



THE NORTHERN FRONT OF ALBERTA'S WAR ON WILDLIFE: CARIBOU UNDER SIEGE

By Christyann Olson, AWA Executive Director

When we were younger and learning about medieval times the tales of fair maidens kept safe behind castle walls and moats to keep the evil enemy at bay seemed quite magical. Knights of the Round Table formed a brotherhood and made plans to defend their lands. All who could took up arms to defend their family and their heritage. Giving up was not an option, battle cries became legendary and gave shape to family crests. The vulnerable lay under siege, holding out until there was no more food, no more fresh water, no more strength, waiting desperately for the knights in shining armour to arrive and save the day. Who would believe that today, in Alberta, we are living a medieval battle, that we have laid siege on our wildlife, and that a twenty year old battle cry is the last hope for some?

In 1990, AWA's battle cry was "the best way to save most species is to protect habitat and let the species save themselves" (1990 AWA tabloid *Alberta's Caribou Written off?*) and we won't give up. As I began pulling this story of caribou together it became clear that Alberta's war on wildlife really is not much different from the tales of old. My fair maiden is caribou, but you could pick almost any wildlife species in Alberta. Wolves, grizzly bears, elk, even beavers - they are the fair maidens behind the castle wall and the siege is taking its toll on them. The gruesome outcome is becoming clearer and more inevitable to those who will look. We are talking about the extirpation of the Little Smoky herd of caribou; we are watching desperate times in desperate places and wonder why, despite all we know, we are not able to do better than declare war.

In Alberta we may have three distinct types of woodland caribou herds: Mountain, Little Smoky and Boreal woodland. The 2005 *Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan* identified the Little Smoky herd as being *at immediate risk of extirpation*. Genetic analyses



Caribou like this one are at the brink of survival especially in the Little Smoky area of Alberta. A great deal has been learned about them, plans have been made, but there has been no direct action taken to protect their habitat. They are victims of Alberta's War on Wildlife. PHOTO: MARK BRADLEY © BOREAL NATURE PHOTOS

reported in the January 2009 *Molecular Ecology Journal* by a University of Calgary research team confirmed that the Little Smoky population is different from other caribou populations in west-central Alberta. It is likely the last remnant of a distinct boreal caribou population along the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies. Human-caused habitat changes – particularly excessive landscape fragmentation including seismic lines, pipelines, roads, and cutblocks – have altered predator-prey relationships, putting the Little Smoky herd at peril. The study, supported by Weyerhaeuser, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, Shell Canada, Parks Canada, and Alberta Department of Sustainable Resource Development focused on mountain caribou. The researchers recognized the adaptive nature of some caribou types, in particular the ability of some individuals to be migratory while others are sedentary.

We now have genetic evidence to support what we have believed for years – the Little Smoky herd is distinct from mountain caribou. These caribou,

estimated to number somewhere between sixty and one hundred, are at risk of extinction. The Little Smoky herd is perhaps the most genetically distinct herd in the greatest danger of extirpation.

Recovery will be a long-term proposition. In 2005 the government-led recovery team made recommendations. Now, four years later, we have deferrals by two forest companies (Canfor and Weyerhaeuser), some great research and an understanding of the problem. Notably, and tragically, the government refused to endorse the recommendation that might have done the most to stop the rapid decline of the Little Smoky herd – implement a moratorium on new mineral and timber allocations. Habitat conservation, an essential part of any recovery strategy, was ignored. Rather than acknowledge the need to rein in industrialization in the Little Smoky herd's range Alberta has continued to promote further development in critical habitat. The siege has become even more threatening for these old-growth forest dwelling herbivores.

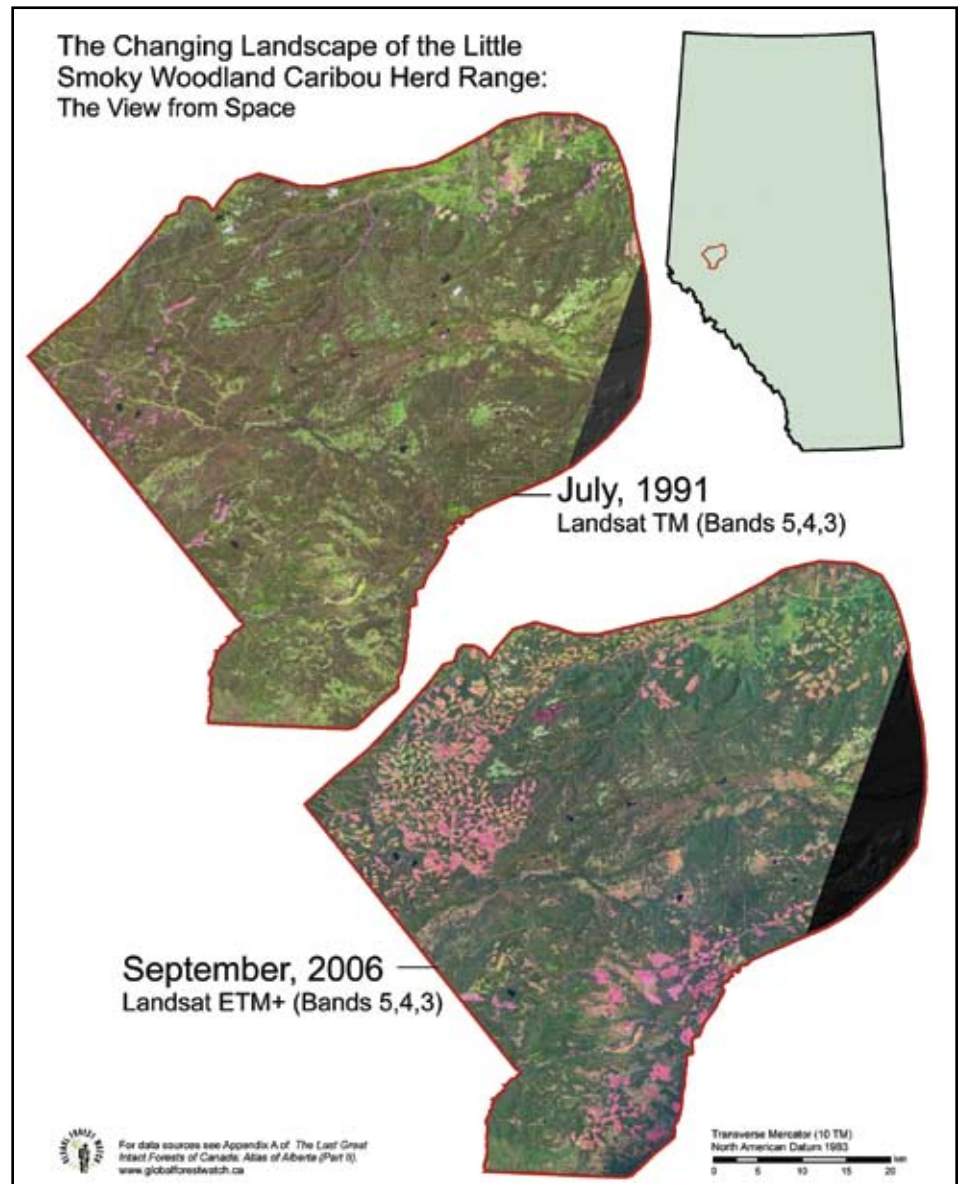
In a 2009 article for the University

of Montana, Mark Hebblewhite talked about the predator-prey relationship and why habitat has become so critical. Woodland caribou seek out lichens and lichens depend on old forests; caribou need many hectares of old-growth forest. Hebblewhite pointed out that recent timber-harvest practices in Canada have wiped out vast expanses of forest across the woodland caribou's range. "What we've done is taken these big chunks of winter range that moose and wolves don't come into, and converted them to young forests that wolves, elk and moose love," he says. Caribou evolved a strategy to avoid wolves in boreal forests, and now, Hebblewhite says, they are "bumping into" the predators more and more frequently. The result is an alarming decline in caribou populations. He wrote: "A third to half of Canadian populations are declining because of human causes. Wolves are the proximate cause of caribou decline. But the ultimate cause is this land change."

Clearly wolves are not the cause of caribou population decline, merely another symptom of uncontrolled habitat disturbance. For this reason, AWA strongly objects to the fact that government officials have killed nearly 200 wolves in the Little Smoky area; meanwhile, government does nothing to secure long-term habitat protection.

As wolf numbers are controlled the numbers of common ungulates such as moose and white-tailed deer increase and this population growth encourages other predators such as cougars and black bears. Will these too now need to be culled to protect caribou from predation? AWA director Cliff Wallis says, "we call this Alberta's War on Wildlife. It extends from wolves to deer to moose, and perhaps bear and even beaver, as the future unfolds and we manage loss of habitat by removing predators and even prey. Habitat has been depleted so significantly in such a short period of time even if we stopped all activity today, we would be looking at decades of restoration work and wolf culling to keep a viable population in the Little Smoky."

AWA continues to press both industry and government vigorously for habitat protection. Some forest companies have voluntarily deferred harvest in intact habitat but there is no long-term plan or assurance that these deferrals will be respected. And, there is certainly no or



Map: Courtesy of Global Forest Watch Canada

little support from government for the deferrals.

The oil and gas industry continues to frustrate the recovery process and continues to push forward with development. The only reason we have not seen more damage in intact habitat from oil and gas development is the downturn in the economy. AWA and others are having discussions with more environmentally conscious companies to try to encourage them to lead by example and protect intact habitat.

The most frustrating thing about defending the Little Smoky herd throughout the past few years has been a lack of support for habitat protection from industry associations and lack of leadership and political will from the Alberta government departments of Energy and Sustainable Resource

Development (SRD). Recommendations from the Alberta Caribou Committee governance board regarding the Little Smoky are promising but the board has received no response to the recommendations made last summer from SRD minister Ted Morton or his deputy minister.

When asked what the bottom line is, Wallis replies "Government and much of industry are refusing to do anything meaningful in habitat protection for woodland caribou." The combination of industrialization in the forests and climate change endangers all woodland caribou herds in Alberta. At best, it will be a tough few decades before there is any light at the end of the tunnel for this species. But, abandoning the woodland caribou is not an option AWA can entertain. 🐾