

# Alberta Woodland Caribou –



By Carolyn Campbell  
AWA Conservation Specialist

## Proposed Federal Recovery Strategy Declares War on Wolves, Lets Habitat Degradation Continue



*For Alberta's caribou to survive the federal caribou recovery strategy must make habitat restoration an urgent priority and not simply declare war on wolves*  
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A long overdue proposed federal woodland caribou recovery strategy, released near the end of August, omits what Alberta's dwindling herds need most: an immediate halt to their habitat loss on public lands. Ottawa has backtracked from its long-term recovery goal of achieving self-sustaining woodland caribou populations throughout their Canadian distribution. Now that proposed goal has been qualified by "to the extent possible" – a phrase some will interpret to mean whatever protects industrial interests.

The proposed strategy writes off the most vulnerable caribou herds in Alberta and across Canada, identifying them as 'grey coded,' non self-sustaining populations. These are the herds that already have lost most of their habitat through human disturbance. They are non self-sustaining precisely because of government stalling on introducing a conservation strategy. In Alberta, the six 'grey coded' populations are in more southerly ranges already deeply compromised by forestry and oil and gas/tar sands activity: the intactness of their habitat, ranging between five and 22 percent, is very low. In an outrageous abdication of responsibility, the federal

government now proposes that their intact habitat level would actually be permitted to continue declining to the five percent level, as long as there are other "management actions" in place for that population that will prop up its current population.

To be clear, the absence of habitat protection means the federal government has opted to kill thousands of wolves as its only key management tool. No other "management actions" except

Relying on mass wolf kills, while allowing more disturbances to open more access for moose, deer and wolves in caribou habitat, is a totally irresponsible approach. Biologist Paul Paquet, an internationally recognized authority on wolves, has condemned the proposed strategy's emphasis on wolf kills as a temporary panacea at best. He wrote that "killing wolves indiscriminately at levels sufficient to suppress populations disrupts pack social structure and upsets

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killing wolves have been demonstrated to slow caribou mortality once human disturbance increases access for deer, moose and the wolves that follow. Federal Environment Minister Peter Kent stated in early September that: "Culling is an accepted if regrettable scientific practice and means of controlling populations and attempting to balance what civilization has developed. I've got to admit, it troubles me that that's what is necessary to protect this species."

the stability of established territories, allowing more wolves to breed while promoting the immigration of wolves from nearby populations."

The proposed strategy states that at least two more years will be spent on more studies of caribou habitat requirements in a highly disturbed landscape with predator management. This is simply a delaying tactic. It is unconscionable given the report's own acknowledgement that habitat alteration

by human use is the greatest threat to caribou survival.

The recovery strategy also identifies ‘blue coded’ non self-sustaining caribou populations that are given higher priority because they form a connected population corridor across Canada and they are less heavily impacted. The five more northerly populations in Alberta fall into this category but they are far from being in great shape: all but one of these populations are declining and their respective intact habitat levels range from only 18 percent to 43 percent. For these populations, the proposed approach combines no new habitat disturbance with restoration of habitat. “No new habitat disturbance” is a good starting action and should be immediately implemented. But retaining all current degraded habitat will only give these Alberta herds a 10 to 25 percent chance of survival.

Urgently needed habitat restoration is the most important piece of a sound caribou recovery strategy and it is treated very loosely and indefinitely in the federal document. The goal there is to show “gradual progress” in restoring habitat over a 50-year time frame. The only suggested performance indicator is that there be “reasonable, gradual increments every 5 years” in undisturbed habitat areas. More rigorous indicators, measured and reported annually, are urgently needed to secure needed on-the-ground actions and to avoid losing five or 10 more years due to inertia. As well, the end goal for these herds – an intact habitat level of 65 percent – is

## Publicizing Public Consultations

Ottawa’s proposed woodland caribou strategy fails more than caribou. It also fails Canadians who want to participate in public policy making. Sparse pretty well describes the publicity Ottawa gave to the release of its proposed strategy on August 25. The strategy’s release was a major event. I cannot, however, find a news release about the strategy anywhere on either Environment Canada’s or the SARA public registry websites (Two requests to the department for clarification have been ignored).

Why wouldn’t the government publicize its own strategy? The answer probably rests in the criticism the proposal received as soon as it was unveiled. “Better not to publicize that

which citizens might object to” seems to be the prime directive when it comes to managing news about species at risk.

So, although Ottawa may not want you to know, there is an ongoing public consultation about the proposed caribou strategy. The deadline for submitting comments is February 22, 2012. The proposed strategy may be accessed at [www.registrelep-sararegistry.gc.ca/document/default\\_e.cfm?documentID=2253](http://www.registrelep-sararegistry.gc.ca/document/default_e.cfm?documentID=2253).

Please try to find the time to comment on the strategy. If you would like to read media coverage of the proposal please send me an email at [awa.wla@shaw.ca](mailto:awa.wla@shaw.ca) and I will be glad to forward you some information.

- Ian Urquhart

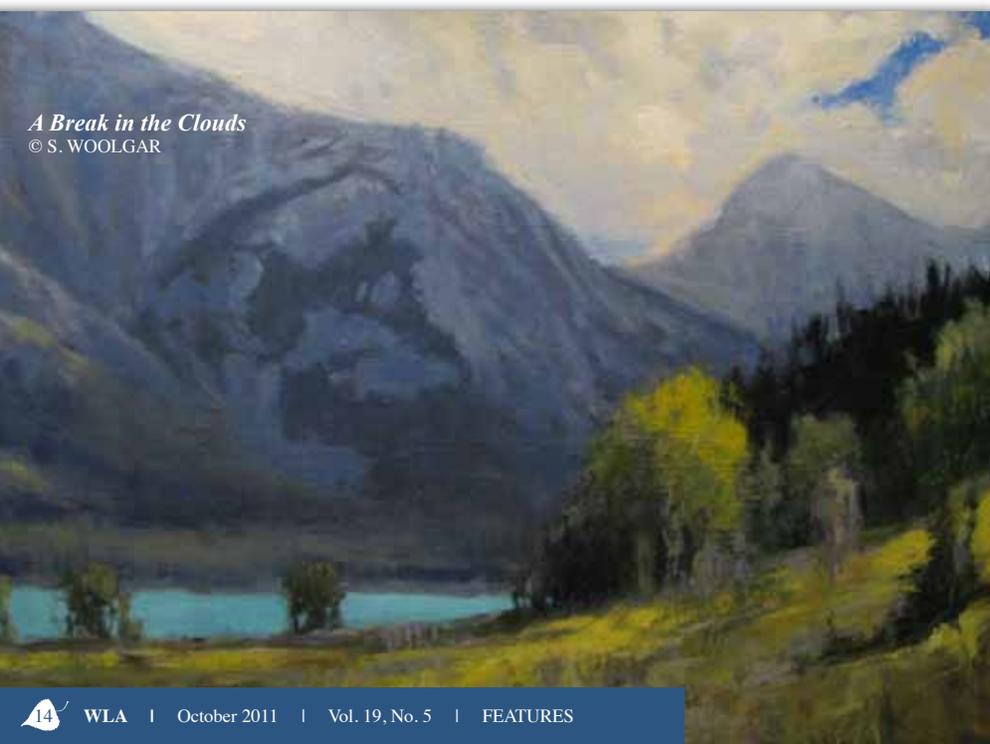
too low: this percentage is a “minimum threshold” by Environment Canada’s own account and is estimated to give a caribou population only a 60 percent chance to be self-sustaining. How would you feel if you were told that you only had a 60 percent chance of survival? In short, it is highly doubtful that even ‘blue coded’ herds will survive in Alberta under this timid, disappointing approach.

Legal action by AWA and other groups appears at least to have accelerated this recovery strategy’s release. A federal court judge ruled in July that the federal Environment Minister had until September 1, 2011 to release a draft caribou recovery strategy as it was more than four years overdue. Several First Nations communities as well as Ecojustice, which

acted on behalf of the Pembina Institute and Alberta Wilderness Association, had sought a court order to force Environment Minister Peter Kent to recommend emergency protection of critical habitat for threatened caribou herds in northeast Alberta. The court ruled that Kent’s “out of the blue” decision not to recommend emergency protection for woodland caribou in northeast Alberta ignored scientific evidence.

What would an effective recovery strategy look like? First, there should be no herds relying only on wolf kills while habitat loss is permitted to continue; all herds should be targeted with, and benefit from, an urgent habitat recovery approach. Second, there should be immediate, concrete actions to implement “no new habitat disturbance” throughout Alberta caribou ranges. Third, there should be immediate actions towards reducing the aggregate industrial footprint in caribou habitat and restoring vegetation in caribou ranges.

For Alberta’s woodland caribou to survive, we need, as organizations and as individual citizens, to press Environment Minister Kent to produce a stronger recovery strategy. The comment period on the current proposal, originally set to end in late October, has been extended to February 22, 2012. Once a federal recovery strategy is adopted, or if there are undue delays in this process, AWA and partners will explore taking further legal action. We will also continue to press for better on-the-ground outcomes through regional openings like the Alberta government’s Lower Athabasca Regional Plan and the AI-Pac forest management area Forest Stewardship Council certification reviews. 🌿



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