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WILDLIFE

Moose survey finds population stable in Voyageurs

Wildlife researchers spotted 45 moose during an aerial survey completed last month in Voyageurs National Park.

The survey, funded by the National Park Service, is the first complete survey of the park since 1992, when the park was estimated to have 35-72 moose. Personnel from the University of Minnesota Duluth, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Minnesota DNR assisted with the survey.

Based on the numbers of moose sighted, Park Service Ecologist Steve Windels conservatively estimates that at least 80 moose currently live within the park.

"We are pleasantly surprised with the total number of moose we observed," said Windels. "Based on moose population declines in the region many of us were prepared for the worst. We would have liked to have seen more calf/cow pairs, but they may have been in cover during the survey. Researchers spotted just three calves during their survey, noted Windels.

Park officials are concerned about the long-term viability of their moose herd given recent declines in moose populations in other parts of Minnesota and adjacent Ontario. Among factors possibly causing these declines are chronic stress related to warmer summer and winter temperatures and lethal effects of parasites transmitted by white-tailed deer such as brainworm and liver flukes.

The recent survey kicks off a multifaceted project funded by the National Park Service and the U.S. Geological Survey that will provide Voyageurs officials with information about these potential threats to moose in the park. Park staff, in collaboration with UMD's Natural Resources Research Institute and the U.S. Geological Survey, will deploy radio collars on moose in 2010.

"Moose seek cooler temperatures on hot summer days. We will use GPS radio collars to measure movement, activity, and habitat use by moose in Voyageurs National Park next year," said Ron Moen, a biologist at NRRI. "We will be able to identify forest types that moose use as thermal cover when it is too hot for them to feed."

Two hundred fifty white-tailed deer were also observed during the survey. Deer numbers have generally increased in northern Minnesota in the last 20 years and the study will also assess changes in the relative number and distribution of deer within the park over that time. It will also examine the prevalence of brainworm and liver flukes in deer within the park. These parasites can be fatal to moose but rarely affect deer.

Researchers recently spotted 45 moose in Voyageurs National Park.
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