



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



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Movements and Distribution of Radio-Collared Caribou in the Buckland Valley and Nulato Hills, Winter of 1989-90

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Open File Report 33
March 1991

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INTRODUCTION

With a minimum count of 343,000 caribou (*Rangifer tarandus granti*) in 1988, the Western Arctic Herd is the largest in Alaska and ranges over the northwest quarter of the state. This herd has continued to increase in size since 1976, when the population was estimated at 75,000 animals (Larsen et al. 1990). Parallel expansion into previously unoccupied winter range has also occurred since 1976. Presently, the Western Arctic Herd is an important subsistence resource to residents of approximately 30 rural villages. Moreover, people from throughout Alaska and elsewhere travel to northwest Alaska to view, photograph, and hunt caribou.

In 1975, NANA Reindeer Enterprises filed an amended application to graze reindeer (*R. t. tarandus*) in the northeast corner of the Seward Peninsula. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) issued a grazing permit to NANA for a maximum of 5,000 reindeer (BLM 1976). Nathan Hadley of Buckland and Doug Sheldon of Candle have held grazing permits in this area since 1987. The Henry family of Koyuk has grazed reindeer in the Koyuk drainage since 1962; Merlin Henry has herded 800 reindeer since 1981. BLM (1986) prepared an Allotment Management Plan (AMP) for his herd. The Sagoonick family of Shaktoolik has grazed reindeer along Norton Sound since 1968; the present herd has an estimated 1,400 reindeer. BLM (1990) also prepared an AMP for the Sagoonick herd. All four reindeer allotments fall within winter range of western arctic caribou.

Caribou and reindeer using the same rangeland have never been compatible (Shideler et al. 1986). When ranges of these two populations (wild and domestic) overlap, resident reindeer link with transient caribou and leave their grazing allotments. Adams (1983) prepared a Habitat Management Plan (HMP) because of this dual use conflict between caribou and reindeer in the Buckland Valley. This study included the Nulato Hills because western arctic caribou expanded their winter range southward into other reindeer allotments in recent years. This report partially implements the Buckland Valley HMP. Results from previous caribou surveys for this area were reported by Adams and Connery (1983), Smith (1984, 1985), Smith and Machida (1986), Robinson and Field (1987), Robinson (1988), and Robinson and Spindler (1989). The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) were

cooperating agencies in this study. Each agency funded their respective share of the work.

Objectives of this project were: (1) to document seasonal migration patterns and winter range of western arctic caribou in the Buckland Valley and Nulato Hills, (2) to monitor the caribou with respect to adjacent reindeer herding activities, and (3) to make information concerning caribou distribution and movements available to the public in a timely manner.

STUDY AREA

Encompassing 6.3 million acres, the Buckland Valley and Nulato Hills comprise one of the largest blocks of BLM-managed land in Alaska. This area is bounded on the north by the Selawik Hills, on the east by the Koyukuk and Yukon rivers, on the south by the Unalakleet River, and on the west by Norton Sound and the Seward Peninsula (Fig. 1). Four domestic reindeer grazing allotments overlap the study area (Fig. 2). The Buckland Valley is broad, whereas the Nulato Hills have rounded summits with gentle slopes dropping into narrow valleys. Elevation ranges from sea level to 3,411 feet atop Debauch Mountain in the Nulato Hills.

Regional climate is characterized by severe winters from October to April and cool, wet, windy summers. Normal winter temperatures range from -20 F to +10 F with extreme lows of -50 F to -60 F. Annual precipitation averages less than 15 inches, including less than 50 inches of snow. Snow depths on the ground vary because of drifting. The average wind speed is 11 knots year-round. Weather patterns can prevent aircraft from flying for several consecutive days (Selkregg 1977).

The areas lowest in elevation are characterized by graminoid vegetation, whereas higher, well-drained slopes are covered by low shrub scrub. The hills and mountains are covered by black spruce (*Picea mariana*) at lower elevations with graminoid and low shrub scrub above tree line. Tall willows (*Salix* spp.) and white spruce (*Picea glauca*) line the riparian zone, and several species of lichens grow throughout the study area.

Key wildlife species in this area are caribou, moose (*Alces alces*), grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*), and wolf (*Canis lupus*). A variety of furbearers, waterfowl, small game, and nongame species are also present. A detailed description of the

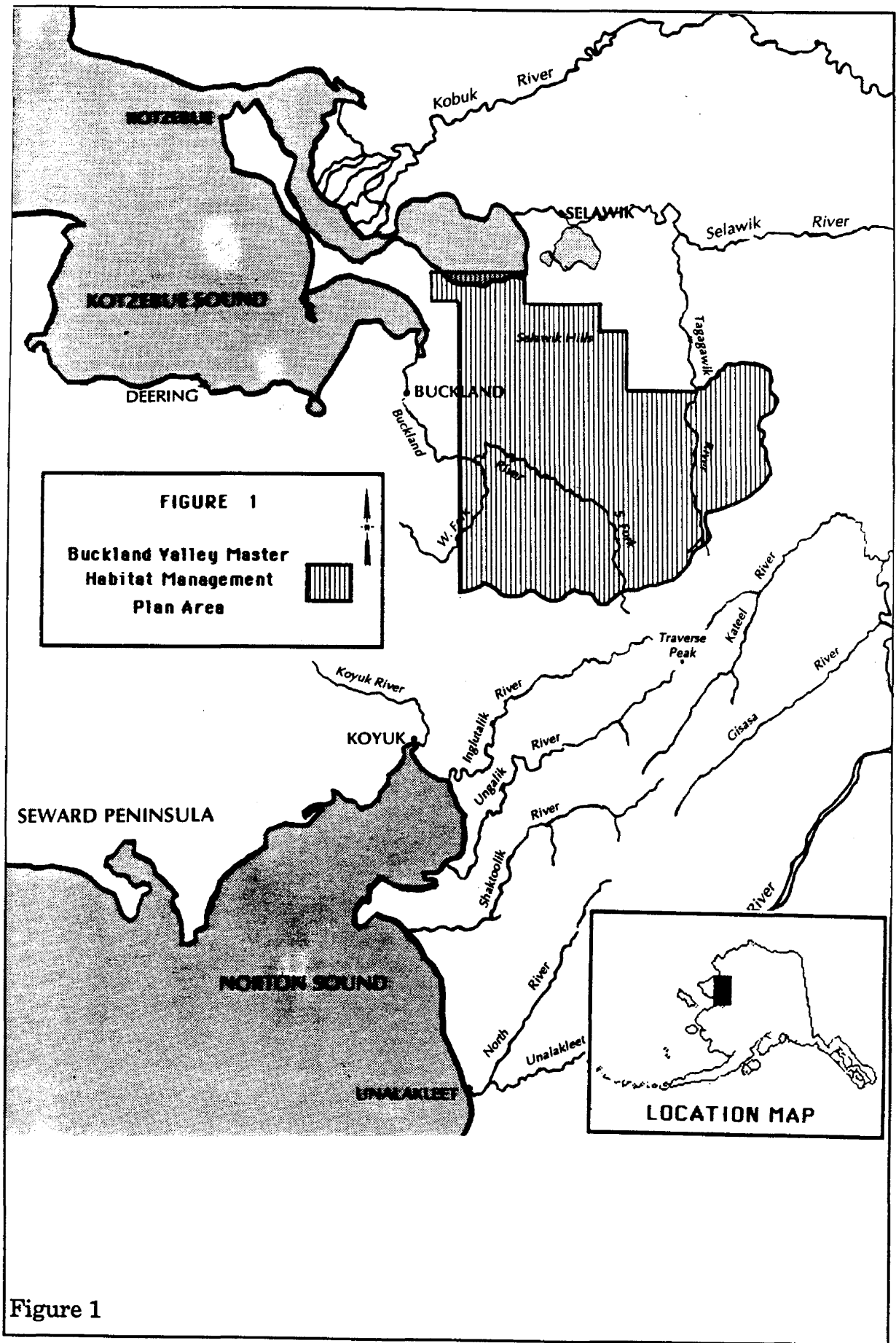


Figure 1

study area can be found in the *Buckland Valley Habitat Management Plan*, the *Northwest Unit Resource Analysis*, and the *Central Yukon Resource Management Plan* (Adams 1983, BLM 1982, 1986).

METHODS

Between September 4 and 11, 1989, ADFG personnel captured and fitted 32 caribou with radio-collars as they crossed the Kobuk River at Onion Portage. This collaring effort brought the total number of caribou fitted with functioning collars to approximately 112 animals. Thirteen radio-tracking flights over part or all of the Buckland Valley and Nulato Hills were conducted from October 4, 1989 to March 26, 1990 (Table 1). Flights were flown as high as 10,000 feet with either a Cessna 185 or 206 traveling at cruising speed. Locations of individual animals were recorded, mapped, and later transferred to a dBase III Plus file for storage on a personal computer at the ADFG office in Kotzebue. Locations of reindeer were also noted whenever possible. Locations were described by general areas within river drainages and, whenever possible, by township and range of the public land rectangular system of survey (BLM 1979).

Shaded areas on Figures 3-5 correspond to two different time periods depicting one or more

caribou surveys. The outside border encompasses all caribou located during the indicated flight. All of the reported mileage figures are considered as a minimum distance traveled. Since the caribou were not monitored daily, these figures represent only a measurement of distance between two location points.

RESULTS

Caribou

Three surveys were flown between October 4 and 11, locating 59 caribou; some animals were located more than once. After crossing the Kobuk River, the majority of caribou moved south and west through the Selawik River valley to the Buckland River valley, where a large aggregation occurred. Sixty-eight caribou were located during three surveys flown October 20, 26 and November 6. During this period, the animals moved near the southern extent of their winter migration. Three caribou were located east of Shaktoolik Village and one on the North Fork of the Unalakleet River (Fig. 3).

The November 28-29 survey located only 11 animals because of incorrect programming of the radiotelemetry receiver, but observations did show a continued southward migration. The

Table 1. Aerial surveys of radio-collared caribou across Buckland Valley and Nulato Hills, Winter of 1989-90.

Flight number	Survey date	Total number relocations	Agency	Observers
1	10/04/89	11	FWS	Spindler, Shaw
2	10/9-11/89	24	ADFG	Larsen, Dau
3	10/10/89	24	BLM	Robinson, Leykom
4	10/20/89	9	ADFG	Larsen, Dau
5	10/26/89	15	ADFG	Dau
6	10/26/89	15	ADFG	Smith, Nelson
7	11/06/89	29	BLM/FWS	Leykom, Karmun
8	11/28,29/89	11	BLM/ADFG	Leykom, Dau
9	12/20/89	30	ADFG	Dau, Hadley
10	1/18/90	43	ADFG	Coady, Machida
11	1/28/90	30	BLM/FWS	Leykom, Karmun
12	2/19/90	31	BLM	Leykom
13	3/26/90	37	BLM	Robinson, Field

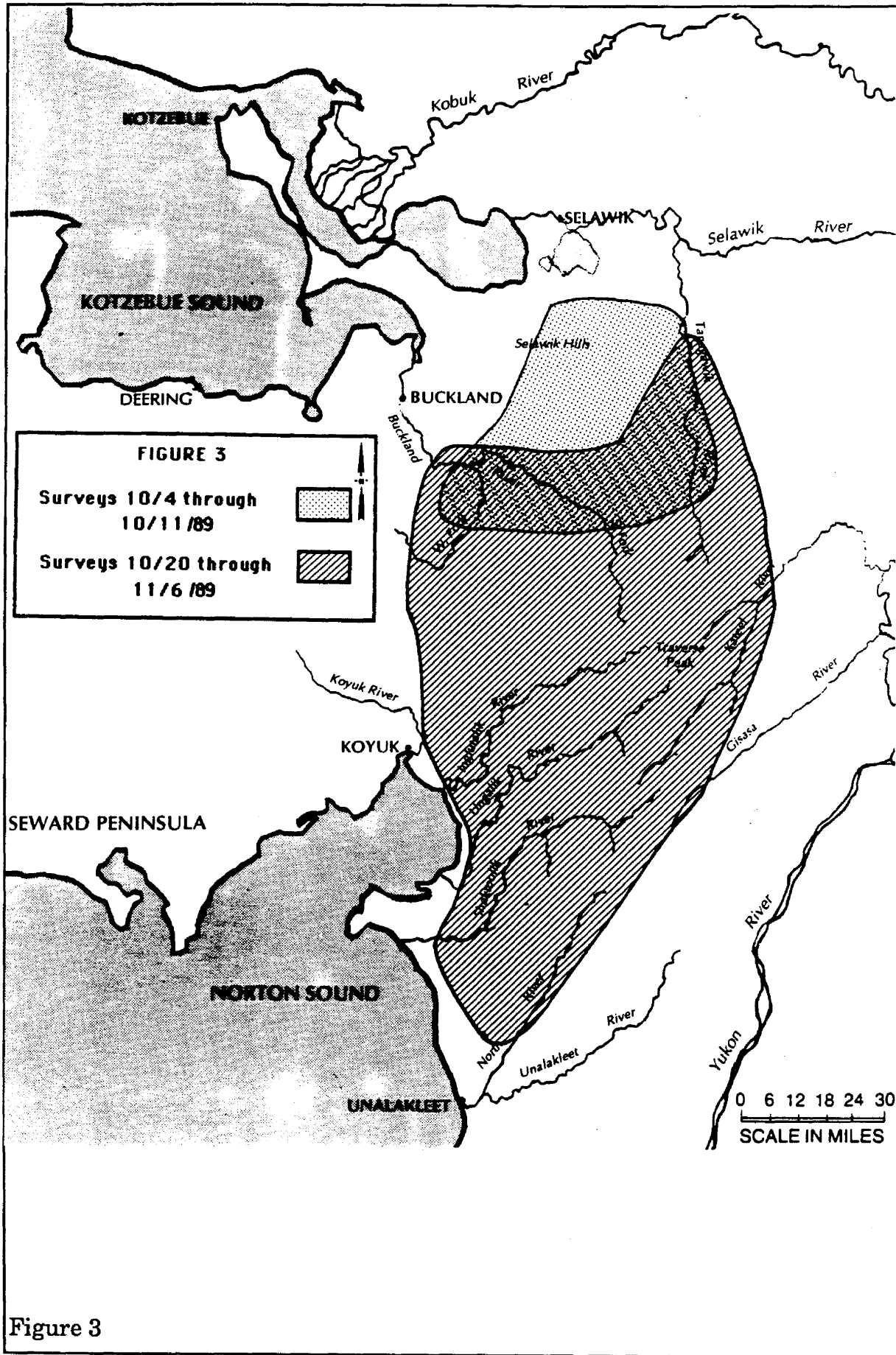


Figure 3

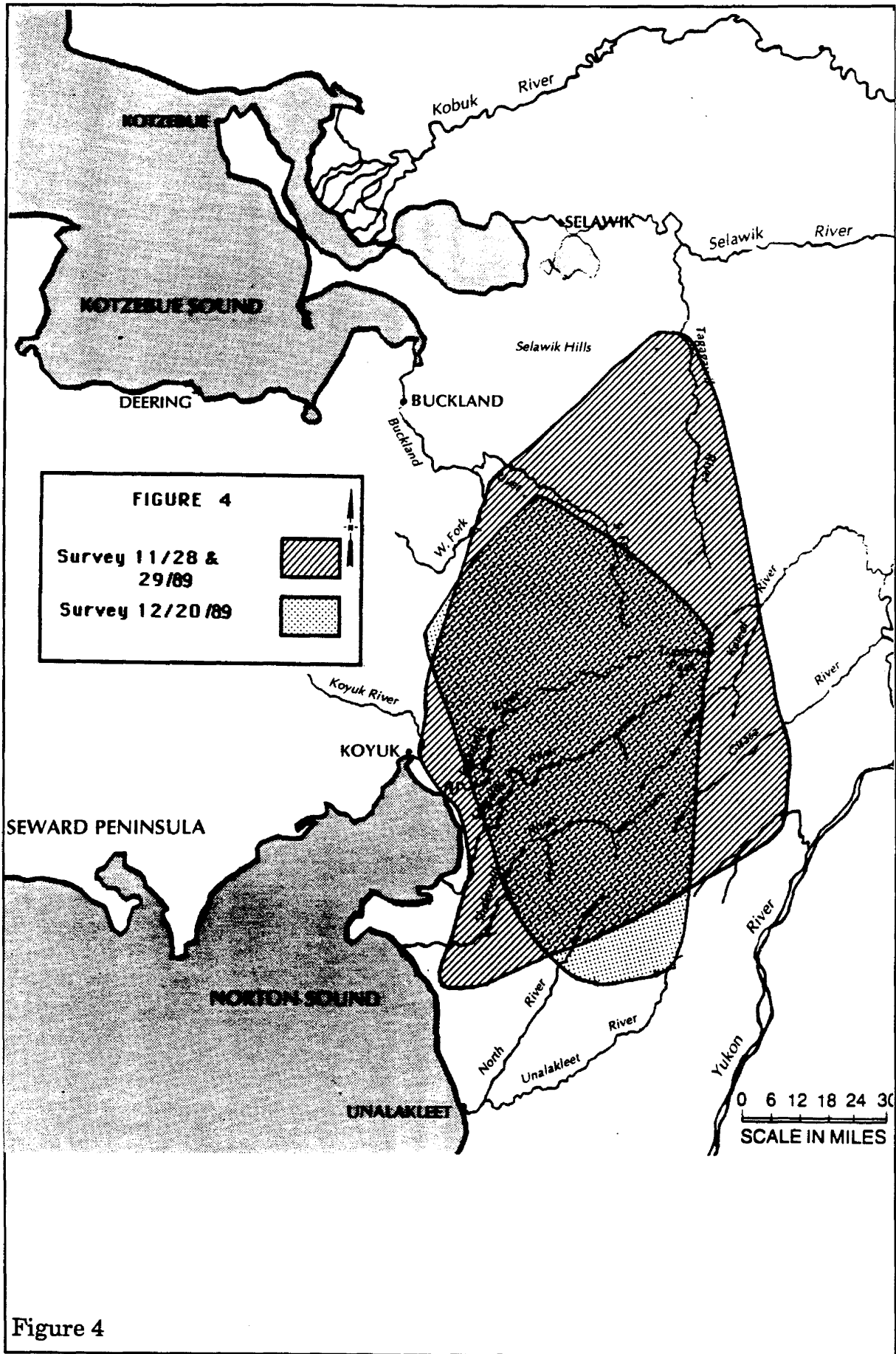


Figure 4

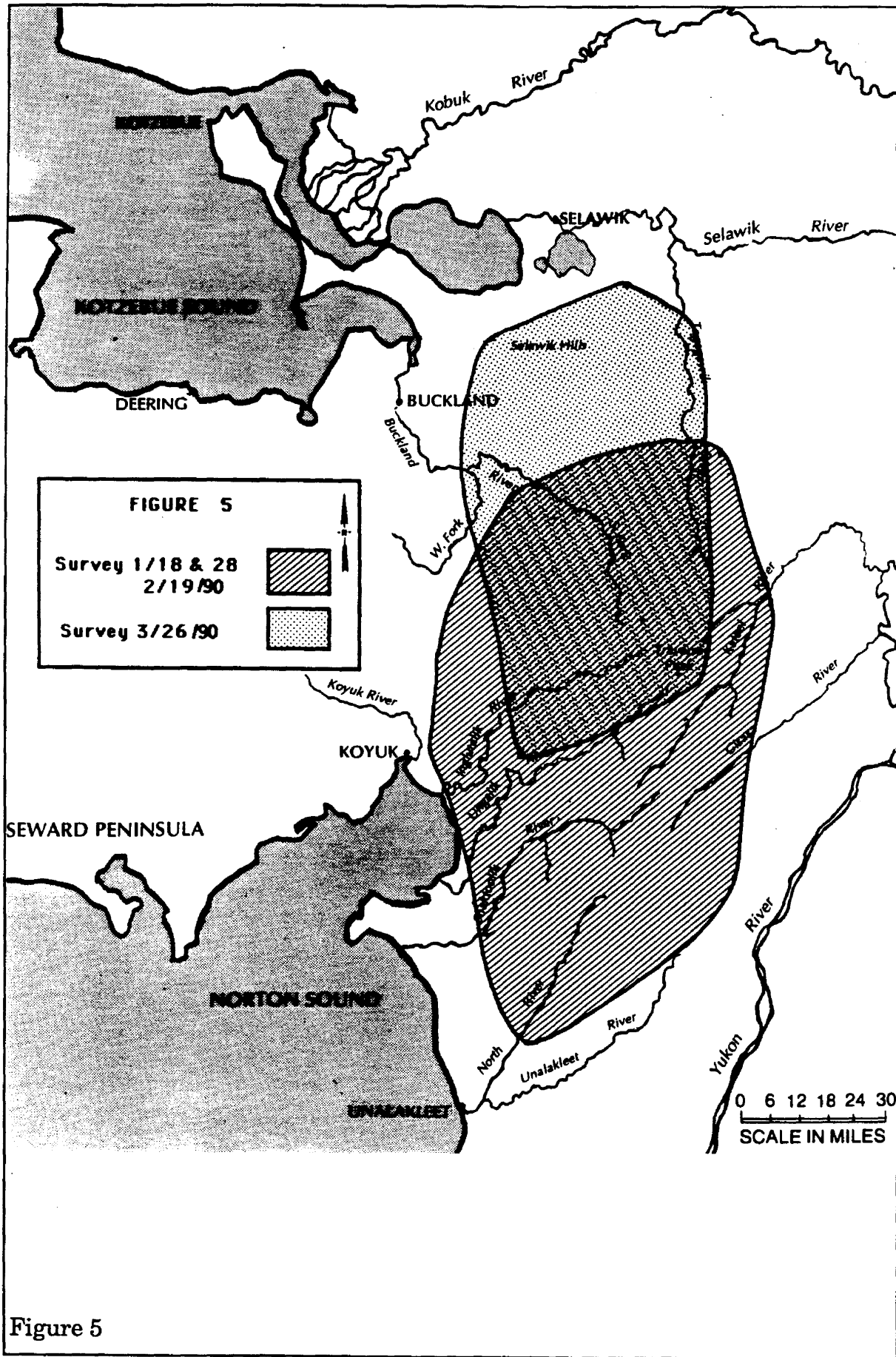


Figure 5

December 20 survey located 30 radio-collared caribou and observed more caribou continuing to move south from the Tagagawik River and Buckland Valley to the Inlitalik, Ungalik and Shaktoolik rivers (Fig. 4). Most caribou located in the November surveys were relocated in December. One animal ranged more than 60 miles north, while another was relocated just 15 miles from the previous survey.

Two surveys were conducted ten days apart during January. Distribution remained similar to that of December, with caribou once again between the Selawik Hills to the north and the Unalakleet River to the south (Fig. 5). The highest concentrations of caribou were in the South Fork Buckland, Ungalik, and Shaktoolik drainages. Most of the relocated caribou stayed within the same river drainage or area during this ten day period. Of the caribou that were located in both December and January, more than half were relocated within 15 miles of their previously recorded locations. Of the more active individuals, one caribou travelled almost 30 miles and two others traveled 50 miles or more: one north-northeast and the other south.

The February survey showed caribou dispersed throughout the same area as in January (Fig. 5). Some congregating was noted in the South Fork Buckland and upper Ungalik drainages and the Traverse Peak area. Of the 18 radio-collared caribou located in both January and February surveys, 14 were relocated within 20 miles of their earlier locations. Once again, a few animals had traveled 40-45 miles during that three week period.

The late March survey showed a distinct northward movement of Western Arctic Herd members (Fig. 5). Of the 37 radio-collared caribou which were located, only two were south of Traverse Peak. Twenty-two of the caribou were in the Buckland Valley, the Selawik Hills, and lower Tagagawik drainage. Almost all individuals located in February and again in March had moved north. One radio-collared caribou was relocated in the Buckland Valley approximately 115 miles from where it was located in the Unalakleet drainage in February.

Reindeer

Mr. Henry's reindeer occupied an area approximately eight miles north of Koyuk Village and east of the Koyuk River from September 1989

until April 1990. He estimated a loss of at least 100 reindeer to caribou that occupied his permit area throughout the winter. He estimated 4,000-5,000 caribou resided along the East Fork of the Koyuk River. Because of the heavy concentrations of caribou, Mr. Henry was unable to move his reindeer into the southeastern portion of his permit area as was planned for the winter of 1989-90 (Merlin Henry, per. commun.).

From November 1989 to April 1990, Mr. Sagoonick did not report any serious conflicts with caribou moving into the area where his reindeer grazed, which was west of Diamond Creek approximately 18 miles northwest of Shaktoolik. However, he did report a major concentration of caribou moving into the area immediately south of Shaktoolik, but they were quickly driven from the area because of intense hunting pressure from the local villagers (Palmer Sagoonick, per. commun.).

DISCUSSION

The Buckland Valley has been an important winter range of Western Arctic Herd caribou since the 1950s (Adams 1983). Tens of thousands of caribou have occupied it in recent winters. Caribou began passing through Buckland Valley into the Nulato Hills and Seward Peninsula during the early 1980s (Smith 1984). Smith (1985) reported caribou as far south as the Koyuk, Shaktoolik and Kateel rivers during the winter of 1984-85. Smith and Machida (1986) reported substantial numbers of caribou migrated southward to the upper Anvik River and several thousand caribou migrated westward to the Kiwalik and Koyuk drainages during the winter of 1985-86. Robinson and Field (1987) reported caribou migrating along the Tagagawik River to spend most of the winter of 1986-87 in the Nulato Hills. Many tens of thousands of caribou occupied the Buckland Valley and Nulato Hills during the winters of 1987-88, 1988-89, and 1989-90 (Robinson 1988, Robinson and Spindler 1989, present report). This range expansion parallels a population growth of the herd from 75,000 animals in 1976 to 343,000 in 1988.

The Buckland Valley has been used for reindeer grazing since the 1930s (Adams and Robus 1981). Where ranges of caribou and reindeer overlap, resident reindeer link with transient caribou. NANA Regional Corporation lost several thou-

sand reindeer during the 1982-83 and 1983-84 winters, but none were reported lost during 1984-85 (Smith 1984, 1985). During fiscal year 1986, NANA lost approximately \$375,000 in the value of its herd because of reindeer migrating away with caribou. Consequently, NANA sold their herd in fiscal year 1987 (NANA 1986, 1988). This year, caribou moved within close range of Mr. Henry's reindeer for the fifth consecutive year. Some reindeer were lost during 1985-86 (Smith and Machida 1986), none during 1986-87 and 1987-88, at least 100 animals during 1988-89 (Robinson and Spindler 1989), and at least 100 animals during 1989-90. Economic hardship to reindeer herders can occur when their animals leave with migrating caribou.

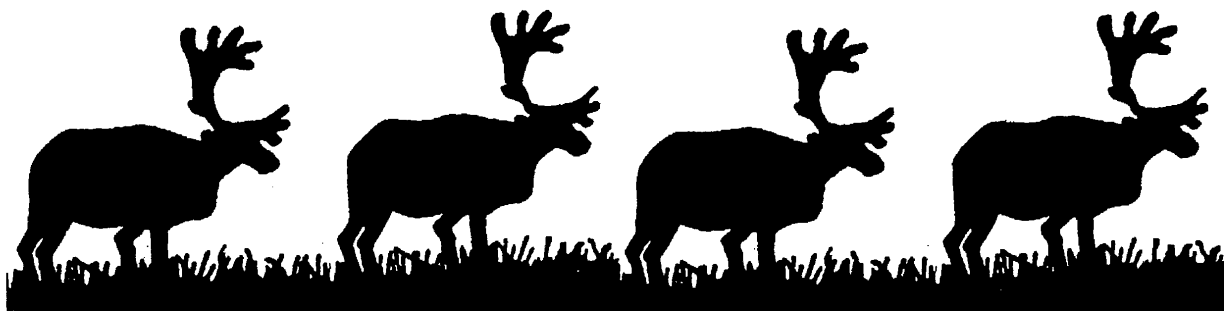
RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates the importance of the Buckland Valley and Nulato Hills as wintering habitat for Western Arctic Herd caribou. Patterns of distribution in 1989-90 showed similar usage to that of the two previous years. Therefore, we recommend that BLM continue to enforce its decision to reduce the size of the reindeer allotment in Buckland Valley and permit reindeer grazing within the eastern half of the Hadley Allotment under an approved AMP only after five consecutive years of non-use by caribou (BLM 1982). ADFG (1984) recommends against

issuing additional reindeer permits on ranges currently occupied by caribou or with a high probability of being occupied by caribou in the future.

We also recommend continued monitoring of western arctic caribou within the study area as directed by Objective 1.c. of the Buckland Valley HMP (Adams 1983). For the herders' benefit, visual sightings of caribou would be nice to have, but would cost additional flight hours. When possible, we will invite a member of the Reindeer Herders Association to fly with us. After each flight, we shall contact the Reindeer Herders Association with information regarding caribou locations. They, in turn, will contact the affected herder.

Acknowledgments. We thank J. Dau (ADFG-Kotzebue) for assisting with tracking and background information. V. Karmun and R. Brubaker (FWS-Kotzebue) assisted with tracking information and acted as observers. Pilots J. Rood of Northwestern Aviation and T. Harold of Bering Air flew safe missions under limited weather conditions. J. Hunter of the National Weather Service office in Kotzebue provided weather information. L. Field (BLM-Fairbanks) prepared the reindeer information. C. Bowne, student in an editing class at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and H. Brownell provided valuable editorial comments for this manuscript.



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