

Decimated moose population attributed to brain worm, predators and habitat factors

By By Reg Clayton

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Ministry of Natural Resources Kenora district staff completed an aerial moose survey of Wildlife Management Areas (WMU) 7A Aulneau Peninsula and 7B Lake of the Woods during January.

The survey was conducted by helicopter with flights over 43 grid blocks measuring of 25 sq. miles each. Observers counted a total of 42 moose, resulting in a projected population of approximately 300 moose for the two wildlife management units combined.

"It was not unexpected. The moose population is not doing well," commented MNR Kenora district biologist Bruce Ranta who took part in the survey.

Ranta noted the population estimate is about 10 per cent of moose numbers compared to the peak population for the same area during the 1990s.

"Brain worm is certainly one of the large factors but not the only factor. Deer and habitat are the two biggest factors," he said.

Deer are the source of the brain worm parasite which is benign in that species but can be fatal to infected moose. The high deer population also supports a large wolf population which prey on moose, particular the young during calving season.

Ranta also referred to a decline in the quality of moose habitat in some areas during recent years. Major forest fires east of Kenora in 1980 and the Sherwood Lake area in 1983 resulted in large burn overs which regenerated in new growth. The nutritious browse provided the animals with a rich food supply to feed on for a number of years. However these virtual "moose factories" have since developed into maturing jack pine stands.

Other factors cited by Ranta for the low moose numbers include a bad outbreak of moose ticks about five years ago leaving many animals nearly hairless by the end of the winter, susceptible to pneumonia and contributing an extensive die off of the animals.

A late season snowfall in May 2004 during the peak of the calving season may have resulted in the loss of an entire cohort.

Snow depth data recorded so far this year also indicates a 60 per cent chance of a severe winter. Deep snow makes movement difficult for deer, increasing their susceptibility to predators.

"We think this winter is going to be hard on deer resulting in the loss of a substantial number," Ranta said. "That's not necessarily a bad thing as the numbers are greater than the habitat can support. As the deer population declines, we anticipate the moose population will recover. It won't happen overnight but the moose will live longer and won't get brain worm or eaten by wolves."

Moose aerial inventory surveys took place this winter in: WMU 13 – Thunder Bay District, WMU 8 – Dryden District, WMU 14 – Nipigon District, WMU 12A – Fort Frances District, and WMU 4 – Sioux Lookout District.