

This is my trip from Washington, D.C. all the way to Dillingham, Alaska. My name is Chelsea Corcoran/Quadt, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Conservation Training Center, and this is my experience at Togiak National Wildlife Refuge--all 4.7 million acres.

There are two herds of caribou on the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge. One herd, the Nushagak Peninsula Herd making up of about 900 animals is the non-migratory herd located in southwest Alaska.

Andy Aderman: It was an introduction of about 150 animals. Then it grew very rapidly the first 10 years and reached about 1,400 animals. Then it declined over the next 10 years down to about 550. And now it's starting to increase again and currently there are about 900 animals. The second herd of approximately 30,000 caribou called the Mulchatna's is a migratory herd that ranges over an area of 60,000 square miles. That's slightly larger than the entire state of Wisconsin.

During the fall, caribou composition surveys are conducted on a portion of each herd using a helicopter. Each caribou encountered is classified as wither a cow, calf, or bull. They're radio collared and tracked to collected information on location, home range, and population dynamics. Female caribou are the only ungulate or hooved species to have antlers. Trails from caribou and ATV's that are still visible 40 years later are sure signs how delicate the tundra is.

Togiak is researching to see if wolves are driving the population dynamics of the Nushagak caribou herd, which has declined from 1,400 to about 550 animals. Starting in 2007, Supervisory Biologist Pat Walsh and his team took a look at two wolf packs located within the Nushagak Peninsula. They collard the packs in order to download location data using aerial radio telemetry to see how many interactions they were having with the caribou herd. The result was that the wolves, though a small contributing factor, were not the main driver for the caribou's decline.

Cape Peirce, part of Togiak National Wildlife Refuge, was our next destination. With eight middle school children, including Yupik Native Alaskans from Togiak, Quentihak and Dillingham, the refuge, along with a number of Traditional Village Councils, work in cooperation to sponsor this camp each year. Village Elder and liaison Pete Abraham teach traditional ecological knowledge about the plants and wildlife there through some incredible life stories and lessons.

Pete Abraham: I got all the grass all over me. I was like a scarecrow. Grass sticking out over here, here and everywhere, drizzle. I told my dogs, "Let's go home." I went home. By the time I got home, I was half dry. I wasn't even cold.

During their week at Cape Peirce, students learn about marine mammals, such as walruses and even how to identify seabirds, including Puffins, Murres, Cormorants, and Kittiwakes. They're taught how to conduct population surveys and make observations by viewing, first hand, the animals they're learning about.

From spending a week with this group of students, it was evident that their connection to nature far surpassed the average 7th grader. They taught ME about edible plants. Some even knew how to build their own small mammal trap using wire, and most knew safety and proper use of a 12 gauge shot gun. As much as I would have liked to think I taught them, I walked away from this experience learning much more about the Yupik culture and a unique way of life.

Chelsea Corcoran/Quadt: Is it good? [young boy eating a fish]

Although you wouldn't know it after meeting these kids, most students in Alaska are just as disconnected with the outdoors as the rest of the lower 48. With such a beautiful landscape that they can call their back yard, most kids have never even been camping, much less hiking a mountain. Technology is just as ingrained in everyday life, and the need for more outdoor experiences is just as imperative.