NOWITNA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Galena, Alaska

Merged With LIS Anchorage Alaska

US FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE--ALASKA
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U.S. Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

Nowitna National Wildlife Refuge

Galena, Alaska

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Annual Narrative Report

Calender Year 1982

U. S. Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

Personnel

1. Charles Blair, Acting Refuge Manager, GS-11/01 (PFT), EOD 05/09/82

US FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE--ALASKA
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Review and Approvals

Charles W Blair 3-4-83
Submitted by Date

Ian C. Riffe 3/24/83
Regional Office Review

Arnett Vivian 3/4/83

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A. HIGHLIGHTS

The Nowitna National Wildlife Refuge was created on December 2, 1980, with passage of Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), Public Law 96-487. The purposes of the refuge were established as follows:

1) Conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity including but not limited to, trumpeter swans, white-fronted geese, canvasback and other waterfowl and migratory birds, moose, caribou, martens, wolverines, and other furbearers, salmon, sheefish, and northern pike.

2) Fulfill international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife and their habitats.

3) Provide, in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in paragraphs 1) and 2), the opportunity for continued subsistence uses by local residents.

4) Ensure, to the maximum extent practicable and in a manner consistent with the previous three purposes, water quality and necessary water quantity within the refuge.

The first staff member, Assistant Refuge Manager (ARM) Charles Blair entered on duty May 9, 1982. ARM Blair assumed responsibility of acting refuge manager for the remainder of the year because a housing shortage prevented the manager's position from being filled.

B. CLIMATIC CONDITIONS

The Nowitna Refuge is characterized by a continental climate regime. Summers are usually short and hot with almost 23 hours of sunlight. Winters are long, clear and cold with extreme low temperatures. Ice breakup on the Yukon River occurred on May 20th.

	Precipitation (inches)			Temperature (°F)	
	mean	1982	snow	maximum	minimum
January	0.82	0.55	7.60	8	-38
February	0.81	0.45	0.70	41	-37
March	0.63	1.02	13.30	37	-20
April	0.52	0.36	2.90	41	-18
May	0.59	0.44	0.50	61	6
June	1.24	0.98	----	81	38
July	2.22	3.00	----	85	47
August	2.76	2.01	----	73	39
September	1.76	2.39	Tr.	65	34
October	0.81	1.45	7.50	40	- 8
November	0.90	1.02	14.60	28	-31
December	0.76	0.53	4.40	38	-36
Totals	13.8	14.2	51.06		
Extreme temperatures				85	-38

C. LAND ACQUISITION

1. Fee Title

The establishment of the refuge with the passage of ANILCA on December 2, 1980, set aside approximately 1,560,00 acres as the Nowitna National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). A survey conducted since that date has established 2,051,132.64* acres within the boundaries of the refuge. A breakdown of land ownership is as follows:

Type of Ownership	Acreage
Native allotment	2,058
Private	5
Native selected	87,400
Cemetery	270
Interim conveyed	60,435.61
Fish and Wildlife Service	1,907,865
Water (proposed navigable)	100

The processing of Native Corporation selected lands appears to be moving ahead. The opposite is true for Native allotments on the refuge. To date, there have seen no allotments patented on refuge lands and because of funding constraints and heavy workloads on the Bureau of Land Management it will be many years before the work is complete.

In relation to the problem of processing Native allotments there is a question of when the Service's management responsibility ends. The refuge has asked Realty for a clarification on this point. Does our interim management responsibility extend until the allotment is patented or after the application for title is accepted by the BLM? If it is the former, we may be managing these lands for a long period of time.

E. ADMINISTRATION

1. Personnel

The first permanent personnel consisted of an assistant refuge manager, GS-11, who came on duty May 9, 1982. The refuge manager's position (GS-12) was not filled during Calender Year (CY) 1982 because of a housing shortage in Galena, Alaska, site of the refuge office. There are plans to complex the Nowitna, Koyukuk, and Innoko Refuges with a headquarters site in Galena during Fiscal Year (FY) 1983 so the refuge manager position will probably remain unfilled until the proposed administrative changes are made.

* Totals do not add up due to incomplete survey.

2. Funding

The refuge was funded with both Migratory Bird, and Mammals and Non-Migratory Bird Program funds. The following is a breakdown by program of FY'82 funding:

Program	Funds
1210	$30,000
1220	$40,000

3. Safety

No accidents occurred during CY'82. Safety Officer Virginia Hyatt conducted a safety inspection of the refuge office in Galena on July 7, 1982, and made recommendations for refuge facilities and equipment. Personnel safety awareness is a viable part of doing the job in Interior Alaska because of extreme weather conditions and isolated environment. "Mistakes" under these conditions can be serious.

F. HABITAT MANAGEMENT

1. General

The Nowitna NWR, comprising approximately 1,907,000 acres, is characteristic of land in Interior Alaska. The majority of the lands of the refuge are forested and belong to three major plant associations. The bottomland spruce - poplar forest is found along the Nowitna and Yukon River drainages and to a lesser extent, along smaller streams and trubutaries. This type is composed of black spruce, white spruce, balsam poplar, quaking aspen, and paper birch. Shrubs include alder spp., willows, roses, cranberries and blueberries. Herbs, grasses, ferns and mosses and lichens are also found here. The low brush-bog and muskeg community is found predominantly in the northern lowlands of the refuge and is comprised of the black spruce and tamarack tree species. Shrubs include labrador tea, crowberry, willows, bog cranberries, roses, blueberries, alders and resin and dwarf birches. sedges, rushes and cotton grasses as well as mosses and lichen may also be found here. The largest plant association on the refuge is the lowland spruce - hardwood forest. This community is dominated by black spruce but white spruce, tammarck, paper birch, balsam poplar, and quaking aspen may also be found. Understory vegetation includes willows, dwarf birch, blueberry, rose, labrador tea, crowberry, bearberry, cotton grass, ferns, horsetail, lichens and possibly sphagnum and other mosses.

The Yukon River forms the northern boundary of the refuge. 82-01 CB

The refuge is bisected from north to south by the Nowitna River which meanders for approximately 230 miles within the refuge. Small rivers and streams interlace the refuge and drain into the Nowitna River. The meandering of the river in the northern "lowlands" has produced numerous oxbow lakes and sloughs which provide excellent waterfowl and furbearer habitat. The southern two-thirds of the refuge consists of rolling hills with elevations ranging up to 2,000 feet above sea level.

A typical bank of the Nowitna River. The meandering river comprises 230 miles within the refuge. 82-02 CB

2. Fire Management

All the lands encompassing Nowitna NWR are part of the Alaska Interagency Fire Management Plan, Tanana/Minchumina Planning Area. This plan was completed in 1982 and provides for specific fire treatment on different units of the refuge. Previous to this plan, all fires occurring on the refuge were treated by aggressive attack until they were controlled and extinguished. Following 20-30 years of fire control it became apparent that habitat was changing and the characteristic wildlife resources of that habitat were decreasing. It was slowly accepted fire was a natural component of this environment combined with the fact that wildfire suppression was very expensive. Hence we entered into fire management from the fire suppression method.

Under the Fire Management Plan there are four options that apply to refuge lands. The following is a summary of those options:

Critical protection	-	Highest priority response. Fires will receive immediate and aggressive initial attacks. This category includes the protection of life and property.
Full protection	-	All fires will receive aggressive initial attack and suppression efforts until the fire is declared out. Native allotments, and selections, private property, and adjoining refuge lands.
Limited action	-	Suppression actions need only be to the extent necessary to keep a fire within the management unit or to protect critical sites within the area.
Modified action	-	This option provides protection between "Full" and "Limited." The intent is to provide manager/owners with an alternative for those lands that require a relatively high level of protection when the risks of large damaging fires is diminished. Its intent is to reduce suppression costs and increase resource benefits during the entire fire season through its two distinct operational responses to fire.

12. Wilderness and Special Areas

The entire 230 miles of Nowitna River classified as "wild" under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is contained within refuge boundaries. The river was added to the system on December 2, 1980, by Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), Public Law 96-487, which also established the refuge. The Nowitna River and its surrounding lands are primitive with few man-made structures, no roads, and few trails. Access to the river is predominately by boat and airplane. The amount of use that occurs by recreational boaters at the present is unknown but is not believed to be great. The river and surrounding lands certainly qualify to provide the experience of a wild river trip but the cost of access and its remote location relative to other rivers does not make it a "popular" trip at this time. This type of use, however, is expected to increase in the future as more accessible areas become crowded.

A management plan will be developed for the river concurrent with the comprehensive conservation plan for the refuge mandated by ANILCA.

The southern "unit" of the refuge is characterized by rolling hills and extensive spruce forests. 82-03 CB

G. WILDLIFE

1. Wildlife Diversity

The refuge contains a diverse group of wildlife species ranging from moose and black bear to warblers and thrushes. A complete list of birds and mammals that utilize the refuge has not been compiled, but mammals, birds, and fish common to Interior Alaska are believed to occur. A preliminary list includes 24 mammals, 103 bird species, three species of salmon and numerous freshwater fishes.

The refuge is utilized by four species of swallows. Here, bank swallows nest in the cut bank of the river. 82-04 CB

2. Endangered and/or Threatened Species

Peregrine falcons have been recorded nesting within a half mile of the refuge boundary and it is assumed they utilize the refuge. The refuge does contain a limited amount of suitable nesting areas and further investigation may determine if the birds nest on the refuge.

3. Waterfowl

The wetlands of the refuge provide habitat for breeding and migrating waterfowl. Canada and white-fronted geese are confirmed nesters on the refuge although their numbers may vary greatly from year to year. The refuge supports approximately 100-120 trumpeter swans which breed annually in the lowlands bordering the Yukon River. Duck species that use the refuge include the widgeon, canvasback, shovler, mallard, pintail, green-wing teal, greater and lesser scaup, and white-wing and surf scoters. The waterfowl densities vary with the quality of the habitat but the Nowitna Flats, recognized as the better habitat, supports up to 67 birds per square mile. In addition to breeding use, migrating waterfowl use the refuge for feeding and resting in fall and spring.

Whitefront geese nest on the refuge.
82-05 CB

4. Marsh and Water Birds

Sandhill cranes are frequently seen on the refuge from June to September and are believed to nest here. Large flocks (about 150 birds) can be seen staging or resting on the refuge during fall migration. Arctic and common loons occur and may nest on the refuge. The red throated loon may be an occasional visitor. Horned and eared grebes can be found from late May to September and may also utilize the refuge for nesting.

5. Shorebirds, Gulls, Terns, and Allied Species

Numerous shorebirds feed and nest on the refuge. In CY'83 we hope to confirm sightings and develop a list of species and their breeding status. The following species are either confirmed sightings or believed to utilize the refuge for feeding and nesting; common snipe, western sandpiper, semipalmated sandpiper, pectoral sandpiper, spotted sandpiper, solitary sandpiper, lesser and greater yellowlegs, ruddy turnstone, golden plover, black-bellied plover, semi-palmated plover, upland plover and long billed dowitcher. Mew and herring gulls are common on the refuge.

6. Raptors

The gyrfalcon is probably an infrequent visitor on the refuge. The marsh hawk, merlin, rough-legged hawk, sharp-shinned hawk, goshawk, red-tailed hawk, great-horned owl, short-eared owl, snowy owl, great gray owl, hawk owl, and boreal owl are raptors that live and nest on the refuge.

Bald and golden eagles are found on the refuge although neither are considered common. Two bald eagle nests were located last year and golden eales are also believed to nest on the refuge. The osprey is also thought to nest on the refuge.

7. Other Migratory Birds

The species composition of passerine birds changes drastically over the yearly cycle. The river corridors are dominated during spring, summer, and early fall by the sounds and presences of Swainson's and graychecked thrushes, yellow rumped and blackpoll warblers, tree, white crowned and savannah sparrows and barn, cliff, bank and tree swallows, many other other migratory songbirds. In winter, the raven, gray jay, redpoll, pine grosbeak, black-capped chicadee, and boreal chickadee dominate the landscape. Other species like the lapland longspur, snow bunting and rusty blackbird can be seen in groups migrating through.

8. Game Mammals

Moose, black bear, brown bear, wolf, coyote, martin, beaver, wolverine, lynx, red fox, and snowshoe hare are all found throughout the refuge. The major species hunted on the refuge are moose and black bear. Martin is the predominant furbearer sought but lynx and beaver may be important during "up" cycles.

Moose

The Nowitna NWR supports a large population of moose and contains valuable moose wintering habitat along the Nowitna River and its associated tributaries. The state has maintained a hunter check station at the confluence of the Nowitna and Yukon Rivers and has conducted fall and winter moose surveys in previous years. We are attempting to obtain this information and plan to begin survey work in 1983.

The habitat along the Nowitna River and its associated tributaries provide important wintering area for moose. 82-06 CB

Black bear

Black bear occur throughout the refuge and are numerous along the rivers and tributaries where they are commonly observed.

The Black bear is a common mammal on the refuge.
82-07 CB

Brown bear

Brown bear occur on the refuge but are infrequently seen and occasionally taken by hunters. We hope to learn more about the population levels and distribution in the future.

Wolf

Little is known about the wolf numbers on the refuge other than they are found throughout the refuge and their sign is abundant along the rivers. Trappers in the area report taking animals each year and are aware of their relative abundance, which they say is increasing.

Beaver

The beaver is a common mammal sought by trappers for both fur and food. The beaver is abundant in the northern area of the refuge where the meandering river and black spruce lowlands provide many oxbow lakes and marshes.

Wolverine

This mammal is present on the refuge and occasionally taken by trappers. However, little is known of its population status and distribution.

Martin

This is one of the most abundant mammals in the forested areas of the refuge. The martin is the mainstay of the trappers take and accounts for the greatest revenue. It is found throughout the refuge but prefers the dense spruce forests that make up a large portion of the refuge.

Other game mammals

Lynx, red fox, snowshoe hare, mink, land otter, and coyote occur on the refuge but little is known about distribution or population status.

10. Other Resident Wildlife

Willow and rock ptarmigan occur on the refuge as well as spruce and ruffed grouse. Porcupine, short-tailed and least weasels, muskrats, and other small mammals may also be found. Little is known about population levels or geographic distribution.

The porcupine is found in the forested areas of the refuge. 82-08 CB

11. Fishery Resources

The rivers and lakes of the refuge provide habitat for a number of fish species. Northern pike are common in most waters and provide sport and subsistence fishing. King, chum, and coho salmon utilize the drainages of the refuge. The Nowitna River is a major spawning area for the sheefish (whitefish). Grayling are found in most drainages on the refuge.

H. PUBLIC USE

1. General

The villages of Ruby and Tanana are located close to the boundaries of the refuge and provide residence for approximately 590 people (Ruby - 196, Tanana - 394, 1980 census figures). An estimated three people live on the refuge. An unknown number of people from these two villages utilize the resources of the refuge. Residents of Fairbanks and to a lesser extent, Anchorage, hunt and fish on the refuge. A survey of river use during September, 1982, indicated the refuge receives heavy "recreational" hunting use from residents of Fairbanks and Anchorage.

Collection of information for implementation of the "cabin policy" was begun in CY 1982. Due to the large land area and transitory nature of refuge users it will probably be mid 1983 before all structures are covered by permit. Information collected during 1982 indicates approximately nine structures and eight users. Predominant cabin use is for trapping but three people live on the refuge throughout the year.

There are four placer mining claims located on the refuge and several active claims off refuge but within the same watershed. The effects of this mining activity is not known at present. The refuge will begin a water quality analysis program in CY 1983

A subsistence users cabin on the refuge.
82-09 CB

2. Hunting

The refuge is a popular hunting area for residents of Fairbanks who travel predominately by boat down the Yukon River to the Nowitna River. The predominant species sought is the moose but black bear are also taken if opportunity arises. Most of the "recreational hunters" or those coming from Fairbanks or Anchorage camp on the river banks and stay for periods ranging from three days to three or four weeks. The refuge also privides subsistence hunting for local residents with moose and black bear as the major species.

3. Trapping

There are approximately five trappers operating on the refuge. Major species sought include martin, lynx, beaver, red fox and wolf. Martin is by far the major species taken and the refuge is considered excellent martin habitat with its extensive spruce forests. Wolf and lynx are taken by some trappers but their numbers are usually small relative to the martin and beaver harvest.

4. Other Wildlife Oriented Recreation

The Nowitna River is considered an enjoyable float trip and the use by floaters is expected to increase in the future with the addition of the river to the Wild and Scenic River System. A float trip down the river provides extensive wildlife observation opportunities and its primitive condition allow the user to experience the "wilderness".

Visitors to the refuge utilize the extensive gravel bars for camping. 82-10 CB

5. Law Enforcement

There is little known about the law enforcement problems on the refuge. During the first year of staffing, two field trips were conducted on the refuge accounting for a total of 15 field days. Obviously, the limited amount of time spent on the refuge is not adequate to judge the situation. More time is planned for the coming year and we hope to learn more.

There are several active placer mines within and just outside the refuge boundary. 82-11 CB

I. EQUIPMENT AND FACILITIES

1. Rehabilitation

The refuge obtained its first facilities in conjunction with Koyukuk Refuge when two excess housing units from Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) were obtained in September of 1982. The structures were built in the early 1940's and are in need of extensive repairs to the heating and plumbing systems. The interior of both buildings was painted and new carpeting installed in 1982. We are hoping to replace the heating system in early 1983 and make structural repairs during the warm months of 1983.

4. Equipment Utilization and Replacement

The refuge has one motor vehicle, a 1980 Chevrolet Suburban four-wheel drive, which was obtained from Region 1, when the Young Adult Conservation Corps (YACC) was terminated. The vehicle appears in good condition and we have had no major mechanical problems as yet. Most of the other equipment obtained this year has been purchased new except for certain small tools which were obrained from the Regional Office as excess. Following is a list of major equipment purchases for FY'82: two Skidoo Skandic snowmobiles and sleds; one 17 foot and one 19 foot Gruman aluminum canoes, one 16 foot Monark modified vee boat, one 50 hp mercury outboard motor with jet unit, and one four hp Evinrude outboard motor.

5. Communication Systems

The refuge purchased two radios for use while working on the refuge. However, what we thought was going to be a portable unit requires a large antennae and power source and is portable only in the sense that it can be moved from place to place and installed with a minimum of effort compared to a fixed antennae base station. It will not meet requirements of being portable for field use when daily movement is required. Installation of this base unit in Galena should be completed in early 1983. We will require portable radio units for field work in CY'83.

J. Other Items

1. Cooperative Programs

A Special Use Permit was issued to Amoco Oil Company and Doyon Corporation to conduct surface geological surveys on the refuge. A Special Use Permit was issued to a resident of Ruby to cut house logs on the refuge.

2. Items of Interest

Refuge Supervisor Don Redfern and Safety Officer Ginny Hyatt visited the Refuge Office on July 7, 1982.

Washington Office Aircraft Coordinator Gene Steffen visited the refuge on July 7, and spent several hours with Acting Manager Blair flying the refuge.

3. Credits

Assistant/Acting Refuge Manager Blair wrote the complete report and Regional Office Clerk Sheryl Daron was responsible for all typing.

K. FEEDBACK

It will probably come as no surprise to the readers of this narrative report that there are many unknowns about the habitat, wildlife resources, and people who utilize them, on the Nowitna National Wildlife Refuge. Following passage of ANILCA in December, 1980, the refuge was created and its purposes and responsibilities set forth in that law. They included conserving fish and wildlife populations and habitat, fulfilling international treaty obligations, providing continued opportunity for subsistence uses by local residents and ensuring maximum water quality and quantity within the refuge. These are important and vital functions of the Refuge. However, one must remember that to measure our progress (or lack of it) we must be able to quantify the item we are measuring. This means we have to know the number of moose, species of waterfowl that nest on the refuge, or if the refuge contains critical habitat for a particular species. We must establish baseline information on subsistence use on the refuge so we can measure and determine how best to provide for that use in the future.

The refuge has one staff member with which to manage 1,907,000 acres. This is a sobering statistic when viewed in conjunction with requirements of ANILCA. It cannot be done at the present level of manpower and funding. In today's Fish and Wildlife Service, it seems to require one person just to perform administrative functions of a refuge. This is not a unique problem for this refuge. Most refuges in Alaska require additional funds to operate at a level that would provide the best protection for the resource.

The refuge will continue to obtain the best information and allocate limited funds to the most important projects. However, with four years before the comprehensive plan is scheduled for completion, this is an opportune time to collect the information that will be vital to the plan. With that in mind, the Nowitna NWR could begin to operate as intended with the following additions: one clerk; one pilot/biologist and airplane, and funding to support an intensive field program. Preliminary estimates indicate a funding level of approximately $300,000.00.