

Yukon Flats

National Wildlife Refuge

A Vast Wetland Valley

Deep within Alaska, the Yukon, America's fifth largest river, meanders for 300 miles through the vast wetland basin known as the Yukon Flats. Encircled by the Brooks Range to the north and the White Mountains to the south, the area comprises an essentially complete ecosystem. Water is a dominant feature in this land of 40,000 shallow lakes, and innumerable ponds and sloughs. Rivers are its living heart. The lowland segments of ten major streams traverse the expansive flood plain before discharging into the Yukon. A wide variety of vegetation types provide excellent wildlife habitat. Hillside stands of white spruce, paper birch and aspen extend into the lowlands where they are interspersed with extensive marsh, meadows and muskeg.



Established by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in 1980, the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge consists of 8.63 million acres and encompasses much of this ecosystem. Its primary purpose is to conserve fish and wildlife populations and their habitats in a natural diversity. Lying along the Arctic Circle, the refuge extends 220 miles on its long axis and includes 120 miles of gradual ecological transitions from north to south. Within the boundaries are nearly two million acres owned by the Native regional and village corporations and individual residents of five communities within the Refuge.

A Land of Extremes

Annual temperature extremes on the Yukon Flats are among the greatest on earth. In winter, extended periods of -50°F temperatures are common and lows in excess of -70°F have been recorded. In the intense cold, ice booms, trees crack and the air is so dense the faintest sound is carried for miles. Biological processes, as well as human and animal activities, slow down in response to plummeting temperatures during winter's daylong darkness.

In contrast, summer temperatures have reached 100°F , the highest ever recorded north of the Arctic Circle. The mid-summer sun circles the horizon, never setting, saturating the Flats with 24 hours of daylight.

A Productive Land

A rich variety of aquatic vegetation thrives in the warm waters of the lakes. Last year's vegetation decomposes rapidly in such heat, releasing the nutrients needed for another generation of plants. By early summer, a luxuriant growth of duckweed, pondweed, sedge and horsetail can be found. The natural processes of wildlife and the periodic flooding and drying of shallow water bodies redistribute the nutrients which maintain the area's high productivity.

Diversity of Wildlife

The Refuge's high quality habitat is reflected in its wide diversity and abundance of wildlife. Of high national and international interest are waterfowl. The Yukon Flats is one of the greatest waterfowl breeding areas in North America.

Before the river ice moves out in May, millions of migrating birds from four continents converge on the Yukon Flats. Smaller ponds open up early. Many of the ducks and geese concentrating there are members of the migrant groups whose destination is farther north and west. The greatest importance of the Yukon Flats is for nesting and rearing of the young of countless waterfowl which spend summers on the Flats.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has censused breeding populations of waterfowl in the Flats on an annual basis since 1953. Predominant species are scaup, pintails, scoters, and wigeons. Other species occurring in impor-

tant numbers are mallards, shovelers, green-winged teal and canvasbacks. The fertile lakes of the refuge are of special significance for canvasbacks, "prince of waterfowl," since the 50,000 birds which nest in the area represent 10 to 15 percent of its diminished population. An estimated 8,000 Canada geese and 5,000 white-fronted geese use the area during the nesting season. The rare trumpeter swan can also occasionally be found. Arctic, red-throated, and common loons, grebes, and sandhill cranes are also common to the lakes and ponds.

By September, more than two million adult and young waterfowl are ready to begin their southward journey. Large lakes serve as staging areas where thousands of birds concentrate before leaving. Traveling all the flyways, these birds will be enjoyed by persons throughout much of Canada, the United States and Central and South America.

In years of drought, when the southern prairie pot-holes lie baked and dry, the Yukon Flats' contribution to the fall flight of waterfowl is even greater. Birds displaced from their traditional breeding areas fly northward to stable water. Continuing loss of prairie wetlands by drainage and filling continues to increase the importance of the essentially unchanged, unpolluted waters of interior Alaska.

The Yukon Flats, however, is not the sole domain of waterfowl. Over one hundred bird species have been identified on the Flats, including the endangered peregrine falcon. Most are migratory, but 13 species (including hawks, owls, grouse, woodpeckers, gray jays and

ravens) remain to endure the awesome winter.

Moose are found throughout the Refuge. In winter, they are most common in areas of willow, birch, and aspen. In summer, they are found along the numerous ponds and marshes. Being the most important game animal, many villagers consider moose synonymous with "meat." They are hunted along the Refuge's boatable streams, sloughs, and lakes.

Black and grizzly bears occur throughout the Flats and surrounding hills. Black bears are numerous throughout the forested lowlands while in the surrounding alpine areas grizzlies become more abundant.

Two of Alaska's caribou herds utilize parts of the Refuge. The Porcupine herd occasionally winters in the north-eastern section and the smaller Fortymile herd in the White Mountains, just inside the southern boundary of the Refuge.

The high alpine tundra of the southern Brooks Range and the White Mountains provide year-long habitat for Dall sheep.

Summer fish camps can still be found along the banks of the Yukon. The chinook, coho and chum salmon that pass through the Refuge travel farther from the sea (up to two thousand miles) to their spawning areas than do the salmon of any other river system in the world. Some spawn in the tributary streams within the refuge, then die, becoming a food source for scavenging bears, foxes and eagles. Resident fish in the Yukon Flats include the northern pike, whitefish, sucker, sheefish, burbot and the prized Arctic grayling.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT
OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



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Man in the Yukon Flats

Archeological evidence suggests that the area was part of the route traveled by Siberian hunters from Asia to America over 10,000 years ago. The present Indians of the Yukon Flats are Kutchin, Athapaskan-speaking people who are related to the Apache and Navajo tribes of the southwest.

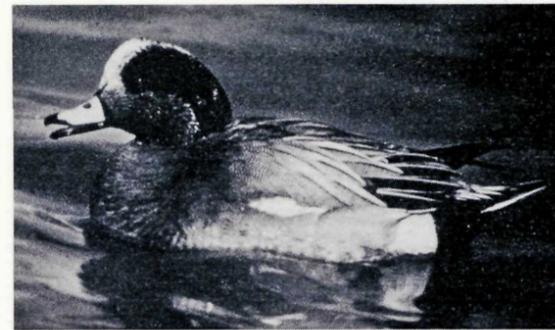
The first resource to lure white men to the Yukon Flats was its abundance of furbearing animals. In 1845, John Bell, of the Hudson Bay Company, descended the Porcupine River to the Flats where he found a wealth of beaver, otter, muskrat, marten, mink, lynx, weasels, wolverine, fox and wolf. Two years later, Ft. Yukon was established at the confluence of the Porcupine and Yukon Rivers,

making it the first English-speaking community in Alaska. By the 1920s, it was the most important fur collecting point in all Alaska.

Fur continues to contribute substantially to the economy of the region. Each winter, more than 100 trappers return to their traplines within the Refuge to pursue one of the most arduous and demanding livelihoods. Some will stay out a day or two at a time, others will remain isolated in the "bush" for months. Trapping in the Refuge provides the basis for some of the most traditional life-ways remaining in America—a living cultural resource.

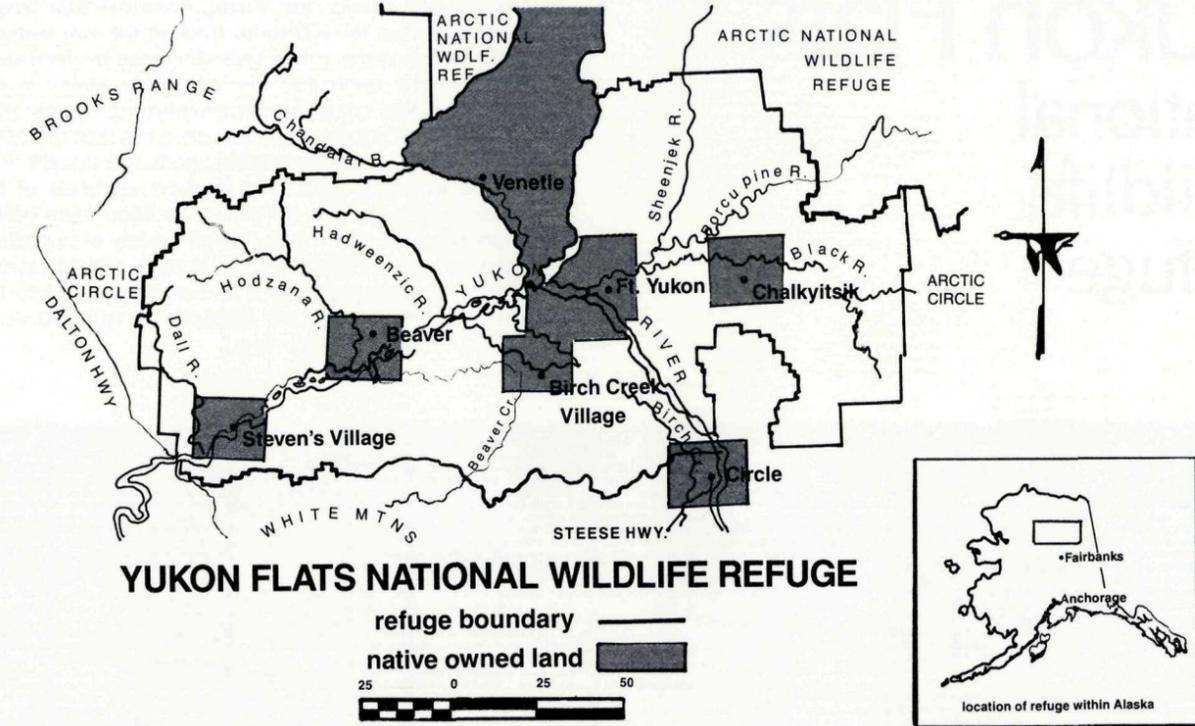
Seven native villages lie within or are adjacent to the Refuge. Ft. Yukon is the largest with a population of about 600, while Birch Creek has only 30 residents. Schools, churches, government agencies and technology have accelerated the assimilation of the Indians into the cash economy. Local residents continue to supplement their income with hunting, trapping, fishing, woodcutting and other "bush" activities.

Aside from those activities related to hunting and fishing, recreation in the Refuge is essentially related to river floating. Many of the rivers within the Refuge are noted for their primitive values. They offer the opportunity for an extended wilderness experience.



A Refuge With Promises to Keep

Some of the greatest recreational benefits will come to those who never set foot in the Refuge. Many will experience the area only through books and magazine articles, and will receive satisfaction just in knowing such an area remains. This is the legacy of the Yukon Flats today and tomorrow.



VISITOR INFORMATION

Access

Access to the Refuge is primarily by aircraft. Two commercial airlines in Fairbanks provide scheduled transportation to the five communities within the Refuge. Charter service to remote lakes and rivers is available from Fairbanks, Ft. Yukon and Circle.

Recreation

Most wildlife-oriented activities are allowed on the Refuge. Due to the nature of the terrain, most summer use is confined to the major waterways. Several rivers can be floated by canoe, kayak or raft. The area's remoteness and isolation, variable weather and water levels can combine to make a dangerous experience for those who are not well prepared and equipped.

Hunting and Fishing

Hunting and fishing are allowed in accordance with State and Federal regulations. Information on hunting and fishing regulations is available from the Refuge and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game at 1300 College Road, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701.

Courtesies

Native village selected lands are identified on the map. Other private property is also found within the Refuge.

Navigable rivers passing through private land are available for public use up to the mean high water mark. Invasion of community and camp privacy is a concern of many rural residents. Be sensitive to local concerns. Do not take pictures of residents unless given their permission.

Trapping cabins and tent camps are essential to the livelihood of many rural residents. They should not be used except in case of real emergency. They may appear abandoned, especially in late summer when the brush is tall. The owners will return though, and will need everything they left for the coming winter. The early trappers and wilderness travelers established an honorable tradition of respecting camps and cabins—a tradition that continues to today.

A Wilderness Experience

Most of the Yukon Flats retains its pristine wild character. You will find few campsites, trail signs or developed trails. With preparation and self reliance, you'll not need or want them. Leave no trace of your presence. Come to the wildland on its own terms—enjoy challenge, risk, discovery and freedom. Make demands on yourself—not on the land.