings. If you have ideas on how we can most effectively use our Facebook page, contact the Executive Board through the Chapter email: [twsalaska@gmail.com](mailto:twsalaska@gmail.com)



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## White Bison Calf - Continued

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"It's interesting that there's enough genetic diversity that this unique recessive trait has persisted," Peirce said. "Bison went thru a big bottleneck with the mass hunting that occurred in the 1800s, and then we bottlenecked them again when we brought them to Alaska, and again when we brought them to Farewell."

Bison hunting in Alaska is carefully managed, and all hunts are lottery-style drawings. There is no special protection for unusually colored animals. There is a spring hunt (DI 352) and a fall hunt (DI 351) for the Farewell bison herd, and hunters apply for the drawing. This year 20 permits were issued for each hunt, for the first time since 2005, but not everyone who wins a permit goes hunting. "We've had a pretty high number that didn't hunt," Peirce said. "It sounds great on paper but once you start putting it together you realize it's a difficult and expensive thing to do." Last year, 17 hunted in the spring hunt, three did not; and 13 hunted in the fall, and seven did not. "There was 80 % success in the spring hunt, that's not unusual," Peirce said.

The gender of the calf is not known, but the hunt is "any bison." The animal could be harvested by a hunter unless the Alaska Board of Game takes action. Any Alaskan can submit a proposal to the Board of Game.

"I would not be surprised if someone put in a proposal to the Board of Game to protect it," Peirce said. "Assuming it survives. Mortality is high in general with baby animals. But by this point, it's made it through a pretty crucial time period for bison around here. If they make it this far, they're doing pretty good."

For more on Alaska's four herds of plains bison, see the [plains bison](#) species profile

For more on the introduction of animals to Alaska, and a complete history of the bison introduction, see [Game Transplants in Alaska](#)



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# TWS Alaska Chapter Leadership

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## Your 2016-2018 Executive Board

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**Help us keep this newsletter interesting and informative!**

