

Caribou/Snowmobile Aerial Monitoring Report

Of January 30, 2011

Methods

The aerial monitoring program is conducted as a cooperative program between Advocates For The West, Defenders of Wildlife, Idaho Conservation League, Kalispell Tribe of Indians and 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 2 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 20 knots above 7,000 feet. The flight began at approximately 1100 and ended at approximately 1330, total flight time was 4.4 hours. A map indicating flight path is shown on 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 monitoring flights in January or for monitoring flights that are conducted this early in the snowmobile season.

Snowmobile tracks were observed to the north of Forest Service road 1388 and onto Continental Lake and along the northern boundary of Continental Mine property. Both locations are within the snowmobile closure

area. The snowmobile tracks that were located to the north of the Continental mine property appeared to enter a short distance into the snowmobile closure area.

Snowmobile tracks were observed within the northern portion or the open or bald portion of Hughes Ridge and appeared to originate from trail 315 where it enters the 'bald' north of the lookout. Only a small segment of tracks were observed because of recent snow and wind.

Snowmobile tracks were observed within lower portion of Blue Joe Drainage on an unidentified road system within the closure area. Only a small segment of tracks were observed because of recent snow and wind activity.

Recent snowmobile activity was observed on Bunchgrass Meadows. Because of the apparent freshness of these snowmobile tracks, they were likely the result of snowmobile activity that day or the previous day.

Snowmobile tracks or snow machine tracks were observed on the Pack River road. Only a short segment of tracks were observed, as any observations were difficult owing to the surrounding topography.

Snowmobile use was observed on Kent Lake, which is not within the closure area but was noted because of the inherent difficulty in reaching this location via snow machine. Other areas where snowmobile use was observed includes Standard Lakes and the Trapper Creek Basin on IDL lands.

Extensive snowmobile use was observed on Boundary Lake and on most of the road systems north of the U.S./B.C. border, between the border and the southern boundary of Stagleap Provincial Park. Extensive cross-country and telemark ski use was observed from the southern boundary of Stagleap Park north to Highway 3 and for a short distance north of the Highway 3. No snowmobile use was observed on the small-unnamed lake that is to the west of Big Snowy Top Mountain. Snowmobile use on this small lake has not been uncommon in previous years.

Wildlife

The presence of wildlife tracks within the survey area was surprisingly lighter than what was anticipated. This may have been the result of the shorter elapsed time since the last snowfall or high wind the day prior to the flight or a number of other factors including the above mentioned ones. Wildlife tracks became more detectable and numerous during the later portion of the flight. Identifiable wildlife tracks include: moose, deer, snowshoe hare, wolf and possible wolverine. Tracks which were identified as possible wolverine tracks were located along the headwaters of Blue Joe Creek. Numerous wolf tracks were located approximately .5 miles south of the international border.

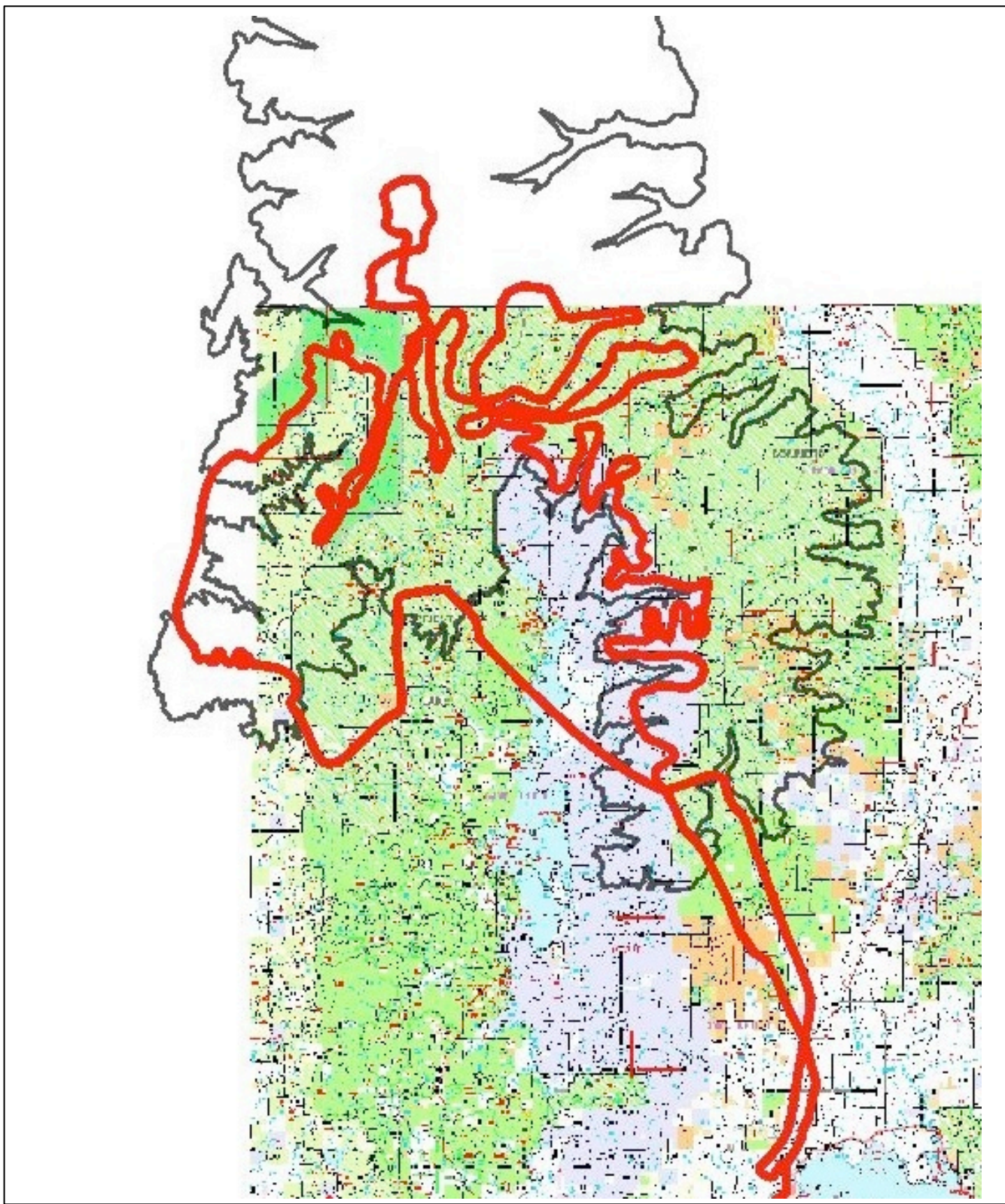


Figure 1. Map of southern portion of caribou recovery area, showing flight path (1/30/2011) taken in red.

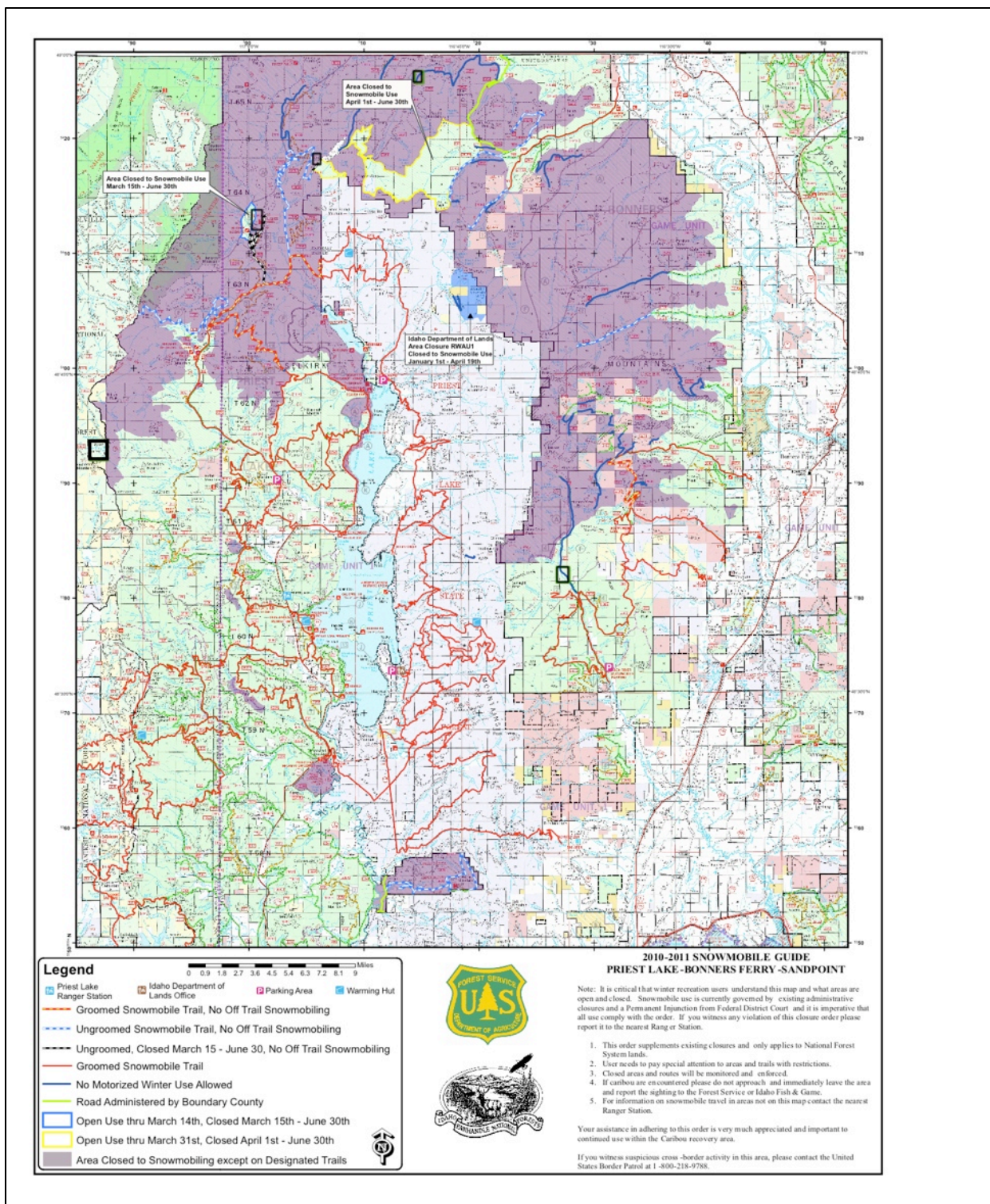


Figure 2. Map showing locations of snowmobile intrusions into areas where motorized winter recreation use is restricted (1/30/2011).



Figure 3. Snowmobile tracks on Bunchgrass Meadow, Jan 30, 2011.



Figure 4. Snowmobile tracks on Boundary Lake, north of international border, (1/30/2011). Photo taken from vicinity of Malcom Creek (U.S.) looking north. Snowmobile activity on Bouncary Creek is not restricted.



Figure 5. Snow Machine on closed road in Pack River. Photo courtesy of ICL.

Timothy Layser
Wildlife Biologist
Selkirk Conservation Alliance