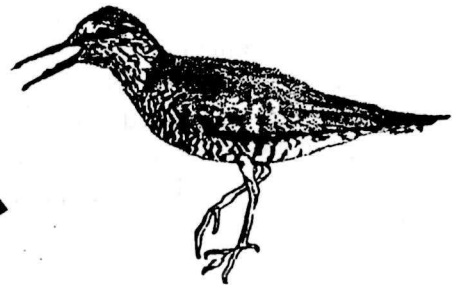
THE TATTLER



The Science Newsletter for
Denali National Park and Preserve

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RADIO-COLLARING CONTROVERSY EXPLODES

Though the study is completed, controversy still surrounds the use of radio-collared rocks to monitor bedload transport in the Toklat River. Public reaction has been growing as more details of the joint USGS-NPS study continue to emerge.

According to internal government documents, radios were apparently implanted into 23 rocks and then dumped into the Toklat River, where they were tracked for up to four weeks at a time by highly sophisticated receivers. Though most were retrieved out of the river, at least four radio rocks were buried under two to three feet of gravel and considered 'lost.'

Public outcry turned to shock as more details emerged of the bedload study. An unnamed source within the Mining branch of the Resource Management Division reported that collars weren't actually used, but that holes were drilled into the rocks, with the transmitters epoxied in. "It is a cruel and vicious procedure," the anguished staffer explained. "These rocks, seemingly protected under the auspices of the federal government, will never be fully assimilated back into the wild environment from which they came."

The National Park Service was quick to defend the study. "We must use the new high technology available to us to learn as much as we can about alluvial sediment transport under flood conditions, while minimizing impact to most of the park's rock population," explained Ken Karle, an NPS engineer. "Besides, it was fun."

As the public protests mounted, the national environmental group FRUMP (Friends of Rocks Underwater Movement Protection) demanded a full-scale inquiry. Additionally, a star-studded musical benefit is being organized to provide relief for the gravel group. The benefit will be called "Rock For Rock."

Karle

LONG-DISTANCE DISPERSAL BY YOUNG EAST FORK WOLF

A wolf that was collared as a 10-month-old near Stony Creek turned up some 360 miles to the southwest, near Dillingham. Wolf 395 was alone when he was collared in March 1990, indicating that he may already have been drifting away from the East Fork Pack where he was born in 1989. He was one of 27 wolves in that pack from March until May 1990, then disappeared.

On February 15, 1991, an Eskimo trapper caught the wolf and another wolf that was travelling with it, at the mouth of the Mulchatna River. He contacted Alaska Fish and Game authorities, who contacted the park. The dispersal of wolf 395 is the longest movement of a collared wolf away from the park in 5 years of research. Another East Fork Pack disperser had travelled 220 miles east to the Nabesna area.

Meier

EAST FORK WOLF 217 PASSES ON

The wolf with the longest research history of any in the park has met her fate in the Kantishna Hills. Wolf 217 was originally collared as a young adult in March 1986. She lived with the East Fork Pack as it grew from 6 to 33 wolves. Although she was not the alpha female, wolf 217 had litters of pups in 1989 and 1990. This last year, she gave birth in an area on the west edge of the pack territory, and was responsible for the back-country closures in the Eielson and Stony areas last summer as she raised her 2 pups separately from the main pack. She did continue to associate with the main East Fork Pack through Fall 1990, but then moved farther west into the Kantishna Hills with 3 companions, probably her pups and a male.

On February 21 wolf 217 was found dead, 5 miles west of Stampede Airstrip. No carcass was seen, but the mortality signal from the radio collar

indicated that it was no longer attached to a live wolf. The area is in the middle of the territory of the Little Bear wolf pack, and it seems likely that 217 ran afoul of them and was killed. This is the most common cause of death for wolves in the park, which are relatively protected from trapping and hunting. The main East Fork Pack now contains 24 wolves. The fate of 217's three companions won't be known unless they can be re-located by snow tracking.

Three other cases of splinter groups branching off of established wolf packs this last year have so far been more successful. A group of three wolves, at least some of which came from the McKinley River Pack, have moved north into an area near Chilchukabena Lake and set up a territory there. A collared male from the Birch Creek Pack moved east to the Bearpaw area and has been living there with a companion since last summer. Male wolf 311, who was born into the Clearwater Pack and adopted into the Headquarters Pack, paired off and raised two pups in the Nenana Canyon last summer. The new pack of four wolves has moved farther east and is living outside the park. To date, about half of the new pairs of wolves known to have formed in the park in the last five years have succeeded in establishing a territory and founding new packs.

Meier

TATTLER
Story Behind the Name

One of the first things I did when I arrived in the Park was to read Dr. Joseph Dixon's Birds and Mammals of Mt. McKinley National Park, published in 1938. It impressed me that Dixon was very excited about discovering the nesting place of the Wandering Tattler. Consequently, I was excited and interested to learn more about this bird.

When it came time to come up with a title for our science newsletter, I wanted something that was distinctly local and carried with it a message. I was never impressed with Yellowstone's newsletter title: "The Buffalo Chip" because I feared the contents would be of similar value. An interpretive program in Yosemite entitled "Barely Managing" also caused me great distress.

The "Tattler" is a title that describes our newsletters function as well as emphasizes the importance of all life forms in Park management. I like it. More importantly, I hope you like it, and its contents.

The "Tattler is a publication of the Division of Resource Management and Preservation. Although we make no commitment to regular publication of the "Tattler", we hope to distribute it often enough to serve as a valuable source of information to park staff. We also hope you can join with us as we poke fun at ourselves and accept this as a sincere effort to share information and promote communication and good will throughout the park. If you have any recommendations about how we can improve the "Tattler", or topics you would liked to see presented, please let us know.

Keay

RAPTOR RESEARCH REACHES NEW HEIGHTS

An experimental satellite radio transmitter was attached to a hatching year golden eagle, last year. The transmitter provided information on the bird's autumn migration route and is currently monitoring it's local winter movements in eastern central Idaho. This is the first wild golden eagle to have been successfully tracked using satellite radio telemetry.

Productivity and breeding success of golden eagles continued to be good, during 1990, compared to other populations within the breeding range of the species. Breeding territory occupancy rates and breeding success rates remain high.

Twenty occupied gyrfalcon breeding territories were observed and at least 14 pairs of gyrfalcons attempted to breed. This is the largest number of gyrfalcons recorded breeding in the study area to date. Two pairs of peregrine falcons attempted to breed within the boundaries of Denali north of the Alaska Range. One pair at Chilchukabena Lake and one pair along the Toklat River near Chitsia Mountain. The Toklat pair failed sometime during the early nestling cycle and breeding results of the Chilchukabena pair are not known. The female peregrine at the Toklat eyrie was previously banded at an unknown location, a USFWS band was visible on her right leg. Attempts to capture her in late July were unsuccessful.

Carol McIntyre
Wildlife Biologist
National Park Service
Alaska Regional Office

The preceding article was extracted from this years Investigator's Annual Report. Each year scientists are required to submit an annual report summarizing their research efforts and publications for the year. We will compile the reports for Denali and make them available this spring. They are also compiled at the regional and Washington level for a broader overview of ongoing research in National Park units. If you would like more information about research in Denali please contact Jeff Keay, Roseann Densmore or Pat Owen.