



Wild Lands Advocate 14(3): 24 - 25, June 2006

Woodland Caribou: How Safe in a National Park?

By Jill Seaton

The story of Alberta's diminishing woodland caribou herds is a disgrace to the wildlife management policies of the provincial government. In particular, the Little Smoky herd, now reduced to less than 100 animals, has lost most of its critical habitat to the logging and petroleum industries. Instead of protecting their remaining habitat, the government has resorted to shooting wolves and corralling pregnant cows.

Faced with the enormity of the unfolding crisis on provincial lands, one tends to forget that there is another herd roughly the same size as the Little Smoky herd in trouble in a national park 200 km further south. These animals are the only ones in the entire Rocky Mountain region known to remain on protected lands year-round. With the critical situation on Alberta lands, the caribou of Jasper National Park may be crucial to the survival of the species in the Rockies.

Why Have Caribou Declined in Jasper?

In 1992, there were about 225 woodland caribou in southern Jasper National Park. In last fall's survey, Parks Canada located 97 animals. The population is split into two separate herds in the Maligne/Brazeau and Tonquin areas. The Tonquin herd may be just holding its own; the Maligne/Brazeau herd appears to be in a fairly steep decline.

For more than 30 years, in spite of warnings from park wardens of the decline in the caribou population, Parks Canada avoided taking meaningful steps to save it. It commissioned three studies (Stelfox 1974; Brown 1994; and Thomas 1996) but then ignored all their recommendations regarding human disturbance of the animals.

In 1992 the Jasper Environmental Association (JEA) – following concerns expressed by the Canadian Wildlife Service – asked Parks to set up two Woodland Caribou Conservation Areas in the Maligne and Tonquin areas. Parks ignored the suggestion.

There appear to be two direct causes of mortality in the park and one indirect one:

- predation, mostly by wolves that use human access routes into caribou habitat in winter
- road kills on the Icefields Parkway, where eight caribou – attracted to the road by salt – have been killed in the past 11 years
- possibly climate change, bringing less snow and a movement of other ungulates and wolves into caribou habitat

There has also been a decrease in the size and number of summer snow patches, which are crucial to caribou seeking relief from heat and insects. Previous studies recommended that hiking trails be rerouted away from areas of important summer habitat for caribou.

Parks Canada's Recovery Plan

Following the introduction of the Species At Risk Act, Parks was legally obliged to face the problem. A Jasper Caribou Recovery Team was put together. It was made up of eight local stakeholders and four Parks Canada staff. The stakeholders included business interests, recreationists, a municipal official, and one JEA member. The first meeting was held on February 27, 2004. Two years later, the future of the woodland caribou in the park looks as bleak as ever.





Instead of rerouting and firmly closing trails that penetrate winter and summer caribou habitat and closing the 50-km Maligne Road in winter to prevent human and wolf intrusion into prime wintering habitat, the plan included the following “actions”:

- Continue studying caribou behaviour and learn more about how caribou, predators, and people affect one another.
- Try out innovative management techniques like “fladry” – barriers made of rags – to discourage wolves from following ski trails into sensitive caribou winter ranges.
- Make winter roads less attractive to caribou by eliminating the use of salt in gravel to reduce both road kills and the time caribou spend in valley bottoms where they are most vulnerable to wolves.
- Eliminate the operational use of helicopters by Parks Canada over caribou ranges and identify acceptable flight paths to private aircraft users.
- Offer skiers new trackset ski trails into areas where there are no caribou, and eliminate tracksetting into important caribou wintering areas in the Maligne valley.
- Restrict dogs to trails where there are no caribou to reduce the stress caribou experience when they see wolf-like animals.
- Educate hikers and skiers and improve official trails so that people can choose to avoid off-trail areas that are important to caribou during the critical calf-raising and wintering periods.

This Phase 1 was described by Parks Canada as “an ambitious and multi-faceted action plan” but other biologists found it “timid”; they said that it ignored recommendations from other studies and that user interests were being given a higher priority than caribou recovery.

On the ground it had little success:

- The request for voluntary avoidance of caribou winter habitat by skiers was ignored by many people.
- The wolves walked straight through the “fladry” barriers.
- Salt continued to be used on the Icefields Parkway because Parks belatedly discovered that having to store the gravel under cover to stop it from freezing was too expensive.
- Some people continued to ignore the restriction on dogs in caribou habitat.

In February of this year, the JEA joined eight other conservation organizations, including AWA, in sending a letter to the newly appointed Minister of Environment asking that a Jasper caribou recovery plan be drawn up by an independent panel of caribou biologists. As yet, we have received no answer.

One has the uncomfortable feeling that some people would be happy to see this population of caribou disappear so they can get on with “business as usual.” But if Parks does not pull out all the stops to save them, they will have to explain to the Canadian people why they allowed a population of national park ungulates to be extirpated without using every available management option to protect them.

As Rachel Plotkin of Sierra Club of Canada says, “If the federal government does not have the political will to implement aggressive recovery measures to restore caribou populations within its own jurisdiction, it sets a grim precedent for federal involvement in caribou recovery across the rest of Canada.”

