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Annual Report on Vital Signs Monitoring Of Wolf (*Canis lupus*) Distribution and Abundance in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, Central Alaska Network: 2008 Report

Natural Resource Report NPS/CAKN/NRTR—2008/149

ON THE COVER
Rick Swisher (pilot) and John Burch (gunner) about to dart a wolf. Photo by Tom Meier.

Annual Report on Vital Signs Monitoring Of Wolf (*Canis lupus*) Distribution and Abundance in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, Central Alaska Network: 2008 Report

Natural Resource Report NPS/CAKN/NRTR—2008/149

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Executive Summary

- Wolf populations have been monitored in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve (YUCH) from March 1993 to present (Burch 2002). Beginning October 2005 the project was incorporated into CAKN Vital signs monitoring program.
- Wolves throughout the greater Yukon-Charley Rivers area are targeted for monitoring of abundance and distribution. This past winter, wolf captures were conducted in November 2007 and February 2008. Monitoring radiocollared packs via radio telemetry flights will occur throughout the year with a concentrated period of flights each year in March – April and again in September – October. All field work is conducted using 1 or 2 biologists and 1 - 3 pilots.
- In winter 07-08, 14 more wolves in 9 packs were captured and collared. We had fair to good snow conditions for searching for uncollared packs in 3 areas in February 2008, but no targeted uncollared packs were found. Furthermore, no old tracks were seen in these areas, indicating that wolf packs may not exist in areas where they once did (at least for winter 07-08). At least 3 areas where packs once lived remain without collared wolves and we hope to find and capture wolves from these packs in winter 08-09. Light snowfall and poor snow conditions throughout most of winter 06-07 severely hampered finding any uncollared packs.
- Fall 2006 wolf density = 3.5 wolves/1000km^2 (or about 33 wolves in the preserve) Spring 2007 wolf density = 1.6 wolves/1000km^2 (or about 16 wolves in the Preserve). The spring 2007 density is the lowest density ever measured since the project began in 1993. Fall 2007 (3.84 wolves/1000 km^2) and spring 2008 (2.68 wolves/1000 km^2) densities indicate a slight rebound in YUCH's wolf population over the past winter.
- Fall 2007 mean pack size was 5.8 wolves/ pack.
- Average litter size was 3.9 pups/ pack**.**
- At least Five wolves were trapped within YUCH in winter 2006-07. No harvest data is yet available for 07-08.
- No substantial changes in protocol are anticipated for the upcoming field season for biological year 08-09 (May 1, 2008 – April 30, 2009).

Key Words

Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, wolves, *Canis lupus*, radiotelemetry, population dynamics, density estimation.

Acknowledgments

This study was funded by U.S. National Park Service Central Alaska Network and Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, Alaska. The skilled and safe aircraft support provided during the study by S. Hamilton, D. Miller, R. Swisher, and T. Cambier is always much appreciated. None of the work gets done without the pilots, they are there for every observation, data point, and capture, and are often the unsung heroes of most wildlife survey work throughout Alaska. Tom Meier reviewed the report and made several helpful comments.

Introduction

CAKN has adopted a holistic view of network ecosystems and will track the major physical drivers of ecosystem change and responses of the two major components of the biota, plants and animals. Thus, CAKN has identified Fauna Distribution and Abundance as one of its top three vital signs. In general, CAKN wants to know where fauna are distributed across the landscape and to track changes in both their distribution and abundance. The Fauna Distribution and Abundance vital sign includes monitoring efforts for a suite of vertebrate species spanning the significant elevation gradient found in CAKN parks, and also including species of specific interest within each park. Wolves (*Canis lupus*), occur in all three network parks and are one of six keystone large mammal species in interior Alaska. Wolves are of great importance to people from both consumptive and non-consumptive viewpoints, and to the ecosystem as a whole. From a monitoring standpoint, wolves are considered to be good indicators of long-term habitat change within park ecosystems because they depend on healthy populations of large ungulate prey, which in turn respond to vegetation, weather and other habitat patterns across the entire landscape (Mech and Peterson 2003, Fuller et al. 2003). As a top predator, wolves can play a key role in influencing ungulate populations, and as a result may influence vegetation patterns (Miller et al. 2001, Ripple and Beschta 2003). The effects of wolves on ungulate populations may be important determinants of ungulate availability for subsistence harvest on NPS Park and Preserve lands in Alaska, and harvest by the general public on NPS Preserve lands (National Park Service 2003).

Wolves are a species specifically identified in the enabling legislation and management objectives of all three CAKN parks (U. S. Congress 1980). Wolves are important to park visitors because of the unique opportunities to view or hear wolves in Alaskan parks. While the primary objectives of wolf monitoring will be to track the distribution and abundance of wolves, a variety of accessory data will be obtained in the monitoring process that are likely to be valuable for wildlife management and research. The body of data on wolf populations in Alaska parks is of great value in developing scientific models of predator/prey systems. In heavily visited portions of the parks, managers may want to know the locations of active wolf dens and rendezvous sites so that they can be protected from disturbance. When intensive wolf harvest or wolf control take place near parks, it is important to know home range boundaries and travel patterns of wolf packs utilizing park lands. These data are used to determine and possibly mitigate impacts of wolf control activities outside the parks. Data on the genetic and morphological characteristics of wolves, obtained as a sidelight to wolf capture, are important in evaluating long-term changes in wolf populations in Alaska.

Measurable Objectives

- Locate non-radiocollared wolf packs utilizing Preserve lands by snow tracking.
- Capture and radio-collar 1 -3 individuals in each wolf pack identified in the study area.
- Determine the demography (numbers, colors, age structure) of wolf packs using Preserve lands.
- Obtain morphological measurements from captured wolves.
- Obtain genotypic data (mitochondrial and microsatellite DNA) from captured wolves.
- Obtain immunological (disease exposure) data from captured wolves.
- Define home ranges of collared wolf packs via GPS collar data and aerial telemetry.
- Determine pack size for each collared pack in fall (early winter) and spring (late winter) each biological year.
- Define the mosaic of wolf home ranges (population area) for estimating biannual wolf densities (fall and spring of each biological year).
- Perform annual capture efforts to maintain coverage of radio collars in the population.
- Detect pack extinction and pack formation events in the population.
- Detect changes in wolf density over time
- Detect changes in wolf pack size over time
- Detect changes in wolf home range size over time.
- Detect changes in the morphological, immunological, and genetic makeup of the wolf population over time.

Methods and Materials

Methods followed the wolf monitoring protocol (Meier and Burch 2004) and include aerial radio telemetry, the use of GPS collars, and direct observation as primary techniques. Radiotelemetry and GPS provide the most effective way to identify and monitor individual packs and populations of wolves as well as to monitor natality, recruitment, causes and rates of mortality and dispersal, and predator – prey relationships (Mech and Barber 2002).

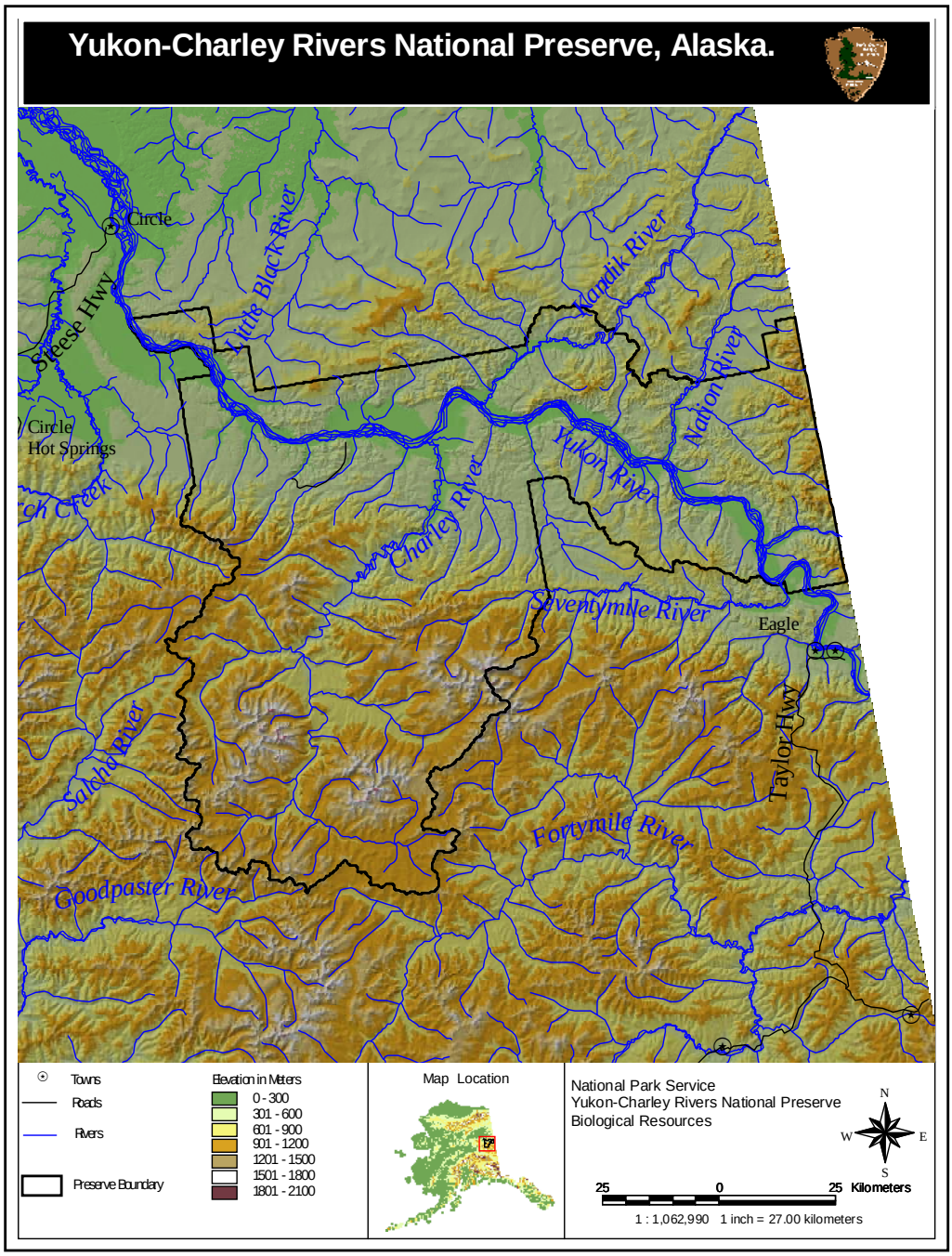


Figure 1. Wolf monitoring study area, Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve.

Results and Discussion

Captures and Radio Telemetry

During November 2007 and February 2008, 14 wolves were captured and radio-collared in or near YUCH, 3 of which were recaptures. Sex and age composition of captured wolves included 1 adult male, 2 yearling males, 1 male pup, 6 adult females, 2 yearling females, and 2 female pups. The capture sample is biased toward adult wolves as breeding adult wolves were specifically targeted because they are much less likely to disperse. Colors of captured wolves varied widely from black to 'blue' (silver gray) to various shades of gray to white. Over the history of the project weights of captured males ranged from 70-148 lbs., (32-67 kg) averaging 108 lbs (49 kg), captured females range from 57-130 lbs. (26–59 kg) and average 90 lbs (41 kg).

Home range Sizes and Movements

Previous home range sizes for individual Preserve packs varied from 268 – 7067 $km^{2.}$ Annual means ranged from 1639 to 3253 km^2 with a grand mean of 2295 km^2, which is larger than found in most other wolf studies (Figures 2-6) (Burch 2002). With the advent of GPS collars, the annual number of locations per pack has increased nearly 10 fold and with it an increase in individual home range size (Burch et al. 2005). Home ranges of packs containing one GPS collar were more than 35% larger than those found using conventional aerial telemetry (Figure 7).

In past years, home range size was measured for each radiomarked pack where more than 20 locations were available in a 2 year time block. This was an attempt to overcome the problem of home range size being dependent on the sample size of locations (when calculated using Minimum Convex Polygons (MCP)). Even with this doubling of sample size the relationship still holds ($r^2 = 19.4$, $P = 0.00017$, n = 67) (Figure 8) and home range size was still dependent on the number of locations (White and Garrott 1990). With the advent of GPS collars, 1 biological year of locations are used, however the problem of home range size being dependent on sample size looks like it may still exist even with 300 locations per year, although the effect is much smaller.. In the upcoming year we are looking into kernel estimates and bootstrapping as a possible solution to this problem.

Pack Sizes, Density and Population Estimate

Fall mean pack sizes increased from 4.3 in 1993 to a maximum of 9.1 in 1999, with an overall average of 7.1 (Figure 10). The wolf population in the area currently appears to be decreasing and is likely responding to changes in the vulnerability to predation of Fortymile Caribou. From 1993 – 2001 the overall increasing trend in mean pack size was significant (r^2=0.59, P=0.015), however from 2002 on it levels out and then drops in 2005 (Figure 10). Wolf densities follow the same trends as mean pack sizes (Figures 11 & 12). Most recently, the population hit an all time low density of 1.6 wolves/1000 km2 in spring 2007, then rebounded to almost 2.5 this past spring 2008. Fall densities are measured when pack size is at its highest and densities are at the greatest for the biological year and follow the same overall trend pattern as Mean pack size and Spring densities (Figure 11). Pack sizes are actually greater right after pups are born in May. However, we cannot reliably count all the pups from airplanes in all the packs until September or

October when the pups are traveling consistently with the rest of the pack and there might be some snow on the ground to increase sightability.

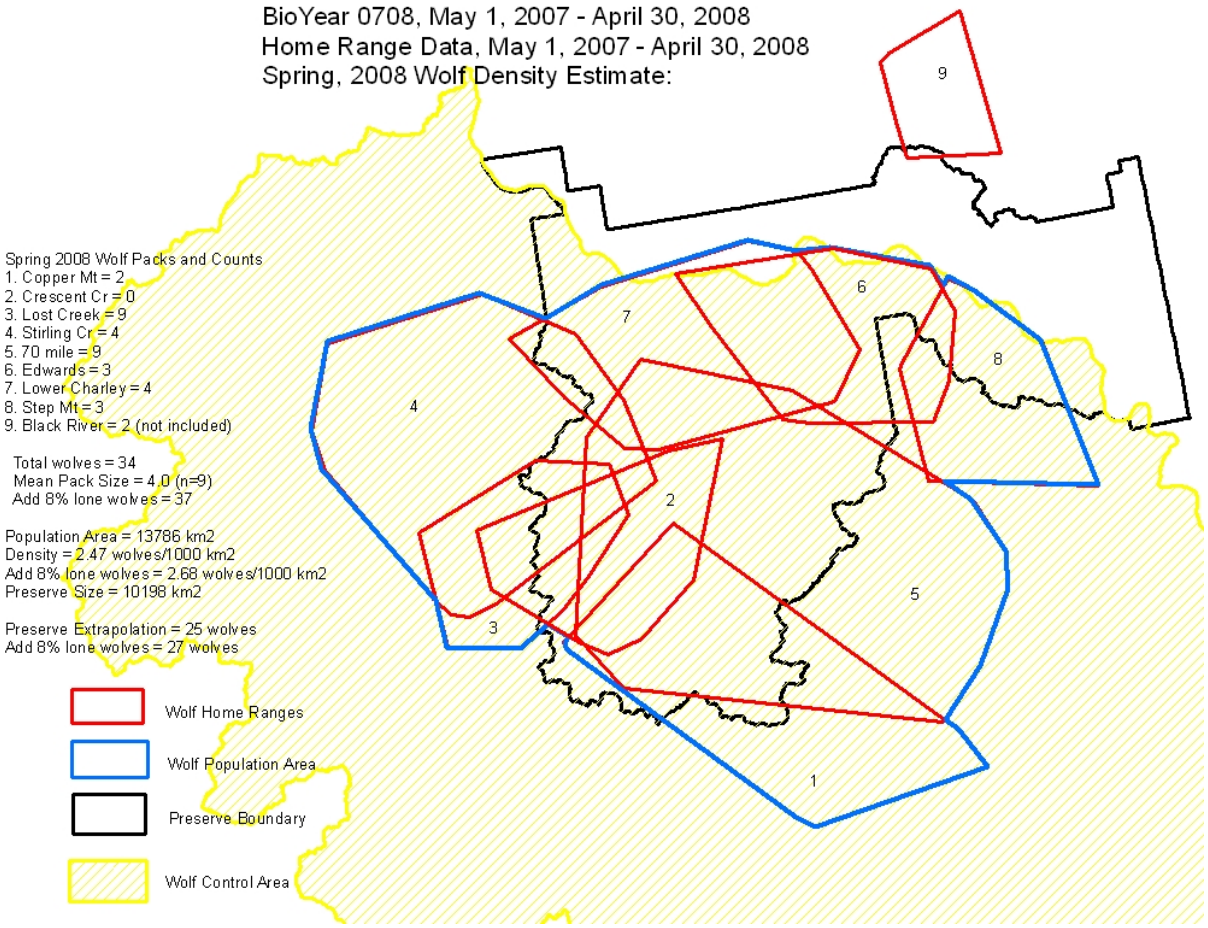
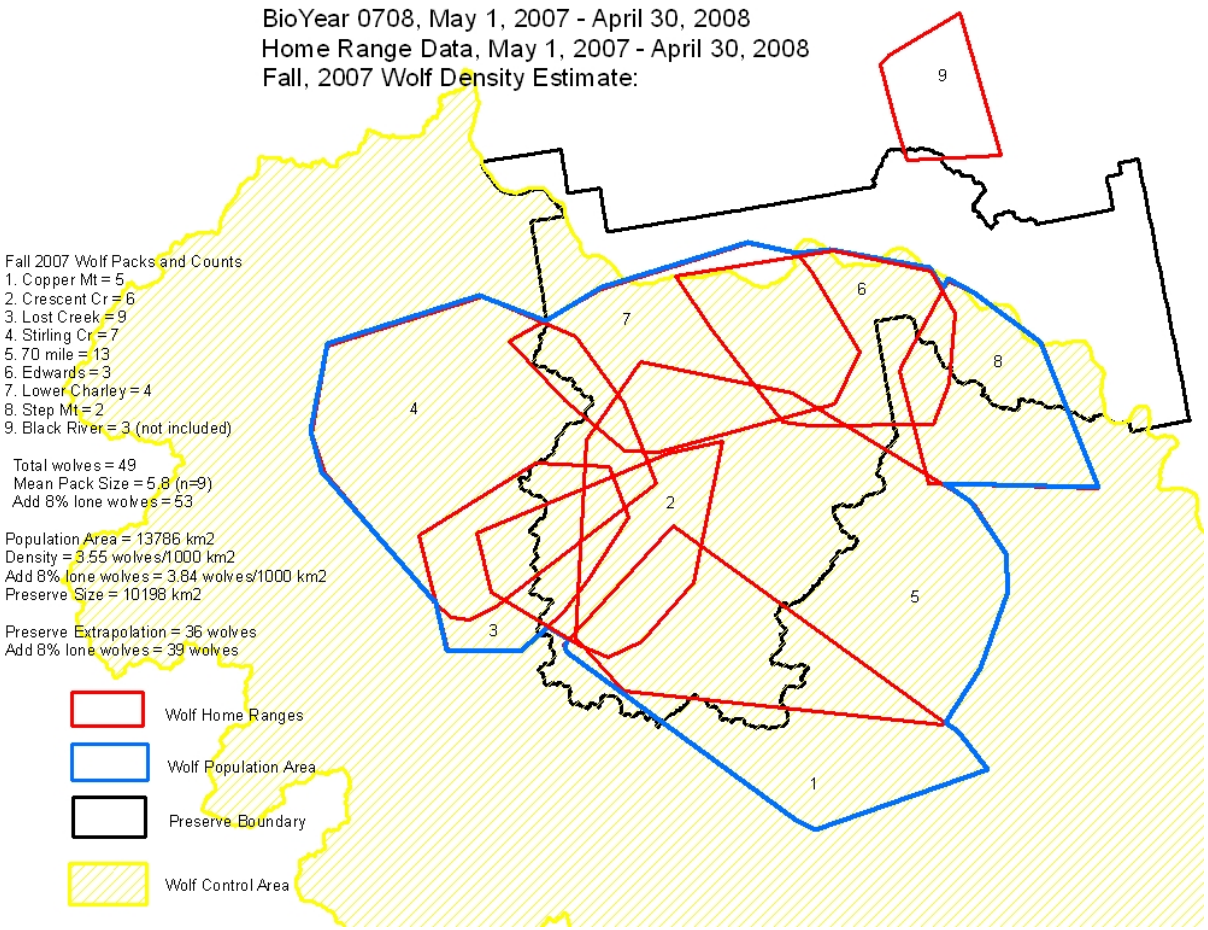


Figure 2. Map of individual pack home ranges, pack counts, and density calculation for Spring 2008. Minimum convex polygons are used to delineate pack home ranges.



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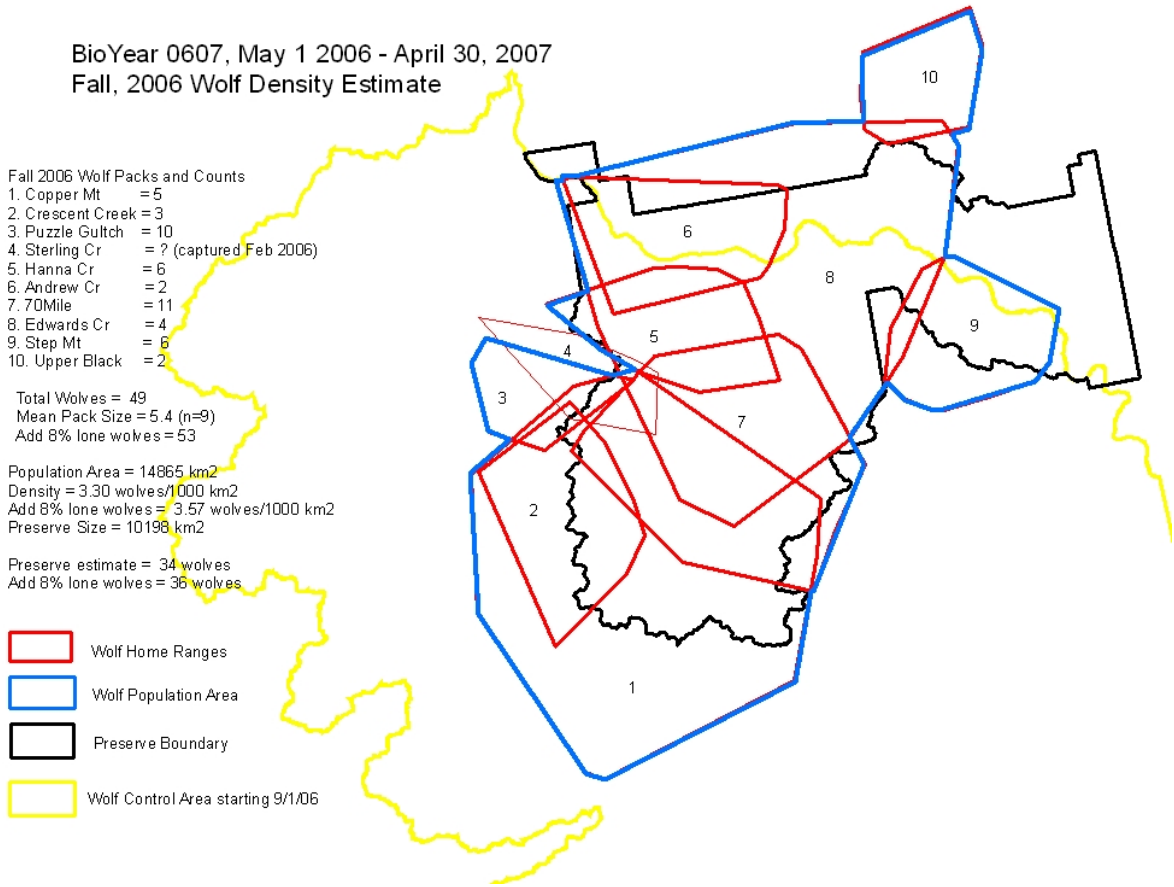

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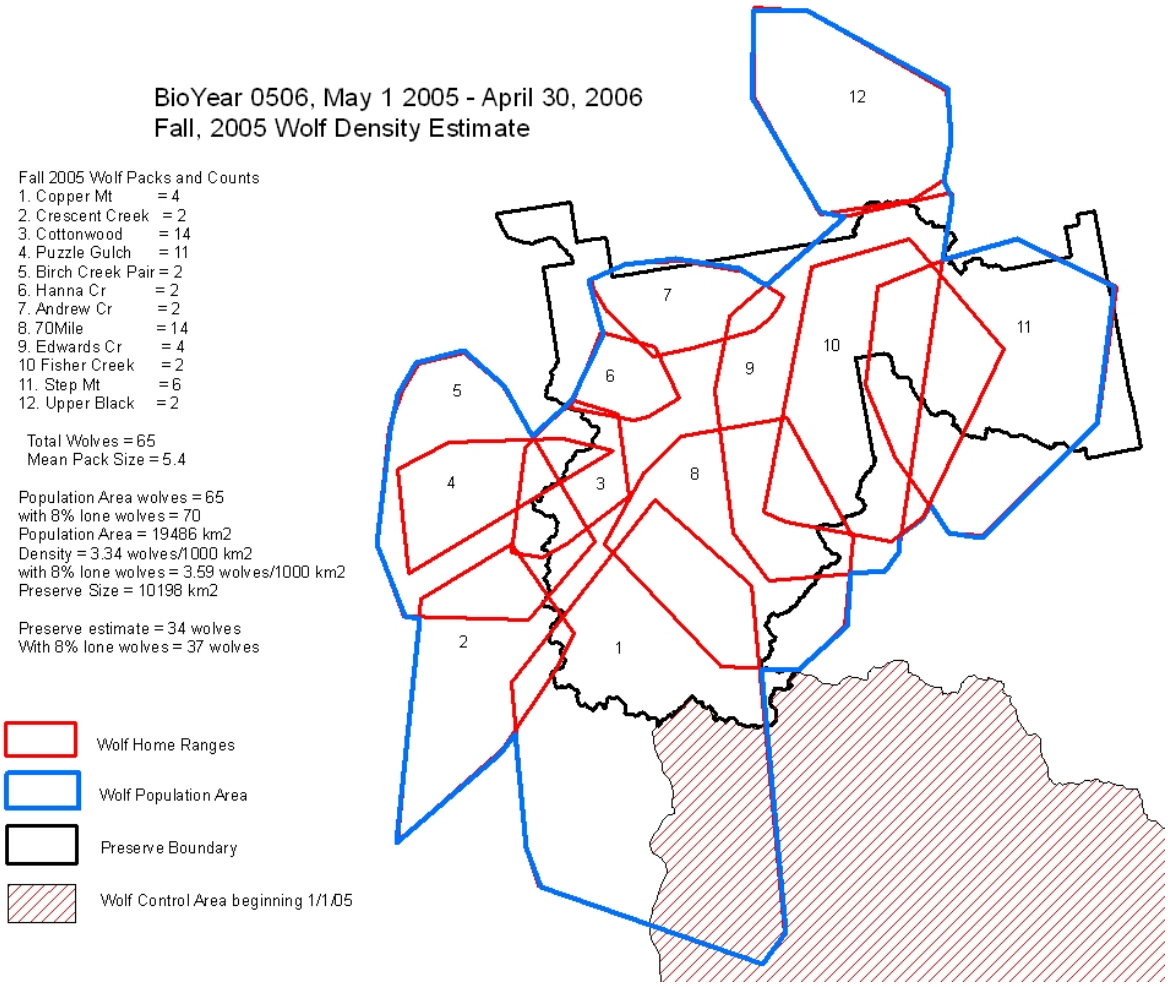

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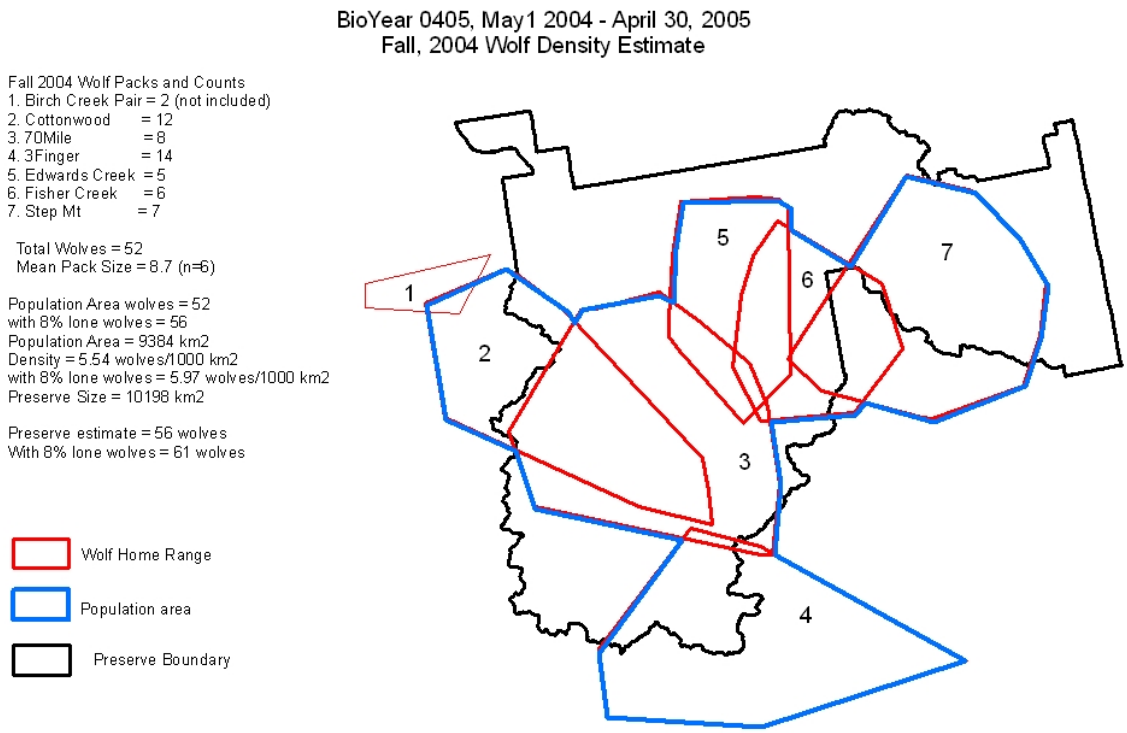
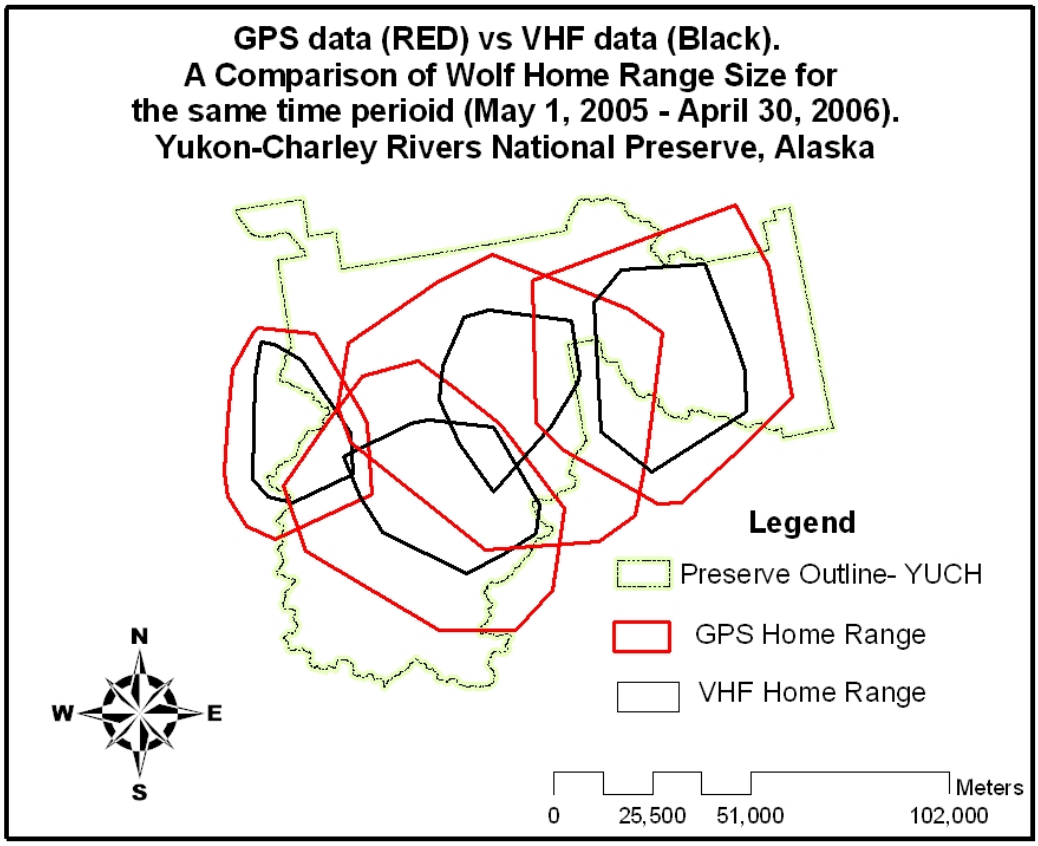


Figure 6. Map of individual pack home ranges, pack counts, and density calculation for Fall 2004. Minimum convex polygons are used to delineate pack home ranges.



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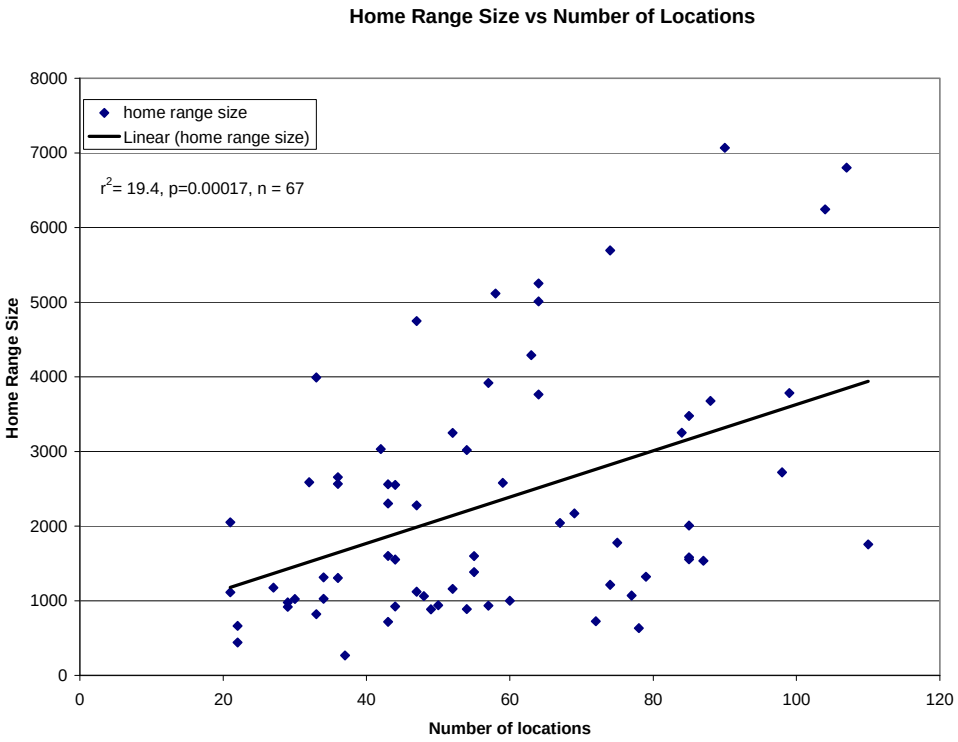

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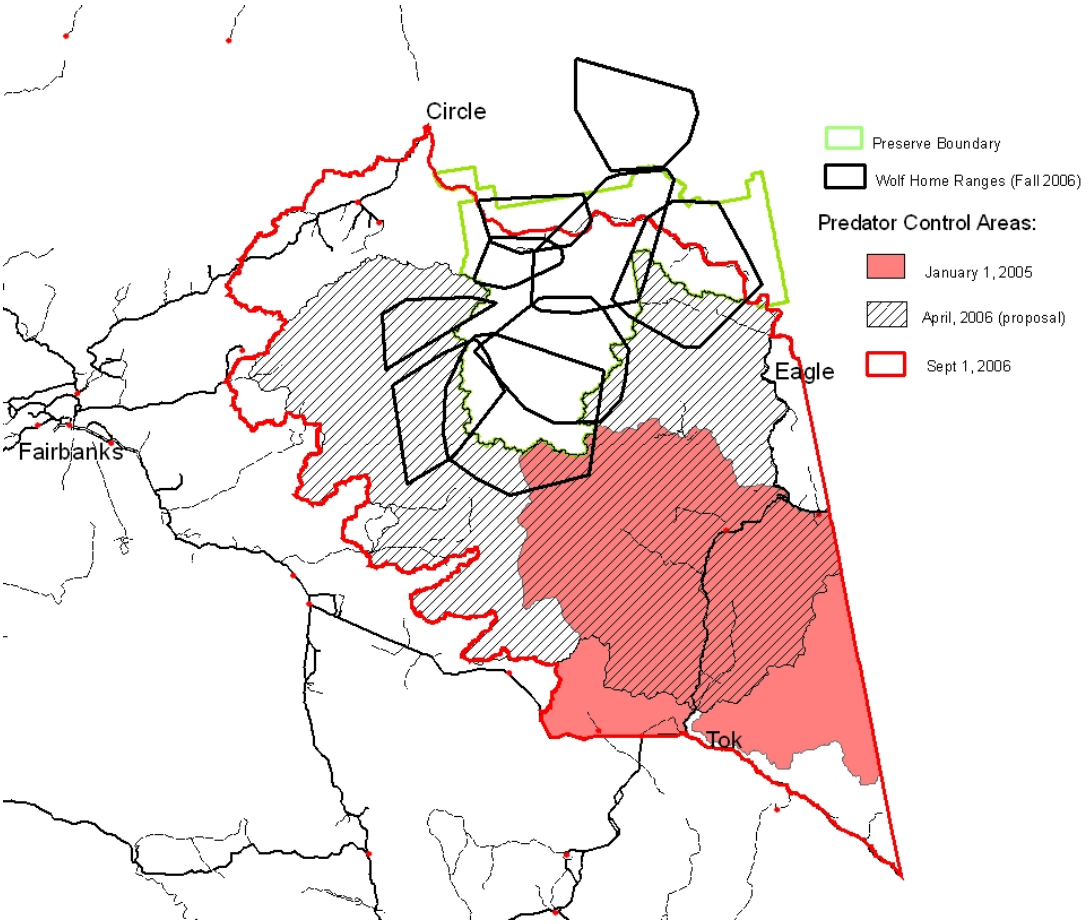

Figure 9. Map depicting the recent history and progression of wolf control boundaries relative to YUCH, and the potential impact to wolf packs using Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve.

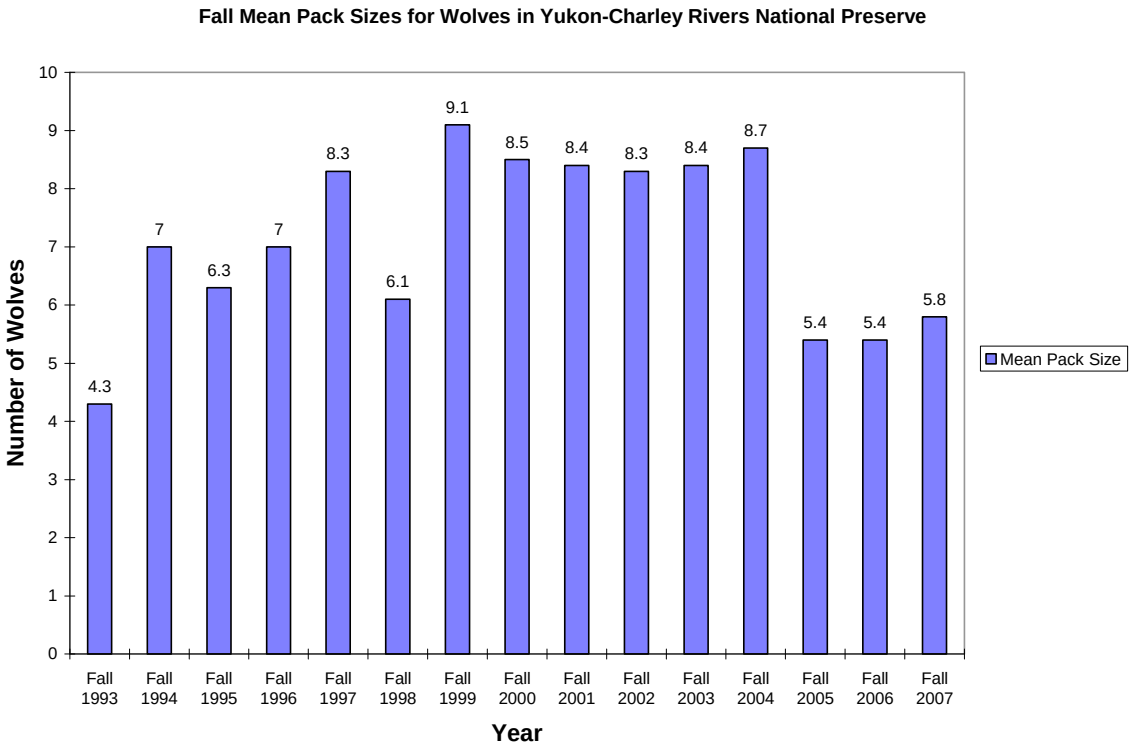

Figure 10. Trend in wolf population using mean pack size. Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve 1993 – 2007.

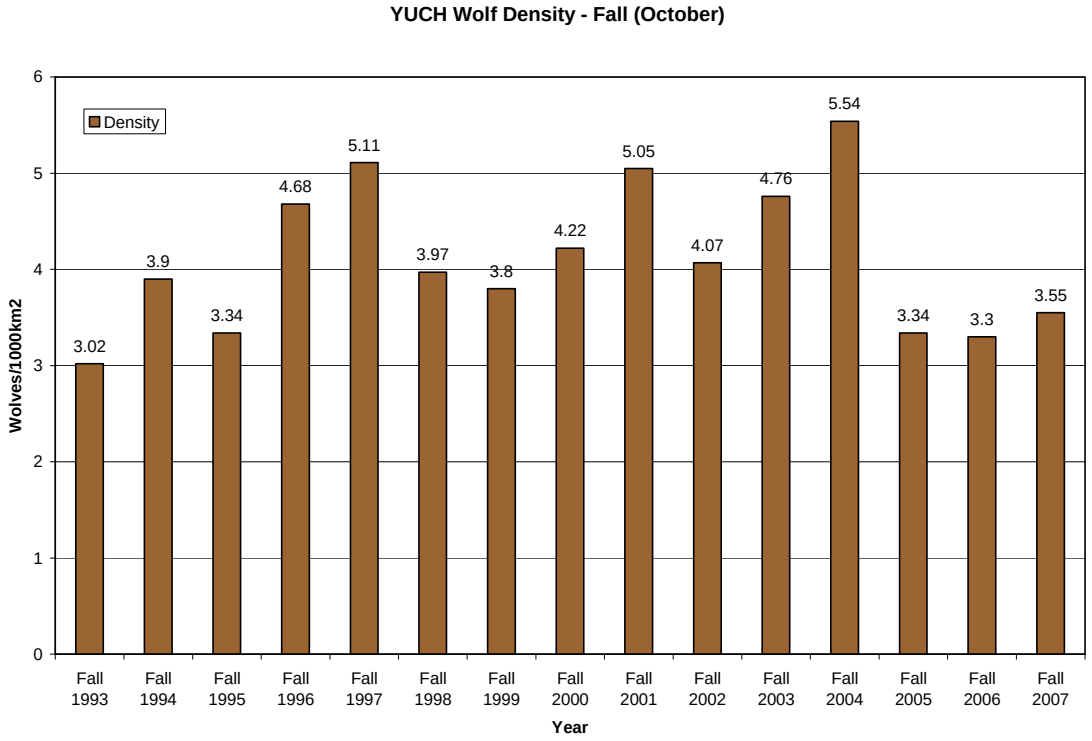

Figure 11. Fall wolf densities (wolves/1000 km^2) in YUCH 1993 - 2007

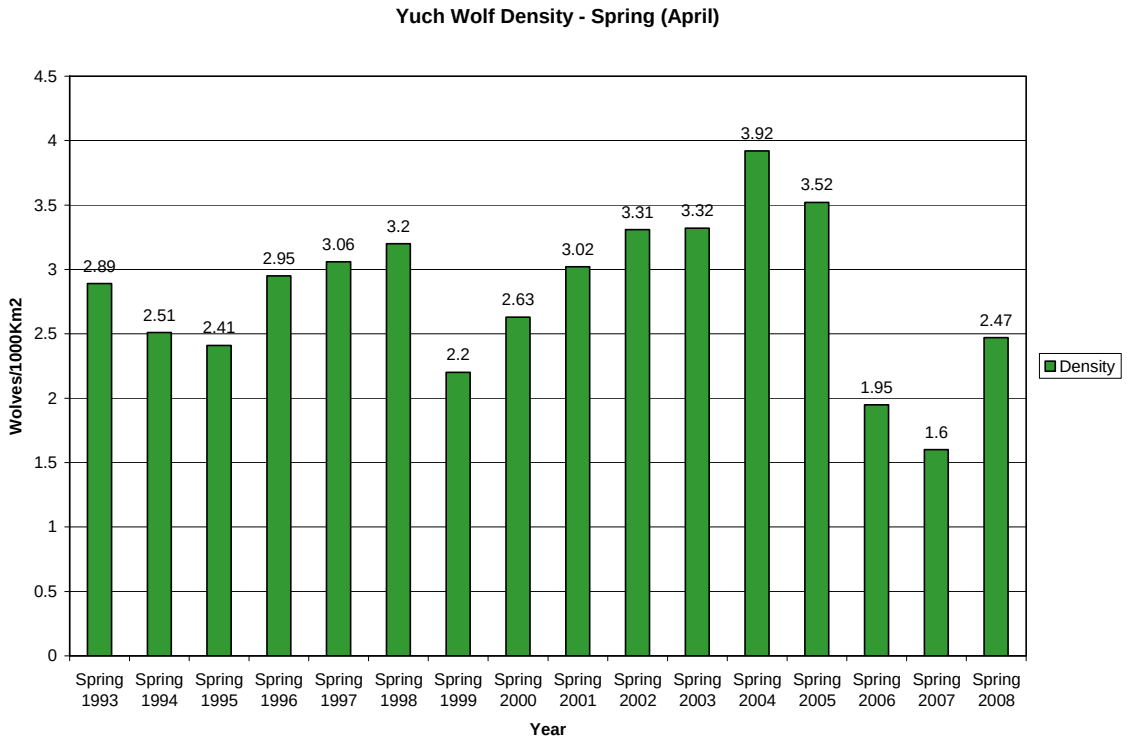

Figure 12 – Spring wolf densities (wolves/1000km^2) in YUCH, 1993 - 2008

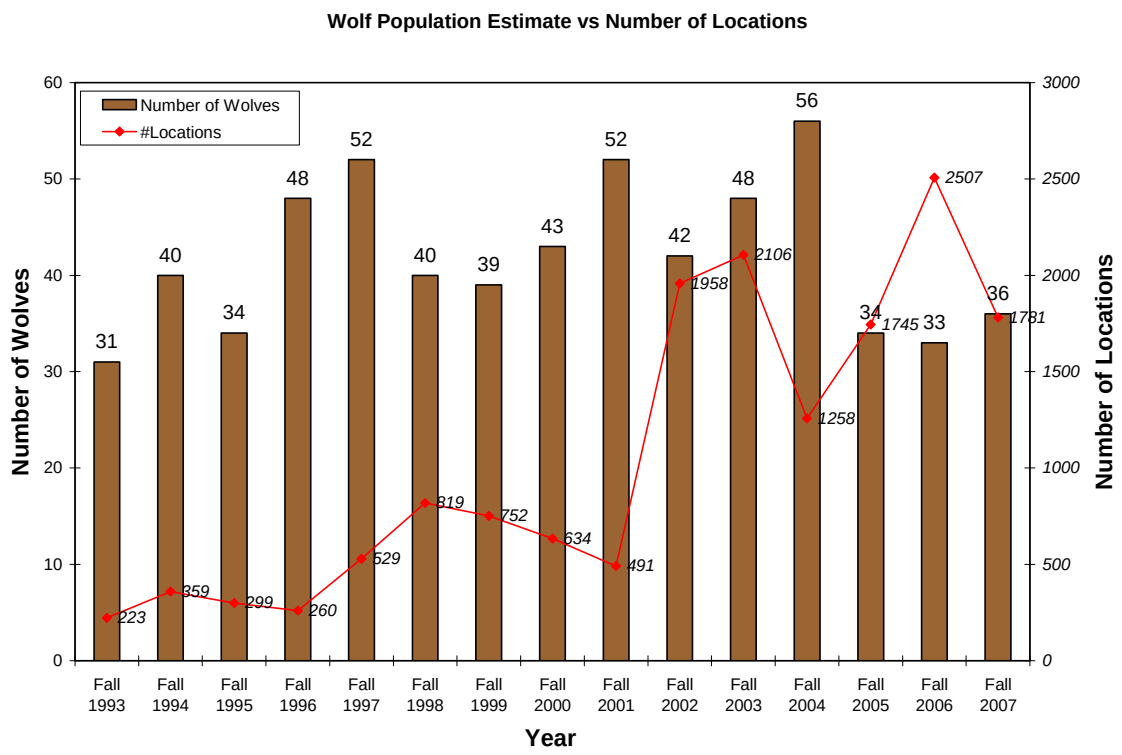

Figure 13. Comparing fall wolf population (extrapolating fall densities to the YUCH Preserve boundary to estimate the number of wolves in the Preserve at any given time) with location counts.

Fortymile Caribou

In 1920 biologist Olaus Murie estimated the Forty Mile Caribou Herd (FCH) to number 568,000 caribou, and the herd ranged from Whitehorse, Yukon to the White Mountains north of Fairbanks (Murie 1935). It is difficult to know how accurate Murie's estimate was as he estimated how many caribou crossed a 1 mile stretch of the Steese Highway in one day and then multiplies that number for a forty mile stretch for 20 days, which is what was reported by others to be the place and time that the herd crossed the road (Murie 1935). In the 1930s the herd population dropped to an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 caribou. The cause of this dramatic decline is unknown but suspicions include overharvest, and food limitations due to range depletion and fires, or other wide spread phenomena. Predation was not considered a causal factor (Valkenburg et al 1994).

During the 1940s and 1950s the herd increased again to perhaps as many as 50,000. From an estimated 50,000 animals in 1963 the herd size dropped dramatically again to 6000 animals in 1973 and Fortymile caribou stopped crossing the Steese Highway. The cause of this decline was attributed to a combination of overharvest, deep snow conditions, and predation by wolves and bears. Starting in 1976, the herd began to increase slowly to over 22,000 by 1990 and was roughly stable at 22000 – 23000 through 1995 (Valkenburg et al 1994, Boertje and Gardner 1996). In 1994 the Fortymile Planning Team was formed and plans for wolf reductions and reduced human harvest on caribou were made. From 1995 through 2002, the herd grew to nearly 45,000 animals (Boertje and Gardner 1996, Jeff Gross, Tok area biologist, Pers. Comm.) where it has remained roughly stable through 2007. The most recent photo census of June 2007 produced a population estimate of 38,364 (Jeff Gross, Tok area biologist, Pers. Comm.) (Figure 14). No photo census occurred in 2008 due to cool/rainy weather resulting in the caribou not grouping up enough to conduct the census.

The drop in wolf numbers in 2005 – 2007 does not correlate well with the roughly stable caribou population during the same time (Figure 14). Low snowfall winters at this time may have allowed the caribou (and moose) to be less vulnerable to wolf predation, thereby causing an increase in wolf dispersal and natural mortality and a decrease in pup production and survival (Figure 15), culminating in a drop in the wolf population. Human Harvest levels at this time were lower than the 23 year annual average of about 7 wolves harvested within the Preserve (Figures 16 &17) and likely played no role in the drop in wolf numbers.

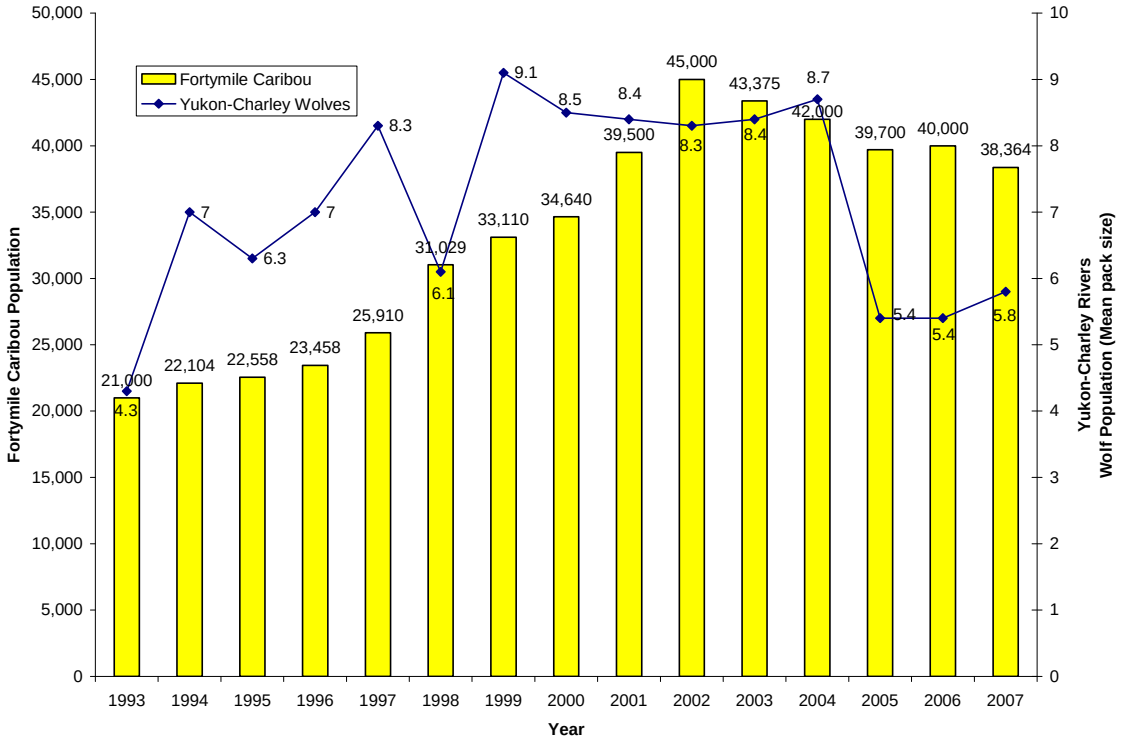

Figure 14. Trend in population change for the Fortymile Caribou Herd (trend in photo census counts) and wolves (in mean pack size) in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, Alaska, 1993 – 2007.

Natality

Pup production and survival to fall is illustrated in Figure 15. The counts of pups are from September - November of each year when the pups are still small enough to distinguish from adults from an airplane. Likely there are more pups born in May and some pup mortality occurs between May and September, so these are minimum counts. The cause of the drop in pup production and/or survival in 2004 and 2005 is unknown but correlates well with the overall drop in population size from 2004 to 2006 (Figures 11, 12, 13 & 14).

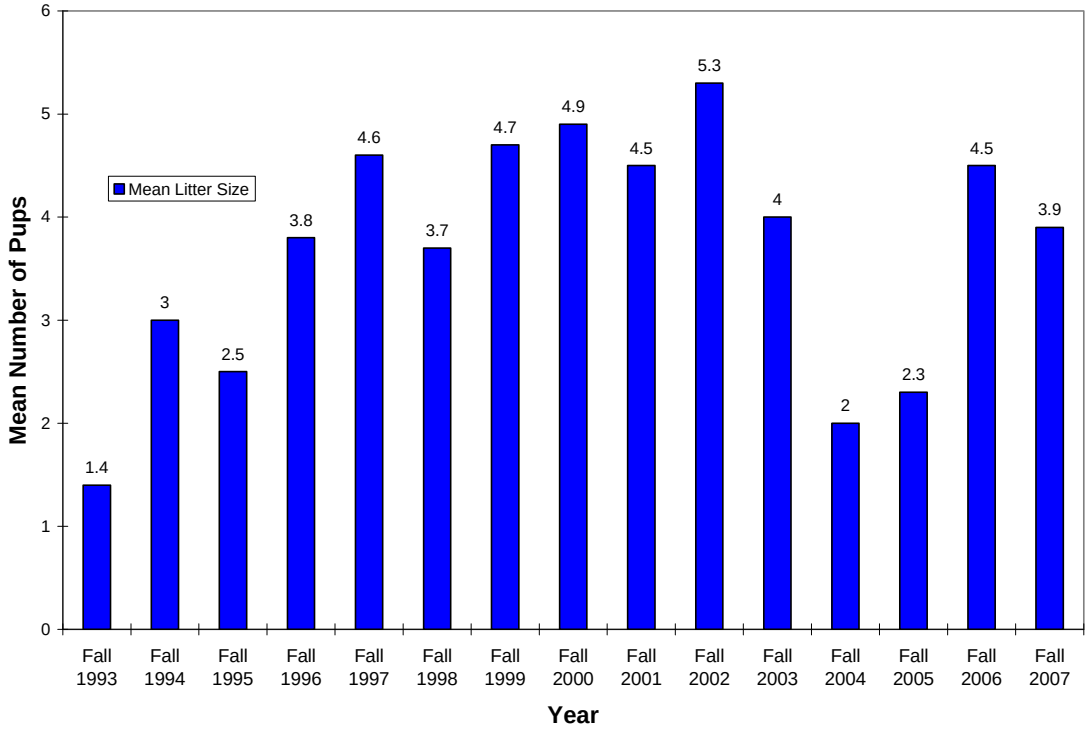

Figure 15 – Trend in Pup production and survival to fall (mean litter sizes).

Mortality

All preserve packs travel outside the boundaries of YUCH, many extensively (Figure 2 - 6). As a result, regulations regarding wolf management outside YUCH's boundary affect the entire wolf population utilizing Preserve lands. This idea is well illustrated by The Board of Game's series of decisions to conduct wolf control up against most of YUCH's boundary south of the Yukon River (Figure 2 – 6, 9). However the past 2 or 3 winters have had poor conditions for snow tracking wolves, resulting in very few wolves being killed in the Fortymile Control efforts (58 in 2005-06, 13 in 2006–07, and 27 in 2007-08) far below the goal of reducing the entire population to 50 wolves. However, good snow tracking conditions, followed by a few days of good flying weather, could dramatically and rapidly change the number of wolves killed in wolf control activities in winter 2008-09.

Figure 16 illustrates the different fates of the sample of collared wolves. Although the sample of collared wolves is not representative of the population they do give a good idea of what happens to most wolves. Only 19% have been trapped or shot within the preserve boundary (or nearby) which isn't very many considering a long trapping season (October 15 - April 30) with no bag limit. The hunting season was recently extended and now runs from August 10 – May 31 with a bag limit of 5 wolves south of the Yukon, and 10 wolves north of the Yukon. Even with these liberal regulations few wolves are harvested in or near YUCH most winters. Based on ADF&G sealing records, human harvest of wolves from within the preserve (via conventional trapping and hunting methods) has averaged about 7 wolves per year over the past 20 years (about 15% of the wolf population on average) (Figure 17) and has had little impact on YUCH's wolf population.

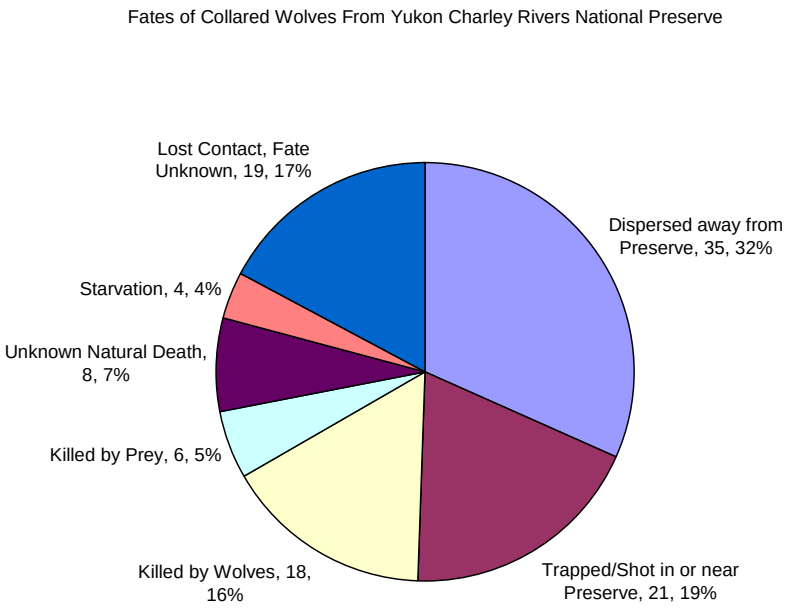

Figure 16. Fates of collared wolves in and around YUCH, 1993 – 2008.

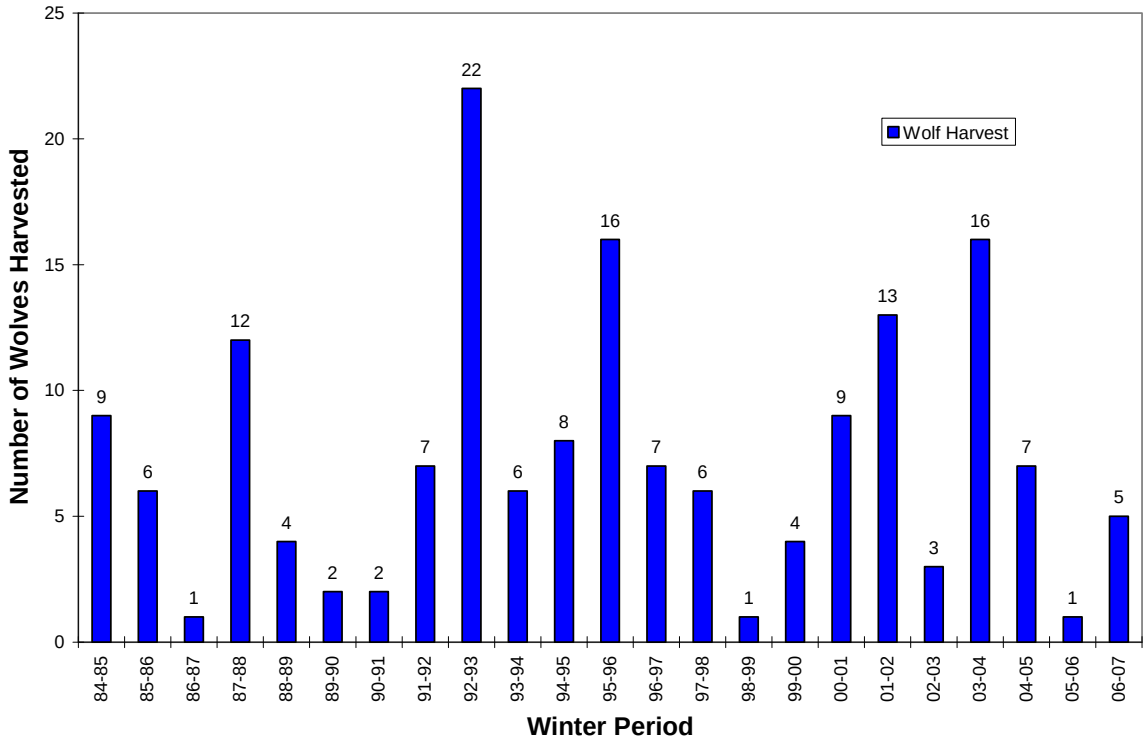

Figure 17. Harvest of wolves within and around YUCH, 1984 - 2007. From ADF&G wolf sealing records.

Plans for Coming Year

In November 2008 and February 2009, we will capture more wolves to maintain 2 or 3 collars in each pack, and search for (and hopefully catch) wolves in any new or uncollared packs using Preserve lands. During this same time frame we will also be radiotracking the collared wolves from aircraft to get accurate pack counts for fall and spring population estimates. During Spring and Fall of each biological year the wolves will be radiotracked 5 – 10 times to generate biannual population estimates and estimate pup production and survival.

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