

FACT SHEET

CANADA'S WOODLAND CARIBOU

There are 2.4 million caribou in Canada, distributed among four subspecies on the basis of their appearance, habitat use and behaviour.

Barren-ground caribou, which make up about half of all caribou, often gather in large herds across the far north and migrate seasonally between the tundra and the taiga. Woodland, or forest-dwelling, caribou are generally found in smaller groups in the boreal forest across the country and in mountainous areas of Western Canada.

Woodland caribou have been classified as at risk across Canada, largely as a result of habitat loss or fragmentation caused by human development. The National Boreal Caribou Technical Steering Committee, with representatives from across Canada, is collaboratively developing a National Caribou Recovery Strategy.

Canada's woodland caribou

Woodland caribou are found in large tracts of mature and old-growth coniferous forests that have large quantities of terrestrial and arboreal (tree-inhabiting) lichens. They favour large, contiguous areas with little or no vehicle access or human disturbance.

Mountain caribou range over a wide elevation through the year, and their preference for valley bottoms and gentle mountain slopes in winter create the potential for conflicts with human activities such as logging and snowmobiling. Boreal caribou generally prefer large mature forest tracts and peatlands and avoid clearcuts, shrub-rich habitat, and sites dominated by aspen.



The many factors leading to caribou decline include habitat loss when forest land is converted to other uses such as agriculture; habitat degradation as a result of harvesting or other disturbances, and landscape and habitat fragmentation due to harvesting, roads, pipelines, transmission corridors or other developments. Large-scale disturbance can also improve habitat for species such as deer and moose, which attack predators that also prey on the caribou.

Caribou recovery plans being developed across Canada identify critical habitat and support decisions related to land use planning, road access and long-term habitat management. Local communities, First Nations and resource industries are actively involved in the implementation of these recovery actions, and forest management plans address the need to ensure there are enough forests for habitat both today and into the future.

Other recovery strategies include strong, local stewardship initiatives to maintain habitat, and access planning and management to reduce the number of roads and trails, which can facilitate access for both people and predators.

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Resource development and caribou

Forest management practices consider the specific needs of different woodland caribou populations across Canada, and most forest companies operating in caribou habitat have some form of access management to limit the effects of humans and predators on caribou.

Protecting species at risk

Canada's national regime to protect species at risk includes federal species-at-risk legislation, habitat stewardship programs and a network of protected areas with representative examples of biodiversity. About eight per cent of Canada's forest is in parks and other formally protected areas. Some parks, such as Ontario's 892,061-hectare (2.3 million-acre) Wabakimi Provincial Park, protect important woodland caribou habitat.

The Species at Risk Act is a key federal government commitment to prevent wildlife species from becoming extinct, to help species at risk recover and to manage species of special concern. Under the act, it is an offence to destroy critical habitat of species classified as endangered, threatened or extirpated. Many provinces and territories also have acts, which protect threatened species and their habitat including caribou.

Canadians are involved in decisions related to the development, protection and use of the 93 per cent of Canada's forests that are publicly owned. Integrated land use planning allows people representing a wide variety of sectors and interests to develop a shared vision for the use of their public lands and resources, one that seeks to balance economic, social and cultural opportunities with environmental considerations.

In regions with caribou populations, land and resource management plans and forest management plans identify areas where harvesting is allowed and the best methods to maintain appropriate caribou habitat.

Research shows it is better to log a few large patches rather than many smaller ones so there are fewer roads, there is less habitat and landscape fragmentation, the site is less attractive to moose and deer that draw predators, and the area more closely resembles caribou habitat when it grows back in 50 to 150 years.

Roads, especially permanent, all-season roads, fragment caribou habitat, create direct barriers and lead to habitat loss due to land conversion. This can be alleviated through long-term road management strategies that reduce the number of roads and consider elements such as density, road access control and decommissioning.

Taking action to reduce impacts

There are a variety of caribou recovery activities underway in jurisdictions across Canada, including:

In Alberta, forestry and oil and gas companies operating in a 500,000-hectare (1.24-million acre) area that encompasses habitat of the Little Smoky and A La Peche caribou herds are coordinating resource development to minimize access impacts.

Since newborn calves are targets for predators, researchers in the Yukon found that they were able to help a small herd facing severe declines likely resulting from predation by enclosing pregnant caribou cows in a fenced area until their calves were about three weeks old.

In some parts of British Columbia, forest companies operating in core mountain caribou habitat must use a unique harvesting system designed to maintain caribou habitat. Companies are also using long cables and heli-logging to move operations to steeper forests that are not as suitable for mountain caribou habitat and to reduce the need for roads.

Ontario's caribou recovery strategy outlines a number of recommended recovery approaches to facilitate caribou recovery, and proposes five recovery zones based on differences in caribou distribution, ecological conditions, and threats, each with specific guiding principles to assist with the development of action plans.

In Quebec, forest companies prepare special management plans in collaboration with the Ministère des Ressources naturelles et de la Faune. These plans include the temporary maintenance of large forest blocks and the application of special silvicultural practices designed, among other things, to allow for the harvesting of a certain volume of timber while preserving a forest habitat in the short and medium term that meets the needs of the caribou.

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador is involved in a detailed monitoring study to determine the size and location of its woodland caribou population. Satellite and global positioning radio collars will be used to determine distribution and assist in better understanding habitat use.