

Antlerless Hunts Shed Light on Management Strategies

By Mark Richards

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For many years now ADFG biologists have been concerned with an escalating population of moose in Unit 20A in the Tanana Flats region. Prior wolf-reduction efforts, mild winters with modest snowfall, high calf survival rates, and subsequent steady harvests of wolves by trappers allowed the moose population to grow until it greatly exceeded the population objectives.

The state had created the highest density of moose in all of North America, but along with that came severe overbrowsing of habitat, the lowest twinning rates and nutritional status, and much more prevalent herd disease. This led to the conclusion among biologists that liberal antlerless hunts were “justified to halt population growth, lessen cumulative effects of high browsing rates, and maximize yield [by hunters].”

The antlerless hunts ADFG advocated for were indeed necessary, but combined with such overall high moose densities and the ensuing influx of so many hunters they did not come without a heavy cost. From Delta Junction to Nenana hunters were complaining about the sheer numbers of mostly motorized hunters from near and far tearing up trails and going off trail, the increasing amount of boat traffic, and the prevalence of more riverboat hunters bringing ATVs across the Tanana and spider-webbing out across the tundra toward the foothills of the Alaska Range.

Recently the Newsminer published an editorial about the antlerless hunts and said that the access abuse problems in places like the Rex Trail “might be eased—or erased—if more areas of Alaska were managed the way Interior’s Unit 20 has been managed.”

As a longtime hunter, the last thing I would hope to see is for more areas of the state to be managed as we have managed Unit 20A.

The Newsminer also stated that the problems along the Rex Trail stemming from so many motorized hunters seemed to be “land management issues rather than game population issues.”

But these two “issues” are inextricably tied and the problems associated with higher densities of game and evermore motorized hunters to harvest all those animals are also happening in other road-accessible areas of the state.

The general notion from the Newsminer and many hunters is that if we “spread out the pressure” to other areas of the state by “growing more moose and caribou” and expanding motorized access that we can avoid the problems we are seeing now with access abuse, habitat damage, and hunter crowding in Unit 20. And while that may seem to make some superficial sense, down the line that reasoning will likely produce a whole lot of road-accessible areas with the same problems as Unit 20.

The irony of advocating for more game, fewer predators, and more motorized access is that it can backfire on those who want to continue using ATVs and ORVs for hunting in certain areas. As the Newsminer editorial proclaimed about the Rex Trail: “Perish the thought, but perhaps it’s time access to these areas is regulated in some way.”

ADFG too often takes the blame for management strategies the Department did not endorse, and management decisions they did not support. ADFG biologists and managers provide the objective biological data and wildlife science to our Board of Game and legislature, but this information is often overridden by political, economic, and cultural values choices within our public system of wildlife management. ADFG is then given a directive on “how” to manage that at times goes against all notions of prudent wildlife science.

We need more moderation in wildlife management across the board. This will only happen if hunters and hunting orgs return to their real conservation roots and look to the long-term future and what kind of Alaska and what hunting opportunities we want to leave our kids and grandkids.

The antlerless hunts highlight intensive management strategies that can backfire. They are a solution to a problem we didn’t need to create in the first place.

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