

# Recall of the Wild

## A Lone Voice in the Wilderness: Michael Bloomfield on Woodland Caribou

By Nigel Douglas

At a time when scientists in Canada are increasingly being ignored, muzzled and demonized by their political bosses it is a salutary experience to talk to Michael Bloomfield, Alberta's provincial caribou specialist between 1978 and 1983. It seems that government's bullying of scientists is nothing new; even thirty years ago, conscientious scientists were required to stick their necks out and resort to inventive, roundabout, sometimes devious methods to try to do their jobs properly.

Now living in Victoria B.C. Bloomfield is founder and executive director of Harmony Foundation of Canada. No stranger to controversy then or now, he popped his head above the parapet again in April this year, when he wrote a piece for the *Edmonton Journal* that was highly critical of present and past management of Alberta's woodland caribou. "Let's make no mistake," he wrote, "habitat loss from logging, mining, oil and gas development and roads has been, and continues to be, the primary cause of the caribou decline."

For more than 30 years, Alberta scientists have been warning politicians about the devastating effects of poorly-planned industrial activity on the province's threatened woodland caribou. And for more than 30 years governments have dithered, delayed and obfuscated, refusing to do anything to even slow down the decline, let alone reverse it. "There is a tendency for government to say, 'If only we had known'," points out Bloomfield. "That's why I jumped in to say: 'Wait a second, you did know! I made it clear 30 years ago and the recommendations are no different now to how they were then. Except the situation

now is more desperate, because you neglected it'." Even thirty years later, Bloomfield is still trying to do his best by the animals he studied. "I wanted to say: 'here's a historical perspective that puts the lie to the view that this is something that we've recently become aware of'."

### The struggle begins

Bloomfield started work in 1978 as Alberta's provincial caribou specialist and regional wildlife biologist for west-central Alberta. "I was recruited because I was the first person in 20 years who had done any serious research on woodland caribou in western Canada," he recalls today. What he found was a caribou population already in trouble in Alberta and a provincial bureaucracy ill-equipped to deal with the problem. Bloomfield's immediate bosses within the Fish and Wildlife division were keen to do the right thing. "(We were) a young, dynamic staff, early in the days of environmental

**"Can we not as Albertans, as Canadians, find some place in all of that for other species and the future health of the environment and the people who live in it?"**

work," he says. "We were encouraged to do things that took our role seriously, not just to rubber stamp development." Unfortunately, Bloomfield believes that attitude was the exception rather than the rule within government circles. "Caribou were being managed, whether it was hunting or land use, with little more than indifference," he suggests. The general attitude seemed to be: "Let's make some grand assumptions, allow for hunting and not worry about it."

Then, as now, the Fish and Wildlife division was at the bottom of the heap when it came to any real power to make management decisions. "We had no authority, we were just in an advisory role at best," he says. "The forest service predominantly had the responsibility for land-use management; issuing permits and enforcing them." During Bloomfield's years with Fish and Wildlife, "(t)he agency responsible for mineral exploration development could make decisions on whether or not these industrial developments were permitted without any input from Fish and Wildlife." (Many times throughout

my conversation with Bloomfield, the thought pops into my head: "That's exactly how things still are today!")

As a scientist, Bloomfield's first focus was the need for good scientific data to inform management decisions, but right from the beginning, getting a budget allocated for this essential work was not an easy job. "I couldn't get any funding for (my research)," he recalls, "so on an annual basis I would submit a research proposal for caribou with a letter to my bosses saying 'this is what we need in order to properly manage and protect this species: if I don't hear from you otherwise, I'm going to spend this money'." If resources were never officially approved, then neither were they officially denied and that was enough for Bloomfield.

For Bloomfield it was clear why caribou were in such trouble in west-central Alberta at the time. "This part of Alberta – near Edson, Hinton, Grande

Cache – was probably under the heaviest development pressure in the province for oil and gas, mining, forestry and recreational activity," Bloomfield points out.

In Bloomfield's mind

the very close, cooperative relationship between the Forest Service and industry at the time was "incestuous."

He gives a number of examples of where government refused to act against industry. "We'd be flying winter surveys of moose, elk and goats and sometimes we'd find a well drilled beyond the operation of the ministerial permit. By the time I got back in the office, we'd have a call telling us to back off."

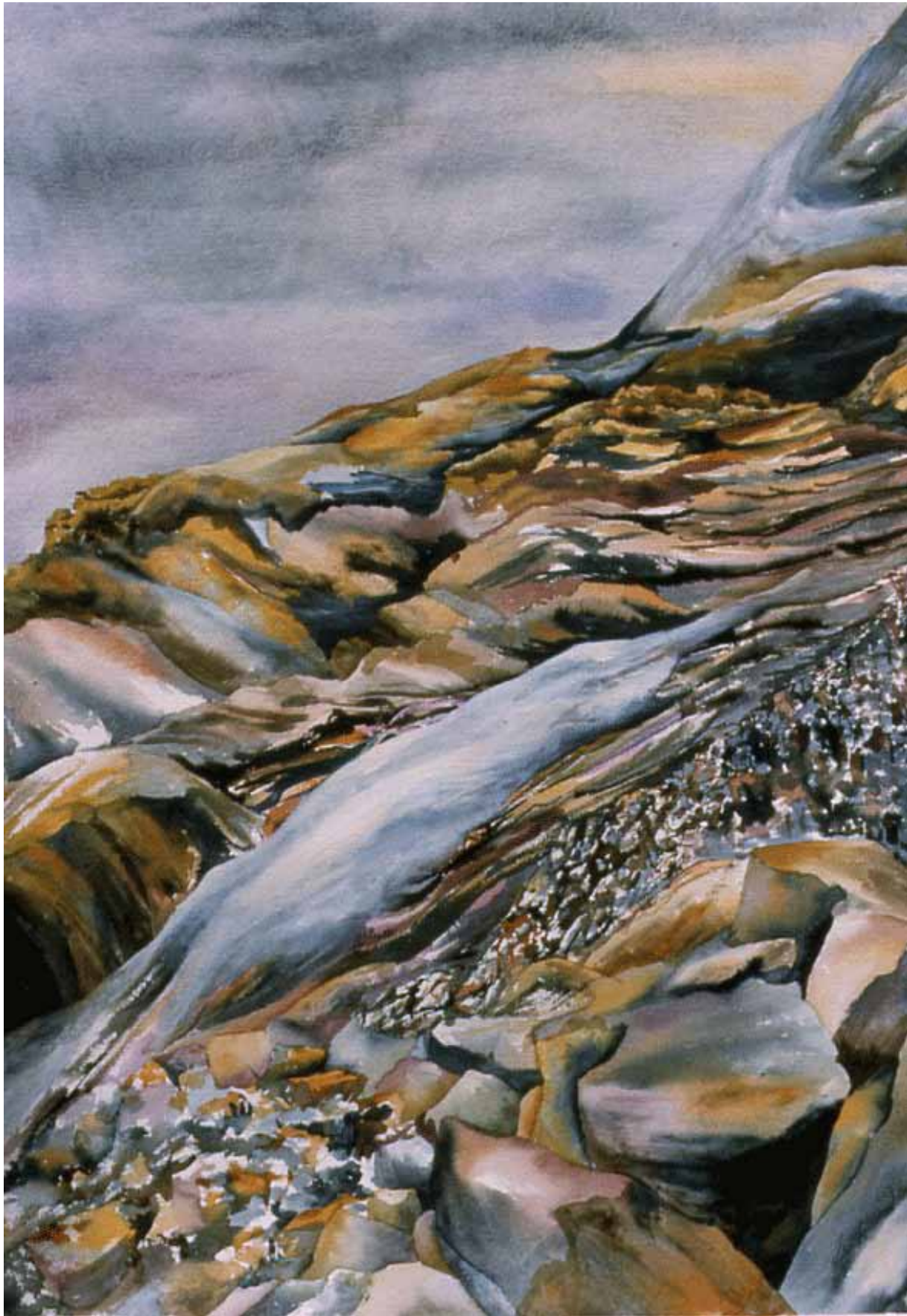
In another case, while flying aerial surveys, his team discovered more than a dozen illicit airfields being used by staff and executives from oil and logging companies: "The evidence was that they were being used as illegal hunting camps." Bloomfield reported the airfields. "I really couldn't get any action on these," he remembers. "We were not exactly a priority to listen to." So instead he had to resort to more roundabout methods. That year, he proposed an intensive tree-planting program, using summer students from his own division and the Forest Service. Those trees just happened to get planted on the illegal airstrips. This did not go over well in the

government although “what we’d done was the right thing, which was to protect wildlife from illegal hunting, put to bed illegal landing strips and to plant trees.”

### **Banning the caribou hunt**

Another area in which Bloomfield put his career on the line, and raised the ire of his bosses, was the continuing caribou hunt in Alberta. “I wanted to close the caribou hunting season, not because I was blaming hunting alone for the decline but because any mortality that could be eliminated had to be eliminated just to protect numbers,” he says. AWA and the Alberta Fish and Game Association became loud advocates for suspending the caribou hunt. Then, as now, wolves were a convenient scapegoat to be blamed for dwindling caribou numbers. “Alberta had killed wolves all through that area in the 50s and 60s” Bloomfield points out, “when the decline really began because of the first wave of land-use activity, and probably poor hunting management, which allowed too many animals, bulls and females, to be killed.”

Despite the possible impact on his government career, Bloomfield was not afraid to speak out publicly. In an August 1979 article in the *Edson Leader*, he wrote in typically uncompromising fashion, “In recent years the size, distribution and quality of caribou populations in Alberta have decreased considerably. The decline is largely due



**Boulder-Field**  
*This 3'x4' watercolor painting was one of my first of the Rocky Mountains. It is the boulder field I struggled climbing outside of Egypt Lake.*

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to the combined effect of logging, oil and gas activity and recreation.” In a later interview he told the *Calgary Herald*: “increased industrial and recreational pressures could virtually wipe out what little remains of the herd. The writing is on the wall. We have to do something or lose them.”

It is hard to imagine a government scientist being so forthright today. Bloomfield spoke as a scientist, but the position of his Minister, then Minister of Public Lands and Wildlife Bud Miller, was a decidedly more industry-friendly one. Quoted in the same Herald article, his take on the situation was: “There seems to be some uncertainty as to the cause. It might be a natural cycle.”

Bloomfield was under no illusions that there would be repercussions for a scientist who contradicted the political messaging of the time. “I understood I really hadn’t done anything to make my career a long and illustrious one,” he says ruefully, “taking my role as a biologist seriously rather than playing the political game and hoping that I would have a long comfortable career.”

#### **Advocates for the wrong cause.**

Looking back, Bloomfield was motivated by “a duty to the people of Alberta, to the future of Alberta and to the wildlife in it to pursue my work with integrity.” This led him to butt heads with his political bosses a number of times throughout his five-year tenure as provincial caribou specialist. In the early 1980s, the province was working in northern Alberta, going from area to area, putting together a comprehensive fisheries and wildlife management program as part of a land-use strategy. Fish and Wildlife input had already been dismissed in some areas because they were “too late” to join the process. So Bloomfield’s response was: “let’s be creative here and anticipate the next area which this will be applied to.” This was to be the Whitecourt area. “We put summer and winter employees to work there collecting fisheries and wildlife data – it was probably one of the most intensively studied areas in Alberta,” he recalls.

His boss at the time was not impressed. Minister Miller, who Bloomfield describes as “one of those chest-pokers” told him: “young man, sometimes because of lack of information you

have to make a decision.” Despite this warning, Bloomfield’s team presented its findings at the public land-use hearings; a brilliant and comprehensive piece of work for which Bloomfield was given a special commendation. But still he got his chest poked again by the minister, who exclaimed “sometimes, *in spite of the best information*, we have to make a decision.” (*That voice again: “that’s exactly how things still are today!”*)

The more the evidence continued to mount that unbridled industrial development was sending caribou on a downward spiral, the more government intransigence became clear, and the more decisions continued to be made “in spite of the best information.” The scientists were, as Bloomfield describes it, “advocates for the wrong cause.”

“(Nothing) was having any resonance with senior bureaucrats or political leaders,” he remembers. “They probably had nothing against caribou but their agenda was economic development through extractive industries – mining, oil and gas, logging – and they were going to do as little as possible for caribou.” Nevertheless, he continued to try to persuade government a different approach was needed if caribou were going to survive. He even enlisted the support of groups such as AWA and the Fish and Game Association. Sometimes he would take senior bureaucrats – the Deputy Minister, or the assistant DM – out on site to update them on his research programs and they would often pass through remote airstrips on their journey. “Lo and behold, AWA or the Fish and Game people always seemed to be at that little airstrip behind the gas station,” he chuckles. Of course the groups were not slow to take the opportunity of a “chance” encounter with a high-level bureaucrat to get their point of view across. “These staged encounters were really important to make it clear to senior government officials that there really was public support for preserving these animals.”

One thing that Bloomfield’s research made clear was that keeping caribou on the landscape was not simply a choice between industrial development or preservation. “Our research was showing that, with proper land-use guidelines, you could have development in there,” he says. “It might not be as all-encompassing or as wide scale as other

areas but this was really a small sacrifice for a wealthy province to make in the interest of some future for nature in the province.”

Unfortunately, then as now, the government refused to listen to anything that might be perceived as a threat to industrial development. (“*That’s exactly how things still are today!*”) The inconvenient Fish and Wildlife division was given a major shakeup: staff were re-assigned and contracts were not renewed. “They didn’t want us there,” he says. “We were an impediment to unbridled development.” For Bloomfield, the writing was on the wall and he eventually left his position in early 1983.

#### **That was then. This is now**

Einstein is reputed to have defined insanity as “doing the same thing, over and over again, but expecting different results.” This would be a fair representation of Alberta’s caribou management since the late 1970s. Count caribou, write reports, kill wolves, but don’t do anything to slow down the industrial exploitation that has been impacting caribou and their habitat for decades.

Of course the situation for caribou in 2012 is far worse than it was in 1978; thirty years of missed opportunities. “Government today is not any more inclined than it was then to make a run for sustainability of caribou,” he says. In some ways he is as baffled by it today as he was then. “Here is the wealthiest jurisdiction in the country. Can we not as Albertans, as Canadians, find some place in all of that for other species and the future health of the environment and the people who live in it?” Of course governments do not exist in a vacuum, and we all have our part to play. “The public has to recognize that our wealth is being generated at the expense of public health, the environment, the future. As consumers, investors, citizens we have to decide if that’s OK with us.”

He doesn’t hold back when he talks about what our own future and what it holds for Alberta’s caribou. “If we don’t care and are just part of the ravenous greed, let’s quit pretending we care about the environment,” he stresses. “If we are serious about the environment and stewardship, let’s get serious in actions rather than words.” And that, of course, is as true today as it was thirty years ago. 🍌