

WINTER MOOSE SEASON IN THE UPPER KUSKOKWIM
CONTROLLED USE AREA, 1982-1983

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Technical Paper Number 72

Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Division of Subsistence
Nikolai, Alaska
March 1983

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INTRODUCTION

In March 1982, the Alaska Board of Game adopted an extended winter moose season in portions of the Upper Kuskokwim Controlled Use Area of Game Management Unit (GMU) 19 following a proposal for a change in regulations submitted by the McGrath Fish and Game Advisory Committee. The Board established a second season from December 1 to February 28 for the controlled use area exclusive of the North Fork of the Kuskokwim River and its tributaries (Fig. 1). The North Fork remained closed after the area-wide 30-day September season. The communities of Nikolai and Telida, with a combined population of 120 in 1982 in 37 households, are situated within the controlled use area (Fig. 1). This report presents a description of the 1982-83 winter moose hunting season by residents of Nikolai and Telida. The information was gathered using systematic interviews with residents and participant observation methods during the winter hunting season.

FINDINGS

Winter Moose Hunting and Use of Moose -- General Patterns

Winter moose hunters in the Nikolai and Telida area employ strategies somewhat different from those utilized during the fall months. During winter moose are tracked and stalked in the snow. Hunters keep downwind from the moose to avoid being detected by sound or scent. If the hunter or traveller encounters fresh moose tracks, he attempts to broadly circle the moose through interconnecting openings with a snowmachine to establish both the general area the moose is in and to cause the moose to stop moving. Moose frequently inhabit areas of dense brush in winter which makes pursuit by snowmachines impractical.

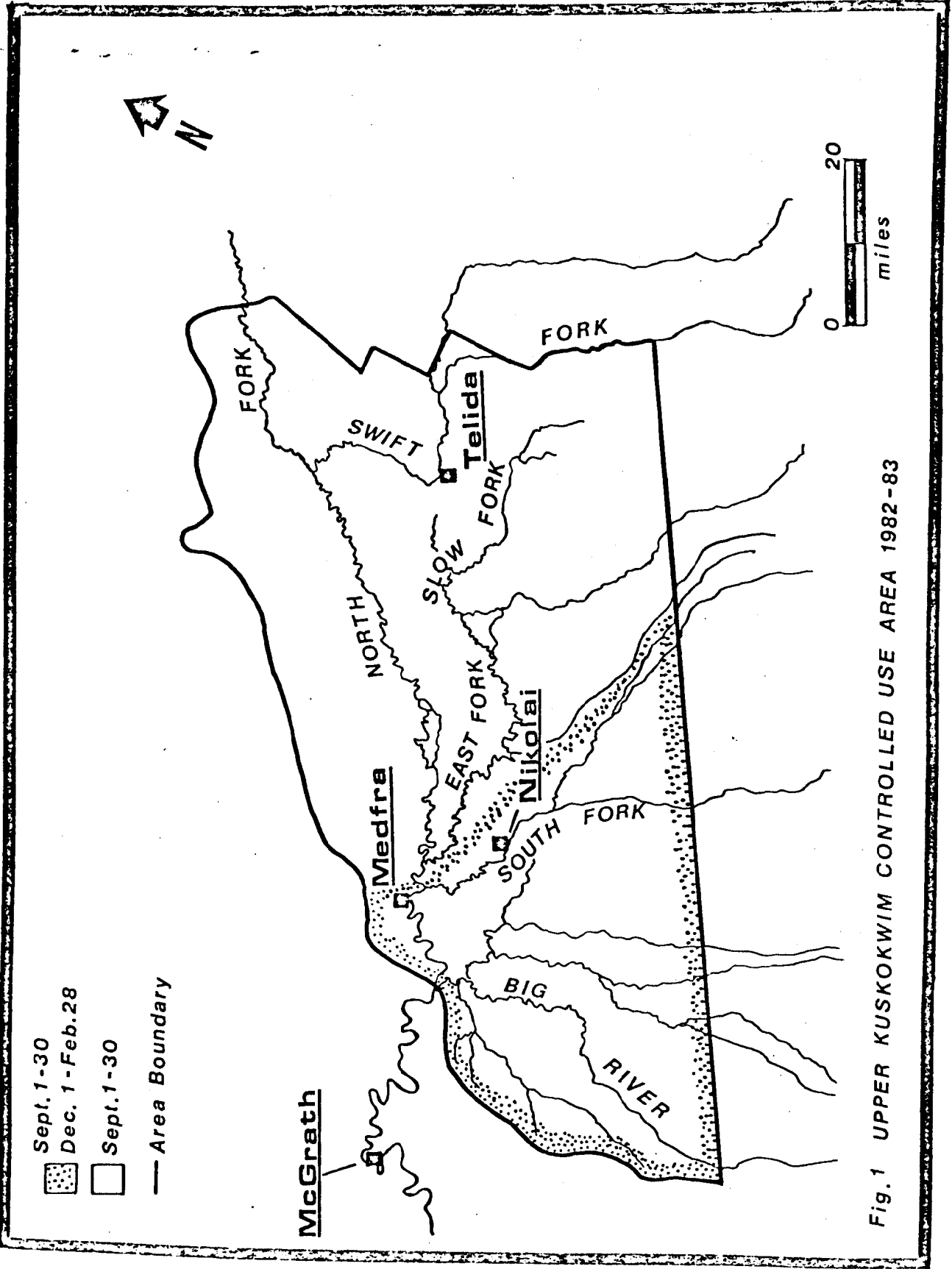


Fig. 1 UPPER KUSKOKWIM CONTROLLED USE AREA 1982-83

Therefore, hunters generally stalk moose on foot with snowshoes. Unless the tracks are particularly fresh or wind conditions favorable, following a moose in brush or forested areas is usually fruitless. Sometimes, when several men are hunting a particular moose together, they will split up and will wait for the moose to emerge at strategic locations where moose can be viewed unobstructed by brush or trees, such as along lake edges or clearings. This type of hunt is generally directed by older, more experienced hunters who instruct "watchers" where to wait and attempt to follow or "drive" the moose through the brush on snowshoes. The composition of the winter hunting party was flexible and included relatives and non-relatives alike and ranged in size from one to eight individuals.

Knowledge of terrain and the behavior of moose are important factors in hunting success. Older hunters are recognized as being more adept in using snowshoes than their younger counterparts. Also, older men are better able to determine the sex of antlerless moose from tracks and brief visual contacts. These visual clues may include subtle color variations, differences in facial and body contours, and the presence of antler pedestals. Hunters on snowshoes rely on their hearing in tracking a moose in the brush, frequently stopping to listen for movement which aids in determining the location of the animal.

Once a moose is taken it may be left for several hours or even overnight before being butchered, particularly if it is taken in proximity to the home community. This allows the flesh to cool gradually which contributes to more tender meat for eating. Virtually every part of the moose is salvaged as with moose harvested during the September season (Stokes and Andrews 1982). Because transportation

is somewhat easier during the winter, the lungs and windpipe which may be discarded in September, are also retrieved for dog food. Snowmachines enable hunters to get close to the dispatched animal resulting in shorter distances to pack the meat. Cross-country trails also greatly shorten distances necessary to transport the harvest back to the home settlement. For example, Salmon River, nearly 160 river miles from Nikolai during the summer, is only 11 miles distant by winter trail.

The distribution of the harvest varies depending on the time of year and other considerations. Moose are commonly divided between members of the hunting party and those who participated in transporting the meat back to the community. These are not always the same groups. Some participants may keep their shares while others may give portions to other community members. At other times, the entire harvest may be distributed community-wide. This community-wide distribution is particularly common in Telida. The most important holiday of the year for Nikolai and Telida inhabitants is Russian Orthodox Christmas in in early January, and several "potlatches" occur during this period. Often meat from a successful hunt is set aside for these events. "Potlatches" may also occur at other holidays or events such as Easter or for the celebration of the baptism of a newly-born son or grandson. At other times, when a death occurs in the community, one or more moose may be harvested for the ceremonies that take place in conjunction both before and after a funeral.

1982-83 Winter Season

In order to better understand the hunting activities which occurred

during the winter season, a brief summary of the September hunt is necessary. The first three weeks of the September season were generally unproductive for Nikolai and Telida participants. Poor weather consisting of high winds and rain made conditions less than favorable for hunters. Bull moose were absent along the river corridors searched by hunters, indicating that bull moose were not yet "moving" at this time. Despite these difficulties, most Nikolai and Telida households were able to harvest at least one moose during the open season. This represented a decrease in success from the 1981 September season and is below the two moose per household average which has been noted in previous reports (Stokes and Andrews 1982; Bishop 1969). Consequently, interest in the winter season was heightened according to the reports of residents. Poor hunting conditions during September also occurred in other communities outside of the controlled use area according to McGrath and Takotna hunters (R. Pegau: personal communication, 1982).

During the 1982-83 winter season from December 1 to February 28 about 15 moose were harvested in that portion of GMU 19 open to hunting. These were all taken by residents of Nikolai. In comparison, during 1981-82, 4 moose were harvested in the same area during the winter season, which was shorter in duration and characterized by poor access due to ice conditions. This year local weather conditions again were a limiting factor to hunters. Temperatures ranged from being unseasonably warm (above 15 degrees Fahrenheit) in December to extended periods of -40 degrees Fahrenheit temperatures in January. In December, snow depths were above average. The combination of warm temperatures and

snow produced open water and overflow conditions in the area. As a result, most hunting occurred during intermittent periods of moderate weather conditions. Harvests took place throughout the open portions of the controlled use area, but mostly within 20 miles of Nikolai.

About half of the harvest occurred in conjunction with other seasonal activities such as trapping or caribou hunting. The other half occurred on outings for the expressed purpose of hunting moose. Several hunters who sought moose were unsuccessful.

During this season, caribou did not provide a substantial food source. The caribou harvest during 1982-83 winter season appeared to be to be equal or slightly lower than that of the previous season by Nikolai residents. In 1981-82 Nikolai residents harvested about 15 animals (Stokes and Andrews 1982). As with moose hunting, weather limited these activities. Furthermore caribou hunters reported difficulty in maintaining sustained contact with the caribou and several parties were unable to locate caribou. Access to areas frequented by caribou is often along traplines. Because of poor trapping yields early in the season and low fur prices, some trappers ceased trapping early or chose not to trap at all. Consequently, some of the access trails were not kept open beyond the middle of December and caribou hunting declined. No caribou were harvested by Telida residents this year or last.

The poor weather conditions and low moose harvests during the September season created particular hardships for the community of Telida. Because Telida is located on the Swift Fork tributary of the North Fork, residents were not permitted to hunt during the second season. Telida residents would have to travel nearly 40 miles to reach

an area open for winter moose hunting. This distance is considered impractical given the multiple trips required to transport the game by snowmachine particularly if moose hunting is not incidental to other activities. Surface transportation of heavy loads for great distances results in substantial wear on the snowmachine and/or sled. Consequently, unlike last year when there was an open winter season in the North Fork drainage Telida had no viable legal alternative to satisfy their meat requirements, especially considering the poor caribou hunting season. Field studies by the Division and user-supplied information indicates the annual Telida moose requirements to be about 16 animals at present.

Telida residents noted an increase in moose sightings in their area this winter. Surface travellers between Nikolai and Telida reported evidence of higher moose concentrations in the vicinity of the East and Slow forks, well within the hunting range of Telida inhabitants. Similarly, Nikolai trappers utilizing the North Fork drainage reported frequent indications of moose activity in their vicinity.

During the winter season, there were no known occurrences of hunters from outside the controlled use area hunting moose in the area.

CONCLUSIONS

The 1982-83 winter moose season established by the Alaska Board of Game for the Upper Kuskokwim Controlled Use Area was successful in

providing Nikolai residents the opportunity to legally harvest moose during times compatible with local environmental conditions favorable for moose hunting and compatible with cultural circumstances. Community interest and participation were higher compared with last year, although harvest levels were only moderate. Weather and travel conditions were restrictive for much of the season but failed to prevent hunters from taking advantage of the winter season. Relatively poor September moose hunting and poor caribou hunting conditions during winter contributed to higher participation in the winter moose hunting season. Telida residents located outside the area open for winter moose hunting reported low September moose harvests this year. Telida hunters did not hunt in the open area near Nikolai during the winter season, primarily because of distance from the village site.

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