# WRANGELL-ST. ELIAS NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE
# WILDLIFE REPORT UPDATE

Fall 2025

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- **Mentasta Caribou Herd**
  - A total of 162 adult caribou (90% CI: 137–227) were estimated during surveys conducted on June 19, 25, and 26, 2025 (Table 1), which is the lowest count since 2017.
  - A composition survey is scheduled for September 22–24, 2025, to estimate calf-bull-cow ratios.
  - Twenty-two GPS collars are currently deployed on individuals captured within the Mentasta herd's range. Seven of these animals have migrated west to the Nelchina herd's range.
  - An additional 13 GPS collars will be deployed on the Mentasta herd during the September 22–24 survey.
  - In 2026 and 2027, a project will analyze historic and current data to evaluate changes in herd overlap among the Mentasta, Nelchina, and Chisana caribou herds. These herds co-occur in time, space, or both within Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, raising concerns about incidental take and overharvest of the smaller Mentasta and Chisana herds when the larger Nelchina herd is present and being harvested in accessible areas. Currently, the Nelchina caribou hunting season is closed.

**Table 1.** Population parameters for the Mentasta caribou herd.

| Year | Estimated Adults (90% CI) | Calf:Cow Ratio | Bull:Cow Ratio |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2017 | 285 (237-385) | 20 | 87 |
| 2018 | 349 (289-475) | 22 | 92 |
| 2019 | 335 (277-459) | 28 | 95 |
| 2020 | 642 (545-833) | - | - |
| 2021 | 470 (388-629) | 12 | 20 |
| 2023 | 258 (203-374) | - | - |
| 2024 | 189 (148-278) | 26 | 33 |
| 2025 | 162 (137-227) | not surveyed yet | Not surveyed yet |

- **Chisana Caribou Herd**
  - A composition survey will be conducted by ADF&G on October 24, 2025, in collaboration with Yukon Environment and Wrangell-St. Elias. Results will be shared during the spring 2026 subsistence cycle.
  - The fall 2024 composition survey indicated above-average calf-to-cow (3-year avg = 25) and bull-to-cow (3-year avg = 37) ratios, exceeding the Chisana Management Plan goals of 15 and 35, respectively. Following the management plan for the Chisana caribou herd, a limited bulls-only hunt is offered.
  - Twenty-six GPS collars are currently deployed within the herd.
  - An additional 15 collars will be deployed on October 3–5, 2025.

- **Dall Sheep**
  - Surveys were conducted across a 2.5-million-acre area in the northern Wrangell Mountains including the Nabesna area, and also the Mentasta, and Nutzotin Mountain ranges.
  - A total of 165 individual 10-mile transects were flown by two aircraft over six days, totaling 49 hours of survey time (Figure 1). Sheep groups were recorded by age and gender.
  - Results are not yet available but will be shared during the spring 2026 meeting.
  - In 2026–2027, a project led by NPS will quantify environmental changes since 2010 across the sheep landscape within Wrangell-St. Elias. This includes weather (e.g., snow characteristics) and habitat variables (e.g., vegetation patterns). The project will:
  - Compare sheep abundance in 2026–2027 with 2010–2011 baselines.
  - Use spatial modeling techniques to analyze environmental drivers of local variation in Dall sheep abundance across 264 survey units, including 58 units in the northern Wrangell Mountains.
  - This work will inform WRST management decisions and provide insights for other Alaskan parks with Dall sheep.

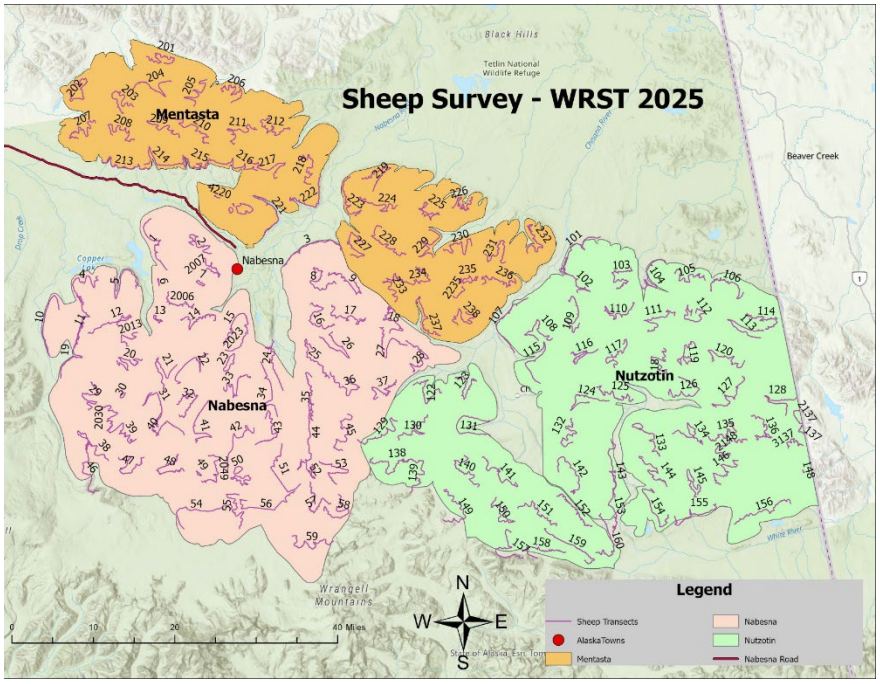

**Figure 1.** Wrangell-St. Elias Dall's Sheep Survey Area, 2025.

- **Microplastic Contamination - Malaspina Forelands**
  - In May 2025, efforts began to investigate microplastic impacts on shorebirds in the Malaspina Forelands and Yakutat Forelands.
  - From May 3–14 2025, visual surveys identified capture sites. Multiple techniques were used to capture shorebirds during their northward migration.
  - In the Yakutat Forelands, 32 shorebirds of six species were captured, and blood and fecal samples were collected.
  - On the Malaspina Forelands, 51 fecal samples from five species and substrate samples from four habitat types were collected near Grand Wash/Esker Stream.
  - Samples were sent to Auburn University for microplastic analysis that will determine plastic occurrence, density, type, and size should contamination exist in the sample.

**Figure 2.** Collecting substrate samples in the lower tidal zone, Grand Wash, Malaspina Forelands (left); a captured and banded Least Sandpiper (middle); foraging Western Sandpipers, Grand Wash. Photo credit: J. Magee.

- **Bald Eagle Foraging on Salmon and Other Prey Items**
  - In 2025, a study was launched to examine bald eagle foraging dynamics along a 124-mile stretch of the Copper River (Chistochina River to Chitina Bridge on the Copper River).
  - Nest site inventories were completed at 15 nests, mostly in live mature cottonwood trees, averaging 13.37 m in height and 1.50 m in circumference.
  - Whitewash (feces) was observed at all but one nest; prey remains (salmon and birds) were found at three nests.
  - Observations of prey items appears limited on the ground as most prey was likely in the nest bowl.
  - Turbidity increased downstream from 3,350 FNU to 5,560 FNU; tributary turbidity ranged from 45 FNU (Tazlina River) to 49,330 FNU (Nadina River). Stream temperature ranged from 10°C to 13°C, varying with tributary inputs.
  - Following recommendations of the SRC and PIMs of the RACs, a bald eagle-and-salmon proposal was submitted to NPS for national funding. The proposal focuses on:
    1. Variation in diet composition (species, condition, biomass) across river reaches and seasons.
    2. Factors influencing salmon and prey use by bald eagles.