

Caribou/Snowmobile Aerial Monitoring Report

Of February 3, 2012

Methods

The aerial monitoring program is conducted as a cooperative program between the Advocacy of the West, the Defenders of Wildlife, the Idaho Conservation League, the Kalispell Tribe of Indians and the Selkirk Conservation Alliance.

An aerial over-flight was conducted of the Southern Selkirk Mountains woodland caribou recovery area to monitor snowmobile user compliance with existing snowmobile use restrictions and to monitor and locate caribou and other important wildlife use areas in relation to areas with snowmobile use restrictions. To conduct aerial monitoring a Cessna 182 fixed wing type aircraft was utilized.

To accurately locate boundaries of areas with snowmobile use restrictions in place, a laptop computer running a geographical information-mapping program (Arc view ver. 3.3) was utilized. In addition to mapping software, the existing arc view extension, DNR gamin, was utilized to connect a handheld GPS system to computer for real-time mapping. In addition to a pilot, a single observer/recorder was utilized. Snowmobile tracks within snowmobile closure areas were recorded, as were any recognizable wildlife tracks. Because of runway conditions at Priest River, the monitoring flight originated and ended at the community airport in Sandpoint, Idaho.

Conditions

Weather conditions were generally clear with occasional high cloud cover. Snow tracking conditions were generally good based on time since last snow and snow conditions. It was estimated that approximately 1.5 days had elapsed since the last snow over much of the surveyed area.

Very little air turbulence was encountered during flight, although some aviation forecasts predicted wind speeds of up to 12 knots above 7,000 feet. A map indicating flight path is shown on Figure 1. The flight began at approximately 1130 and ended at approximately 1300; total flight time was 3.5 hours. A map of the flight path is shown in Figure 1.

Results

Snowmobile Use

Snowmobile use within the surveyed area was generally “light” when compared to previous winter surveys, but use was ‘similar’ when comparing similar flights in early February or being this early in the snowmobile season and also for being a Friday.

Evidence of snowmobile use was generally light as this survey was on a Friday. It is very likely that a similar survey conducted within a few days would likely show more extensive snowmobile use within most areas.

Snowmobile use was observed within the Roman Nose area and south of this area, but all use was within areas that were open for snowmobile use. Other areas were not checked during this flight because of time limitations. No evidence of snowmobile use was observed on Bunchgrass Meadows, Hidden Lake, Continental Mountain, Pack River or Chimney Rock. Evidence of snowmobile use in the Trapper Creek, Cow Creek and Grass Creek drainages. Snowmobile use was observed within the closed area between Trapper Creek and Cow Creek drainages and within the ridgeline that separates the Trapper Creek and Grass Creek drainages.

Wildlife

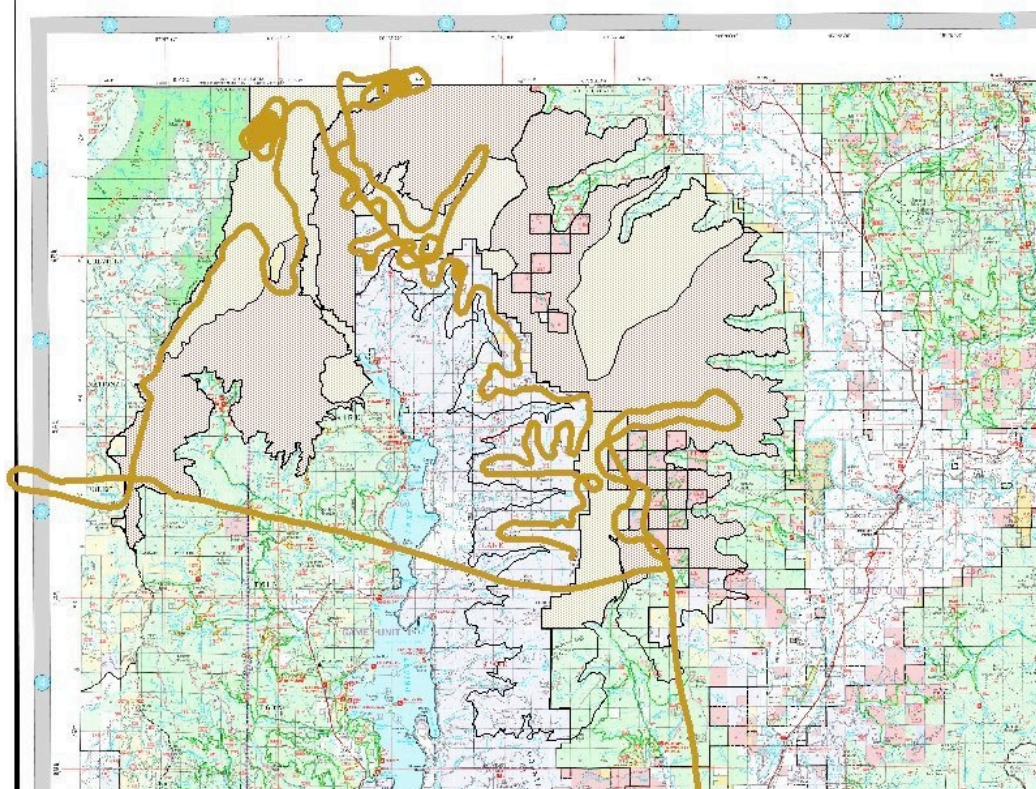
The presence of wildlife tracks was generally scarce during the beginning portion of the flight, but became more obvious during the latter portion of the flight. This was likely the result of a combination of factors such as time of day and increasing elapsed time since last snowfall. Identifiable wildlife tracks encountered included, caribou, wolf, mountain goat, moose and snowshoe hare.

Four caribou were located approximately 6 miles south of the international border along the Shedroof divide within the state of Idaho near the border with Washington. The caribou were bedded down within an open timber stand within an unburned section within the Hughes Fire, which burned in 2006. Visible track within the snow indicated that the caribou had traveled between basins within the general vicinity and generally moved approximately 1 mile northward from the basins which had older snow covered caribou tracks. It appeared that the caribou had been in the basin, which we observed them for several days, based on the amount and extent of the recent tracks.

Recent wolf tracks and associated beds were located within the upper reaches of Malcolm Creek. No wolves were seen but it was believed that they were in the vicinity based on the amount and apparent 'freshness' of the tracks that were observed.

Mountain goat tracks were observed within the vicinity of Green Bonnet Mountain and within the vicinity of Lionshead Ridge.

Figure 1. Map of southern portion of caribou recovery area, showing flight path (1/30/2011) taken in red.



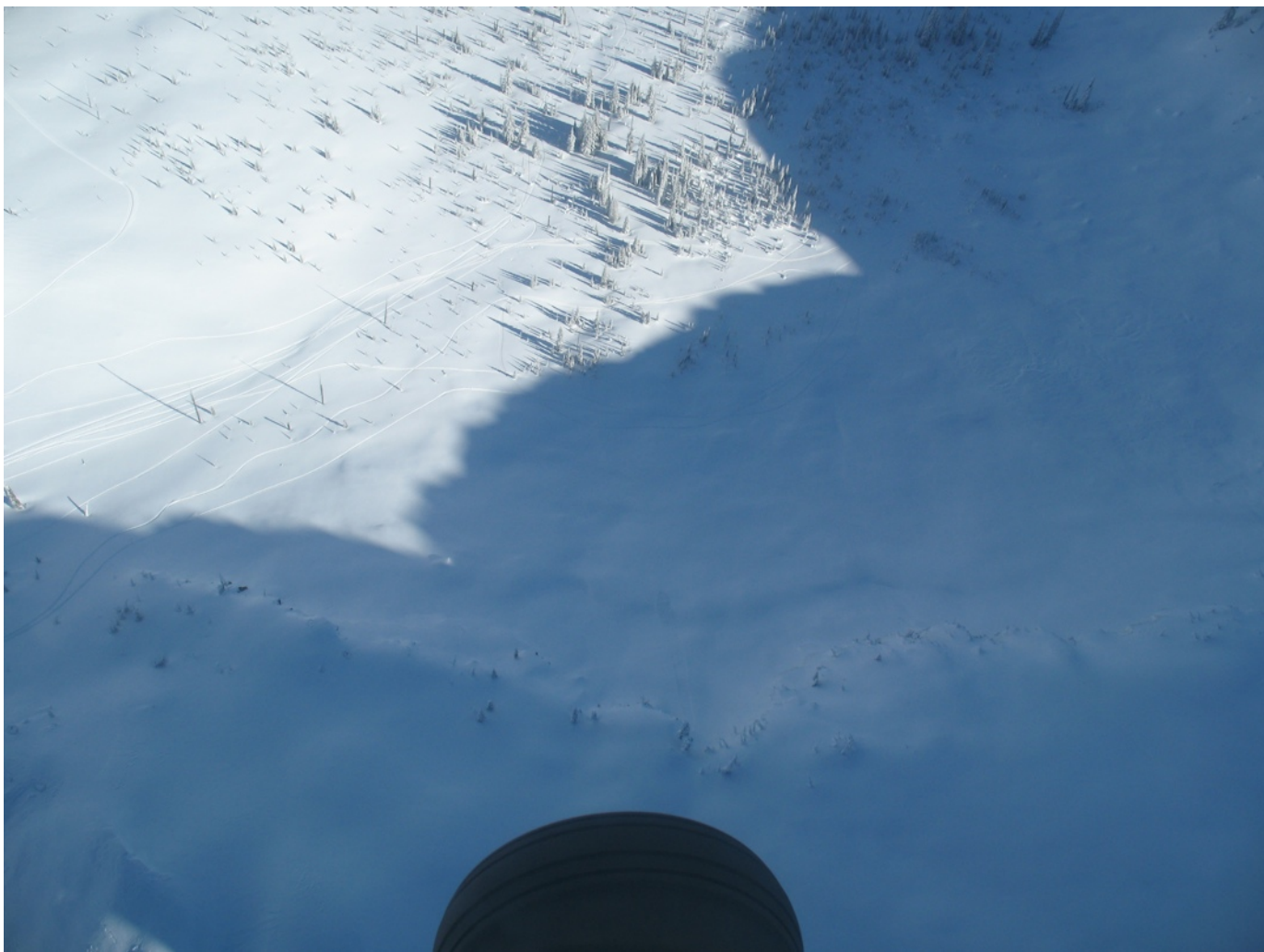


Figure 1 Photo of snowmobile tracks within upper portion of Grass Creek, looking north. Photo also shows tracks crossing ridgeline between Trapper Creek and Grass Creek, through closed area (center right of picture).



Figure 2. Photo from Cow Creek looking towards Trapper Creek. Snowmobile tracks observed crossing through closed area between Trapper Creek and Cow Creek.



Figure 3. Four caribou bedding down in timber, along Shedroof divide approximately 6 miles south of border.

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