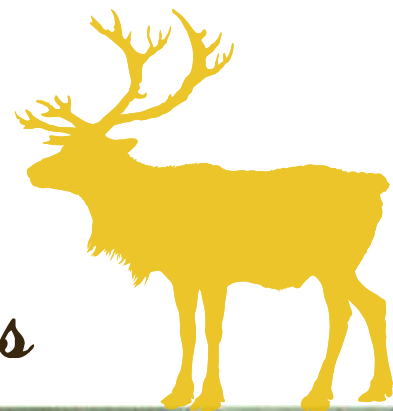


Caribou Protection in Jasper National Park: A Tale of Two Ski Areas



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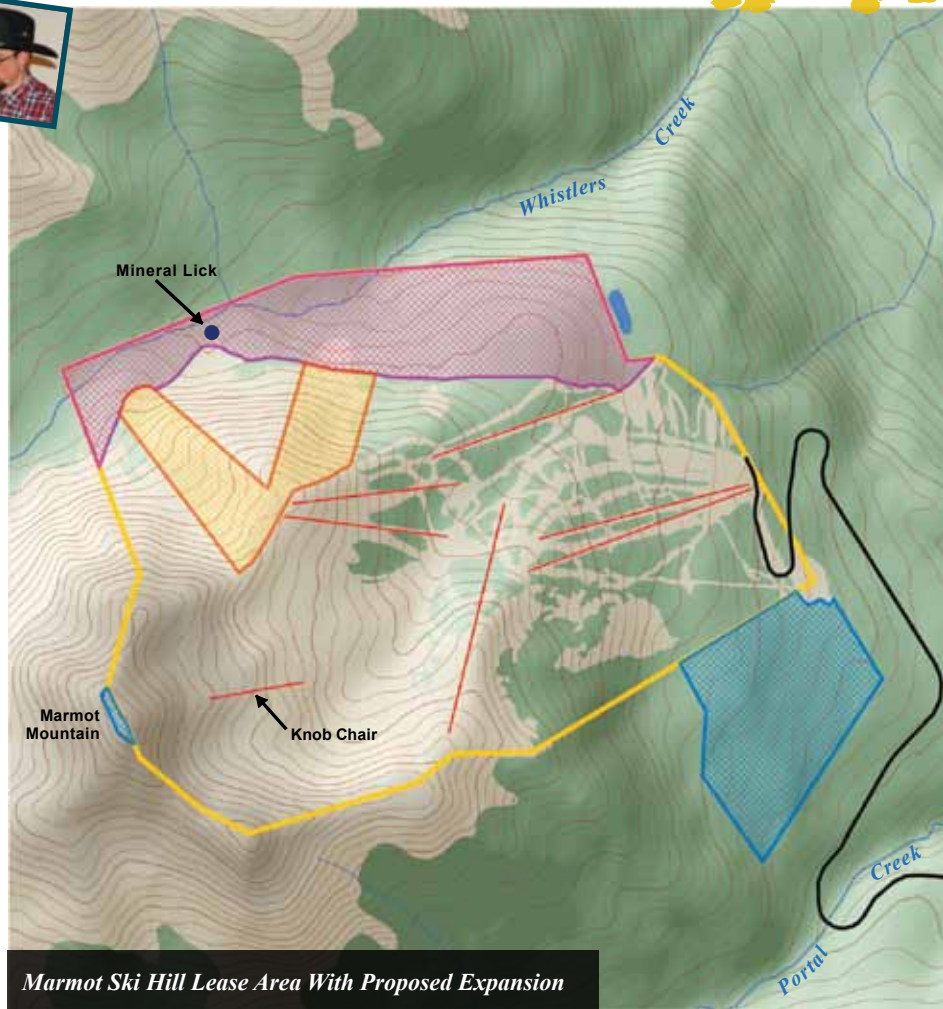
So how does one hide a ski hill? According to some at Parks Canada, the answer is apparently: at the other end of the country, under an island of sand.

On February 12 the Government of Canada issued a proud news release announcing the tabling of Bill S-15 establishing the Sable Island National Park Reserve off the coast of Nova Scotia. Hidden away from immediate sight in an accompanying background summary to S-15 is the apparently innocuous statement that the Bill will “reconfigure the leasehold boundary of the Marmot Ski Basin Area in Jasper National Park of Canada.”







Only the sharpest of readers might have paused at this point to wonder what on earth a leasehold boundary on an Alberta mountain had to do with a marine park reserve in the Atlantic Ocean. Yet the subtlety of the announcement belied its true import.

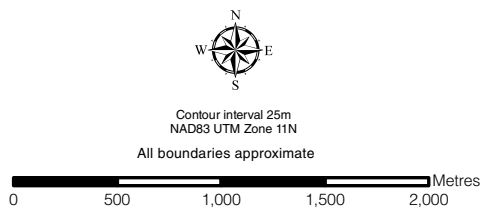
In a manner reminiscent of the peeling of an onion, even this next layer of the story involves its own layer of misdirection. The boundary amendment is itself a distraction from the real issue at stake: the encroachment of the Marmot Basin ski area onto the vital caribou migration corridor that runs along its north edge.

This is in fact not the first time we have heard of this amendment. For a full background and discussion of this story, see Jill Seaton’s story in the February 2011 issue of *WLA*. In that article, Jill examines at length the issue of this boundary amendment. She explains how the deal, termed by Parks Canada as a “substantial environmental gain” is nothing of the kind. Parks Canada describes it as the “surrender” of 119.6 hectares of pristine land in exchange for 222 hectares of less



Marmot Ski Hill Lease Area With Proposed Expansion

-  Existing Lease Boundary
-  Surrendered Area
-  Licence Of Occupation Areas
-  Potential Lift Areas
-  Existing Lift Lines
-  Access Road



valuable land where Marmot Basin can expand their operations.

Fair enough, but that description completely ignores the further development proposed for Marmot Basin as part of the deal. This further development includes an extension of the Knob Chair to the summit ridge of Marmot Peak and two

ski lifts into the Whistlers Creek Valley. The new two lifts in the valley would stop just short of the new boundary. This latter development will leave only a very narrow strip of land between the new edge of the ski run and Whistlers Creek along the valley’s bottom – a valley that presents an important migration corridor for Jasper’s



Woodland Caribou, Jasper National Park.
PHOTO: © P. SUTHERLAND

pressured caribou.

Parks Canada's own scientists agreed that this proposal was highly concerning. In an internal report obtained by the Jasper Environmental Association through a request under the Access to Information Act, Parks Canada biologists cited many concerns; they concluded that only "a lease reduction involving removal of the *entire* Whistler Creek drainage would be considered a substantial environmental gain" (emphasis in original) but that "removing only a portion of Whistler's Creek (as this amendment proposes to do) would not be a significant environmental gain given the proposed increase in development."

As recently as March 13, Parks Canada staff have asserted that no decision has yet been made regarding the Whistlers Creek development, citing ongoing studies on woodland caribou by Dr. Fiona Schmiegelow, and on mountain goats, by Dr. Steeve Côté. Depending on the results of the first study especially, it may yet be possible to halt the Whistlers Creek ski lifts.

Yet in the meantime, Bill S-15 was introduced in the Senate, considered in the Senate Committee on Energy, the Environment and Natural Resource, and passed by Canada's upper chamber at the beginning of May. To their credit our conservation cousins from the national office of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society appeared before the Senate Committee to draw the attention of Senators to the negative impact that ski hill development

proposals at Marmot could have on caribou.

Senator MacDonald asked Alison Woodley, CPAWS' national director of conservation, how the proposed lease land transfer could be environmentally harmful since Marmot's total lease area would be reduced. Ms. Woodley's answer stressed the importance of Whistlers Creek to caribou.

On May 7 the bill was read for the first time in the House of Commons. From our perspective, since the government is pushing ahead with changing the Marmot lease boundaries before Dr. Schmiegelow completes her caribou study later this year prospects for the caribou seem dim.

So: how do you push through a lease boundary change that your own scientists question for ecological integrity reasons? As we've seen this year, one way is to deflect the ecological implications by saying "we're reducing the size of the lease" and then bury that whole deal under an Atlantic Ocean marine park.

Yet the great irony in all this is that at the same time these regrettable Marmot Basin plans are seemingly being pushed through to the detriment of the Jasper caribou, positive steps are being taken elsewhere in Jasper National Park to save them.

On March 22, mere days before Bill S-15 passed second reading, Parks Canada announced it would proceed with its plan to curtail winter use of some backcountry ski areas.

Beginning with the 2013-2014 season,

the popular Cavell-Tonquin and Brazeau backcountry ski areas will be closed from November 1 until February 28. The much less popular North Boundary trail also will be closed during this period.

These closures, ones that angered many backcountry enthusiasts not least because they knew about Marmot's development plans, are designed to address the threat of facilitated predator access. According to the Parks Canada news release, "This would eliminate the threat of packed trails enabling predators to access caribou habitat during periods when they would otherwise be deterred by deep snow."

Areas affected by the closure fall within the ranges used by the Brazeau, A La Pêche, Tonquin and possibly Maligne herds (closing the Maligne Valley to backcountry access has yet to be finalized).

This is certainly one area where the parks announcement is firmly on the side of science. There have been several studies indicating that predator access along such recreational trails is indeed a threat to caribou survival and AWA applauds this measure.

It remains nevertheless puzzling, if not hypocritical, that Parks Canada can on the one hand be taking actions to promote the survival and well-being Jasper caribou, yet simultaneously take other actions so detrimental to their future. It would be helpful for all concerned to see a bit more consistency from our government.

In the meantime, however, it was the best of plans, it was the worst of plans. 🐾