CARIBOU SURVEYS IN THE COLVILLE SOUTH SURVEY AREA, NORTHERN ALASKA, 2019

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Prepared for
ConocoPhillips Alaska, Inc.
Anchorage, Alaska

Prepared by
ABR, Inc.—Environmental Research & Services
Fairbanks, Alaska

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June 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This study investigated the distribution, abundance, and movements of Central Arctic Herd (CAH) and Teshekpuk Herd (TCH) caribou in 2019 in the Colville South survey area south of Nuiqsut, Alaska and east of the Colville River; this is a currently undeveloped area that is of interest for potential oil development.
- Four aerial surveys were conducted by fixed-wing airplane in calving (early June), oestrid fly season (late July), late summer (late August), and fall (late September). The planned May survey could not be completed due to poor weather.
- Telemetry data from the CAH and TCH were used to assess movements by individual collared caribou in the vicinity of the survey area.
- The spring of 2019 was warmer and snow melted earlier than average with most snow melting prior to the early June survey. July temperatures were warmer than average and mosquito and oestrid fly harassment was predicted to be high during that month. August temperatures were close to average and early September temperatures were far above average.
- We estimated that 404 caribou including 2 calves were in the survey area during our aerial survey conducted in early June, 8 caribou were in the survey area in late July, 48 caribou were in the area in late August, and 46 caribou were in the survey area in late September.
- Based on available telemetry data, the Colville South survey area is not heavily used by either herd. The highest use occurs during oestrid fly season, late summer, and fall migration for the CAH, and during spring migration and fall migration for TCH females and during calving and late summer and fall for TCH males.
- One moose was seen in the survey area on 30 September. The survey area is near the northern extent of moose range in north-central Alaska.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was funded by ConocoPhillips Alaska, Inc. (CPAI), and administered by Robyn McGhee, Environmental Studies Coordinator for CPAI, for whose support we are grateful. Assistance with field logistics was provided by Justin Blank, Zac Hobbs, and Krista Kenny. Beth Lenart and Lincoln Parrett of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Wildlife Conservation, generously shared unpublished information. Bob Gill and Ron Vogt of 70 North, provided safe and efficient piloting of survey aircraft under flying conditions that often were less than optimal. Skilled assistance in the field was provided by ABR employees Katie Hayden, John Shook, and Forrest Rosenbower. Support during data collection, analysis, and report production was provided by ABR employees Tony LaCortiglia, Will Lentz, Pam Odom, Chris Swingley, and Dorte Dissing. This report was improved through reviews by Adrian Gall of ABR and Robyn McGhee and Chrissy Pohl of CPAI.

INTRODUCTION

Two herds of barren-ground caribou (*Rangifer tarandus granti*), the Teshekpuk Caribou Herd (TCH) and the Central Arctic Herd (CAH), inhabit the central Alaskan Arctic. Their summer ranges overlap at the Colville River Delta with the TCH generally remaining west and the CAH generally remaining east of the Colville River (Murphy and Lawhead 2000, Person et al. 2007, Lenart 2015, Parrett 2015a). The CAH summer range includes the Kuparuk Oilfield (Figure 1). The TCH has had limited exposure to infrastructure, although recent oilfield development has expanded west of the Colville River and additional construction within the TCH range is planned.

The CAH typically calves in two broad areas of the coastal plain between the Colville and Canning rivers, uses coastal areas for insect relief, and winters in the central Brooks Range, primarily in the southern foothills in recent years (Arthur and Del Vecchio 2009; Lenart 2015, Nicholson et al. 2016). The herd size of the CAH has varied widely over the past 4 decades. It grew rapidly from ~5,000 animals in the mid-1970s to 23,444 caribou in July 1992 before declining 23% to 18,100 caribou in July 1995. The herd then increased to a peak of 68,442 animals in 2010 (Lenart 2015). The herd subsequently declined to an estimated 50,753 animals by July 2013 (Lenart 2015) and 22,630 animals by July 2016 (Lenart 2017). The magnitude of the recent decline may have been affected by emigration of some CAH animals to the Porcupine Herd and the TCH, with which the CAH often intermixes on winter range (Lenart 2017). The most recent estimate of CAH herd size was 30,096 individuals in 2019 (Lenart 2019).

The TCH typically calves near Teshekpuk Lake, ~75 km (47 mi) west of Alpine, and uses coastal habitats and areas around Teshekpuk Lake for relief from insect harassment during summer (Yokel et al. 2009, Wilson et al. 2012). Most TCH animals winter on the Arctic Coastal Plain (Person et al. 2007), however, in some years, large portions of the herd have wintered in the central Brooks Range or with the Western Arctic Herd on and near the Seward Peninsula. An unusual excursion of TCH animals to northeastern Alaska occurred in the winter of 2003–2004 (Carroll 2007, Parrett 2009, Lawhead et al. 2010). Similar to the CAH, the TCH increased substantially in size from the mid-1970s to an estimated peak population size of 68,902 animals in July 2008 (Parrett 2015a). The herd subsequently declined at least 19% to an estimated 55,704 animals by July 2011 and then dropped at least 30% further to an estimated 39,172 animals by July 2013 (Parrett 2015a). The herd then increased in size to 41,542 animals in July 2015 and 56,255 animals in July 2017 (Klimstra 2018). A new, higher-resolution camera was used for the photo censuses in 2017, and the improvement in photograph quality may have been partially responsible for higher caribou counts in both herds in that year (Lenart 2018).

The study reported here was conducted to establish baseline use of the Colville South area by caribou. Understanding how use of the area varies seasonally and by herd will be important for assessing potential impacts if development occurs in the area. Results from 2018 aerial surveys were reported in Prichard et al. (2018b). Although caribou were the primary focus for this study, observations of other large mammals in the area were recorded as well.

The 2019 study had three objectives:

- Use aerial surveys to document the distribution and abundance of caribou in the Colville South survey area during different seasons;
- use existing radio telemetry data to characterize caribou use of the Colville South area seasonally and by herd; and
- record the distribution and abundance of other large mammals encountered incidentally during wildlife surveys in the Colville South area.

STUDY AREA

The Kuparuk oilfield and surrounding area (known as the Greater Kuparuk Area, or GKA) is located on the outer coastal plain in the western portion of the summer range of the CAH. Since 1978, shortly before development of the Kuparuk oilfield, considerable interest has focused on the use of the oilfield and surrounding area by the CAH.

The Colville South study area is southwest of the Kuparuk oilfield, and south of the Alpine

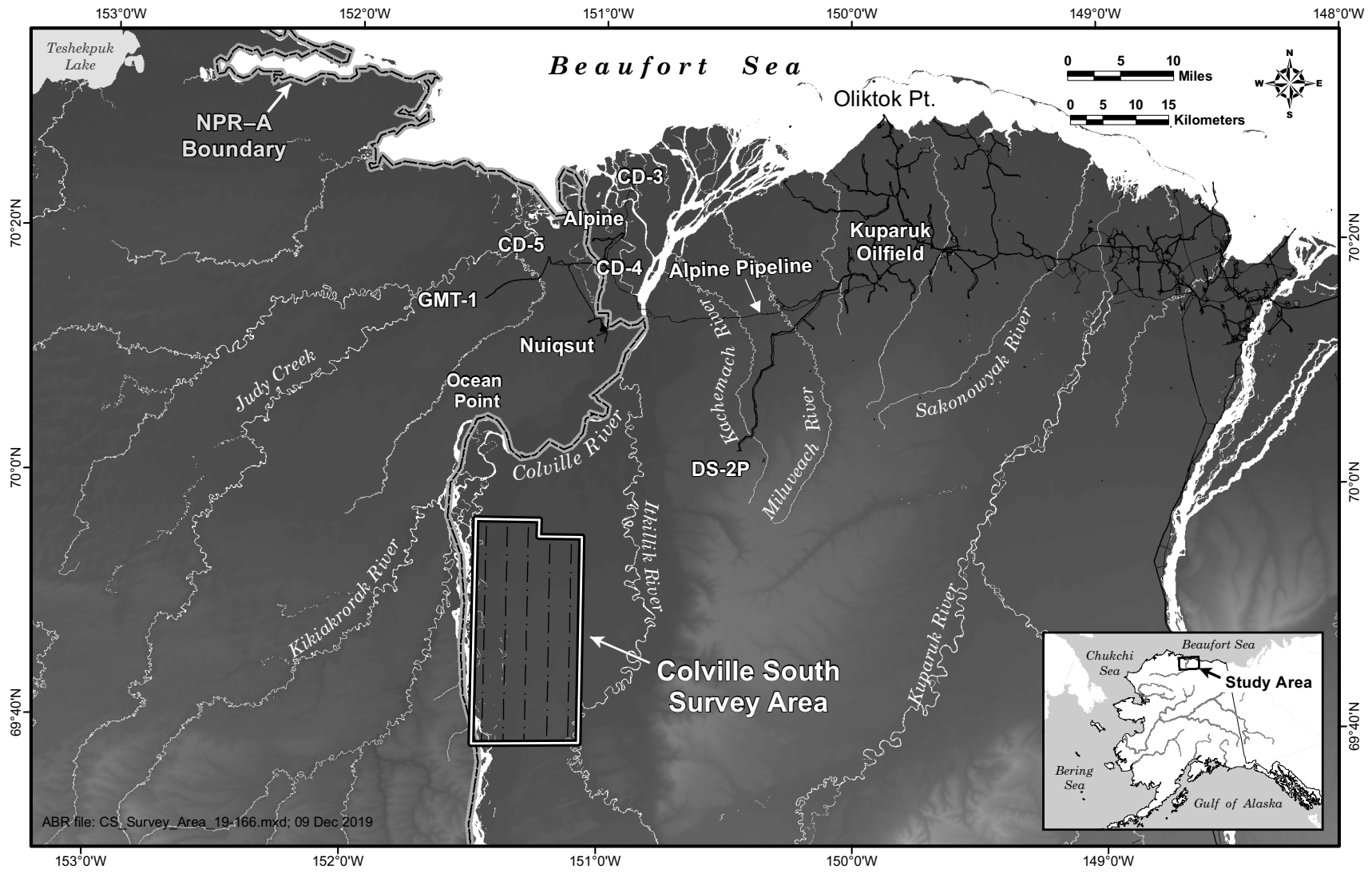

Figure 1. Survey area and transect lines for systematic aerial surveys of caribou in the Colville South survey area, northern Alaska, in 2019.

oilfield (Figure 1). The area is between the Colville River to the west and the Itkillik River to the east, approximately 50 km (31 mi) from the Beaufort Sea coast, and 30 km (19 mi) south of the community of Nuiqsut. The physiography, vegetation, and climate of the central Arctic Coastal Plain were described by Walker et al. (1980).The landscape in the Kuparuk–Colville region slopes gently downward from upland, moist tussock tundra in the upper reaches of the Sakonowyak, Ugnuravik, Kalubik, Miluveach, and Kachemach river drainages to moist and wet tundra near the sea coast. The terrain is characterized by permafrost-related features, such as oriented thaw-lakes, drained-lake basins, beaded streams, and pingos. The Colville South study area is largely composed of sedge-shrub tundra and wet sedge land cover types and is near the northern extent of tall shrubs in the central Alaskan Arctic, and extensive tall shrubs are present in the southwestern portion of the study area (Figure 2).

METHODS

WEATHER AND INSECT CONDITIONS

Spring weather influences the location of calving (Carroll et al. 2005; Griffith et al. 2002) and the availability of highly nutritious early-emerging forage (Kuropat 1984, Johnstone et al. 2002, Johnson et al. 2018). Summer weather conditions can be used to predict the occurrence of harassment by mosquitoes (*Aedes* spp.) and oestrid flies (warble fly *Hypoderma tarandi* and nose bot fly *Cephenemyia trompe*) (White et al. 1975, Fancy 1983, Dau 1986, Russell et al. 1993, Mörschel 1999). We used meteorological data from National Weather Service reporting stations at Kuparuk and Nuiqsut to summarize spring and summer weather conditions affecting the area during 2019. Thawing degree-day sums (TDD; total degrees Celsius above zero) were calculated using average daily temperatures at the Kuparuk airstrip. The probability of mosquito activity was estimated based on hourly temperatures and wind speeds from Nuiqsut, using an equation developed by Russell et al. (1993). The estimated probability of oestrid-fly activity was calculated from average hourly wind speeds and temperatures recorded at Nuiqsut, using equations developed by Mörschel (1999). These summaries were compared to long-term averages for 1983–2018.

AERIAL SURVEYS

Four aerial strip-transect surveys of the Colville South area were conducted by ABR in 2019: a calving survey on 3 and 5 June; an oestrid fly season survey on 29 July; a late summer survey on 26 August; and a fall migration survey on 30 September. A fifth survey was planned for May, but could not be completed due to persistently poor weather conditions. These time periods were chosen to coincide with the different seasons when caribou were more likely to be present in the area based on previously collected telemetry data for the CAH and TCH.

Caribou were counted and mapped by two observers, looking on opposite sides of a Cessna 207 airplane. Parallel transect lines were oriented north-south and spaced systematically at intervals of 3.2 km (2 mi) within the study area (Figure 1). The pilot navigated along transect lines using route coordinates loaded into a GPS receiver, maintaining the aircraft speed at ~150 km/h and the altitude at ~150 m (500 ft) above ground level (agl). Observers counted caribou within an 800-m-wide strip on each side of the flight line, for a sampling intensity of 50% (1.6 km of every 3.2 km). The strip width was estimated visually by comparison with background maps loaded into the observers' GPS receivers. For each caribou group observed within the strip, the airplane location was recorded using a GPS receiver, the number of adults and calves were recorded, and the group was assigned to a distance category (one of four 200-m-wide zones) east or west of the airplane. Caribou groups were then assigned to the midpoint of the distance zone (100, 300, 500, 700 m) in which they were seen. All surveys were conducted in accordance with a scientific research permit issued by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG; permit number 19-118).

Population estimates for total caribou were extrapolated from their respective counts and standard errors were calculated using formulas modified from Gasaway et al. (1986). Because surveys covered 50% of the study area, the "observable population" (i.e., the estimated number of caribou in the entire survey area) was

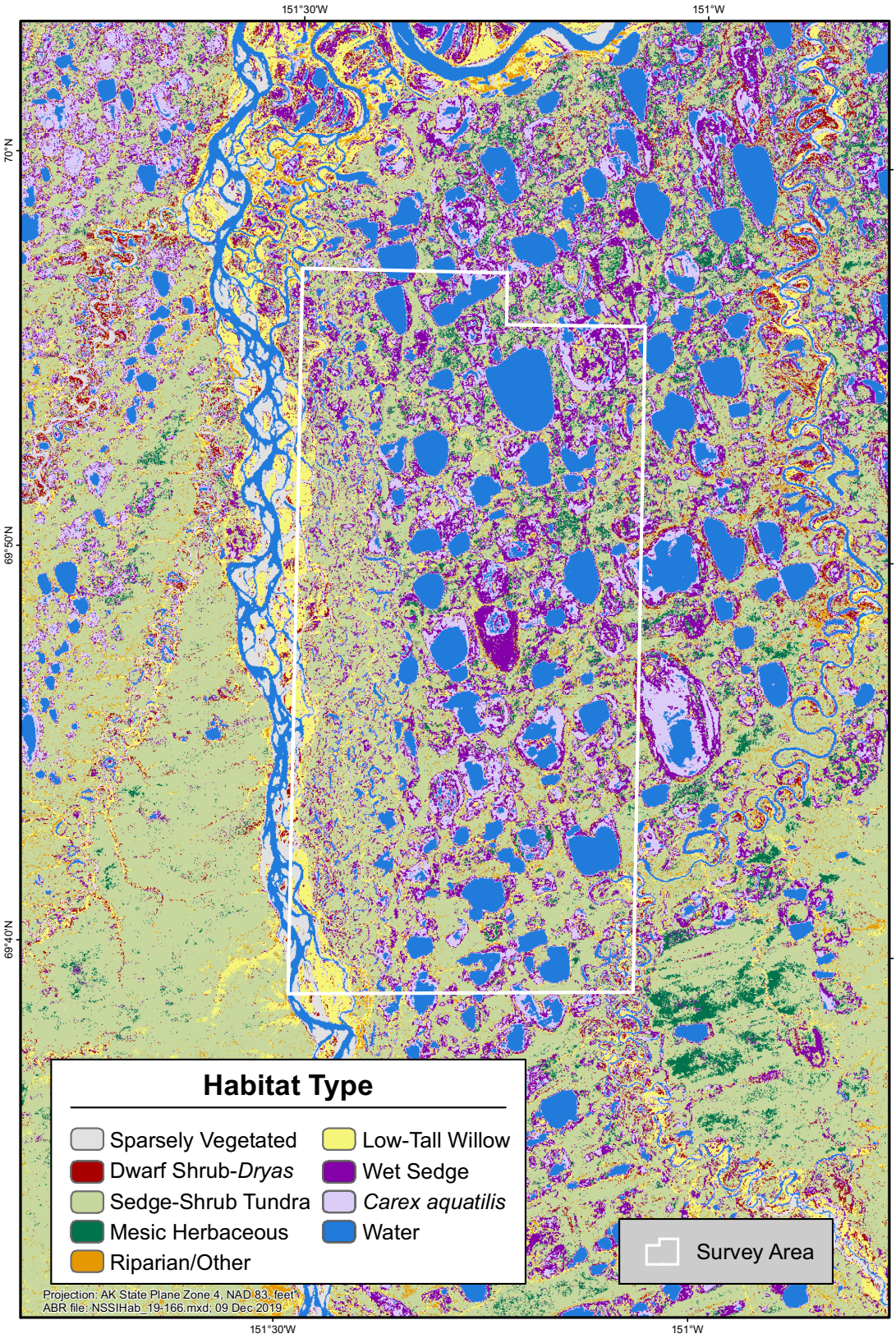

Figure 2 Habitat types in the vicinity of the Colville South survey area (aggregated from NSSI 2013).

estimated by doubling the number of caribou observed. In this report, we provide an 80% confidence interval (CI) for estimates; for example, an observable population estimate of 70 ± 30 caribou means that the 80% CI ranges from 40 to 100 caribou.

TELEMETRY DATA

We analyzed telemetry data from 695 collar deployments on 537 caribou (Table 1). Telemetry data used for this analysis were collected between 1990 and October 2019 for the TCH and 2001–October 2019 for the CAH. This included 185 satellite (PTT) collar deployments on 165 TCH animals, 304 GPS collar deployments on 221 TCH animals, 24 satellite collar deployments on 24 CAH animals, and 182 GPS deployments on 127 CAH animals. A total of 79% of TCH deployments and 96% of CAH deployments were on female caribou. Telemetry data were provided through a data sharing agreement with ADFG, Bureau of Land Management, and the North Slope Borough and additional GPS collars were funded by CPAI and deployed by ADFG.

We used fixed-kernel density estimation (KDE) to quantify the spatial distribution of CAH and TCH caribou by season. Because most collared CAH caribou were females, we only conducted separate analyses by sex for the TCH. Caribou in northern Alaska are sexually segregated during some seasons, especially during calving, so our results during these time periods may underrepresent male CAH caribou.

To conduct KDE, we calculated the average latitude and longitude of each caribou for every two day period of the year (all years combined). We used the *ks* package for *R* (Duong 2017) and the plug-in method to calculate the bandwidth of the smoothing parameter to create KDE utilization distributions of relative caribou density for each herd for each two day period. We then averaged the resulting utilization distributions together for each combination of herd, sex (TCH only), and season to get the final seasonal kernels. This method allowed us to capture caribou movements during a season without biasing the results towards individual animals with many locations.

Monthly use of the Colville South survey area was evaluated based on KDE results. We calculated the proportion of each monthly utilization distribution from KDE within the survey areas for TCH females, TCH males, and CAH males and females combined, after first removing the portion of each seasonal utilization distribution

Table 1. Number of TH and CAH radio-collar deployments and total number of collared animals that provided movement data for the Colville South caribou study. Some individual caribou had multiple deployments of collars.

Herd [a] / Collar Type	Years	Female		Male		Total Deployments
		Deployments	Individuals	Deployments	Individuals	
Teshekpuk Herd						
Satellite collars	1990–2019	97	86	88	79	185
GPS collars	2004–2019	289	207	15	14	304
Central Arctic Herd						
Satellite collars	2001–2004	10	10	2	2	12
Satellite collars	2012–2015	6	6	6	6	12
GPS collars	2003–2019	182	127	0	0	182

[a] Herd affiliation at time of capture.

contour that overlapped the ocean. To estimate the number of caribou expected in the Colville South survey area based on the KDE results, we multiplied the proportion of the utilization distribution in the survey area times the estimated herd size (56,255 for the TCH and 30,096 for the CAH) assuming 75% of the TCH was female (Parrett 2015a).

To visualize caribou movements based on GPS collars, we used dynamic Brownian Bridge Movement Models (dBBMM) to create maps of caribou movements based on the locations of GPS-collared individuals (Kranstauber et al. 2012). Because very few GPS collars were deployed on males (Table 1), we only ran dBBMMs for female caribou. These dBBMMs, a modification of earlier Brownian bridge models (Horne et al. 2007), use an animal's speed of movement and trajectory calculated from intermittent GPS locations to create a probability map describing relative use of the area traversed. We computed the 95% isopleth of movements for each individual caribou outfitted with a GPS collar moving through the area and then overlaid the isopleth layers for each season and herd to calculate the proportion of collared caribou using each 100-m pixel. This visualization displayed the seasonal use of the area by caribou as a function of both caribou distribution and movements. The dBBMMs were computed using the *move* package in *R* (Kranstauber et al. 2017).

OTHER MAMMALS

The locations and numbers of large mammals other than caribou were recorded during aerial transect surveys. These observations were mapped, summarized, and compared to previous opportunistically collected observations of large mammals in the area.

RESULTS

WEATHER AND INSECT CONDITIONS

Spring 2019 was warmer than the long-term average (1983–2018) and snow melted earlier than average at the Kuparuk airport (Figure 3). May temperatures were at or above the long-term average and average daily temperatures were above freezing on 21–25 May. Snow depth at the Kuparuk airstrip remained below or at the long-term average until 20 May before completely melting by 23 May during the period of warm temperatures (Figure 3). Temperatures were near the long-term average during the calving and postcalving periods in early and mid-June (Figure 3).

During the summer insect season (mid/late June to mid-August), variability in weather conditions typically results in fluctuating insect activity levels and corresponding changes in caribou movements and distribution. Caribou move rapidly toward the coast in response to mosquito harassment and then move inland when mosquito activity abates, in response to cooler temperatures or higher wind speeds (Murphy and Lawhead 2000, Yokel et al. 2009). The 2019 insect season generally had average or above average temperatures (Figure 3, Appendix A). July temperatures were well above average with 16 days with a high probability of mosquitos and 2 days with a high probability oestrid fly activity (>50% probability; Figures 3–4; Appendix A). August temperatures were near the long-term average but early September temperatures were well above average.

AERIAL SURVEYS

Four complete surveys were conducted in 2019. During the calving survey on 3 and 5 June, we counted a total of 201 adult and 1 calf caribou. Doubling our 50% sample produced estimates of 404 ± 65 total caribou including 2 ± 2 calves (0.766 ± 0.122 caribou/km²; Figure 5, Table 2). During the oestrid fly season survey on 29 July we counted a total of 4 adult caribou. Doubling our 50% sample produced an estimate of 8 ± 4 total caribou (0.015 ± 0.007 caribou/km²; Figure 5, Table 2). During the late summer survey on 26 August we counted a total of 24 adult caribou. Doubling our 50% sample produced an estimate of 48 ± 20 total caribou (0.091 ± 0.038 caribou/km²; Figure 5, Table 2). During the fall migration survey on 30 September we counted a total of 23 caribou. Doubling our 50% sample produced an estimate of 46 ± 24 total caribou (0.087 ± 0.045 caribou/km²; Figure 5, Table 2). Caribou were widely spread across the study area with no obvious areas of higher density (Figure 5).

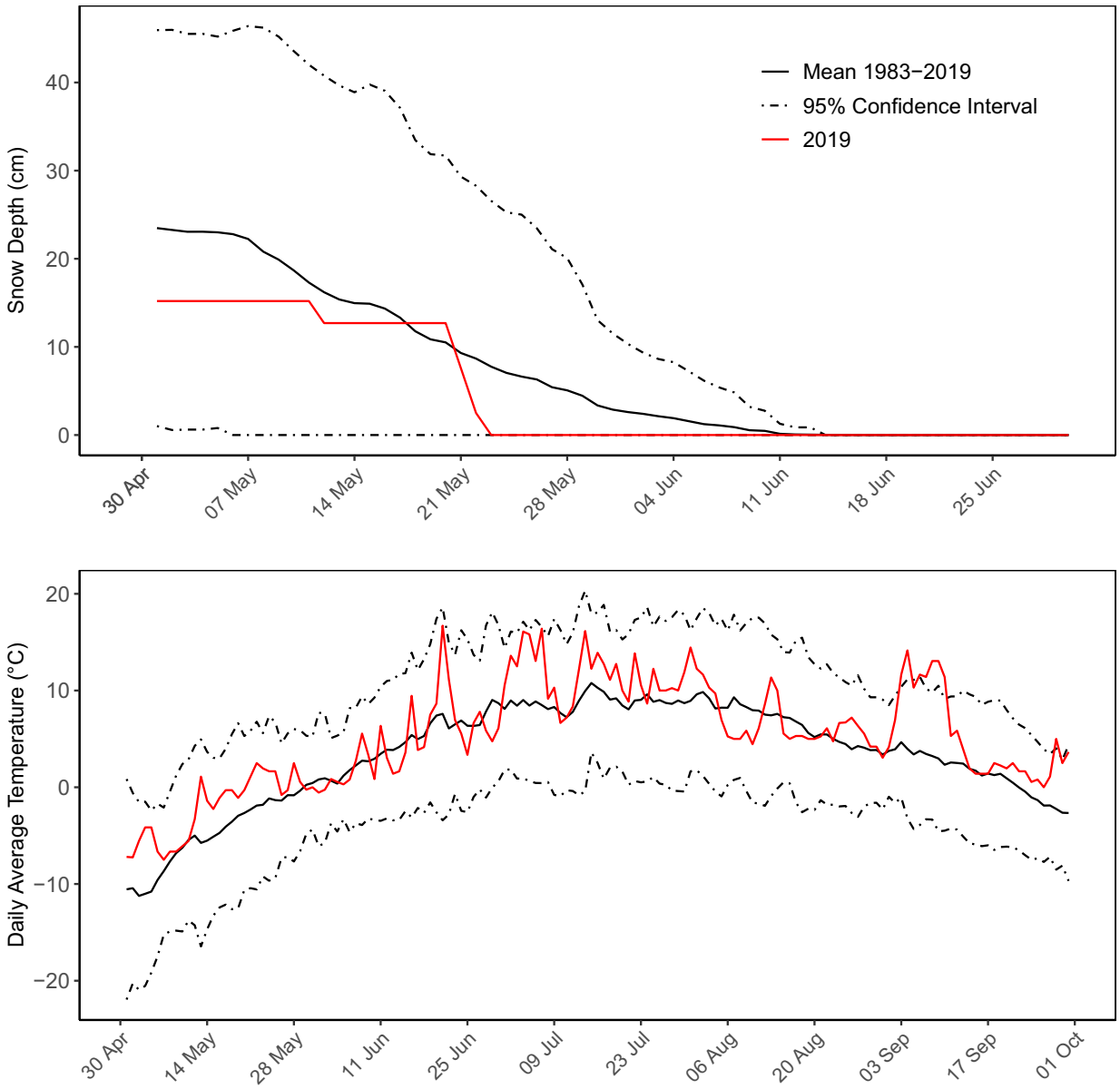

Figure 3. Snow depth at the Kuparuk airstrip during May–June 2019, compared with the long-term mean and 95% confidence interval (top panel) and daily average air temperature during May–September 2019 compared with the long-term mean and 95% confidence interval (bottom panel).

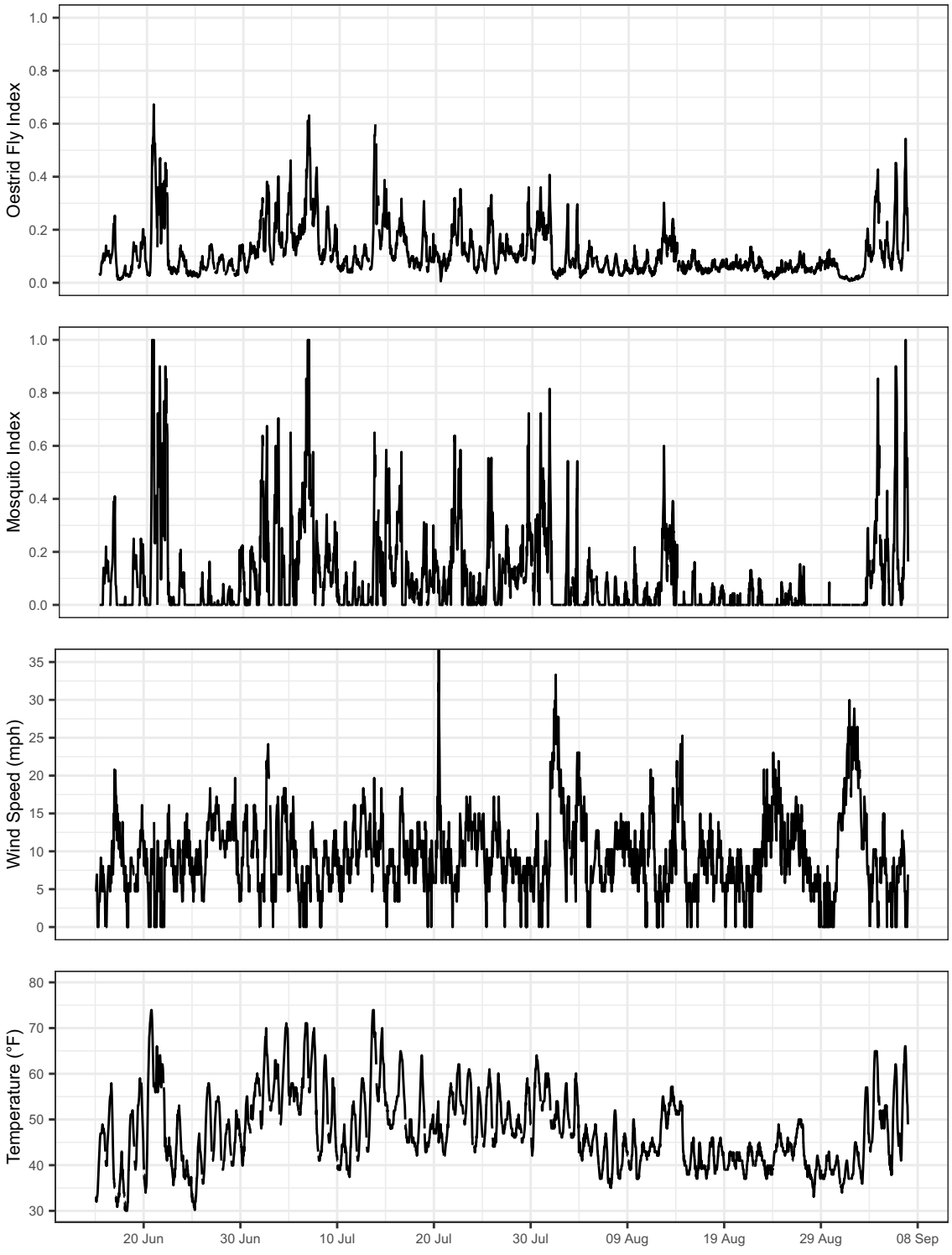

Figure 4. Hourly mosquito probability, oestrid fly probability, wind speed, and air temperature at Nuiqsut during 15 June–7 September 2019. The mosquito probabilities were calculated based on equations from Russell et al. (1993) and the oestrid fly probabilities were calculated based on equations from Mörschel (1999).

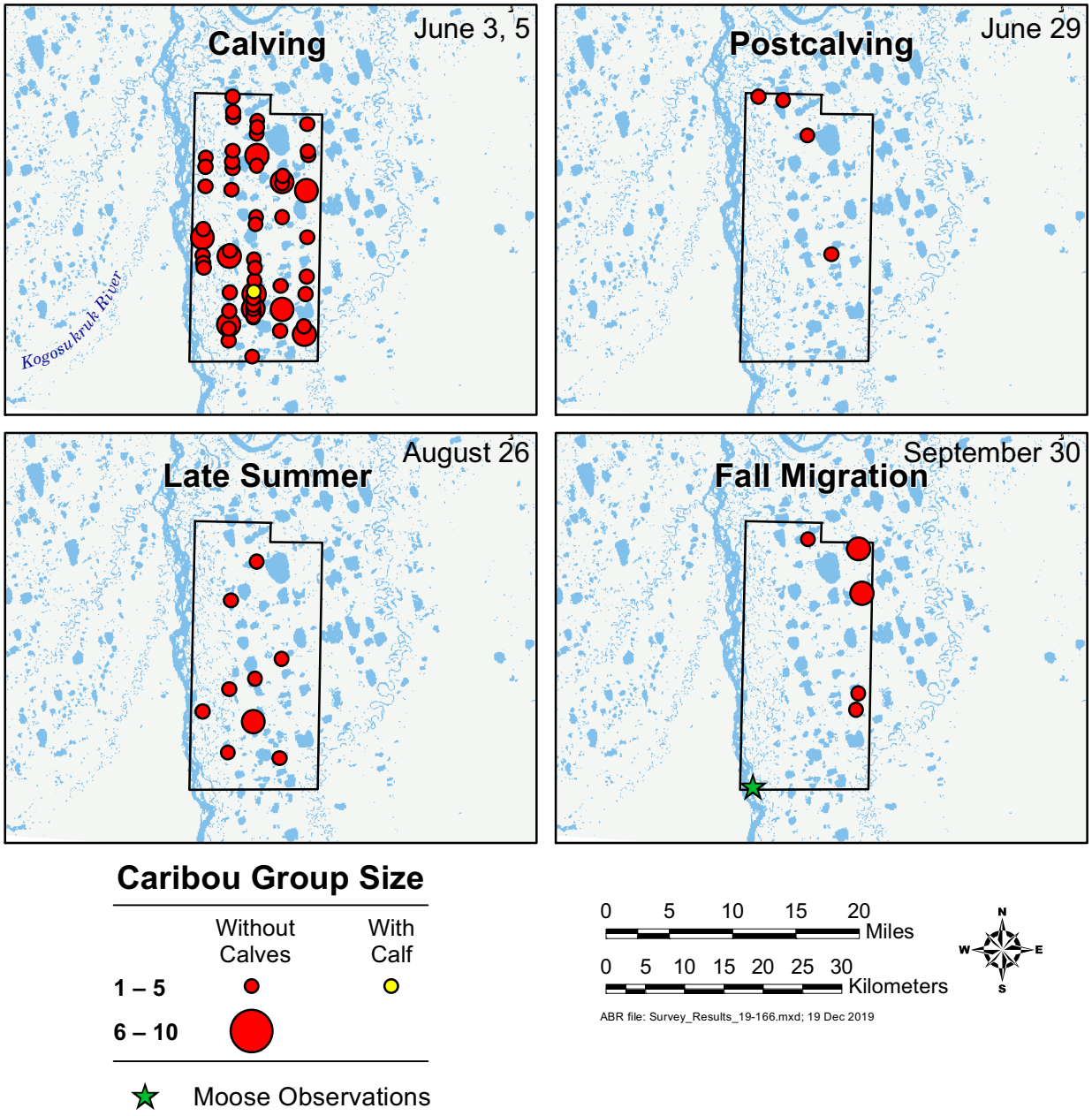

Figure 5. Distribution and number of caribou in the Colville South survey area June–September 2019.

Table 2. Number and density of caribou in the Colville South survey area ± 80% confidence interval, June–September 2019.

Date	Area Surveyed [a] (km²)	Adults Counted	Calves Counted	Total Counted	Estimated Total	Density (caribou/km²)	Number of Groups
June 3, 5	264	201	1	202	404 ± 65	0.766 ± 0.122	59
July 29	264	4	0	4	8 ± 4	0.015 ± 0.007	4
August 26	264	24	-	24	48 ± 20	0.091 ± 0.038	9
September 30	264	23	-	23	46 ± 24	0.087 ± 0.045	4

[a] 50% coverage of survey area; total area was 527 km².

TELEMETRY DATA

KERNEL DENSITY ESTIMATION

The KDE estimates for the CAH indicate that CAH caribou are located primarily near the Brooks Range and south of the survey area during winter (Figure 6). The survey area is on the periphery of the herd's typical range during much of the summer but is in the medium density portion of the herd range during late summer and close to medium density portions of the range during fall migration. The KDEs for the TCH indicate higher use of the study area by the TCH than the CAH during some seasons (Figures 6–8). The survey area is in the high density portion of the TCH females herd's range during winter and in medium density portions of the herd's range during spring migration and fall migration (Figure 7). A higher proportion of TCH males than TCH females winter in the Brooks Range and the survey area is in the high density area for TCH males during calving and fall migration and in the medium density area during spring migration, postcalving, and late summer (Figure 8).

The predicted number of caribou in the survey area based on the proportion of utilization distribution surface from the KDE within the survey area ranged from 152 to 620 animals, with the highest numbers occurring during October and the lowest numbers occurring in July. The predicted numbers were substantially higher than what we observed during aerial surveys in 2019, with the exception of the calving survey in early June when we estimated 404±65 animals were present in the study area and the KDE models predicted 320 animals would be present (Figure 9; Table 2). The KDE estimates are derived from 29 years of telemetry data, and thus large yearly and seasonal variation is to be expected.

DYNAMIC BROWNIAN BRIDGE MOVEMENT MODELS

The dBBMMs show movements of female collared caribou during different seasons. Unlike KDE, they do not attempt to account for uncollared caribou. With high sample sizes, however, they may approximate the herd distribution while portraying movement patterns. Similar to KDE results, few collared CAH caribou were in the Kuparuk area during winter (Figure 10). The few collared caribou in the area during winter were likely animals that remained in the area before migrating south later in the year. Few collared animals were in the area during spring migration, calving, postcalving, or the mosquito season. Some CAH caribou moved through the survey area during oestrid fly season, late summer, and fall migration (Figure 10). The dBBMM results for the TCH indicate that some collared TCH females moved through the Colville South area during winter, spring migration and calving, but TCH females were largely absent from the area during postcalving, mosquito harassment, oestrid fly seasons, and late summer (Figure 11). Some collared TCH females did move through the area again during fall migration.

OTHER MAMMALS

One bull moose (*Alces alces*) was observed on 30 September in the far southwest corner of the study area (Figure 5). Additionally, one brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) was observed on 5 June south of the

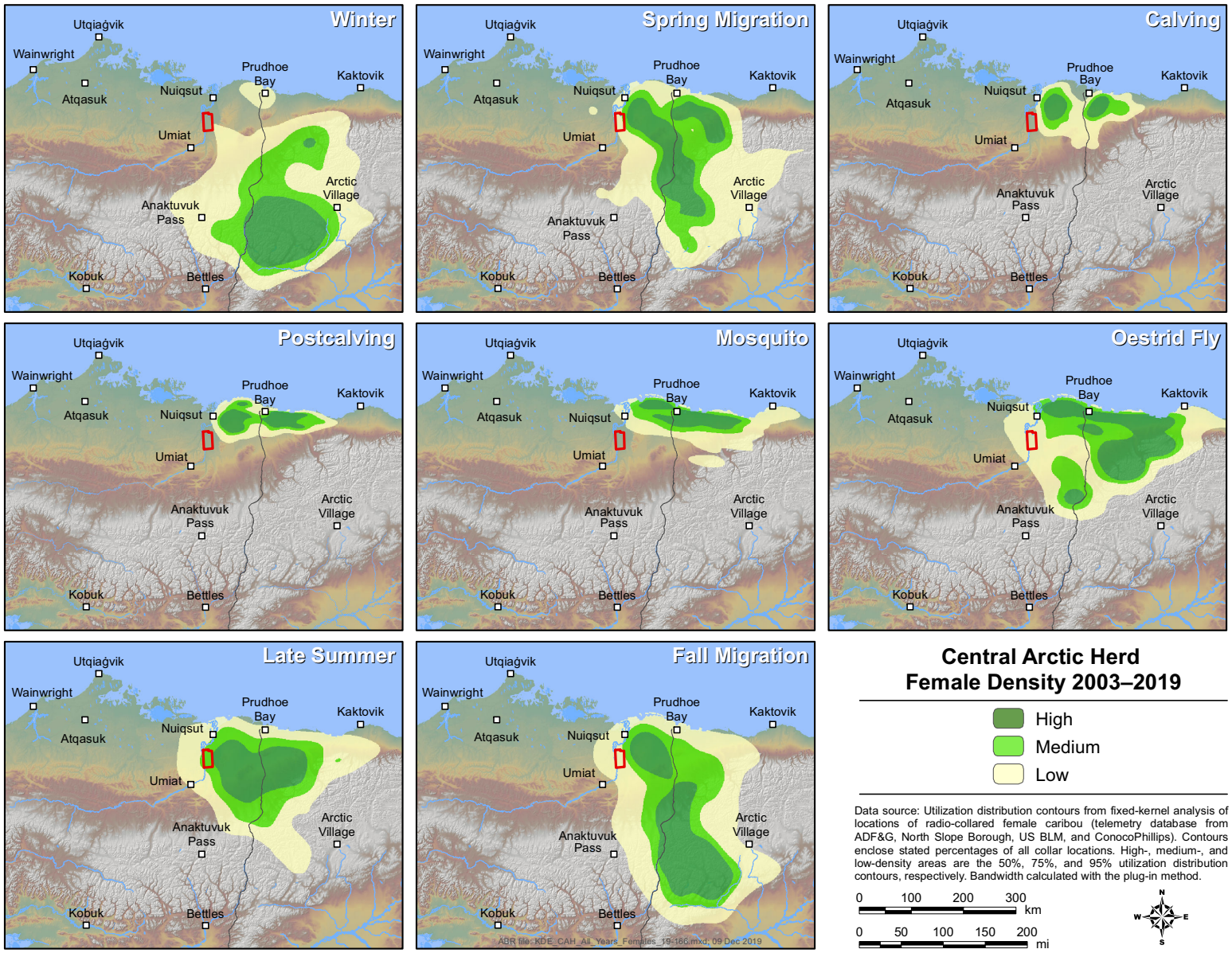

Figure 6. Kernel Density Estimates of seasonal distribution of female caribou from the Central Arctic Herd (study area is in red).

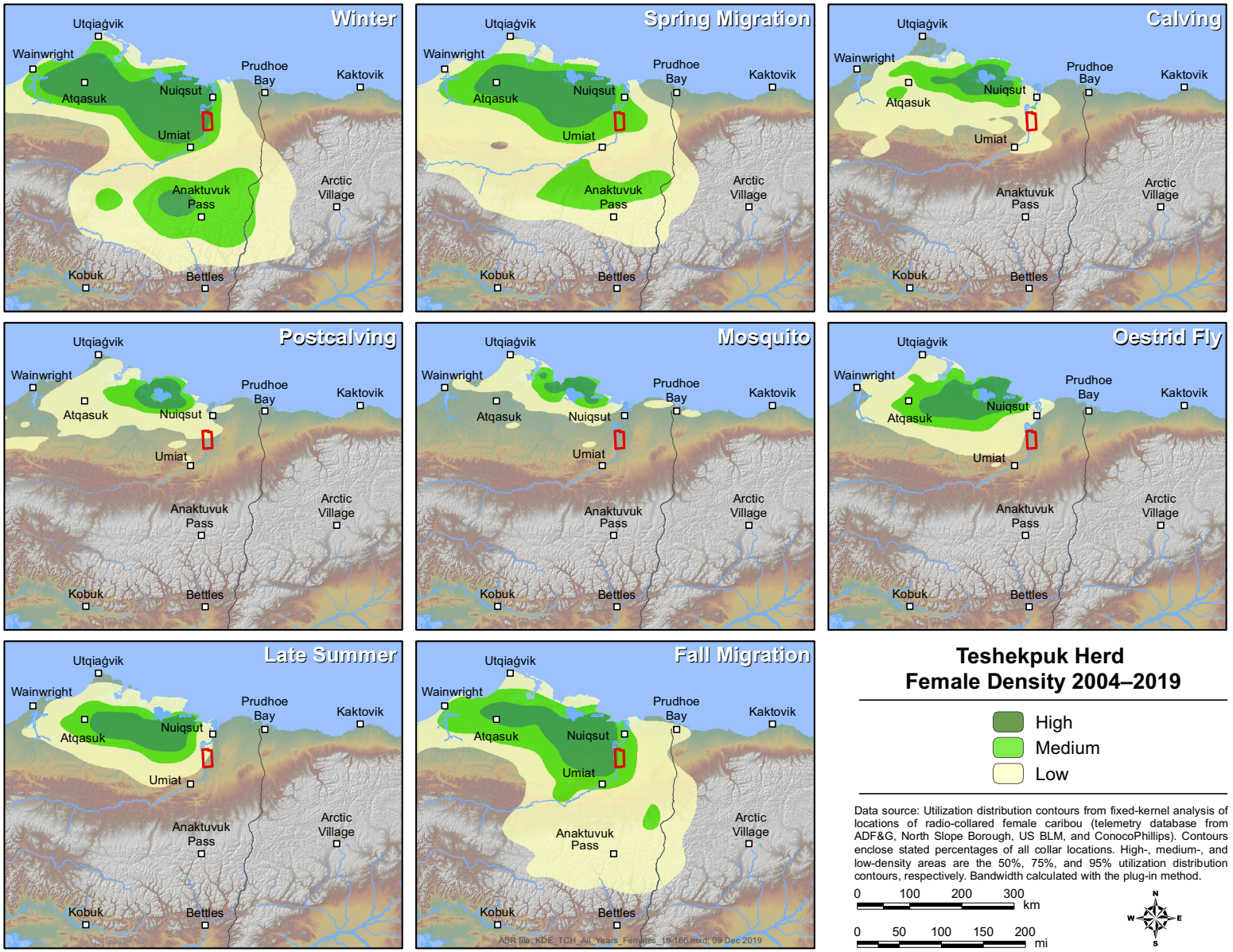

Figure 7. Kernel Density Estimates of seasonal distribution of female caribou from the Teshekpuk Herd (study area is in red).

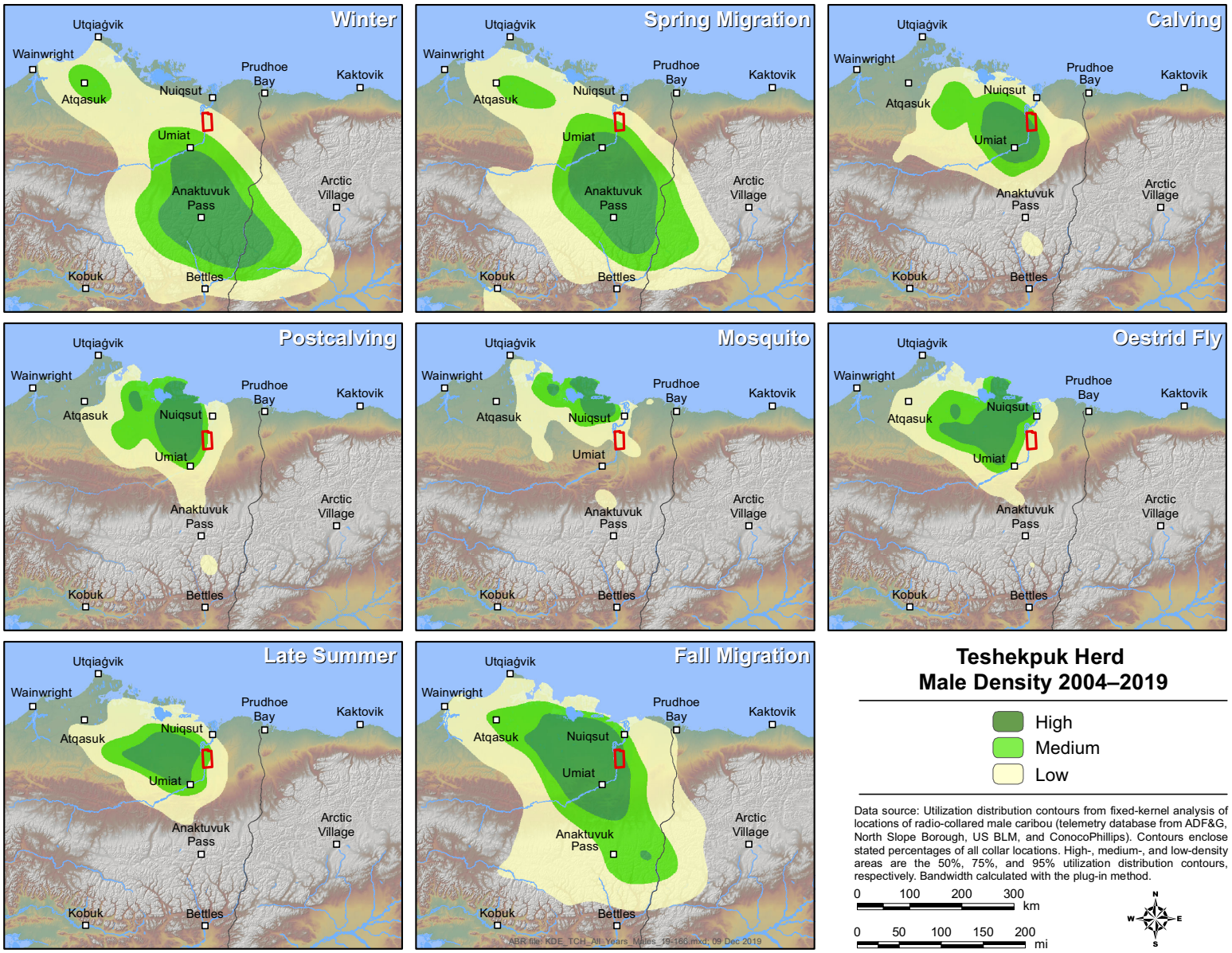

Figure 8. Kernel Density Estimates of seasonal distribution of male caribou from the Teshekpuk Herd (study area is in red).

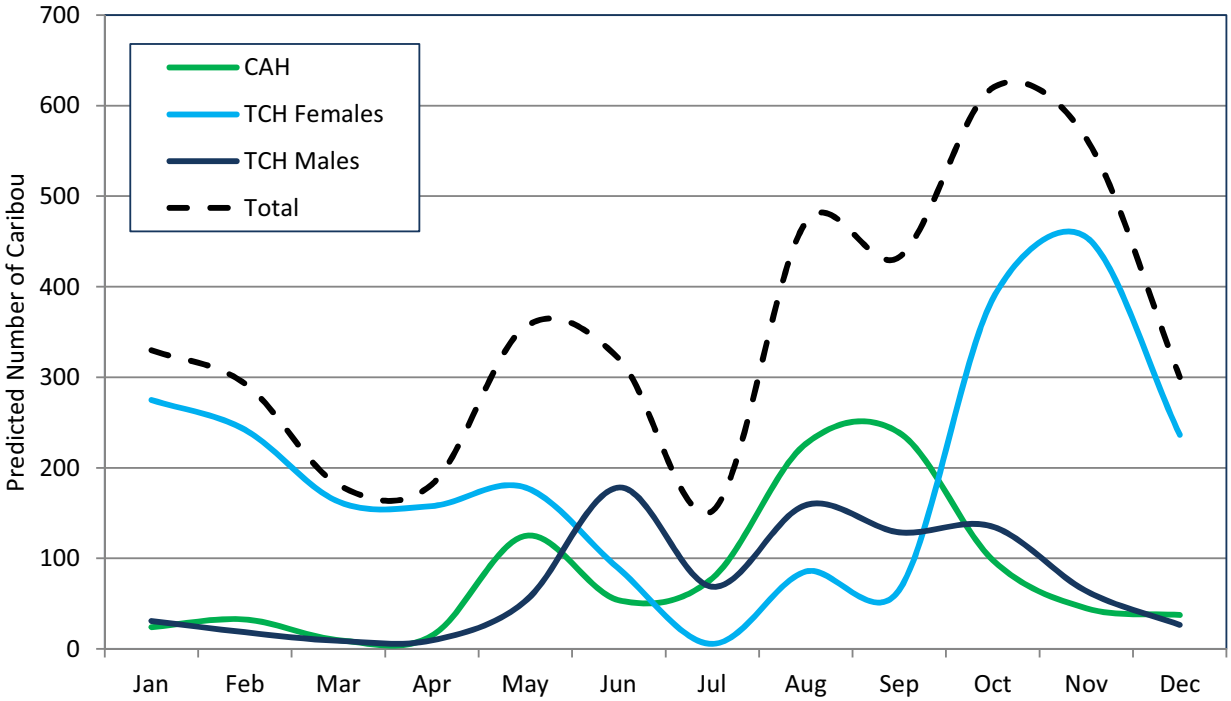

Figure 9. Predicted number of caribou in the Colville South survey area by month based on Kernel Density Estimation.

Kuparuk oilfield but outside of the survey area while commuting to the survey (Figure 12). Muskoxen (*Ovibos moschatus*), wolves (*Canis lupus*), and wolverines (*Gulo gulo*) have occasionally been observed during aerial and ground surveys conducted by ABR in the general area during previous years (Figure 12).

DISCUSSION

Densities of caribou in the Colville South survey area were moderately high during the calving survey and low during the other 3 aerial surveys in 2019. We observed a total of 201 adults and only 1 calf during the calving survey, suggesting that this area is not heavily used by parturient cows for calving. In 2018, only 6 adults and 1 calf were observed in the area (Appendix B). The CAH calving distribution in the area northeast of the survey area was surveyed during 1993, 1995–2017 (Prichard et al. 2018c), and low calving densities in the Colville South survey area are consistent with distribution patterns described in these previous surveys. The densities of calving caribou generally declined near the Itkillik River and the highest density calving in the region occurred on the higher elevation areas near the upper Miluveach, Kachemach, and Sakonowyak Rivers (Prichard et al. 2018c). This western edge of the calving distribution is seen clearly in the dBBMM results for the CAH (Figure 10). The caribou observed in the survey area during early June 2019 may have included non-parturient female CAH, early arriving CAH males, and TCH males still migrating towards the herd's summer range near Teshekpuk Lake from wintering areas in the central Brook Range.

Following calving, the CAH generally move north prior to the emergence of mosquitoes which typically occurs in late June. Once mosquito harassment begins, CAH caribou move to the coast where mosquito harassment is typically less severe due to higher winds and lower temperatures. Caribou then drift inland when cooler temperatures or high winds cause harassment to abate (Murphy and Lawhead 2000, Parrett 2007, Yokel et al. 2009, Wilson et al. 2012). In mid-July, oestrid flies are the primary driver of caribou behavior and CAH caribou disperse into smaller groups and move

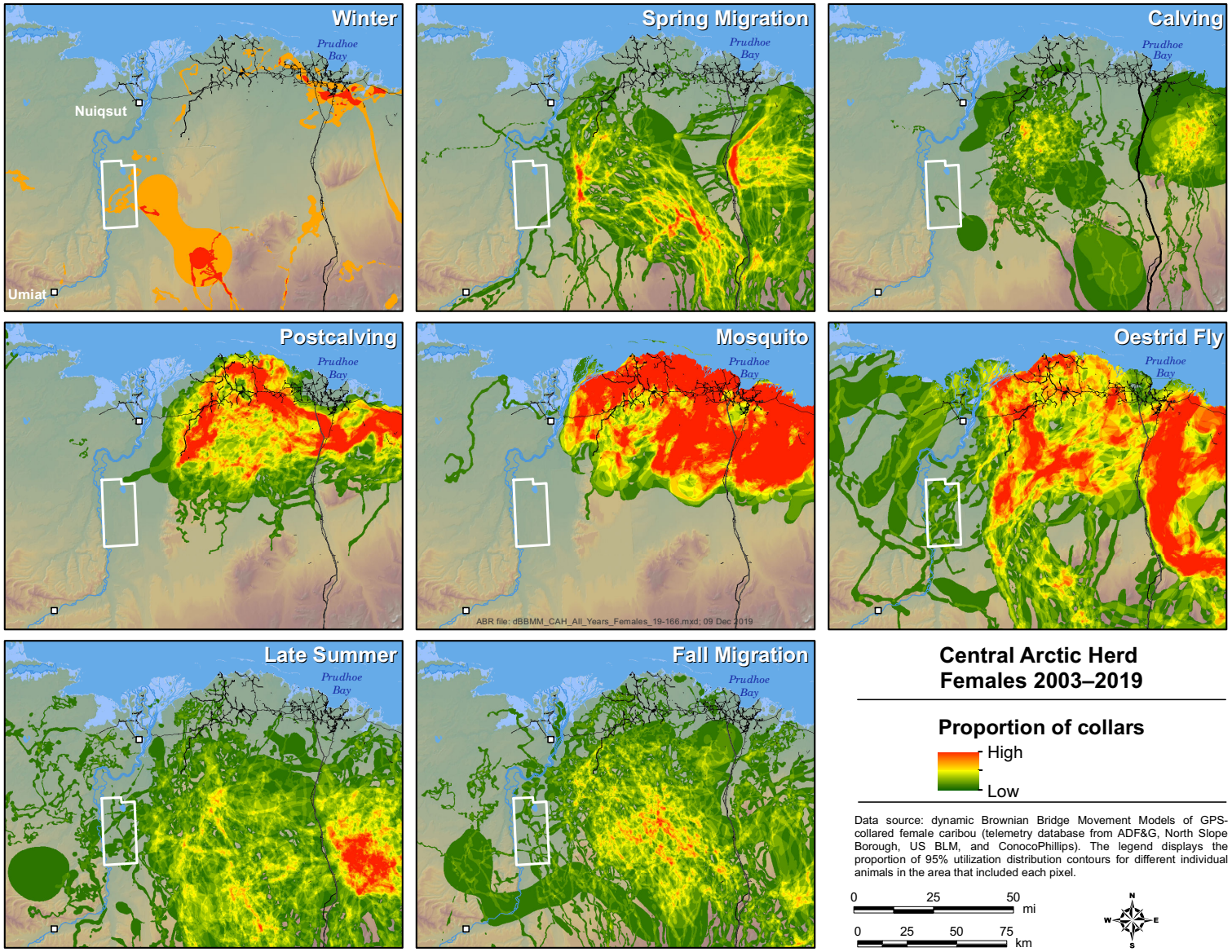

Figure 10. Seasonal movements of female caribou of the Central Arctic Herd based on dynamic Brownian Bridge Movement Models. Proportions of collars are relative to the number in the area during a season.

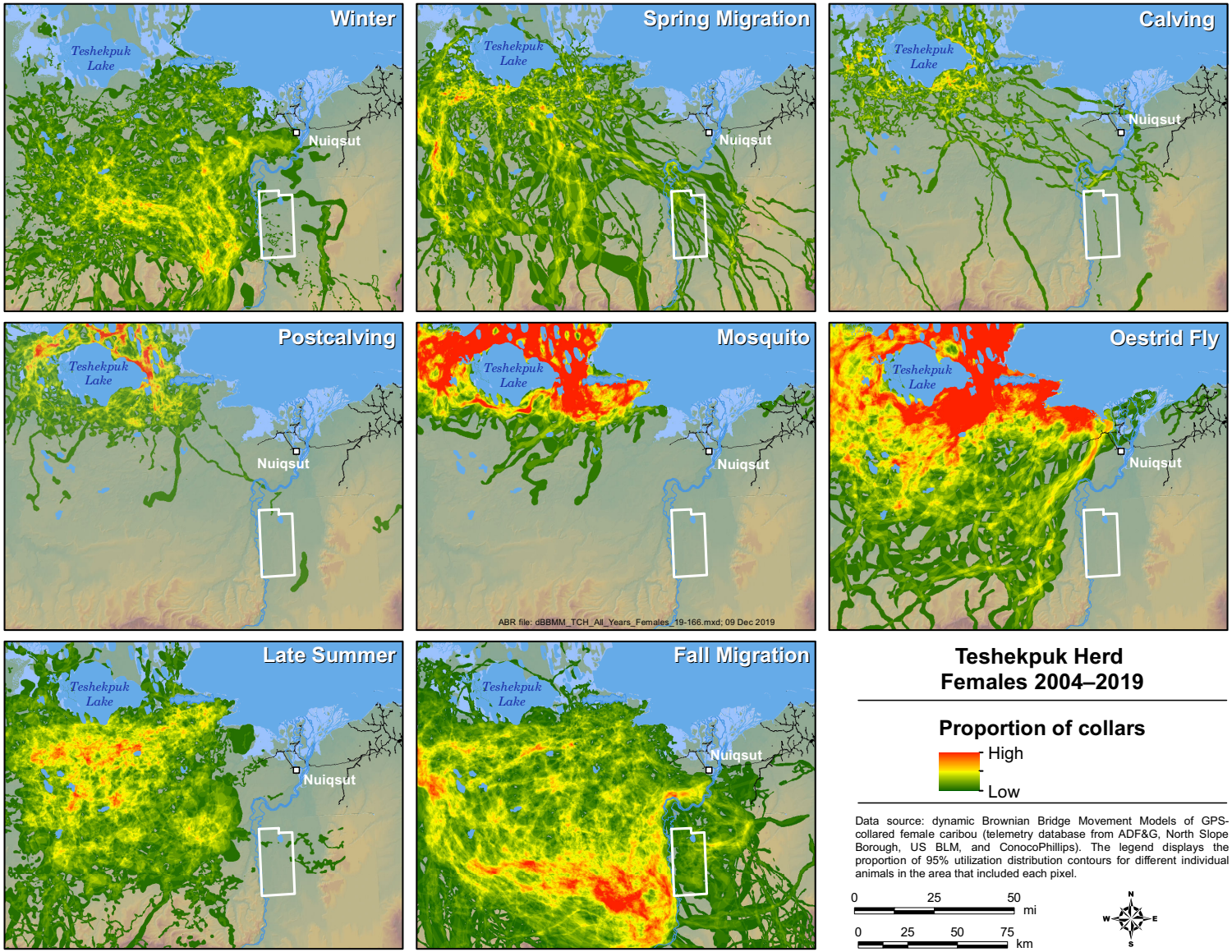

Figure 11. Seasonal movements of female caribou of the Teshekpuk Herd based on dynamic Brownian Bridge Movement Models. Proportions of collars are relative to the number in the area during a season.

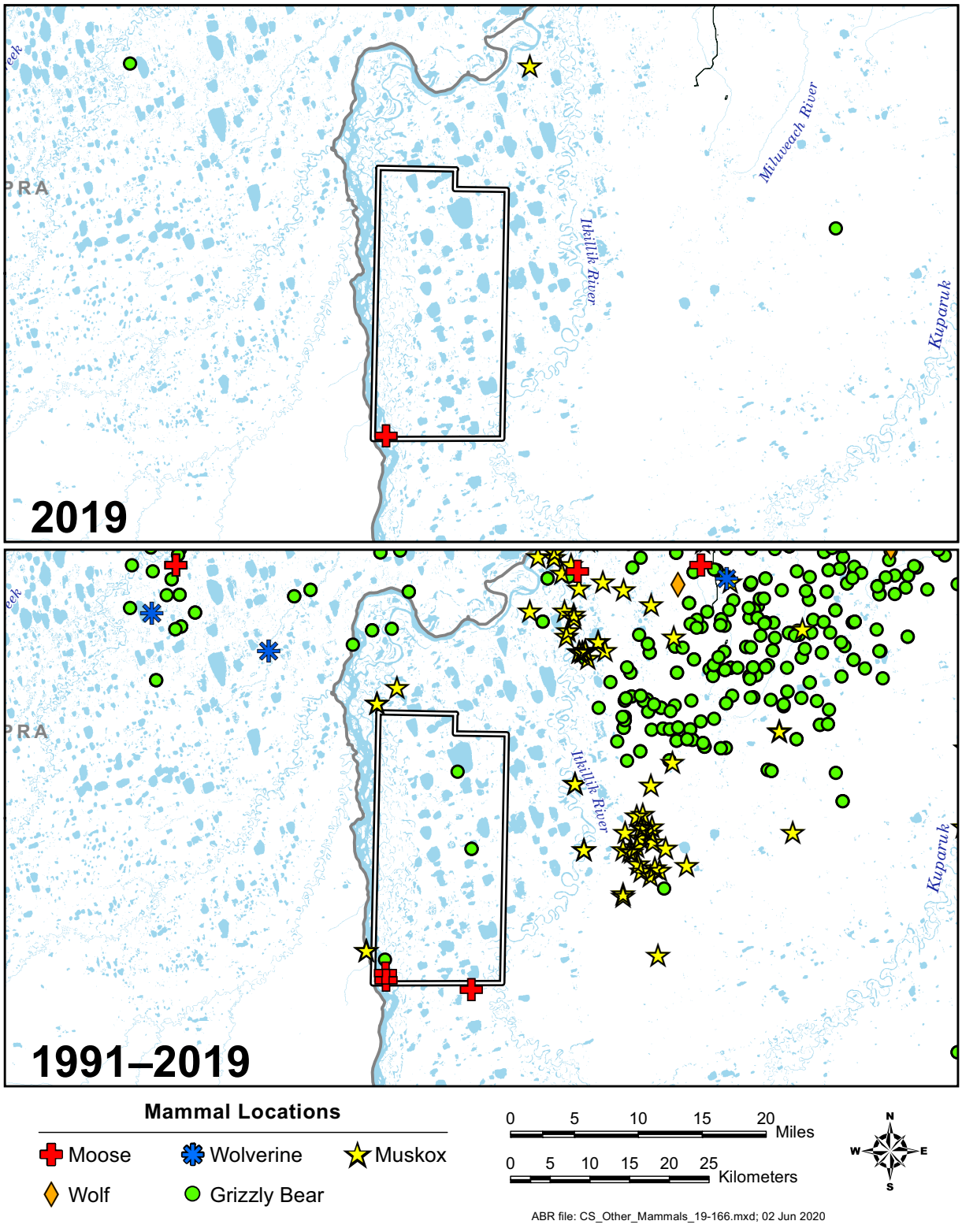

Figure 12. Distribution of other large mammals observed during aerial and ground surveys conducted during 2019 (top panel) and during all years (bottom panel). Because the research effort varied by area, these results do not reflect mammal densities in the area.

inland, often using ridges, gravel bars, roads, and pads as areas for oestrid fly relief (Pollard et al. 1996, Murphy and Lawhead 2000). The CAH migrates south to winter in the Brooks Range, usually east of the Dalton Highway (Arthur and Del Vecchio 2009, Nicholson et al. 2016).

The Colville South survey area was largely outside of the typical distribution of the CAH from winter to the mosquito season. Some CAH caribou used the area from oestrid fly season through fall migration as the CAH disperse widely across the central Coastal Plain and several notable incursions of the CAH to the west side of the Colville River have been recorded sporadically over the years (Prichard et al. 2018a).

The TCH differs from most arctic caribou herds in that most animals remain on the Arctic Coastal Plain during winter, although a portion of the herd, including most males, winter in the Brooks Range predominantly west of the Dalton Highway (Person et al. 2007, Parrett 2015a, Prichard et al. 2018a). The highest density of TCH calving occurs near Teshekpuk Lake and the area north of the lake is used for the predominant mosquito-relief area (Person et al. 2007, Yokel et al. 2009, Wilson et al. 2012, Prichard et al. 2018a). Similar to the CAH, the TCH disperses into smaller groups and spreads inland from the oestrid fly season to fall migration. Most TCH animals remain west of the Colville River during the summer. Hence, the major use of the Colville South area by the TCH occurs during migratory movements by the portion of the herd that winters in the central Brooks Range.

With the exception of the early June survey, our predicted numbers of caribou in the survey area based on monthly KDE analyses were higher than what we observed during aerial surveys. KDE creates a smoothed surface from caribou locations; however, it does not take into account abrupt changes in distribution that could occur near prominent landscape features such as rivers. If the TCH generally remains on the west side of the Colville River, the KDE may overestimate densities along the east side of the river. Similarly, the CAH appears to use the higher elevation areas east of the survey area preferentially. KDE smoothing near the eastern edge of the range may have overestimated CAH numbers in the Colville South area. The distribution of caribou in the area at any one time may also differ dramatically from the long-term average for the CAH and TCH that is reflected in the kernel density maps.

OTHER MAMMALS

One moose was observed in the survey area in September, 2019. Both the Colville and Itkillik rivers are used for moose hunting by residents of Nuiqsut (SRB&A 2010). Moose on the North Slope are primarily found in riparian areas with tall shrubs, especially tall willows (*Salix* spp.; Tape et al. 2016). Our aerial survey transects were offset from the tall willow habitat along the Colville River in order to minimize disturbance of subsistence hunters. This made it more difficult to observe moose in the area. However, the fact that we observed a moose during a survey in 2019 and 2 moose were observed on separate surveys during 2018 suggests that this area is regularly used by moose.

The survey area is on the northern extent of tall willow and moose range, although moose have occasionally been observed farther north during ABR surveys (Lawhead et al. 2014). Climate warming has resulted in a northward range expansion for both tall shrubs and species like moose and snowshoe hares (*Lepus americanus*) that are strongly associated with tall shrubs on the North Slope (Tape et al. 2016). Tape et al. (2016) estimated that the height of tall shrubs along the Colville River increased 63% from 1901 to 2009. Moose habitat on the North Slope is predicted to more than double in size by 2099 due to a warming climate and increases in tall shrubs (Zhou et al. 2020).

Other large mammals occur at low densities across the Coastal Plain and are likely to use the area regularly (Figure 12). These species include brown bears, wolves (*Canis lupus*), wolverines (*Gulo gulo),* red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), and arctic fox (*Alopex lagopus*). A small group of muskox (*Ovibos moschatus*) has typically been located east of Nuiqsut in recent years (Prichard et al. 2018c) and may occasionally use the Colville South area.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of existing telemetry data indicates that the Colville South survey area is between the ranges of the TH and CAH and gets little use by

either herd as reflected by the low density of caribou observed in the area during aerial surveys in most seasons. The area is expected to have low densities of caribou during calving and caribou are least likely to be in the area during postcalving and the mosquito seasons. In 2019, we estimated that there were 404 total caribou in the area during calving, this is much higher than the estimated number in 2018 (26 total caribou; Appendix B; Prichard et al. 2018b). Only 2 calves were estimated to be in the area during calving in 2019, suggesting that these animals were largely non-parturient females, early-arriving males, or migrating TCH animals. The area is used during spring and fall migration by the portion of the TCH that migrates to the central Brooks Range. The area is on the northern extent of moose range in north-central Alaska and is also near the current northern limit of extensive tall shrubs along the Colville River. Moose numbers may continue to increase in the future due to climate warming (Tape et al. 2016, Zhou et al. 2020).

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Appendix A. Sum of thawing degree-days (ºC above freezing) at the Kuparuk airstrip during five periods of the insect season, mid-June through August 1983–2019.

Year	June 16–30	July 1–15	July 16–31	August 1–15	August 16–31	Total
1983 [a]	66.2	74.8	103.9	100.1	50.7	395.7
1984	75.3	122.8	146.4	99.6	59.8	503.9
1985	92.9	84.8	99.5	100.0	70.8	447.8
1986	100.9	112.3	124.7	109.6	54.4	501.8
1987	61.3	112.2	127.9	93.1	109.3	503.7
1988	78.0	108.5	143.0	137.7	52.3	519.3
1989	109.5	214.7	168.1	215.8	133.9	842.0
1990	132.2	145.0	150.0	82.5	72.8	582.5
1991	127.6	73.3	115.0	70.7	54.5	441.1
1992	85.2	113.9	166.1	104.2	96.2	565.5
1993	94.4	175.9	149.8	96.1	78.0	594.2
1994	51.6	149.7	175.8	222.2	92.4	691.6
1995	87.5	162.9	106.9	83.4	83.6	524.1
1996	121.1	138.9	168.1	95.8	34.7	558.6
1997	109.7	101.7	177.8	194.2	97.8	681.1
1998	135.0	158.9	184.4	174.4	123.1	775.8
1999	67.8	173.3	81.1	177.6	69.8	569.5
2000	169.8	113.4	127.2	118.6	53.6	582.5
2001	72.2	79.8	183.9	131.7	32.5	500.0
2002	70.2	92.3	134.5	106.2	90.7	493.8
2003	77.4	140.0	144.7	91.9	54.9	508.8
2004	185.7	148.0	151.5	153.4	123.2	761.7
2005	78.3	67.5	79.5	176.8	44.5	446.5
2006	153.2	82.3	186.2	109.6	36.9	568.1
2007	81.8	115.2	138.9	134.4	103.5	573.7
2008	138.9	172.3	132.5	86.0	73.9	603.5
2009	44.5	142.7	126.5	133.7	95.0	542.3
2010	51.1	126.7	168.8	149.2	115.2	610.9
2011 [b]	103.0	122.4	171.6	142.8	83.7	623.3
2012 [b]	137.3	140.2	194.1	142.9	166.3	780.7
2013	131.7	112.8	185.5	185.4	52.9	668.3
2014	82.0	127.2	102.3	67.9	112.0	491.2
2015	197.2	117.9	95.7	108.8	51.4	571.0
2016	131.2	174.7	130.8	98.1	132.7	667.4
2017	121.3	173.4	174.5	150.5	74.7	694.3
2018	47.7	137.0	195.9	63.6	57.4	501.6
2019	108.5	180.3	181.3	118.0	85.6	673.7
Mean	102.1	129.5	145.8	125.0	80.4	582.7

[a] Some missing values estimated by interpolation.
[b] Estimated by averaging data from Nuiqsut and Deadhorse while Kuparuk airstrip was closed for paving (Lawhead et al. 2013).

Appendix B. Number and density of caribou in the Colville South survey area ± 80% confidence interval, 2018– 2019.

Year	Date	Adults Counted[a]	Calves Counted[a]	Total Counted[a]	Estimated Total	Density (caribou/km²)	Number of Groups[a]
2018	May 21	0	0	0	0	0	0
	June 8[b]	6	1	7	26 ± 15	0.027 ± 0.014	3
	July 31	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Aug. 29	13	0	13	26 ± 15	0.049 ± 0.028	5
	Sept. 24	23	0	23	46 ± 20	0.087 ± 0.038	5
2019	June 3, 5	201	1	202	404 ± 65	0.766 ± 0.122	59
	July 29	4	0	4	8 ± 4	0.015 ± 0.007	4
	August 26	24	-	24	48 ± 20	0.091 ± 0.038	9
	September	23	-	23	46 ± 24	0.087 ± 0.045	4

[a] 50% coverage of survey area; Area surveyed was 264 km² and total area was 527 km².
[b] Applied sightability correction factor of 1.88 (Lawhead et al. 1994).