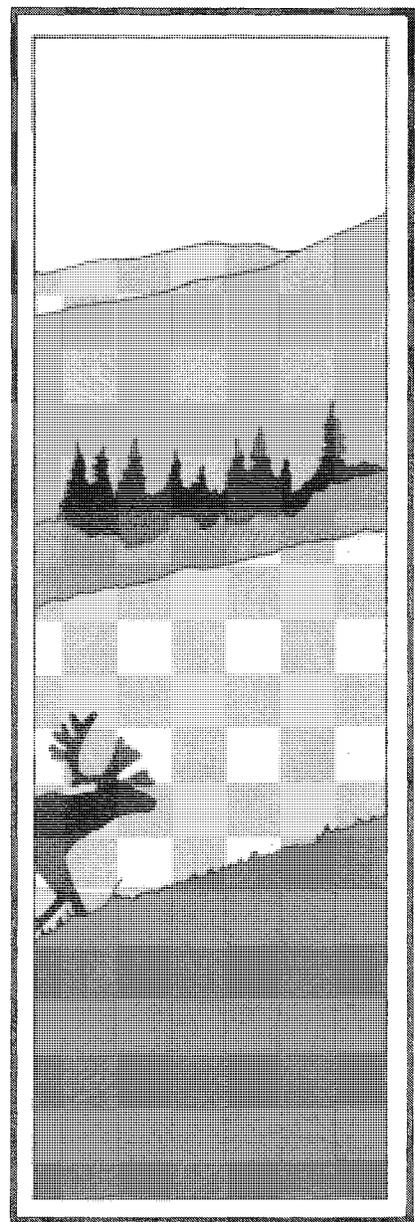
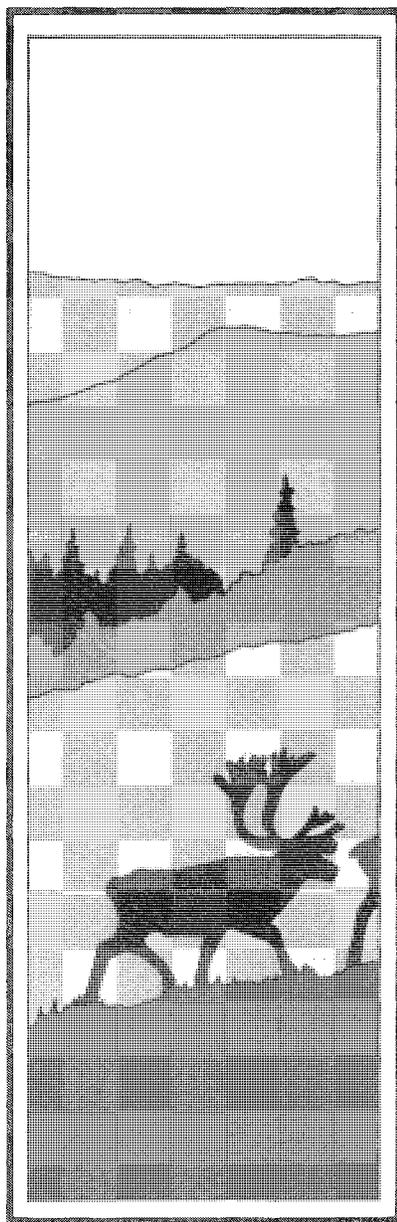
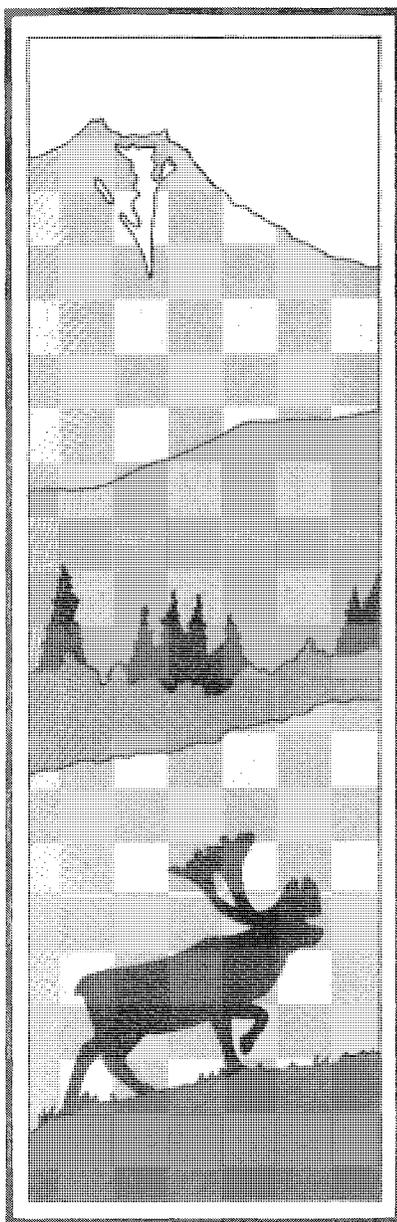


The Fortymile Herd

ON THE COMEBACK TRAIL TO THE YUKON



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*A hundred here, a thousand there
A score down in the hollow,
Spread far and wide in countless bands
As far as glass could follow...*

• • •

*Three days we camped there in their midst
Our work around completing
Though all northwestward held their course
We noticed no depleting.*

H.S. Bostock, 1979¹.

The history of the Fortymile caribou herd is a testimony to the effects of misuse, mismanagement, and mistaken assumptions. From gold rush times to the present, the herd's population has fluctuated between hundreds of

thousands and near extinction, due mainly to overhunting and increased access. Today, with increased knowledge and public support, we could witness the comeback of another magnificent barrenground caribou herd.

¹ Excerpts from 'The Caribou', a poem recounting one of the last great migrations of the Fortymile herd south of the Dawson Range in 1933. H. Bostock 1979. Packhorse Tracks. Canada Geological Survey, Open File 650.

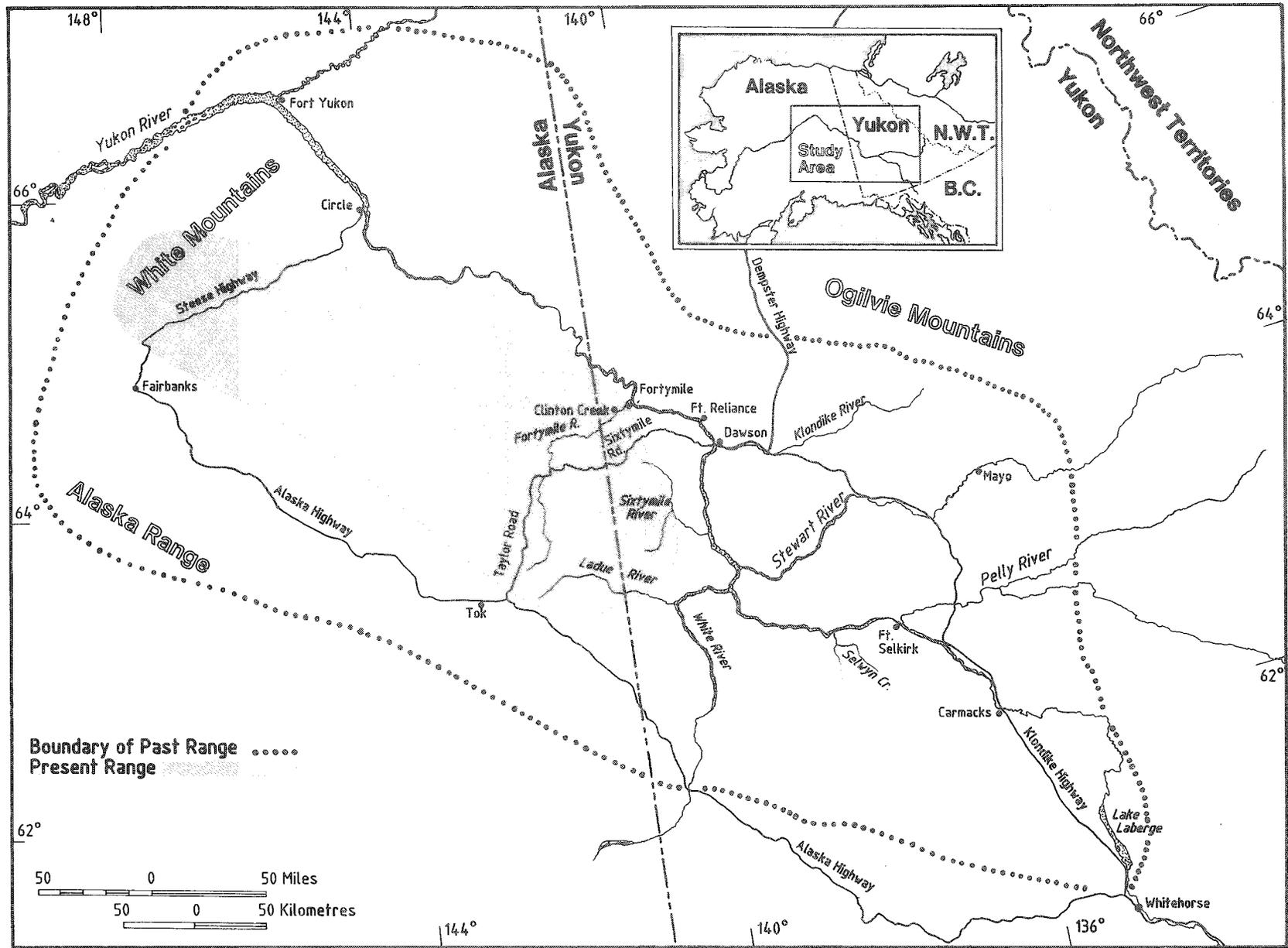


Figure 1: Past and present ranges of the Fortymile caribou herd.

The Goldrush Era: 1880 - 1900

It should have been called "The Goldrush Herd" because throughout the late 1800's, it was this herd that fed the goldseekers along the Yukon River all the way from Whitehorse to the Klondike and beyond to Fort Yukon north of Fairbanks, Alaska (Fig. 1). But instead, it was named after the Fortymile River, a Yukon tributary forty miles downstream from Ft. Reliance which was the only supply post for prospectors in the region. And it was on the Fortymile river in 1886 that the first coarse gold was discovered in the Yukon basin, precipitating the 'real' goldrush to the territory. In 1887, a trading post was established at the mouth of the Fortymile River and by 1892, it was serving several thousand miners in the district (Fig. 2). This discovery occurred in the heartland of the Fortymile caribou herd which, in 1887, was described by Warburton Pike as follows:

"On some of these plateaux, the caribou wander in their thousands, and as they frequently cross the river, form an invaluable winter food supply to the miners. Their passages are uncertain, however, and although sometimes they cross Fortymile close to the mining camp and are then slaughtered in great

*numbers, there have been several winters when the want of fresh meat was severely felt, and scurvy played havoc among the bacon eaters."*²

In a region where food supplies were infamously scarce and expensive, the miners naturally capitalized on caribou which obligingly blundered onto their claims. Thus, by 1897 on the eve of the "Klondike Gold Rush", Mrs. Frederick Schwatka observed:

*"Formerly during the winter season, a living could be made by experienced hunters in bringing moose and caribou back to camp. I heard one miner say, who had spent four winters on the Yukon, that he had seen moose and caribou so numerous on the bald hills above timber limit, in the present gold field district, that they gave the snow a mottled, gray appearance. Of course, these have now disappeared with the advance of civilization, and fresh meat of any kind is now at a premium."*³

The influx of thirty thousand more argonauts on the trail of '98 undoubtedly put further strains on the Fortymile herd, although the actual degree of impact will never be known.

² W. Pike. 1896. *Through the Subarctic Forest*. Edward Arnold, N. Y.

³ A. C. Harris. 1987. *Alaska and Klondike Goldfields*.

The First Recovery: 1900 - 1920

Whatever the effects of the gold rush were on this herd, it appeared to have recovered by 1920 when Olaus Murie, a pioneer Alaskan biologist, made the first attempt to census it. For 20 days Murie estimated the number of caribou passing him on their annual fall migration from the White Mountain district of Alaska southeast toward the Yukon. Murie's calculation of 568,000 animals in what he called the 'Yukon-Tanana Herd' is crude by modern standards, however from his observations, it is evident that the herd was very large and may indeed have numbered several hundred thousand. At that time, it

ranged from the White Mountains north of Fairbanks, Alaska, to Mayo, Carmacks and Whitehorse in the Yukon (Fig.1). Annual spring and fall migrations traversed this vast area and the spectacular crossings of major rivers and roads were notorious among residents and travellers of the region (Fig. 3). This was in fact the largest caribou herd in Alaska and certainly one of the most important caribou populations in North America. Naturally, both Alaskans and Yukoners considered the legendary Fortymile herd to be inexhaustible, yet by the early 1940's, it had all but disappeared.



Figure 2: By 1898, the community of Fortymile (background) had already become a gold mining centre. It remained continuously occupied until the 1930's, (Yukon Archives, Whitehorse).



Figure 3: "The last great caribou migration, 500,000 took 10 days to cross the Yukon River near the mouth of Selwyn". Photo and words by A. Innes-Taylor, 1927 (Yukon Archives, Whitehorse).

The Big Decline: 1920's - 1940's

How could a caribou herd numbering in the hundreds of thousands shrink to a mere remnant of 10 - 20,000 in just 20 years (Fig. 4)? There is no definite answer, but the most likely explanation is a combination of overhunting and heavy predation which rapidly decimated the population by removing both calves (by wolves) and adults (by hunters and wolves). Following the First World War, the Fortymile range was invaded by a new generation of gold-miners and trappers who, in the traditional manner, fueled their operations with caribou. Throughout this period,

the Fortymile herd was relentlessly hunted for survival, income, sport and just plain amusement (Fig. 5-7).

In 1934-35, an estimated 10,000 caribou were taken in the Ft. Yukon district of Alaska. Also many cases of excessive hunting were reported on the newly constructed Steese Highway from Fairbanks to Circle, which cut across the Fortymile herd's migration route to and from the White Mountains. On September 1, 1941, Game Officer Clarence Rhode made the following entry in his log:

“Counted 146 cars on Eagle Summit in two hours. Quite a few caribou being killed. Some evidence of violation. Took pictures of cripples that had died after running some distance and were untouched.”⁴

The following year, another game officer observed that more caribou were crippled than killed because the hunters were shooting blindly into the herd. He concluded that, “Most people are content to believe that the animals are in countless numbers that cannot be exhausted”.

On the Yukon side, it was a similar story. Ever since the first Game Ordinance was passed in 1902, the bag limit had been six caribou for a six month season. Moreover, prospectors, surveyors and miners, etc. were exempted from these regulations when “in actual need of the beasts for food.” In a land where game abounded and enforcement was particularly difficult, hunting was essentially unrestricted. As one historian put it:

“Although hunting licenses were, in theory, required, in practice everyone carried a gun and killed

when and where game was found, irrespective of season. Many of the natives made their livelihood by supplying fresh meat to mining communities. The chief mode of travel was by dog team, and the thousands of dogs used by white men and natives were fed on the game meat of the country.”⁵

Caribou remained plentiful in the Dawson area throughout this period, and their migrations often crossed the river in front of town (Fig.8). A former Dawson resident recalled that around 1938, one fellow shot about a dozen caribou as they were coming out of the river onto the beach in front of the R.C.M.P. barracks. He was fined \$25.00.

Being near the core of the Fortymile herd's range, Dawsonites were less aware of the decline than other Yukoners further to the south and east. Canadian government geologist, Hugh Bostock recorded the last crossing of the Yukon River at Fort Selkirk in 1942 and Wilf Gordon, a Mayo resident, remembers seeing a small band of caribou crossing the Stewart River in 1946. The Fortymile herd was never seen in those places again.

⁴ Yukon Department of Renewable Resource files.

⁵ *Wildlife Management in the Yukon Territory (typed MS, Yukon Archives, Whitehorse).*

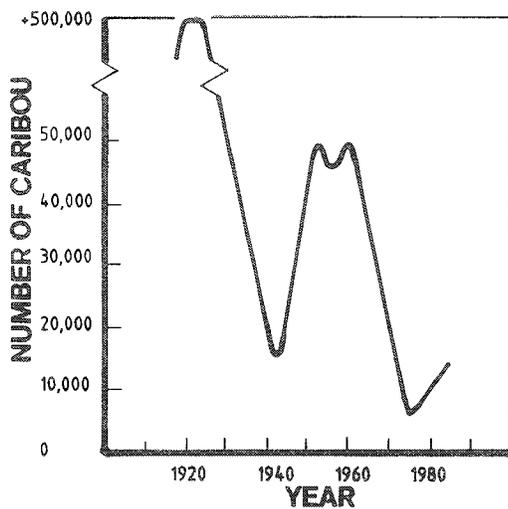


Figure 4: Fluctuations of the Fortymile caribou herd, 1920 - 1985. (Courtesy, Alaska Dept. Fish & Game)

The Second Recovery and Third Decline: 1940's - early 1970's

Sometime in the early 1940's, the Fortymile herd began to increase again. The major credit for this reversal has been given to wolf control programs which began in Alaska and later included the Yukon. Census methods that were substantially superior to Murie's 1920 attempt put the herd at between 45,000 and 55,000 in 1953 (Fig.4). By then, it was once again making regular treks through the Dawson region and in 1959-60, most of it wintered in the Yukon rather than Alaska.

But its Yukon home had changed in the past 15 years. Between 1941 and 1951, the human population had doubled from 4,000 to 9,000 and the completion of the Alaska Highway in 1944 had switched the emphasis from water routes to roads so that by the late 1950's, the Fortymile herd was accessible to hunters from anywhere in the southern Yukon. Mayo residents recall driving along the newly completed Stewart Highway to the Sixtymile or Boundary Road⁶ to hunt the same herd that migrated past their own doorstep 15 years before (Fig.1).

⁶ Presently named Top-of-the-World Highway.

Without a no-hunting corridor along the Sixtymile Road, caribou crossing it could literally be shot from the vehicles. Many that were wounded ran down the steep bank on the far side and few of these were ever retrieved. And by the time caribou reached this road, most of them had already run a similar gauntlet across the Steese and Taylor highways in Alaska. Yet, biologists felt the herd was able to withstand such hunting as long as wolf control programs were in effect. This belief was based on the relatively high calf production of the herd together with a vastly underestimated appreciation of harvest levels with the result that, although the population seemed "healthy", it was in fact declining. People on the land, however, were noticing a substantial decrease in caribou numbers and apparently communicated their concern for the herd to the local authorities. Based on reports from the Dawson R.C.M.P. detachment, Inspector J.T. Parsons wrote the following to the Director of Game in Whitehorse in the fall of 1957:

*"It is noted that the migration this year appears much smaller than last year and if this trend continues, it may be necessary to consider closing the season entirely or reducing the number of caribou that can legally be taken."*⁷

This was never done.

Wolf controls in Alaska ceased entirely in 1960 and thereafter, the Fortymile herd plunged to a mere 5,000 animals by 1973. As before, the major factors were assigned to hunting and wolf predation, particularly in Alaska during the early 1970's when hunters killed many more animals each year than the herd was producing. At the time, a popular explanation for the herd's decline was emigration to the Porcupine herd but recent evidence from radio-tracking studies indicates that such large scale herd exchanges are highly unlikely.

⁷ Yukon Department of Renewable Resources files.



Figure 5: Families living along the Yukon River were dependent upon the annual migrations of the Fortymile herd as a source of food. (Yukon Archives, Whitehorse).

As the Fortymile herd decreased in numbers, its range shrank in size, gradually withdrawing from the Yukon until by the early 1970's, it had once again become a Canadian memory. With the disappearance of the Fortymile herd from the Yukon, hunting activities switched from the Sixtymile Road to the partially constructed Dempster

Highway which gave access to the relatively untouched Porcupine herd. As completion of the Dempster Highway and non-renewable resource development brought hunters and industry into the Porcupine range, research and management attention became focused on this herd throughout the 1970's and early 1980's.

The Third Recovery: 1973 - 1986

When the 1973 photo-census clearly showed that the Fortymile herd had dropped to a tenth of its former size in 13 years, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game restricted hunting, which, combined with the scarcity of caribou, resulted in an average kill of only 30 caribou a year. At the same time, the wolf population was also decreasing, apparently due to a general lack of both moose and caribou. These factors combined to permit a gradual increase in the herd from 1973 to 1981, when it reached at least 12,500. Also a wolf control program from 1981 to 1983 reduced the number of wolves on the winter range from 125 to about 60 and was probably of some benefit to the herd which by 1985 had increased to about 14,000 (Fig.4).

Along with the growth of the Fortymile herd, there had been a gradual return to the Dawson area much to the delight of local residents who have been reporting more and more sightings in the past few years. Recent surveys by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the Yukon Department of Renewable Resources have confirmed this trend. In the fall of 1985, six radio-

collared caribou and a few thousand others were located between the Sixtymile River and the north fork of the Ladue River. The following spring, tracks representing about 50 animals were observed passing through the abandoned town of Clinton Creek and a few other trails were found along the Alaska border south of the Fortymile River. These were presumed to have been made by caribou migrating out of the Yukon to the calving ground in Alaska.

If the herd continues to increase, it may progressively reoccupy much of its former Yukon range, unless such advances are halted by hunters and wolves. In 1984, 15 caribou were shot near the Sixtymile Road and a few were also harvested in 1985. Most of these were taken by placer miners working in the Sixtymile district. An early snowfall in 1985 which closed the Sixtymile Road during the hunting season probably reduced the total harvest that year. The amount of wolf predation of Fortymile caribou in the Yukon is unknown, but in nearby Alaska, the predation level has been low enough to permit continued growth of the herd in recent years.



Figure 6: To provide fresh meat for the mining camps, market hunters slaughtered caribou in great numbers (C.S. Farnsworth Coll., acc.#72-252, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Dept., University of Alaska, Fairbanks).

The Future

The great herds of barrenground caribou have always captured man's imagination and, among these, none has received more praise and attention than the international Fortymile herd. Once thought to be the largest herd in Alaska, it is still considered to have the most potential for subsistence and recreation uses there, and the same could be said for the Yukon. To wildlife managers, it is known as the most un-

predictable herd in a league renowned for its unpredictability, and considering its ups and downs over the past hundred years, it could safely be called the most exploited. The Fortymile herd is currently working on its third come-back in this century and given a chance - given half a chance - it could once again become a major feature of Yukon wildlife.



Figure 7: A sport hunter's trophy from the Fortymile herd. (Yukon Archives, Whitehorse).



Figure 8: Caribou were often a navigational hazard to sternwheelers. (Yukon Archives, Whitehorse).

The roller coaster career of the Fortymile herd is largely a history of hunters and highways; first via the Yukon River, then by the Steese, Taylor, Top-of-the-World (Sixtymile Road) and Alaska highways. Each of these routes brought waves of hunters into the Fortymile range who were instrumental in subsequent declines when wolf predation and hard winters helped to tip the balance. Highways and hunters will always play a major role in the future successes or failures of the herd, particularly in the Yukon, where a net-

work of mining roads blankets its range. In order to occupy their former home, Fortymile caribou must cross and recross these roads many times every year which means that the potential for overkill is staggering. Thus, the fate of this herd in the Yukon may ultimately rest with the hunters on these backroads, who must choose between an occasional easy shot today or much greater hunting success in the future. In fact, over and above government legislation, public pride in re-establishing the herd will be the crucial factor.

In order to assist the Fortymile herd's expansion into the Yukon, the Department of Renewable Resources has closed Game Management Zone 3 with the exception of a small portion west of the Yukon River where the bag limit has been modified to one bull only and the season reduced by one

month (see Fig.9). Likewise, in the interest of the herd's well-being, discussions with the Alaskan government are being pursued to develop complementary management policies that will promote the growth of this caribou population.

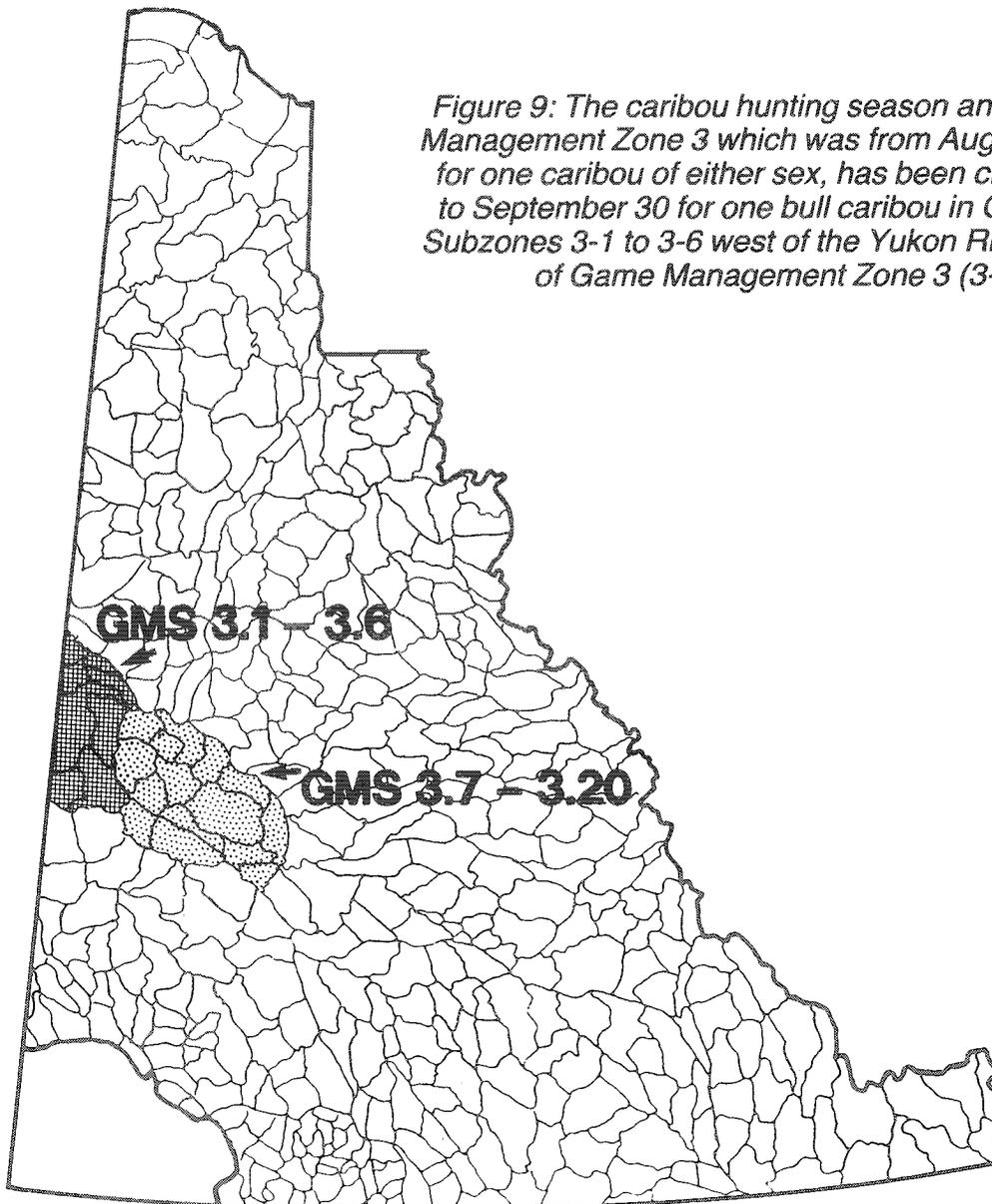


Figure 9: The caribou hunting season and bag limit in Game Management Zone 3 which was from August 1 to October 31 for one caribou of either sex, has been changed to August 1 to September 30 for one bull caribou in Game Management Subzones 3-1 to 3-6 west of the Yukon River. The remainder of Game Management Zone 3 (3-7 to 3-20) is closed to caribou hunting.

The successful return of the Fortymile herd has substantial implications for Yukoners. As a tourist attraction, what could match caribou crossing the Yukon River in front of Dawson or the viewing opportunities from the Top-of-the-World Highway and perhaps even the Klondike Highway? Such events could occur as early as August which is the peak tourist season and would be a vastly superior attraction than the Dempster crossings of the Porcupine herd that only occur in the late fall and early spring when tourist traffic is minimal.

The direct benefits for Yukon residents are even greater considering the possible harvest opportunities that might eventually result from the herd becoming re-established on former Canadian ranges. And above all, few things animate a winter landscape like a caribou herd.

Nothing means more for those who have known it and nothing is sadder for those who have lost it. The caribou stories of generations past could become a reality once again (Fig.10), and the Fortymile herd could enliven a huge tract of "lifeless" territory, once it re-establishes a reasonable foothold in the Yukon. If this is to happen, now is the time. This decade appears to be a golden age in which all of North America's great caribou herds are increasing. The ecological factors causing this may be giving the Fortymile herd its best chance to regain its place as the most important caribou herd in the Yukon and Alaska. Management of the herd by the Yukon Department of Renewable Resources is designed for that purpose, but the cooperation of Yukon residents is paramount to the achievement of this goal.



Figure 10: To allow the Fortymile herd recovery within the time and memory of those who live with it, would be a significant wildlife management achievement.

*By Doug Urquhart and Richard Farnell
Original artwork by Thom Rodger
1986*

