

Itcha-Ilgachuz Caribou Herd: Late Winter Recruitment Survey.
Prepared by Nicola Freeman, March 2010

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We flew on March 9, 2010 for 6.8 hours (4.8 of actual survey) with Highland Helicopters. Crew: Nicola Freeman (MOE), Pat Dielman (MOE), Gary Holte (Ulkacho Band).

Survey Results:

We were unable to locate any caribou. Zero.

We covered the known winter range, based on historical surveys and saw old tracks that were very melted out. We did not see any fresh caribou tracks. We also flew over an area where caribou are not usually located, but sightings have been trickling in from locals (anecdotal only); we saw lots of tracks, but were unable to identify the species. It was difficult to differentiate caribou track from moose, cattle, or horse due to the melted state of the tracks and lack of recent snow in the past few weeks. While looking for caribou in dog-hair pine is like finding a needle in a haystack, I would have thought we would have seen at least one caribou.

We *can* say that the caribou appear to be doing things differently in the past couple of years, as recent surveys (i.e. post-calving) are 'atypical' compared to historic surveys from the 1990 and early 2000s. It is possible that the warm winter has resulted in snow conditions that are unfavourable for cratering, such that the melt-and-thaw has created a hard crust that caribou have difficulty breaking through to access terrestrial lichen. We thought the caribou may have moved to areas where they could feed on arboreal lichen, however our recce flight into those areas did not show any fresh sign either. In hindsight, we wish we had landed the helicopter to see how hard the snow was, and whether any tracks were visible on the snow crust...but we didn't. Regardless of this, we still would not have been able to locate any caribou from the air if tracks were invisible to us. In the amount of flight time we had available, we covered a lot of ground. Survey map of flight route overlaid with winter range and habitat suitability mapping needs to be completed and filed.