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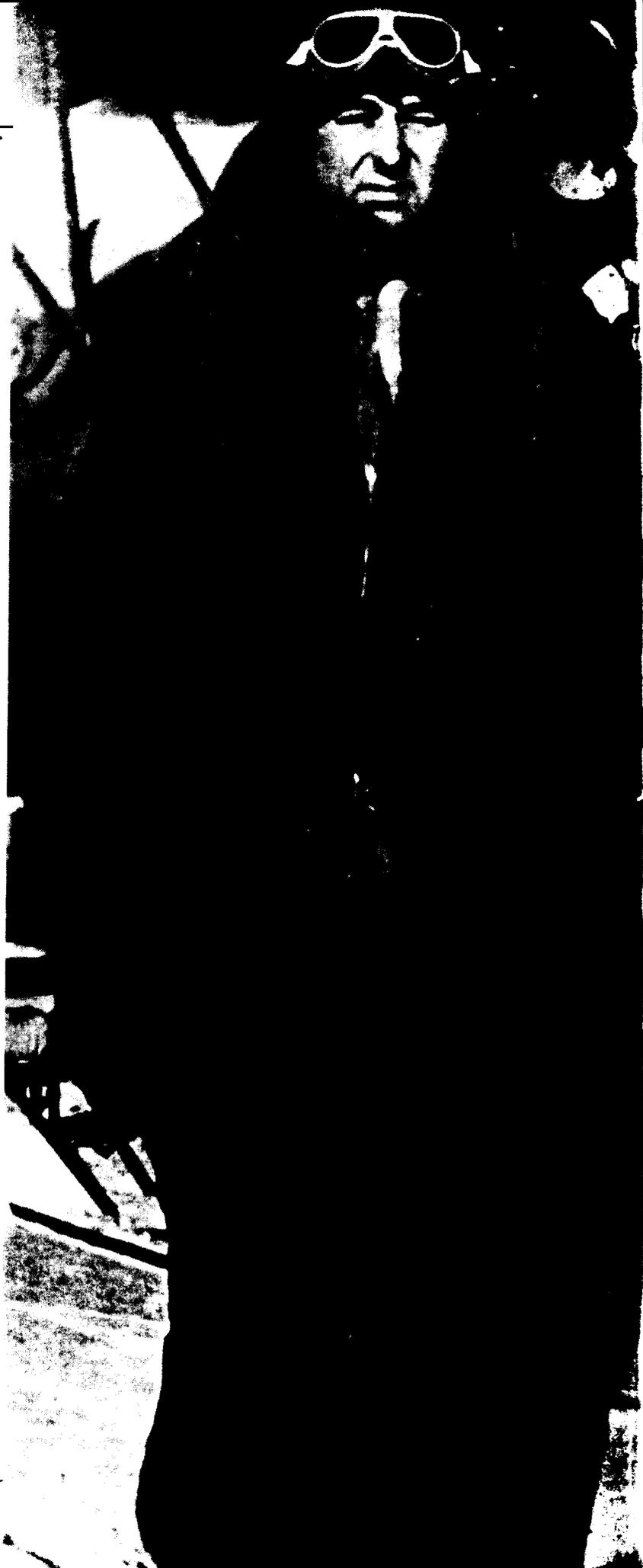
pp. 14-17 + 59 + 61-62.

Sam O. White

The First Flying Game Warden

By Dave Hall

Sam wore a caribou-skin flight suit for flying his open-cockpit biplane in cold weather. The suit proved unsatisfactory over time because the skin shed and the hairs got into the gas and oil. (Alaska Land Pioneer Museum, Fairbanks)



Sam O. White passed from this earth December 14, 1976, but memories of him will long live in Alaska.

Known for honesty and fair play, Sam was the first game warden assigned to northern Alaska. He patrolled more than a quarter-million square miles, and he was the world's first flying game warden.

Sam devoutly believed in wildlife conservation, a subject he effectively introduced to America's last frontier. He commanded respect, even from those he arrested. His experiences while on the trail, and in the air, are still remembered by many interior and northern Alaskans. A 12-part autobiography, "Sam White, Alaskan," ran in the December 1964-November 1965 ALASKA SPORTSMAN®, parent magazine to ALASKA®.

Sam was born on November 26, 1891, in a log cabin near Eustis, Maine. One of 10 children, he was a lumberjack at 14, and a deer and black bear guide at 16.

While working as a foreman on the International Boundary Survey, Sam started dreaming of moving to Alaska. His move was delayed when he enlisted as an Army Ranger during World War I. While in the services he met Alaskan Jack Allman who convinced Sam that Alaska was the place for him. They fought together in the trenches of Europe throughout the war. Afterward, in 1921, Sam worked for the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey on the Colorado River from Utah to Arizona. In 1922 he passed the civil service examination for a position with the U.S. Geodetic Survey in Alaska.

He arrived at Seward on the old Northwestern, traveled on to Anchorage, and then to Fairbanks. He soon became familiar with the vast Interior, surveying on foot, by horseback and with canoe, clear to the boundary of Canada's Yukon Territory.

Keenly interested in wildlife, Sam recorded game populations, using detailed maps to plot species distribution. His wildlife surveys during the 1920s confirmed reports completed during the same period by

scientists Alfred Brooks, Olaus Murie and Alfred Bailey.

At the turn of the century Alaska's primary law was a frontier democracy called the "Miner's Code." There was essentially no government control, no law enforcement and no representation in Congress. Without regard for species, sex or season, market hunters and trappers had substantially reduced wildlife populations.

In some months he traveled as much as 1,600 miles on a sled behind what he called, "a team of 15 free-thinking dogs."

Some species, including the sea otter, beaver and marten, were feared doomed. Started during Russian ownership and continuing after U.S. purchase in 1867, this exploitation threatened Alaska's fur and game.

Congress enacted the first Alaska game law in 1902, but there were no provisions for game wardens. Between 1909 and 1911, however, seven Alaska game wardens were appointed, but all of them were assigned to coastal areas.

Responding to reports of reduced wildlife numbers, Congress passed a new Alaska Game Law in 1925, which provided for a warden force accountable to an executive officer, who was a member of a five-man Alaska Game Commission. The four other commissioners were selected from each of the four judicial districts.

Sam White's work with the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in Alaska ended in 1926. When he passed through Juneau, with regrets about leaving Alaska, he called upon Ernest P. Walker, newly-appointed executive officer of the Alaska Game Commission.

"I sure would like to work for the Alaska Game Commission,"

he told Walker. He left Walker his game surveys and maps.

The Game Commission planned to station a warden at Fort Yukon, a job that called for a person with experience, courage and common sense.

"I know just the man," Walker told the other commissioners. They agreed. Sam, working on a survey team in Louisiana, received a telegram offering him the job.

"I nearly broke my neck getting back to Alaska," he remembered.

Sam stopped at Fairbanks in July 1927, before going north to Fort Yukon. When asked why he became an Alaska game warden, his standard answer was, "To hold back the killin' and the burnin'."

He went right to work. In a letter he wrote at the Central Roadhouse on November 17, 1927, to H.W. Terhune, executive officer of the Game Commission, Sam explained why his arrest reports were submitted from on the trail.

"I did not want to bear the expense incident to returning to town, and also be subject to the delay.

"I am leaving here for the Hot Springs tomorrow [via dog sled] to look up D.F. Davis who is trapping without a license. Mr. Davis is the one you have listed for failure to report for two consecutive seasons the number of furs taken. I expect this action to sort of impress on others the necessity of sending in their reports at the end of each trapping season.

"I arrived in Circle on the 21st and immediately got in touch with the U.S. Marshal and the Commissioner, and visited with all the Natives. I warned them against forest fires, pointing out the resulting destruction to their game supply and many other items of irreparable damage done by fire. I told them that they would be watched very closely on their meat killing and that any instance of killing cow moose that come to my attention, especially in spring and summer, would be severely dealt with."

Sam's reports indicate that in some months he traveled as much as 1,600 miles on a sled behind what he called, "a team of

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Sam (left) posed poacher Hugo Stromberger with the evidence on December 4, 1939. Sam ordered Hugo to mush his team to a pickup point for the flight to jail. (Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska, Fairbanks)

15 free-thinking dogs."

Sam's early field reports illustrate his impatience and frustrations with dog sled patrol:

"November 15, 1927 — it was very fortunate that I had my sled rigged up substantially. The trail has been very rough and a lot of gravel bars have given it some punishment, especially where I have had to drop down over steep banks with insufficient snow to break the shock of the fall. On the 15th, in coming down the north side of the Eagle Summit, the sled tipped off the trail and rolled over the edge of the snow bank. I could do nothing but cut the dogs loose and it looked rather bad for a while, with dogs scattered all over the mountainside [chasing] after caribou, and my sled buried in the snow at the foot of the bank."

Sam searched for improved techniques to patrol his vast territory. He even purchased a

motorcycle, which worked all right in summer, but was almost useless in winter.

He was impressed by his first encounter with an airplane in 1924, and became convinced that aircraft could revolutionize wildlife protection. When he was transferred to Fairbanks in 1929, he pestered Noel and Ralph Wein, pioneer aviators who operated a flying service there, to teach him to fly. They finally agreed, for \$25 an hour, with Sam furnishing the fuel. Sam purchased an open cockpit Bone Golden Eagle monoplane, powered with a Leblond 90-hp, seven-cylinder radial engine. His determination to fly was a personal commitment that put him \$3,500 in debt for purchase of the plane when his annual salary was only \$2,800.

Half the town of Fairbanks was present to watch Sam solo on a summer evening in 1929. No one realized that history was being made. He had become the first flying game warden.

His first flying report was submitted in January 1929, through channels to Washington, D.C.:

"Yesterday, January 15, 1929, we saw a total of 20 moose, 12 of them seen in pairs, three in one

bunch and five in another bunch. Saturday the 12th we saw about 500 caribou and nine moose between Dry Creek and the Big Delta.

"It was strange the way the plane affected the different animals. The moose paid practically no attention to it, lifting their heads now and then to look at it but usually not becoming alarmed. The caribou, however, became considerably alarmed, usually when sighting the plane, and left that particular place in a hurry."

The Golden Eagle did not perform satisfactorily, so Sam sold her for \$500 and purchased a Swallow biplane for another \$3,500. The Swallow, a two-place, open-cockpit plane, had a three-hour, 20-minute range. Sam could now cover his entire territory in days, compared to a year or more by dog team.

Sam apprehended the first wildlife violator with his aircraft in 1930. The plane was used extensively during the early 1930s, and it added an element of surprise that dog team patrol lacked. The case against Hugo Stromberger, who Sam called "one of the foulest meat poachers in Alaska," is an example. The

following is from Sam's diaries and case report:

"December 2, 1939. Wayne House and I landed at West Fork, Little Delta River. Made tent camp and prepared to snowshoe to Hugo Stromberger's camps.

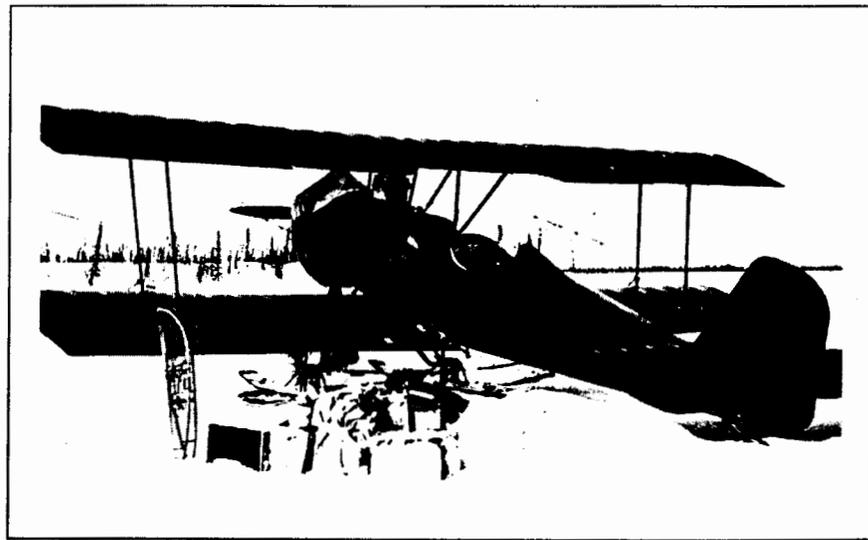
"December 3rd and 4th. We snowshoed along and over mountains with packs on backs, no trail, no bushes, not even a blade of grass above the snow. We went by map and compass in a fog and hit her on the button. We ate when and what we could. Arrived Hugo's (middle) Dry Creek cabin. Hugo came out of cabin with a .30-06 rifle. I told him, 'Hugo, you put that rifle down,' which he promptly did. Hugo was so stunned that he tried to shake hands with somebody right quick. Some of his agitation and bewilderment shows in the picture taken by House. We immediately began a search which had quick results. House located a whole sheep buried in the snow and tromped over the first set gun (.30-06). Stayed overnight.

"December 5th. Proceeded to (upper) Dry Creek cabin with Stromberger in between us and searched the place. Found more (30.06) set guns and more sheep, including horns of ewes and one lamb, under the snow. More photos were made. Back to middle camp for the night.

"Set guns were discovered on each of the cabin doors, which Hugo said was to protect the cabins from bears. In mid-winter?

"December 6th. I returned to West Fork Little Delta, as much work had to be done on runway before a takeoff with load could be accomplished. House went to Stromberger's (lower) cabin, keeping Stromberger in front of him, and located more contraband. More photos were made. I arrested Stromberger and seized his dogs and sled for transporting two cow moose heads and other contraband to the airplane.

"After delivering contraband to the airplane, I told Hugo, 'Now you know you are under arrest. You go to Birch Lake with your dog team, make arrangements to lodge your dogs with Tex Blair and wait for me to pick you up and fly you to jail in Fairbanks. Hugo, you had better be at Birch



Lake when I come to pick you up in about a week.' "

Sam then flew evidence seized from Stromberger to Blair Lake, and from Blair Lake to Fairbanks, although much meat was left at Stromberger's cabins. Malcolm Wise, a prospector living nearby, although licensed, didn't like to kill. Sam gave him a letter authorizing him to go to Stromberger's cabin and help himself to meat. He did the same for Tex Blair at Birch Lake.

On December 12 Sam flew to Birch Lake and flew Stromberger to Fairbanks and lodged him in the jail. On December 13, Hugo pled guilty to five counts before Commissioner Growden.

Sam told the court, "Stromberger has done untold damage to the sheep of that section since 1924. A pile of 34 ram horns was located under a tree near the upper cabin, and most of these were fresh kills. His place was a morgue. Evidence was found of the illegal take of over 50 sheep and eight moose taken during four months."

Growden told Hugo that it was the worst case he had ever sat on. And Growden was much impressed by the set guns. Hugo was fined \$150, and given six months in jail.

Sam later said about Stromberger, "He was really an honest man, though, and knew he was doing wrong. He took his punishment and bore no hard feelings."

Change has historically been difficult, and sometimes painful. This was true with Sam White's

Sam bought this Swallow for \$3,500 at a time when his salary was only \$2,800 a year. With it, he became the world's first flying game warden. (U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey)

introduction of flying to the game warden's work. He was in constant trouble with the bureaucrats because of his airplane and its use in government work. He was once required to take two weeks leave to recover and repair his personal plane after he made a forced landing on an isolated lake while on game warden business.

In his book, *Last of the Bush Pilots*, (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1969) Harmon "Bud" Helmericks explained Sam's situation: "Thus, by personal initiative and at his own expense, Sam White became the first man to use an airplane for conservation work in Alaska, and from all I can gather, this holds true in all America and likely for all the world. Sam White, after years of pack horse, dog team, and canoe, at last had a way to cross Alaska's vastness in hours. All he had to do was furnish the airplane, maintain it, repair it, do all the work, and the Game Commission would furnish him the gasoline while paying him \$2800 a year. A man just couldn't have had it any better, Sam felt, and as usual, he was right. He was doing an old job a new way."

In 1936, \$30,000 was

Continues on page 59

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eddy, and wavy images left by salmon materialized continuously for the next mile as we passed over a series of shallow runs and gravel shoals. It was obvious the August coho run had reached the upper Swanson and we had crossed a prime spawning area.

The last leg of our trip was nearly complete. Only the flickering of starlight guided our way along the river. Then the shimmering glow of a campfire appeared on the dark horizon. It was the first sign of other people we had seen since we left Paddle Lake the first morning. That firelight signaled the end of a rewarding journey. Not only had we discovered great rainbow trout fishing, but we were also left enchanted with vivid memories of beautiful wilderness in Alaska. □

Author Chris Ricardi has published several articles about his travels in Alaska. He presently lives in Colorado.

SAM O. WHITE
Continued from page 17

appropriated for the Game Commission for transportation equipment. Over Sam's strong objections, four "scout boats" were purchased. They proved worthless and were disposed of the following year. To protest this decision, Sam sold his patched-up old airplane in 1937.

The 14th Annual Report of the Alaska Game Commission (1937-38) gave testimony that Sam was right in a paragraph that read, "Airplane travel is becoming more and more important and necessary in enforcement of the game laws in Alaska. This type of travel was utilized during the past year by engaging passage whenever practicable on regularly-scheduled flights, by chartering planes with commercial pilots and by chartering one plane which was flown by an Alaskan Wildlife Agent (Sam White) who is a licensed pilot. The last method proved to be by far the most economical and effective."

That report showed that agents

traveled 25,000 miles by air and only 1,161 by dog team — a reversal from the years before Sam introduced flying patrols.

The Game Commission purchased two Fairchild 24 airplanes in 1938 — one to be used in interior Alaska, the other in Southeastern. Sam had finally won. He was sent to pick up one of the Fairchilds at Hagerstown, Maryland.

Sam's lot also improved that same year when young Clarence Rhode was transferred to Fairbanks to study under him. Clarence benefited greatly from his game warden training, and Sam taught him to fly.

In 1939 Clarence accompanied Sam and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police on a joint aircraft patrol along the Alaska-Canada boundary. Numerous arrests resulted from this patrol, which attracted considerable favorable publicity for the "flying game warden."

After WWII Clarence Rhode supervised a new U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Aircraft Division in Anchorage. From 1948 until 1958 when he was killed in a

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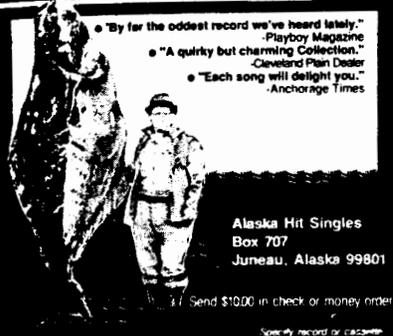
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crash, Rhode was Regional Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska, and Executive Director of the Alaska Game Commission. Under his leadership, airplanes became a mainstay for FWS agents throughout Alaska — and the ability to fly was an important qualification for their jobs.

Sam enjoyed a few years of apprehending violators with the Commission's new Fairchild 24 before a new conflict came along. With the war, Alaska's population soared from 72,000 in 1940, to 225,000 in 1943. Only 75,000 of these were civilians.

At the time that problems of protecting Alaska's wildlife were the greatest, appropriations were cut, and more than half of the experienced FWS field men went into the service. An even more ominous development was described by Sam: "The military needed something to occupy their time; they wanted special concessions to violate the game laws. The generals and commanders were the worst, and it went right on down through the ranks."

Sam disobeyed orders to overlook violations committed by military personnel. Bud Helmericks described the situation: "Sam took a dim, dim view of the use of helicopters to kill moose and bears and of the wanton killing, and so brave, honest Sam spoke up.

"The pressure on Sam began building up, and he got the word that he would have to go along with the trend. The military set the pattern and you went along or else.

"Low wages; furnishing his own equipment; dangerous, cold work and endless hours hadn't dampened Sam's spirit. When he had to submit to popular pressure and go along the easy path that he knew was not right, he resigned."

Sam's superior character again surfaced when he agreed not to discuss the reason for his resignation. He did not want to damage the outstanding reputation of his fellow wardens. As always, he was as good as his word, and it was 10 years before he would discuss the matter.

Sam went to work flying mail and passengers for Wien Airlines, at the bush station of Hughes. The increase of salary from \$3,200 to \$7,200 did little to take away the pain. Sam had been forced to resign because he

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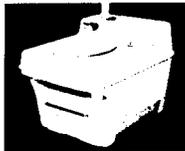
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performed his duties fairly and
honestly.

He flew for Wien until his 70th
birthday in 1962, when another
government rule forced his
retirement. Sam surrendered his
commercial pilot's license, but
continued to fly his own
Stinson L5 for several more years.
The Stinson was finally sold, but
it was destroyed by fire a few
days later.

"Died of a broken heart," Sam
said.

During nearly 40 years of
flying, Sam recorded more than
11,500 hours in the air and
experienced 11 forced landings
and only two accidents. Bud
Helmericks remembers, "Every
Indian and Eskimo, their fathers,
and most of their grandfathers,
knew Sam. They all thought he
was the patron saint of aviation,
and several named their children
after him. One cute little girl at
Alatna [1969] is called 'Sam
White,' and the little rascal has
the independence of her
namesake, too."

Sam's struggle to "hold back
the killin' and the burnin'" has
not been forgotten. To help
preserve the memory, a
handmade wood stove and other
articles used in the Swallow
biplane, along with photos of Sam
working as a warden, are
displayed at the Alaska Pioneer
Museum at Fairbanks. His field
diaries, oral tapes and
publications are part of the
archives of the Elmer E.
Rasmuson Library on the
Fairbanks campus of the
University of Alaska. □

*Dave Hall is a U.S. Fish and Wildlife
Service special agent who has worked in
Alaska.*

SLOW COMEBACK ON THE FORTYMILE

Continued from page 21

the Territory was well developed.
At the time, however, the
vastness of the Territory hindered
biologists and game wardens.
Further, there was a poor
understanding of the dynamics of
game in Alaska.

The Alaska Game Commission
was formed in 1925, but it was
not until the late 1940s that
aircraft were routinely used for
monitoring game populations.
Without aircraft, biologists were
not sufficiently mobile to collect
the information needed for game

management. Regulations were
conservative, for widespread
declines of bison, antelope, elk
and deer in the Lower 48 were
still within memory.

In Alaska caribou had declined
throughout most of the Territory,
and they had been eliminated
from Nunivak Island. Muskox
were wiped out on the North
Slope, and beaver and white-
fronted geese were severely
reduced. During the late 1940s
and 1950s, hunting seasons for
moose, caribou and other species
were short; hunting was generally
restricted to males; and wolves
were kept at low levels by federal
agents who poisoned, trapped,
snared and hunted them with
airplanes.

Game thrived, and the decline
of the Fortymile herd was
reversed. By the late 1950s the
herd again numbered more than
60,000. Caribou hunting
continued to be popular along the
Steese and Taylor highways until
the early 1970s. All seemed well.

Then came another disaster:
the Fortymile herd declined
dramatically and unexpectedly in
the late 1960s and early 1970s.
The hunting season was closed
by emergency order in 1973 after
the herd reached the record low
level of about 5,000 animals.

Mismanagement? Many
Alaskans faulted the Alaska
Department of Fish and Game,
perhaps justifiably, but
management decisions were
based on the best information
available.

Prior to the 1970s, most studies
of game had been in the Lower
48 states where large predators
had been largely eliminated. In
such a situation, some extremely
dense deer populations did suffer
from overcrowding. Predator
control was thought to be
counterproductive, or at least
unnecessary, because it was
generally accepted that predators
remove mostly the old and infirm
animals that were going to die
anyway.

After 1960, when the new state
of Alaska started to manage its
wildlife, controversial predator
control programs were ended, and
hunting seasons for big game
were liberalized. Alaska's new
cadre of college-trained wildlife
biologists feared that game
populations in Alaska were in
danger of overusing their range.
Predators were thought to be
beneficial to the health of game
populations. This thinking
continued to dominate decisions