



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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50,000 MIGRATING CARIBOU CROSS RIVER FOR 72 HOURS

The characteristic crackling and snapping of caribou hoofs awoke two Fish and Wildlife Service wolf hunters last August 9 at 6:30 AM in their camp on the Noatak River, Alaska. It was the beginning of one of the largest migrations of caribou seen in Alaska in recent years; 72 hours later stragglers were still crossing the river. The account of the mass migration was given by Stanley K. Patrick, one of the hunters, in his monthly narrative report, the FWS said today.

"About three miles downstream from Nimiuktuk River the caribou began crossing the Noatak," Patrick reported. "We decided to try for pictures, but caribou appeared in such large numbers that we took to our canoe. In about an hour we were in a great mass of moving animals, which we later estimated must have been about 50,000. We obtained 16 MM movies and 35 MM still pictures at extreme close range-- both on the crossing and in the nearby hills."

Patrick reported that many stragglers and cripples were noted. Many of these old and lame animals were preyed upon by wolves following the migration. Evidence of wolf kills among the stragglers was noted by the hunters in succeeding days.

Caribou are large members of the deer family weighing 150 to 300 pounds. Closely related to the reindeer, caribou range across the Arctic tundra. Herds of caribou once numbered hundreds of thousands, but were greatly reduced by poachers and predators. This migration may be an indication that a slight increase in caribou numbers may be starting this year. Caribou are almost constantly in migration, as they search for sparse tundra vegetation on which they browse, or respond to other unknown urges.

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