CANADA’S WOODLAND CARIBOU

There are 1.5 million Woodland Caribou in Canada, distributed among several ecotypes on the basis of appearance, habitat use and behaviour.

Canada’s Caribou

Woodland Caribou include several distinct ecotypes including Boreal Caribou, Northern Caribou and Mountain Caribou.

Woodland Caribou are found in large tracts of mature and old-growth coniferous forests that have large quantities of lichen. They favour large, contiguous areas with little or no vehicle access or human disturbance. Woodland Caribou have been classified as at risk across Canada.

Mountain Caribou range over a wide elevation throughout the year, and their preference for valley bottoms and mountain slopes in winter create the potential for conflicts with human activities such as logging and snowmobiling.

Boreal Caribou generally prefer largemature forest tracts and peatlands and avoid clearcuts, shrub-rich habitat and sites dominated by aspen.

Northern Caribou are the most common type in B.C. with populations extending from westcentral to northern B.C. Like Boreal Caribou, they also depend on a winter diet of ground lichens, but these populations are associated with alpine areas during calving and either low elevation pine forests or wind-swept ridges in winter.

Assessing Habitat Loss and Recovery

Declining caribou populations can be attributed to a number of factors: predation; 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.

The National Boreal Caribou Technical Steering Committee, with representatives from across Canada, is collaboratively developing a National Caribou Recovery Strategy. This will 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. Their 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.
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.

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 caribou habitat.

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

Roads—especially permanent, allseason roads—fragment caribou habitat, create direct barriers and lead to habitat loss due to land conversion. A solution to this is a long-term road management strategy that reduces the number of roads and considers 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 strategies 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-in 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. These plans include the temporary maintenance of large forest blocks and the application of special silvicultural practices designed to allow for the harvesting of a certain volume of timber while preserving a forest habitat 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.

The Species at Risk Act

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 their own acts which protect threatened species and their habitat including caribou.

Canada’s national mandate to protect species at risk includes federal species at risk legislation, habitat stewardship programs and a network of protected areas and parks with representative examples of biodiversity. Some parks, such as Ontario’s 892,061-hectare (2.2-million acres) Wabakimi Provincial Park, protect important Woodland Caribou habitat.