

Where are Alberta Caribou Range Plans and Protected Areas?

by Carolyn Campbell, AWA Conservation Specialist



In June 2016, the Alberta government made a significant, high profile commitment to Alberta's threatened population of woodland caribou. It declared that its woodland caribou recovery actions would include "providing permanent protection to an additional 1.8 million hectares of caribou range in the Chinchaga, Bischo, Yates and Caribou Mountains ranges." New protected areas were a key component in the government's June 2016 *Alberta's Caribou Action Plan*. That plan also declared: "We are committed to achieving self sustaining caribou populations. We cannot and will not abandon them to history."

AWA welcomed these promises. But nine months later we are concerned by what appears to be the very slow pace of implementing these promises. Canada's *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) requires woodland caribou critical habitat on provincial and federal lands to be identified and protected. Critical habitat for caribou was identified in Alberta in 2012 but no actions to protect that habitat have been initiated yet. The federal government gave Alberta and other provinces until October 2017 to produce range plans outlining how lands on each caribou range will be managed to achieve a minimum of 65 percent undisturbed caribou critical habitat. In June 2016, Alberta released one draft plan covering the Little Smoky and A La Peche ranges, a plan which in AWA's view still needs major revision (see below). Alberta has a mere seven months left to issue draft plans for 13 ranges, receive public comments, and finalize plans for all 15 ranges.

The Challenge

Caribou need large intact areas of old forests and peat wetlands. Although caribou and wolves have co-existed for millennia, excessive industrial disturbance in the boreal robs the caribou of their ability to minimize overlap with predators. If caribou have a future in Alberta, many other old forest and wetland-reliant species will also benefit. This is why wildlife biologist Mark Hebblewhite wrote recently: "There can be no better umbrella species for the Boreal forest than woodland caribou."

Clearcuts, roads, seismic line and pipeline corridors create young forest that boosts populations of deer, moose, and wolves. Industrial surface disturbance also gives predators easy routes to travel deep into the formerly impenetrable older forests and wetland areas that caribou prefer. In fact, when measuring habitat disturbance in a caribou range, the 2012 federal caribou recovery strategy requires any human-caused disturbance, whether a 'line' such as a road, or a 'polygon' such as a well pad or cut-block, to be buffered by 500 metres. This reflects how profoundly disturbance increases the risk of predation. This was the minimum appropriate disturbance buffer suggested by scientific evidence at the time.

The current Alberta government inherited an awful situation. Its predecessors were guilty of neglect. Decades worth of scientists' and multi-stakeholders' carefully considered recommendations to limit caribou habitat disturbance were ignored. Meanwhile, accumulating forestry and energy industry impacts have fragmented our boreal and foothills forests and wetlands. For ex-

ample, by 2012, 63 percent of Alberta's oil sands region was within 200 metres of human disturbance. This is a staggering shift in a boreal forest area the size of Florida that was relatively intact 30 years ago. Protected areas are the exception to this rule but they don't cover nearly enough caribou range. This is why Alberta's 2016 promise for new northwest Alberta protected areas was so important and needed so urgently.

Not surprisingly, researchers in 2013 confirmed that almost all Alberta caribou populations were in significant decline. Three populations were 'stable or slightly declining': two in the north, Yates and Richardson, which still had relatively low human-caused disturbance, and the Little Smoky.

The Lone Range Plan

Alberta's only caribou range plan to date is in draft form. It covers two west central Alberta populations: the Little Smoky boreal caribou and the neighbouring A La Peche mountain caribou. Habitat disturbance in the Little Smoky range was estimated at 95 percent in 2011. This is the highest disturbance percentage in Canada. Since late 2005, the Alberta government has killed approximately 100 wolves each winter to reduce caribou predation. That is why it is the other Alberta caribou population rated as 'stable or slightly declining.' AWA has repeatedly criticized the scapegoating of wolves while Alberta continues to authorize the habitat destruction that drives wolf predation of caribou.

As described in more detail in the August 2016 *Wild Lands Advocate*, both the

draft Little Smoky - A La Peche (LS-ALP) plan and the stakeholder consultation in the months before its release were improvements over what had been produced previously. Government-appointed mediator Eric Denhoff's May 2016 report on LS-ALP gives a useful account of various viewpoints and issues. However, the Alberta government's draft plan, which was based on Denhoff's report, still allows unacceptably high critical habitat destruction in the near term, and offers no roadmap or details about when, if ever, the minimum 65 percent undisturbed habitat goal will be achieved. After receiving public comments on this draft up until last August, the government seems to be willing to wait to release the final LS-ALP plan with the rest of its plans in autumn 2017.

Alberta has less than 2 percent of its foothills region in protected areas. This landscape is vital to caribou yet the draft LS-ALP plan proposes no protected areas for the Little Smoky range; the A La Peche's alpine summer range already is protected by Willmore Wilderness Area but its winter range in the foothills lacks any protection whatsoever. The draft plan proposes more wildlife manipulation instead. A big fence will be built to confine wild caribou females and their calves will be released as yearlings...

into, as things stand now, a degraded and degrading habitat. Since June, fence design proposals have been submitted for consideration. AWA is concerned the fence will provide another excuse to keep destroying habitat and will drain resources from habitat conservation. The wolf cull will continue, and there is no end in sight to it unless new surface disturbance, which adds to the degraded habitat equation, essentially ends. This is possible to do by ending in-range logging and having a strict limit on energy-related disturbance. It's an option that depends on political will.

The draft plan allows significant in-range clearcut logging to resume by Alberta Newsprint Company (ANC) and Foothills Forest Products. Such logging had been halted in early 2016. This is especially frustrating since a major logging decrease is already planned within ten years in LS-ALP ranges and surrounding area, as unwarranted mountain pine beetle surge cuts are completed. The Denhoff report noted that both ANC and their largest quota holder, West Fraser (which owns 49 percent of ANC), have requested an Annual Allowable Cut reduction in ANC's overall Forest Management Agreement area in order to reduce unsustainable pine beetle surge cuts. In AWA's view, logging in and adjacent

to the small ranges must end now, while there are still caribou. To minimize impacts to communities from this halt to in-range logging, sustainable harvest levels outside of LS-ALP ranges and buffer zone should be reallocated among the regionally interdependent forestry companies to support all the region's mills. Alberta Newsprint Company should be required to use at least some recycled paper in its feedstock.

There are some positive aspects of the draft LS-ALP plan. It includes an extensive seismic line restoration program and clustering of the excessive new logging near already-disturbed areas for five years. Unfortunately, there are no hard limits on cumulative surface disturbance. Instead there is a promise of "strict operating conditions" and access planning that will "balance values, benefits and trade-offs." This may be an improvement, or may be more of the same weak measures that enable ongoing new disturbance. What hasn't been promised, but is urgently required, are strict access regulations for this endangered species habitat to confine energy infrastructure to a few nodes and corridors. That approach would support caribou recovery chances while allowing energy extraction. Constrained by strict access rules energy companies would be highly motivated to pool leases in a given area, extend the reach of directional drilling, and cluster or avoid well pad and pipeline disturbance.

Since June 2016 plans have advanced to pilot a seismic line restoration program. This has very positive potential to set forest habitat on a trajectory towards recovery and to provide good jobs for communities to offset the end of in-range logging. If there were strict access rules, we would unreservedly support an extensive restoration program. Under the draft plan, however, restoration efforts may create jobs but amount to nothing for caribou. This winter, local trappers were concerned to see pilot restoration work proposed on the same seismic line site as a proposed spur road for an energy company. Without strict access rules it is very probable that new energy infrastructure will be built near or right over



Well and cutblocks in endangered Little Smoky caribou range, January 2013. There are still no strict limits on industrial surface disturbance there, nor an overall access plan, so new energy infrastructure could be built near or right over recovered seismic lines and negate efforts at restoration. PHOTO: © C. CAMPBELL

recovered seismic lines. This would simply waste the restoration effort.

Positive Mineral Rights Changes

While we await all the caribou range plans that have been promised for this October, we recognize that some very positive changes in provincial energy policies have occurred. Alberta Energy deferred new energy rights sales in Little-Smoky - A La Peche ranges in May 2013 until range plans were completed. AWA welcomed that move. Until recently, however, Alberta Energy continued to jeopardize caribou recovery in all other caribou ranges by auctioning off new mineral rights in a fashion that didn't establish any effective limits on surface footprint.

To its credit, the government has recently reshaped two key mineral rights policies to reduce barriers to caribou recovery. After quietly halting its caribou range oil and gas lease sales in summer 2015, Alberta Energy officially stopped all mineral rights sales within caribou ranges in September 2016. The pause covers oil, gas, oil sands, coal and industrial mineral rights, and will last until "stringent operating practices" for caribou have been defined.

In another positive move, Alberta Energy decided in November 2016 that any oil sands, oil, gas or mineral lease holder in a caribou range could apply to extend their deadline to prove up leases until March 2019. This means companies may delay surface disturbances related to drilling, if they choose. We hope Alberta Energy will soon report on the extent and location of voluntary drilling deferrals.

Rest of the Range Plans

With only seven months remaining to complete plans for 15 caribou ranges, there is no time for further multi-stakeholder discussions to help generate draft plans. This is unfortunate. A well-managed multi-stakeholder process, operating with common access to good data, can significantly reduce exaggerated claims. It can generate a useful range of optimized proposals, to

help government authorities make better choices. In the absence of that, AWA will continue to put forward the solutions we see for habitat-focused caribou recovery.

In our view, the government must keep its promise soon to establish large permanent protected areas in northwest Alberta. The Denhoff report recommended that, subject to consultation with indigenous communities, three unallocated forest management unit (FMU) areas should receive Wildland Provincial Park protection (see map). It further recommended pursuing protection of roughly half of FMU F23 (south and southeast of F10, along the border of Wood Buffalo National Park) in partnership with the Little Red River Cree. This First Nation has a large forestry quota there and is interested in sustainable co-management of the area.

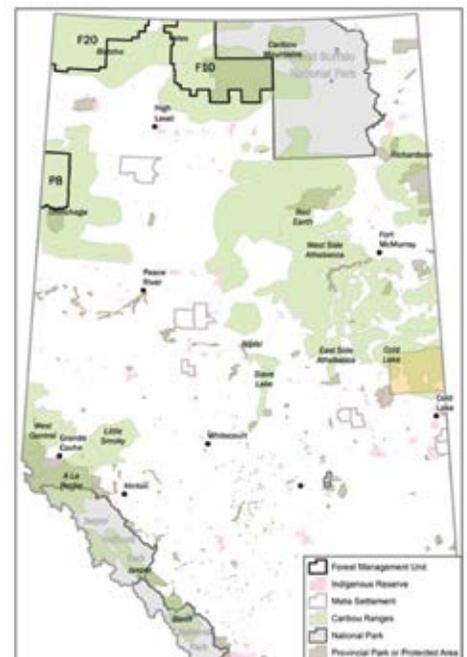
For the Bistcho caribou range, creating a Wildland Provincial Park on FMU 20 would benefit wildlife habitat on 87,000 km² or 60 percent of the range. It would achieve multiple conservation benefits. Situated along Alberta's far northwest border with B.C. and the Northwest Territories, the Bistcho range has no other protected areas. Many of the radio-collared female Bistcho caribou use the FMU 20 area. Areas with high levels of biodiversity including Bistcho Lake would also be protected.

While it is helpful that no new mineral rights are being sold in Bistcho or other caribou ranges, the Bistcho range is not pristine: it was rated at 71 percent habitat disturbance in 2011. Since late 2012, the Alberta government auctioned off 1500 km² of new energy leases there before halting lease sales. Establishing a Wildland Provincial Park would minimize cumulative impacts of existing leases. The precedent of Hay-Zama Wildland Provincial Park, with government-First Nations-industry-ENGO collaboration to reduce, manage, and restore energy industry disturbance would be a good fit for these northern Alberta protected areas.

The advantage to Denhoff's strategy to protect unallocated FMUs is it minimizes conflicts with the forestry industry and is therefore more likely to actually proceed. The drawback is that, in some ranges, these

unallocated FMUs may not overlap with the highest value areas for caribou and other wildlife. If that is the case, and if a swap in tenure areas could be arranged to protect an equivalent area of highest value caribou habitat and log in lower value habitat, that would be a promising approach. But given the shrinking time window for decisions, protecting the 'good' is preferable to losing the opportunity completely.

Alberta's caribou range plans should create protected areas in core caribou zones, set strict limits on new industrial surface disturbance consistent with caribou population recovery, and accelerate the restoration of the industrial footprint. Range plans for endangered woodland caribou are an important way for Alberta to demonstrate its commitment towards implementing responsible resource development. There have been some encouraging recent promises and policies by the Alberta government. The magnitude of ongoing caribou habitat loss from industrial activities requires much more to be done. ▲



Map from mediator Eric Denhoff's May 2016 report Setting Alberta on the Path to Caribou Recovery. In June 2016, the Alberta government accepted Denhoff's recommendations to permanently protect 1.8 million hectares in the outlined P8, F20, and F10 forest management areas. AWA would like to see the government follow up on those recommendations. CREDIT: GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA