

Voyageurs moose appear to be doing well

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Moose in Voyageurs National Park appear to be doing fine, according to a recent aerial survey.

In the first comprehensive look at the park's moose population in 17 years, biologists in January counted 45 moose in the 218,000-acre park.

Using established wildlife survey estimates, the number would put the overall population at about 80 cows, bulls and calves, up from between 35-72 in the last count, in 1992.

"I was very surprised," Steve Windels, terrestrial ecologist for the park, told the News Tribune. "We were prepared for the numbers to be on the low side, considering moose are essentially extinct in northwestern Minnesota and that they are declining in parts of Ontario and northeast Minnesota."

Windels said it's not clear if the population is has gone up or down in recent years because it's been so long since the last survey was done. But he said the number shows there's "at least no catastrophic decline at this point."

While Voyageurs' habitat is similar to nearby areas of Minnesota and Ontario, moose are not hunted in the park and there is no logging or development there.

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A concern, however, is that only three calves were spotted, which could indicate a trend toward low reproduction, a problem that has puzzled biologists in Northeastern Minnesota.

"Seeing that few calves is definitely a concern, but that may be because, from the air, we just can't see the cows and calves that were in heavy cover," Windels said. Some scientists say increased summer temperatures and shorter winters maybe be combining to stress moose.

The Park Service,

University of Minnesota
Duluth's Natural Resources
Research Institute and U.S.
Geological Survey will continue studying moose in the park for the next two years, including fitting 16 adult cows with GPS and radio transmitters in 2010.

"We'll be able to identify forest types that moose use as thermal cover when it is too hot for them to feed," said Ron Moen, NRRI researcher.

The research also will look at increased white-tail deer numbers in recent decades and whether an abundance of deer, which can carry a brain worm fatal to moose, may be affecting moose.

