



**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

# Steese

National Conservation Area

**Alaska**

Annual Manager's Report—Fiscal Year 2019



U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management

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Front Cover: *Endless Ridges* by Brad DeFrees. Watercolor by 2019 Pinnell Mountain National Recreation Trail Artist in Residence. Used with permission.

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U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management

# Steese

National Conservation Area

## Designating Authority

**Designating Authority:** Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, PL 96-487

**Date of Designation:** December 2, 1980

The Steese National Conservation Area (Steese NCA) includes the North Unit and the South Unit, totaling 1.2 million acres, designated by Congress through the Alaska National Interest Lands Claims Act (ANILCA). The Steese NCA is managed to maintain environmental quality with a careful balancing of multiple use and sustained yield, with particular attention to the special values of caribou range and Birch Creek.

## Additional Designations

Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River (WSR) was designated, by ANILCA, as “wild” under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (PL 90-542). The 126-mile WSR flows through the South Unit of the Steese NCA for 77 miles and is managed for water quality, the free-flowing condition, and the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of scenery, recreation, and fish diversity.

Pinnell Mountain National Recreation Trail (NRT) was added to the National Trails System (PL 90-543) in 1971. This 27-mile trail follows the southern boundary of the Steese NCA’s North Unit for 18 miles as it traverses tundra-covered alpine ridges.

The Steese NCA includes two Research Natural Areas (RNAs) managed for research and education: Mount Prindle RNA and Big Windy Hot Springs RNA.

## Site Description

The two units of the Steese NCA, encompass the forested valleys, marshy lowlands, and the broad, tundra-covered ridges of several small mountain ranges of the Yukon-Tanana Uplands. The area plays a major role in the annual life cycle of the Fortymile and White Mountains caribou herds, offering migration corridors, crucial summer calving grounds in high alpine tundra, and winter ranges among lichen-rich black spruce forests.

## Steese National Conservation Area Offerings

Just a couple hour’s drive from Fairbanks, Alaska, the Steese NCA’s remote lands provide ample opportunity for undeveloped recreation, subsistence activities, or field research. Summer visitors camp, hunt, fish, pick berries, hike, backpack, float rivers, and explore the area’s gold mining history. In addition to the spectacular winter scenery and northern lights, winter visitors enjoy snowmobile adventures, dog mushing, and

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skiing. Hunting and trapping are also common winter activities throughout the Steese NCA.

The remote North and South Units of the Steese NCA are primarily accessed from primitive roads and trails along the Steese Highway. Five waysides provide visitor facilities and access to the Steese NCA's primary recreation offerings: a 110-mile float on Birch Creek WSR and a 27-mile hike on the Pinnell Mountain NRT.

### **Year Accomplishments**

- Collaborative management of the Fortymile caribou herd and various investigations on caribou habitat across current and historical ranges
- Conducted public meetings, archaeological surveys and route evaluations to support development of a Travel Management Plan
- Continued to assess placer mine reclamation and stream restoration projects
- Hosted an Artist in Residence on the Pinnell Mountain NRT
- Provided real-time, web-accessible water and climate data on Birch Creek

### **Future Priorities and Opportunities**

- Celebrate anniversaries of Steese NCA, ANILCA, and the Pinnell Mountain NRT
- Complete the Steese Travel Management Plan.
- Augment cooperative effort with USGS to monitor water quality and stream flow
- Clean up abandoned property at former mine sites
- Address State of Alaska navigability quiet title filing on Birch Creek WSR

## **Steese**

### **National Conservation Area**

Eastern Interior Field Office  
222 University Ave.  
Fairbanks, AK 99709  
Phone: 907-474-2200

NCA Manager: John Haddix

Site Web Address: <http://www.blm.gov/visit/steese-nca>

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# 1 Steese Overview

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## Acreeage

<b>Total Acres in Unit</b>	1,198,113
<b>BLM Acres</b>	1,198,113
<b>Other federal Acres</b>	0
<b>State Acres*</b>	15,624
<b>Private Acres*</b>	195

\*State and private acres are not part of the total unit acres

## Budget

Budget Title	Code	Funding
Monuments & Conservation Areas	1711	\$ 453,821.00
Rangeland Management	1020	\$ -
Forestry	1030	\$ 334.00
Cultural Resources	1050	\$ 8,234.00
Aquatic Resources	1160	\$ 3,994.00
Wildlife Management	1170	\$ 20,795.00
Wilderness Management	1210	\$ -
Recreation & Visitor Services	1220	\$ 84,540.00
Cadastral, Lands and Realty Management	1440	\$ -
Maintenance and Ops	1660	\$ 10,724.00
Mining Law Administration	1990	\$ 4,037.00
<b>Total Budget</b>		<b>\$586,479.00</b>

## Current Areas of Focus

Work in the Steese NCA focuses on caribou habitat, water quality surveys, and visitor management.

### Caribou Herd Management

In ANILCA Title VIII Section 802, Congress declared that fish and wildlife on federal lands in Alaska be managed for subsistence uses. Federal land managers in Alaska manage subsistence harvest of fish and wildlife on unencumbered federal lands. ANILCA Title IV identified caribou range as a special value in the Steese NCA. The Field Manager of Eastern Interior Field Office (EIFO) has been given designated authority to make in-season changes to federal caribou hunts, including emergency closure actions. The Fortymile caribou herd is the most important caribou subsistence resource in eastern Interior Alaska, and is the primary herd within the Steese NCA. Close coordination with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG), the NPS, and the ANILCA-mandated Regional Advisory Councils is required to manage the harvest, herd, and the herd range. BLM biologists have forged a partnership with the ADFG to conduct population, distribution, harvest, and habitat monitoring. This relationship is guided by Memorandum of Understandings between ADFG and BLM and ADFG and the Federal Subsistence Board and is supported by annual funding through a Cooperative Agreement and expenditures by each agency, as well as the Yukon Territorial Government. BLM-provided funding has been recognized by ADFG as critical to implementation of the Fortymile recovery plan.

The Steese NCA was historically heavily used as a calving area by the Fortymile caribou herd, formerly known as the Steese-Fortymile herd. In 1920, this herd numbered several hundred thousand animals but declined to an estimated low of 6,500 in the 1970s, by which time the herd used only a fraction of its former range. In 1994 an interagency, international group was formed with the goal of restoring the herd into its former range that used to span from north of Dawson City, Yukon through the Steese NCA near Fairbanks, Alaska. The cooperative effort has seen successes during the last decade, as caribou have expanded their range back into both units of the Steese NCA. This year ADFG estimates show the herd has grown to a population of approximately 83,000 animals. With the increase population, biologists are now concerned about the quality of the range because some indices of herd condition suggest a decline in nutritional status. New goals to slow the herd's growth have required flexible changes to hunting regulations and the ability to align State and federal regulations.

This year EIFO worked with the Eastern Interior Regional Advisory Council and the Federal Subsistence Board to obtain temporary authority to set season dates (used most often to close hunts when harvest quotas are met), harvest limits, and sex restrictions for federal lands within Fortymile caribou hunt areas. We also submitted a proposal to the Federal Subsistence Board to make this authority permanent. More information about the caribou habitat management can be found in the Section 2 under wildlife resources.

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## **Birch Creek**

The Steese NCA is directed to protect the values of Birch Creek. In ANILCA, 126 miles of upper Birch Creek were designated as “wild” under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to be managed to protect and enhance water quality, the free-flowing condition, and the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of scenery, recreation, and fish diversity.

Approximately 77 miles of Birch Creek WSR flows through the South Unit of the Steese NCA.

Water quality (turbidity) in Birch Creek has historically been variable due primarily to the fluctuation of placer mining activities in the watershed. During past periods of active placer mining activity, water quality has been poor. Three stream segments in the Birch Creek drainage, upstream of the WSR, continue to be identified as water quality-limited for turbidity in Alaska’s Statewide Water Quality Reports from April 1992 through November 2018 (the latest report). These segments include Alaska ID Number Waterbody-Segment 40402-001 Birch Creek Drainage: Upper Birch Creek, Eagle Creek, and Gold Dust Creek.

Although recent regulatory enforcement has improved water quality downstream of the active placer mines on State mining claims, protecting water quality of Birch Creek WSR continues to be a substantial challenge during high-water events due to the extent of erosion from land features disturbed by past mining activity on State lands. No federal mining claims currently exist within the Birch Creek WSR corridor. Current Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC) priority actions for upper Birch Creek include continued inspections to monitor active mine sites, particularly during storm events; continued implementation of reclamation activities in key areas to address high-priority nonpoint source problems; and monitoring at key sites in the drainage to determine the extent of the water quality improvements. More information can be found in Section 2 under Aquatic Resources.

## **Comprehensive Travel and Transportation Management Planning**

In December 2016, a resource management plan (RMP) for the Steese NCA was completed. The RMP determined the OHV area designations to be “limited” and identified interim management decisions for the use of OHVs on BLM-managed public



*User-generated OHV trails evaluated for the Steese National Conservation Area's Travel Management Plan.*

lands. The plan also directed the BLM to develop a Comprehensive Travel and Transportation Management Plan (TMP) that will identify the final OHV management decisions and establish allowable uses in the Steese NCA.

This year, significant time and effort was put into developing a TMP for the Steese NCA. Over the winter, the BLM's interdisciplinary team (ID team) worked with Logan Simpson LLC to compile resource data, generate criteria for area and route evaluations, and finalize the route inventory. Four public meetings were held in the spring to review maps and verify inventoried routes while discussing recreation and access opportunities. During the summer, the ID team began route evaluations to address resource and access concerns, including archeological surveys of summer use trails for potential impacts as required by the National Historic Preservation Act. Our objective with the TMP is to establish a long-term and sustainable travel network and transportation system of areas, roads, primitive roads, trails, and other

transportation features. By moving toward a desired transportation network rather than relying on unmanaged cross-country travel, we can more effectively serve the public while minimizing resource damage.

## Planning and NEPA

### Status of the Resource Management Plan

- Record of Decision and Approved Eastern Interior Resource Management Plan, December 2016

### Status of Activity Plans

- Recreational Activity Management Plan, October 1993
- Birch Creek National Wild and Scenic River Management Plan, December 1983
- Comprehensive Transportation and Travel Management Plan in preparation\*

\*Logan Simpson LLC is currently contracted to complete this plan under direction of the BLM.

### Status of the RMP Implementation Strategy

- EIFO is currently working through a Resource Management Plan Implementation Strategy to develop step-down plans identified in the RMP. One of these is the travel management plan for the Steese NCA. As detailed in Section 2: Programs and Accomplishments Public Access, EIFO staff is currently working through the route evaluation phase of the TMP with the contractor. Additional step-down plans identified in the Implementation Strategy are the Recreation Activities Management Plan and the Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River Management Plan.

## Staffing

The Steese NCA is administered by EIFO, which is also responsible for the following Congressionally-designated Special Areas: the Fortymile WSR, Beaver Creek WSR, and the White Mountains National Recreation Area (NRA). The following table summarizes the positions and percentage of time dedicated to Steese NCA duties.

**Table of Steese NCA Staff**

Position	Series/Grade	% Time Dedicated	Home Office*
Field Manager	0340/13	10	FO
Law Enforcement	1801/11	20	FO
Assistant Field Manager/ Resources	0340/12	10	FO

<b>Position</b>	<b>Series/Grade</b>	<b>% Time Dedicated</b>	<b>Home Office*</b>
Assistant Field Manager/ Visitor Services Steese NCA Manager	0340/12	20	FO
Archaeologist	0193/12	20	FO
Archaeologist - Seasonal	0193/9	30	FO
Archaeologist Technician	0102/7	30	FO
Fish Biologist	0482/11	10	FO
Hydrologist	1315/11	10	FO
Physical Scientist	1301/11	10	FO
Realty Specialist	1170/11	10	FO
Wildlife Biologist	0486/11	10	FO
Wildlife Biologist	0486/11	50	FO
Outdoor Recreation Planner	0023/11	50	FO
Interpretive Park Ranger	0025/9	50	FO
Park Ranger - Seasonal	0025/7	90	FO
Natural Resource Specialist	0401/9	10	FO
Geologist	1350/9	20	FO
Physical Science Technician - Seasonal	1311/4	10	FO
District Manager	0340/14	10	DO
Budget Analyst	0560/11	10	DO
Planning & Environmental Coordinator	0301/12	5	DO
National Conservation Lands Lead	0301/13	10	SO

\*FO = Eastern Interior Field Office, DO = Fairbanks District Office, SO = Alaska State Office

# 2 Programs and Accomplishments

## General Accomplishments

This year brought not only numerous caribou to the Steese NCA but also new BLM initiatives to sustainably develop natural resources while building on our legacy of conservation stewardship for the Steese NCA’s unique values. In FY19, we strengthened partnerships to improve our management of the Fortymile Caribou habitat. We delved into a comprehensive effort to address the use of OHVs in the Steese NCA — an effort that quickly proved timely as abundant caribou brought record numbers of hunters onto public lands near the Steese Highway. We prepared for next year’s celebrations of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Steese NCA and ANILCA as well as the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Pinnell Mountain NRT. Before and during the field season, specialists worked with placer miners on incorporating sound reclamation design into their operations. Our FY19 accomplishments in specific programs are detailed below.



*Rugged ridges of Mt. Prindle RNA*

## General Accomplishments Table

	Number of Visitors	Education Participants	Interpretative Participants	Visitor Center/Contact Station Visits	Hours of Volunteers	Abandoned Mining Claims	Miles of Cultural Resource Inventory	Miles of Inventoried Trails
<b>TOTALS</b>	33,280	2,884	821	N/A	239	64	58	398

## Education, Outreach, and Interpretation

### Fairbanks Community Events

EIFO participates in a variety of community events each year. These events are an important opportunity for BLM staff to interact with the public and for the public to make connections with Steese NCA resources. In addition to providing assorted brochures and maps at these events, we also provided information about popular activities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, berry picking, and OHV use.

The BLM hosts an information booth every year at Fairbanks' spring and winter trade show events, which attract thousands of outdoor enthusiasts from across Alaska. At these trade shows, EIFO staff made hundreds of contacts, providing information about recreation opportunities for visitors of various skill levels and helping people to learn how to safely access their public lands.

Trade Show Event	Public Contacts
Outdoor Show – 3-day event	1,200
Winter Expo – 2-day event	800



*Children's boat safety activity.*

Every year, EIFO participates in several fairs around the Fairbanks area and the Fort Wainwright U.S. Army post. In addition to staffing an information table at each of these family-oriented events, we led children through an activity that promotes the safe enjoyment of rivers and lakes.

Community Fair Event	Public Contacts
Ft. Wainwright Earth Day	320
Ft. Wainwright Safety Stand Down	155
Fairbanks Families Health Fair	299
Children's Museum Fostering Families	110

### Outdoor Days

Every spring, EIFO employees participate in the interagency Outdoor Days with the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District. This year the three-day event gave 514 sixth-grade students an opportunity to learn about field science and outdoor professions. Students tried their hand at digging for artifacts, tracking wildlife, and panning for gold. Demonstration jumps by the BLM Alaska Smokejumpers are a

highlight each year, and this year cooperative weather allowed smokejumpers to land each day during lunch and talk to students about firefighting.



*Three scenes from the 2019 Outdoor Days Event. Left: Digging for cultural artifacts. Center: Panning for gold. Right: Smokejumper landing during lunchtime demonstration.*

## **Cultural Resources**

During the 2019 field season, BLM archaeologists completed an intensive survey of OHV routes within the Steese NCA. This assessment of routes and their potential impact to cultural resources is an important step for EIFO's ongoing travel and transportation management planning effort and is required in all travel management plans to meet the requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act. The Steese NCA's trail inventory includes 398 miles of documented user-created trails and routes. Approximately 120 miles are currently considered summer-use OHV trail routes selected for potential survey during this project. During FY19, archaeologists surveyed 450 acres distributed over 55 miles of trails and routes and identified three new archaeological sites.

## **Wildlife Resources**

### **Youth Hire**

This year saw a major emphasis to organize wildlife data collected over many years into GIS databases. Through our cooperative agreement with the University of Montana, a recent college graduate (youth) was hired and significant progress was made in creating or updating raptor nest survey data, caribou GPS telemetry data, caribou collar video collections, moose aerial survey data, and various data related to caribou food habits. We have already put these databases to use in providing data for field work projects.

## Fortymile Caribou Partnership

BLM Alaska continued work as a primary partner, with the ADFG and the Department of Environment of Yukon Territory, in managing, inventorying, and monitoring the Fortymile Caribou Herd and habitat. The National Park Service has also contributed in this partnership. (See Science section for more.)



*A caribou crosses tundra in the fall.*

Herd growth and resulting changes in movement patterns have resulted in high numbers of caribou along the Steese Highway in the past several years. Herd proximity to road access has brought very high hunting pressure. EIFO biologists advised members of the Fortymile Caribou Harvest Management Planning Team (an international team composed primarily of members of local advisory groups) as it prepared the Harvest Management Plan that will guide the next five years. The

working group's concern this year was focused on the rate of herd growth. ADFG data on pregnancy rates and body weights indicate a long-term decline in nutritional condition, possibly indicating that carrying capacity of habitat is being approached. However, the herd is not yet using portions of the historic range, and nutritional condition may stabilize or improve if it does. Herd managers hope that an ongoing habitat relationships study, along with long-term interagency monitoring, will provide insight into the quality of unused historical habitat.

## Aquatic Resources

### Stream Reclamation

Monitoring continued on the Harrison Creek Stream Channel Reclamation Project. Harrison Creek, a major tributary to Birch Creek WSR, is located in the Steese NCA's South Unit. The reclamation project includes several sections of the 11 miles of the Harrison Creek valley that have been disturbed by placer gold mining dating back to the late 1890s. Reclamation became necessary for several mined areas that were abandoned or where past reclamation efforts had not successfully supported vegetation and aquatic life to be re-established.

Since 2011, we have evaluated these reclamations through semi-permanent photo points, estimating the complexity of riparian vegetation, surveying a longitudinal and three cross-sectional profiles of the stream channel, completing a Bank Erosion

Hazard Index survey of the entire stream reach, and measuring the composition of riverbed material. During annual monitoring, in 2019 the stream and riparian conditions at these mine sites showed modest improvement in streambank stabilization from previous years. None of the reclamation sites have yet satisfied the reclamation requirements, however we continue to work with operators and monitor to achieve success.



*These photos of Harrison Creek in 2017 and 2019 show the effects of BLM reclamation advice to a mine operator who pulled the streambanks back from the stream's edge to approximate original contours. This reduces the slope of the bank and decreases erosion while providing a chance for natural revegetation to occur. Over time, vegetation further increases bank stability by binding soils in place with new root and stem growth.*



Data collected through this work can be used to: 1) describe the impacts to fish and aquatic resources from land use proposals that alter stream channels, riparian vegetation, and floodplains, 2) develop mitigation and reclamation techniques that will reduce short- and long-term impacts to fish and aquatic resources, and, 3) determine whether the required stabilization of stream banks has been achieved after reclamation. Ultimately, the BLM Alaska will use this type of data to make future land management decisions that result in the sustained yield of fish and aquatic resources while still allowing for surface-disturbing activities.

## **Birch Creek Water Quality Monitoring**

The BLM monitors the water quality of upper Birch Creek utilizing an automated stream gage station equipped with GOES satellite telemetry. The stream gage is located near the start of the WSR corridor, upstream of the Upper Birch Creek Wayside at MP 94 Steese Highway and is operated in cooperation with the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC) and the National Weather Service (NWS). Data collection currently includes water stage, water temperature, air temperature, cumulative precipitation, and water turbidity at 15-minute intervals. Data are archived on the website and on internal BLM servers. Hourly data is available for public viewing on-line at the following NOAA websites:

[https://hads.ncep.noaa.gov/cgi-bin/hads/interactiveDisplays/displayMetaData.pl?table=dc&nesdis\\_id=32B3986C](https://hads.ncep.noaa.gov/cgi-bin/hads/interactiveDisplays/displayMetaData.pl?table=dc&nesdis_id=32B3986C)

This gage is important for monitoring daily turbidity levels to determine the extent of water quality improvements in the upper Birch Creek watershed and working with ADEC to resolve water quality issues when they occur.



*Upstream view of Birch Creek at river mile 0 of the designated wild and scenic river, showing good water quality and low turbidity at low flow.*

Providing real-time climate and streamflow data also represents a major benefit to recreational boaters planning float trips on Birch Creek WSR for fishing, hunting, and wildlife viewing. Visitors planning river trips rely on this important information to help

with trip planning and launch decisions. When the system is out of service, visitors call the Fairbanks District Office to find out when the system will be in service and inquire about river conditions.

Floatability improves with additional water in the creek. Stage of less than 1.0 foot is very low flow, making it difficult for floating. Stage of 2 feet is moderate flow, representing good float conditions, and stage of 3 feet is near bank full, reducing gravel bar camping opportunities. BLM recreation websites provide links to the current observations, available to the public on the NWS's Hydrometeorological Automated Data System (HADS) website: (<https://hads.ncep.noaa.gov/charts/AK.shtml>).

### **Locatable and Mineral Materials**

EIFO mining compliance specialists conducted seasonal mining inspections this year on Harrison Creek, Eagle Creek, Frying Pan Creek, and Bottom Dollar Creek within the Steese NCA's South Unit.

We continued to prioritize removal of abandoned mining equipment and solid waste on both active and voided mining claims in the Steese NCA in 2019. Specific priorities included mine sites on Bottom Dollar Creek, Ptarmigan Gulch, Volcano Creek, and Loper Creek. Most of these sites are located on mining claims that have been voided for decades; one of the issues with removing abandoned mining property is working with owners who are either elderly, deceased, or otherwise incapable of addressing their circumstances.

This year, to resolve some of these legacy mining issues, we completed much of the pre-work required for cleaning up solid waste and occupancies on voided claims and pursuing cost-recovery with the former claim owners where appropriate. Next year we plan to complete these efforts.

## **Partnerships**

### **Hunter Ethics Working Group**

Since 2010, the Eastern Interior Alaska Subsistence Regional Advisory Council (EIRAC) has been advocating for the Federal Subsistence Management Program to develop a hunter ethics education outreach program in partnership with federal and state land management agencies and various user groups, including tribal and hunter organizations, hunting guides, and air taxis. In response to concerns voiced by the EIRAC, three outreach concepts for hunter ethics were developed in September 2017 during a workshop hosted by the USFWS Office of Subsistence Management. The workshop involved 23 stakeholders from the BLM, USFWS, NPS, U.S. Air Force, Department of Defense, State of Alaska, the Alaska Outdoor Council, University of Alaska Fairbanks, tribes, Native corporations, and Tanana Chiefs Conference. The three concepts developed by the working group are outlined below:

### ***Hunt like an Alaskan***

Objective: Build relationships and understanding between military personnel, communities in the Eastern Interior Region, and the land.

### ***Local Community Liaison***

Objective: Convey community-developed messages about local hunting values and traditions to hunters as they travel into areas in effort to build mutual understanding.

### ***Hunt with Heart: It's the Alaskan Way***

Objective: Develop outreach to unify Alaskans (and those who hunt in Alaska) around shared values.

Work continued in 2018 to refine the concepts and in 2019 the working group made progress on one of its three primary concepts: *Hunt like an Alaskan*. Along with a smaller working group, EIFO is helping to develop messaging and materials to distribute at events at nearby military installations.

### ***Hunting the Alaskan Way***

*near home or in a new place.*

- *Before we go hunting, we prepare our minds and hearts.*
- *To be good hunters, we learn about where we are going - everywhere is "home" to someone - and that matters.*
- *We arrive with respect for people, animals, the land, cultural heritage and local hunting practices, knowing good hunters who visit our homes will do the same.*
- *We learn all the rules we need to know, then follow them – respectful hunting is responsible hunting.*
- *We understand that how we hunt today becomes the traditions of the next generation - with every hunt we are creating a legacy that honors our children, our children's children, our state, and our nation - we are proud to hunt this way...*

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***This is hunting the Alaskan way.***

*"Hunting the Alaskan Way" messaging developed for military hunter outreach.*

## Recreation and Visitor Services

### Visitor use

Visitor use management is adjusting to new patterns of use, as shifting fall caribou migrations over the last few years have drawn thousands of hunters to the Steese NCA for the caribou hunt in August. Much of the area is open to cross-country use of off-highway vehicles (OHVs), and many hunters rely on them to access hunting sites. As a result of these changing hunter patterns, we have seen the proliferation of user-generated trails. Dry, rocky ridgelines are generally resilient to OHV travel, but in some places repeated travel over sensitive areas has damaged permafrost soils and existing infrastructure.



*Successful caribou hunters*



*OHV damage to the non-motorized Pinnell Mountain National Recreation Trail*

In preparation for this year's hunt, EIFO staff placed additional signs and posters at waysides to inform hunters about regulations and OHV limitations. Special attention was paid to Twelvemile Summit Wayside, a trailhead for the Pinnell Mountain NRT. Despite these efforts, motorized use impacted several sections (2 miles total) of the non-motorized National Recreation Trail as hunters on OHVs followed the hiking trail, cutting switchbacks and damaging trail improvements. Cross-country OHV travel is permitted on State of Alaska and BLM-managed public lands outside

the 100-ft trail corridor. To protect the trail, OHV traffic was directed away from the non-motorized trail by installing temporary fencing at both trailheads. To repair impacted sites, Steese NCA staff reduced erosion by placing water bars and promoted revegetation by dispersing native seeds.

### Visitor Use Tracking

The Steese NCA is remote, offering challenging recreation experiences and few developed sites. Visitors to remote areas generally stay several days to a week.

Visitation continues to be highest during the fall hunts, with the Steese NCA a popular destination for hunters seeking not just caribou, but also moose, Dall sheep, bear, gamebirds, and waterfowl. Winter hunting and trapping are also common activities throughout the Steese NCA.



*Aerial view of Clum's Fork, a major tributary to Birch Creek WSR in the Steese NCA.*

The remoteness of the Steese NCA contributes to the challenges of monitoring use. This year's use numbers were estimated from baseline visitation established previously for the Steese NCA and trends tracked at the nearby White Mountains NRA. Baseline visitation is based on comprehensive counts using traffic and trail counters for monitoring use of the Pinnell Mountain NRT and aerial counts of visitors on Birch Creek WSR.

This year, the area continued to see the higher level of use that has been recorded since 2017. Total visitation was 33,280 visits and 131,340 visitor days. Much of that use is dispersed across undeveloped areas, with a total of 7,719 dispersed use visits and 126,162 visitor days. This recent increase in visitation is largely due to the August caribou hunt, which draws thousands of hunters. For the past few years, caribou have become more available to hunters due to several factors. Growth in the size of the herd has allowed for a larger harvest and longer hunting season. In addition, shifting migration patterns since 2017 have brought the herd into the Steese NCA and road-accessible areas near the Steese Highway during the hunt.



*Remote lands of the Steese Highway at Twelvemile Summit Wayside.*

The Steese Highway, a State Scenic Byway, runs between the North and the South Unit of the Steese NCA on its way to the Yukon River and the small communities of Central and Circle. The highway provides vistas of the Steese NCA and opportunities for wildlife sightings. The BLM maintains five Steese Highway waysides that provide access to Birch Creek WSR and the Pinnell Mountain NRT. These waysides are popular with highway travelers as well as visitors on their way into the Steese NCA. Amenities include parking, vault toilets, kiosks, and interpretive panels. With reduced visitor use during winter months, only Twelvemile Summit Wayside is maintained year-round with snow clearing provided by State of Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. Visitation for these facilities is summarized in the table below:

<b>Steese Highway BLM Waysides</b>	<b>Number of Visits</b>
Twelvemile Summit Wayside	10,231
Eagle Summit Wayside	6,885
Upper Birch Creek Wayside, WSR put-in	6,433
Lower Birch Creek Wayside , WSR take-out	1,712
Birch Creek Bridge, Motor Boat Launch	267

***The Pinnell Mountain National Recreation Trail***

The non-motorized trail traverses alpine ridges entirely above treeline as it follows the southern boundary of the Steese NCA’s North Unit between two Steese Highway Waysides: Eagle Summit Wayside and Twelvemile Summit Wayside. The trail’s two

emergency trail shelters provide protection from the alpine weather and cisterns for water. In FY19, the trail received visits from 2,950 day-hikers and 467 through-hikers.

This year's monitoring and inventory work included routine visits to trailhead waysides to stock kiosks with brochures and registration forms while servicing facilities. In addition, staff through-hiked the trail during the Artist in Residence's visit and to complete the trail's first archaeological survey.



*A backpacker hikes across tundra on the Pinnell Mountain NRT.*

### ***Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River***

Float boating continues to be a popular way to visit the Steese NCA, with peak periods during spring high water and during fall caribou and moose hunts. Floaters generally take a week to travel 110 river miles between the put-in at the Upper Birch Creek Wayside and the take-out at the Lower Birch Creek Wayside. Approximately 500 people made the trip in 2019.

In our annual monitoring of the WSR we incorporated a raptor survey to evaluate the watchable wildlife along the river. We discovered 26 peregrine falcons, 12 Harlan's red-tailed hawks, and 3 bald eagles. The general location and season of nesting raptors is shared with permitted guides and outfitters along with stipulations in order to enhance visitor education and enjoyment while reducing camping pressure near active nests.



*A peregrine falcon soars over Birch Creek WSR*



*Floaters line their canoes through Shotgun Rapids on Birch Creek WSR.*

## **Special Recreation Permits**

The BLM authorized and monitored eight Special Recreation Permits for activities in the Steese NCA. These included guided big game hunting, guided trips on Birch Creek WSR and the Pinnell Mountain NRT, day-hiking tours, dogsled and snowmobile tours, and transportation and outfitting services. Also included were nature and educational tours, among them 'midnight sun' tours and the University of Alaska Fairbanks Wilderness Leadership Course, which floated Birch Creek WSR

Every winter we authorize and monitor the Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race, a 1,000-mile competitive event that runs through Birch Creek WSR and the Steese NCA on its way between Fairbanks, Alaska and Whitehorse, Yukon.

## **Interpretive Media**

In FY19 we updated and printed 12,000 copies of the popular *Steese & Elliott Highways Travel Guide* to meet the new BLM design standards. This popular brochure is the main guide for accessing the Steese NCA. It is distributed statewide and provides general information on outdoor recreation and sites of interest including visible remnants of gold rush days.

## Volunteers

### Birch Creek WSR monitoring and Raptor Surveys

Retired BLM biologists, Tim and Erica Craig, volunteered 200 hours in the Steese NCA assisting with raptor surveys on Birch Creek WSR. The Craigs' expertise and extensive experience conducting raptor surveys were invaluable.



*A volunteer biologist observes peregrine falcons on Birch Creek WSR.*

### Artist in Residence

In preparation for celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Steese NCA and the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Pinnell Mountain NRT, the Steese NCA hosted photographer and watercolor artist Brad DeFrees. Hiking the 27-mile trail with BLM staff in August, DeFrees found inspiration in the opportunity to experience the trail's challenges and expansive alpine views while witnessing the migration of the Fortymile caribou herd. His watercolor is depicted on the cover. DeFrees plans on making a public presentation of his art and trail experiences in 2020.



*Artist in Residence Brad DeFrees hikes the Pinnell Mountain NRT.*

## **Public Access**

The two remote units of the Steese NCA (the North Unit and the South Unit) are separated by State of Alaska lands and the Steese Highway (AK Route 6). The five waysides along the Steese Highway provide access to the Steese NCA's primary recreation features (Birch Creek WSR and the Pinnell Trail NRT). A few primitive roads lead from the Steese Highway into the Steese NCA to provide access for recreation, mining, hunting, and subsistence activities. These roads are unmaintained, and most are suitable only for high-clearance, four-wheel-drive vehicles or OHVs.

The Steese NCA is open year-round to cross-country use of OHVs up to 1,000 pounds curb weight and 50-inch width, with the exception of Research Natural Areas, Birch Creek WSR, and a Primitive Area near the western boundary of the North Unit.

These exceptions are only open to cross-country travel in the winter. Utility Terrain Vehicles (UTVs), a larger type of OHV, exceed the size limitations for cross-country travel but are often ridden on the primitive roads open to highway vehicles. Visitors have created a number of OHV trails in higher use areas. Steese NCA and WSR boundaries are marked along only a few of the primitive roads and trails.



*An OHV trail follows a ridge near Harrison Creek in the South Unit of the Steese NCA.*

## **Comprehensive Travel and Transportation Management Plan**

This year BLM staff worked with environmental planning services contractor Logan Simpson LLC to create a Comprehensive Travel and Transportation Management Plan that will cover the Steese NCA. Public meetings were held in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Central, and Fort Yukon to review maps and verify inventoried routes while discussing recreation and access opportunities.



*Public meeting for Travel Management Planning in Fairbanks, Alaska*

The final inventory for evaluation included 398 miles of primitive roads and trails primarily used for hunting, recreation, mining, and subsistence. After finalizing the inventory, the planning team evaluated areas and routes to address resource and access concerns and began developing alternatives for an Environmental Analysis.

## **Rights-of-Way**

EIFO issued one right-of-way authorization in 2019, allowing the miner to use and maintain an access road along Squaw Creek so he could develop his nearby mining claims on State lands. No other requests for rights-of-way were received in 2019.

## Navigability

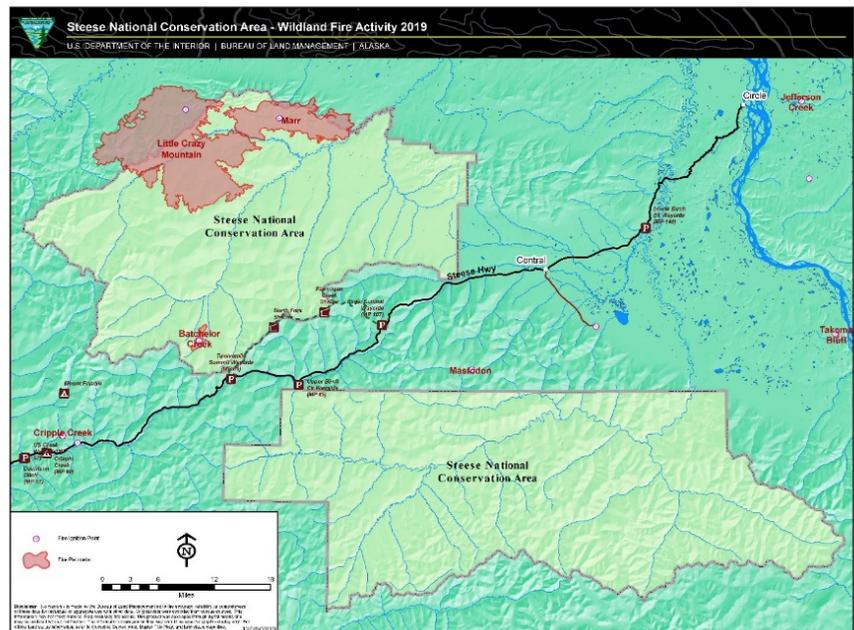
On August 24, 2018, the State of Alaska provided notice to the BLM of its intent to file a quiet title action to the submerged lands of Birch Creek WSR, designated by the BLM as non-navigable waters. The State of Alaska is asserting that title to these lands passed to Alaska at statehood based on the equal footing doctrine, the Submerged Lands Act, and the Alaska Statehood Act. A similar case, previously filed by the State of Alaska for portions of the Fortymile WSR (located on public lands also managed by EIFO), is currently working its way through the judicial system with the Department of Justice. Judicial navigability findings from the Fortymile WSR case, expected in 2020, will likely set precedence in the court system and could have impacts to future management of rivers on federally administered lands in Alaska.

## Other Program Topics

### Wildland Fire

#### Fire Activity

Alaska's busy 2019 fire season burned 2.6 million acres, including significant acreage along the northern boundary of the Steese NCA (see map below). Three lightning-ignited fires of significance burned in the Steese NCA's North Unit: the Little Crazy Mountain Fire (78,132 total acres/44,105 acres on BLM), the Marr Fire (23,040 total acres/19,746 acres on BLM), and the Bachelor Creek Fire (1,130 total acres total/856 acres on BLM). All three fires occurred in areas designated for Limited Fire management and overall suppression was not needed. Smokejumpers and helitack crews conducted chainsaw work and limited mop-up in successful efforts to protect a historic cabin from the Little Crazy Mountain Fire and a BLM-owned cabin from the Marr Fire. EIFO utilized the District and Alaska Fire Service Public Affairs personnel to communicate with miners, recreationists, and other BLM land users about hazards associated with fire activity and smoke from these and other nearby fires. These fires met the objectives for fire ecology and fuels reduction in BLM's Eastern Interior Resource Management Plan.



2019 wildfires in the Steese NCA were concentrated in the North Unit.



*Aerial view of the 2019 Marr Fire in the remote North Unit of the Steese NCA.*

### ***Campfire Restrictions***

Due to the extreme fire conditions, particularly in eastern Interior Alaska, campfires were restricted to established campgrounds on July 2. Ten days later BLM Alaska joined other State and federal agencies in implementing broader restrictions, including a ban on all open fires (campfires) on BLM-managed public lands for Southcentral and Interior Alaska. The fire restrictions were lifted on July 30 after heavy rains reduced fire hazards.

# 3 Science

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## Ongoing Scientific Research

### Fortymile Caribou Herd Recovery Partnership

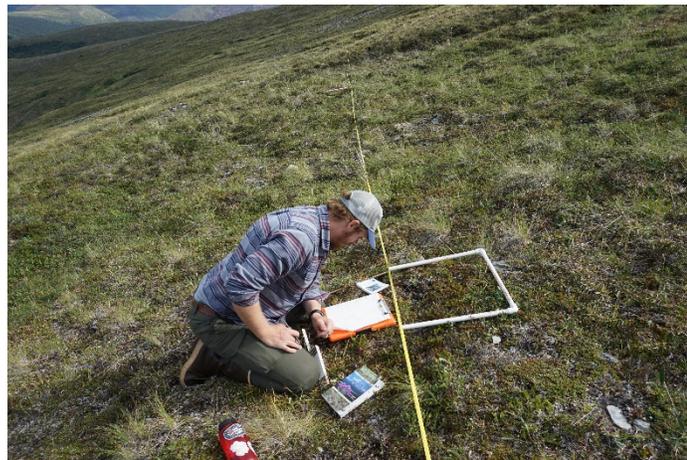
Partners: BLM, University of Montana, Northern Arizona University, ADFG, and Department of Environment of Yukon Territory (Environment Yukon).

Through successful cooperative management, including coordinated and targeted research efforts, the Fortymile caribou herd has grown and is now expanding into portions of the Steese NCA where they had long been absent. As the herd has grown, there is increasing interest in range condition and diet to gain a better understanding of critical habitat components and how they may respond to increasing caribou populations. This information will better allow managers to continue to optimize caribou range, an important value for management as identified in ANILCA.

#### ***Habitat Relationships***

This year was the second field season of the partnership investigating Fortymile caribou habitat relationships across current and historical ranges. Information on availability and quality of habitat will assist with difficult population management decisions.

Crews conducted intensive work at sixteen sites in Alaska and Yukon Territory (including four in the Steese NCA). At each site, researchers estimated plant cover at 10 plots (and then harvested plant material at half of those for biomass determination). They also collected forage samples, analyzed forage quality, counted fecal pellet groups, and used an Unmanned Aerial System (drone) to collect very high-resolution multispectral imagery.



*Chigago Botanical Garden Intern, Andrew Davies, estimates plant cover for a caribou forage quality study*

Northern Arizona University will utilize the multispectral imagery and biomass data to train satellite imagery with a goal of quantifying biomass of plant type groups in alpine habitats across the Fortymile herd's range. BLM's Intern with the Chicago Botanical Garden, Andrew Davies, became a key field team member on Alaska sites and spent much of the following several months drying and weighing plant samples in the lab.

### **Caribou Camera Collars**

University of Montana students and employees reviewed and classified nearly 10,000 video clips that had been captured by cameras on caribou during the summer of 2018. The second phase, beginning in 2020, will employ a botanist to identify consumed food items. Seventeen camera collars were refurbished and redeployed on female caribou. Quantifying caribou diet and habitat selection will greatly aid BLM habitat management efforts.



*Picture of caribou captured with a camera collar used to understand caribou diet and habitat use.*

### **Caribou Quality Monitoring**

EIFO biologists collected samples of caribou forages in both early and late summer at Eagle Summit and Twelvemile Summit, with the intention of establishing a long-term monitoring effort. Variations in forage quality through time may be a primary driver of caribou condition.

### **Caribou Diet**

In FY19, EIFO biologists summarized ongoing laboratory analyses of fecal pellets for Fortymile and White Mountains caribou. Biologists collected additional samples opportunistically during other field work and when caribou occurred near roads.

### **Forage**

During caribou hunt monitoring, biologists collected paired rumen and fecal samples from hunter-harvested caribou to better characterize caribou use of mushrooms — a high-value late summer food item that is not very detectable in feces. An understanding of caribou diet will aid in identification of critical habitats and design of habitat monitoring.

### **Other Caribou Collaborations**

- *Cumulative effects assessment of human impacts on the Fortymile caribou herd in the Yukon.* Environment Yukon and University of Montana
- *Influence of fire and habitat disturbance on caribou habitat use and population dynamics.* This project is supported by NASA's Arctic-Boreal Vulnerability Experiment. Eric Palm, a University of Montana Phd student, is including Fortymile caribou GPS data and a lichen cover map.

### **Rock Ptarmigan Reproductive Ecology**

ADFG and the University of Alaska Fairbanks completed field work to examine the reproductive ecology of rock ptarmigan near Eagle Summit. From May through August, researchers found and monitored 54 nests to collect data on nest location, clutch size, incubation initiation and duration, nest success/failure rate, bi-weekly chick survival, and mortality rates. After hatch, field crews monitored radio-collared hens to collect data on brood survival. FY19 was the second year of a 3-year graduate research study. The BLM supported this work by providing use of the Central Field Station. ADFG intends to use information gained from this project to inform management decisions to include decisions on bag limits and hunting seasons.



*Biologist fits a rock ptarmigan with a radio transmitter.*

### **Publications**

Three multi-agency wildlife-related publications were completed or accepted by journals this year. BLM biologists are collaborators on two NASA Arctic-Boreal Vulnerability Experiment (ABOVE) projects, which supported the two peer-reviewed journal articles.

Environmental Influences on Dall's Sheep Survival. *In revision.* van de Kerk, Madelon; Arthur, Stephen; Bertram, Mark; Borg, Bridget; Herriges, Jim; Lawler, James; Mangipane, Buck; Lambert Koizumi, Catherine; Wendling, Brad; Prugh,

Laura. *Journal of Wildlife Management*.

Lichen cover mapping for caribou ranges in interior Alaska and Yukon. *In press*. Macander, Matthew; Palm, Eric; Frost, Gerald; Herriges, Jim; Nelson, Peter; Roland, Carl; Russell, Kelsey; Sutor, Michael; Bentzen, Torsten; Joly, Kyle; Goetz, Scott; Hebblewhite, Mark. *Environmental Research Letters*.

Bertram, M.R., J. Herriges, C.T. Seaton, J. Lawler, K. Beckmen, and S. Dufford. 2018. Distribution movements, and survival of Dall's sheep (*Ovis dalli dalli*) in the White Mountains, Alaska. *Refuge report 2018-002*. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Fairbanks, Alaska.

## **Science Plan**

The EIFO is developing a science strategy plan for the Steese NCA and the neighboring White Mountains NRA to prioritize and coordinate research efforts and scientific outreach in accordance with the goals of the Science Strategy for the National Landscape Conservation System. The plan is near completion and will be submitted to the Alaska State Office in FY20.

# 4 Resources, Objects, Values and Stressors

Congress established the Steese NCA, as stated in Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, P.L. 96-487, At Title IV, sec 401, 1980, to provide for the immediate and future protection of the lands in federal ownership within the framework of a program of multiple use and sustained yield and for the maintenance of environmental quality. Special values to be considered in planning and management of the area are caribou range and Birch Creek.

## **Caribou Range**

Two caribou herds occupy lands within the Steese NCA and the White Mountains NRA. The White Mountains Caribou Herd resides year-round in the White Mountains NRA and Steese NCA's North Unit, while the much larger Fortymile Caribou Herd seasonally occupies the North and South Steese NCA units and the White Mountains NRA as well as lands to the southeast. In 1920 an estimated 260,00–570,000 Fortymile caribou crossed the Steese Highway to calving grounds in the White Mountains NRA and North Unit of the Steese NCA. Numbering an estimated 83,000 caribou in 2017, the Fortymile Caribou Herd is one of Alaska's most important herds for subsistence and sport harvest.

The Steese NCA's North Unit has long been the primary winter range of the small White Mountains Herd and has been consistently used heavily by the Fortymile herd in winter since 2013. The herd has also been making more use of the Steese NCA during the summer, and began heavily using the Clums Fork calving area of the Birch Creek drainage in 2016. This was the main calving area in late 1960s and 1970s.

Interagency monitoring includes caribou numbers, productivity and survival, calf weights, pregnancy rates, movements and distribution, food habits, and assessment of vegetation from ground plot to satellite imagery scales. More details about the work of the Fortymile Caribou Partnership can be found in Section 3: Science.

## Caribou Range Status and Trend Table

Status of Resource*	Trend*
Good	Declining somewhat as Fortymile herd use of the area increases. Lichens are most sensitive and showing increased signs of use, but are lightly used relative to the traditional core summer range. Two large burns in 2019 continued a recent trend of increased fire, which removes lichen-rich, old spruce stands.

\*Excellent, Good, Fair and Poor are qualitative terms and are based on professional judgement intended to provide a simple overview of resource status. Trend is based on resource condition since the 1980 Steese NCA date of designation.

## Caribou Range Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Acres in Steese NCA	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY19
1,198,113	1,198,113	100% of unit has suitable caribou range. The herd moves throughout the unit and concentrates in certain areas seasonally, as indicated in the narrative above.	1,198,113

## Stressors Affecting Caribou Range

Caribou can degrade range quality through overuse. Monitoring of caribou population, movements, and distribution continues through interagency cooperation. Habitats are monitored at varying scales — from ground plots to satellite imagery. Understanding the interaction of weather, climate, fire, caribou population and distribution across habitats as well as caribou productivity and survival are all important in managing the herd and its habitat and for providing subsistence opportunities as required by ANILCA. Through our partnerships with ADFG, Yukon Environment, and NPS, we are gathering information on all of these topics.

Extensive burns eliminate lichen as a forage source for 60 or more years. Two large burns occurred in the North Unit of the Steese in 2019 in an area heavily used by the Fortymile Caribou Herd in recent years (extensive burns occurred in 2004 and 2005 as well). Although alpine summer range is thought to more directly limit this caribou herd, spruce-lichen winter range is declining in extent and may become limiting.

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OHVs provide access for hunters to Fortymile caribou, but uncontrolled, cross-country use can impact caribou habitat and increase risks of invasive plants. Trail density can be an issue with high hunting season use, possibly affecting caribou movements and migration.

### **Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River Water Quality**

In 1980, Congress directed the BLM to consider Birch Creek's special value in management of the Steese NCA and designated the 126-mile-long corridor as a wild and scenic river. Approximately 77 miles of Birch Creek WSR runs through the Steese NCA.

Extensive mining for placer gold has occurred in the Birch Creek drainage since the late 1800s. Early gold operations mined streambed gravels — in many cases from valley wall to valley wall — with little or no reclamation. Because of persistent, elevated turbidity levels resulting from mining activity, upper Birch Creek and several small tributaries, located primarily on State land, were listed under the Clean Water Act as impaired waters for excess turbidity in April 1992. Water quality in Birch Creek WSR continues to be variable due primarily to the past placer mining practices in the watershed. State and federal agencies continue to work with the miners to reduce the turbidity and suspended solids levels entering the river. Based on limited data collected in 2018 and 2019, water quality is fair at low to moderate water levels. However, during periods of high water, erosion primarily from areas disturbed by past mining on State lands continues to contribute to elevated turbidity levels on Birch Creek WSR. Determination of current Birch Creek water quality status and trend is based on reports and observations beginning in 1983, when the BLM developed the River Management Plan for Birch Creek WSR and reported water quality as poor.

## Birch Creek Water Quality Status and Trend Table

Status of Birch Creek Water Quality*	Trend*
<p><b>Fair:</b> Water quality is fair at low to moderate water levels based on limited 2018–2019 data. However, during periods of high water, erosion primarily from areas disturbed by mining continues to contribute to elevated turbidity levels on Birch Creek.</p>	<p><b>Improving:</b> Since the 1980 establishment of the Steese NCA unit, Birch Creek water quality has improved.</p>

\*Excellent, Good, Fair and Poor are qualitative terms and are based on professional judgement intended to provide a simple overview of resource status. Trend is based on resource condition since the 1980 Steese NCA date of designation.

## Birch Creek Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Miles in Steese NCA	Miles Inventoried	Miles Possessing Object	Miles Monitored in FY19
77	77	100%	77

## Stressors Affecting Birch Creek Water Quality

### Current/Future Mining on Non-BLM Managed Lands

The Steese NCA and headwaters of Birch Creek WSR are highly mineralized and of interest for further exploration and development by the mineral industry. The headwaters area has mixed ownership comprised of BLM- and State-managed lands, with active mining claims on State lands. Mining activity upstream and adjacent to the Steese NCA boundary has the potential to adversely impact water quality, fish, and aquatic resources within the Steese NCA. Monitoring and enforcing mitigation measures, as well as the use of improved mining and reclamation techniques, aim to reduce adverse impacts to the resources adjacent to and within the Steese NCA.

### Warming Climate Trends

The Steese NCA landscape increasingly shows impacts due to a warming climate, including vegetation changes, especially those from more frequent wildfires, and soil instability with the loss of permafrost. Adverse impacts to water quality may result from increased erosion of permafrost soils.

# 5 Summary of Performance Measure

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The Congressionally-defined purposes for designation of the Steese NCA were detailed in the previous chapter. Those objects, resources, and values are generally in good condition, and have remained in good condition since the NCA was established. The special values which the NCA was created to conserve, specifically those related to caribou habitat and Birch Creek, are still present and are still drawing scientists, the visiting public, and users from local communities.

As benchmarks have not yet been established through a Science Plan, the following assessment focuses only on those ecological values currently being monitored in the NCA.

<b>Resources, Objects, and Values Status Summary Table</b>		
<b>Resource, Object, or Value</b>	<b>Status*</b>	<b>Trend*</b>
Caribou Range	Good	Stable
Birch Creek WSR Water Quality	Fair	Improving

\*Excellent, Good, Fair and Poor are qualitative terms and are based on professional judgement intended to provide a simple overview of resource status. Trend is based on resource condition since the 1980 Steese NCA date of designation.

# 6 Manager's Letter

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I am looking forward to filling several vacancies, especially the positions for Field Manager and Assistant Field Manager for Visitor Services. While I am grateful to the individuals that assisted the field office in FY19 by temporarily filling these and other vacant positions, permanent replacements for the vacancies will come as a great relief to EIFO staff.

This year significant work was made with the contractor Logan Simpson LLC to develop the Travel Management Plan for the Steese NCA. The route evaluation phase is nearly complete and I look forward to working through the next phase in 2020.

Subsistence hunting on federal lands in Alaska will continue to grow in importance for rural Alaskans. While managing caribou habitats in the Steese NCA continues, staff also collaborate with partners to manage harvests and habitats on a regional/landscape level. Recent changes in migration patterns of caribou will likely continue to present management challenges in the future. With increased growth of subsistence and recreational activities in the Steese NCA, implementation of a Travel Management Plan to address resource impacts is timely.

Current legal proceedings regarding navigability are likely to have management implications that will need to be addressed in the future.

Significant progress was made during 2019 to complete our science plan and I anticipate finalizing the plan in 2020. That plan covers the Steese NCA as well as the adjacent White Mountains NRA, also managed by the EIFO. Despite a focus on developed recreation in the White Mountains NRA, the connection between the two areas' natural resources includes caribou migration and calving. Developing a plan to address the resources and opportunities of both areas will assist us in managing this habitat at a larger scale and allow us to better track the science being conducted in both areas. The science plan will focus on research partnerships and with the new science grant procedures being implemented nationally, we hope to identify research partners and opportunities, monitor their work and highlight their findings, as the data will help inform management decisions.

As we transition into 2020, I am encouraged by the opportunities ahead to implement RMP decisions and finalize science and business plans for this unique and important resource.



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

## Steese

### National Conservation Area

Fairbanks District Office  
Bureau of Land Management  
Eastern Interior Field Office  
222 University Avenue  
Fairbanks, AK 99709  
Phone: 907-474-2200

February 4, 2020

The mention of company names, trade names, or commercial products does not constitute endorsement or recommendation for use by the federal government.

*Every February dog mushers test their mettle in the Steese National Conservation Area during the 1,000-mile Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race, which runs between Fairbanks, Alaska and Whitehorse, Yukon. The BLM issues a Special Recreation Permit for the portion of the course that follows Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River.*