



Caribou Recovery in Northwest Alberta



Photo Credit: © Wayne Lynch

Caribou Belong

Woodland caribou are beautiful creatures, amazingly adapted to Alberta's boreal and foothills forests. With their large hooves, they 'crater' through snow for their winter diet of lichen, and move over wetlands and snowpack that other animals cannot easily cross. They live at low densities within old growth forests and peat wetland areas, which other prey species such as deer and moose avoid. That's allowed caribou to minimize encounters with their natural predators such as wolves and bears, with whom they have been able to co-exist for thousands of years.

Caribou are North America's best land-based sustainability teachers. They need areas of largely intact older forests and wetlands to avoid predators. In that way, they challenge us to learn to manage our cumulative impacts on our public lands, so that we and many other species can thrive. It's taken scarcely a century of land use changes in Alberta for scientists to predict they will die out in just a very few decades - unless we protect and restore their habitat now.

Right behind our declining caribou, other Alberta wildlife are in difficulty: arctic grayling fish populations, and migratory birds that rely on intact old growth forests and wetlands. They are showing us that we are not sustainably managing the forests and waters that we are passing on to our children. Caribou are the sentinels of our old growth forests and wetlands. We don't have the right, as an adaptable, prosperous society, to wipe out these amazing creatures in our lifetime.





Drivers of Alberta Caribou Decline and Recovery – Decades of Knowledge

For forty years, we have known from Alberta scientists' research that our caribou populations would fall significantly if we failed to limit total surface disturbance in caribou home ranges.

Government, forestry and energy industries have all known this for decades: every few years since the early 1990s, high profile multi-sector caribou committees have reviewed evidence that logging, energy and access impacts on Alberta caribou must be carefully limited and large habitat areas must be protected. For 40 years Alberta governments have stated their support for caribou recovery and done the opposite, allowing extensive new surface disturbance in their home ranges.

Caribou need core protected areas and strict surface disturbance limits both inside and outside protected areas. The current best available evidence is that their home ranges must be managed to recover to at least 65% undisturbed. **If our grandchildren are ever to see wild Alberta caribou, we must support strong actions to protect their habitat now.**

Communities and Caribou Recovery

Caribou planning and actions need meaningful local participation from indigenous peoples and local communities that assists the urgent basic task of protecting existing habitat and restoring degraded habitat. These elements of caribou recovery are not 'business as usual', but fair to northwest communities:

- Linear disturbance, both inside and outside protected areas, needs to be reduced and carefully managed through clear regulations.
- Core protected areas, free of mines, oilsands and industrial forestry, are needed in part of each caribou range. The three proposed new northwest protected areas (in Forest Management Units F10, F20 and P8) do not overlap with existing forestry. They will achieve the most protection of caribou range for the least socio-economic cost to northwest communities.
- These new Wildland Parks should be managed with indigenous and local participation to cluster and phase-out oil and gas, following Hay-Zama Wildland Park's successful example. The Parks should have fire suppression and forest restoration, and manage access for hunting and trapping compatible with caribou recovery.
- Outside protected areas, there can be substantial energy extraction on current and new leases, but from a greatly reduced surface footprint e.g., through restoring legacy disturbance, longer distance directional drilling, pooled leases and shared infrastructure.
- There are substantial jobs from extensive forest habitat restoration programs across and adjacent to ranges.
- Regional timber supply allocation and management need to be reformed, to support sustainable forestry compatible with recovery of caribou and other sentinel wildlife species.

Caribou Myth Busters

Three proposed protected areas recommended by mediator Denhoff's 2016 report will "shut down" northwest communities

Actually, the three proposed new northwest protected areas (in Forest Management Units F10, F20 and P8) do not overlap with existing forestry. Unlike other public lands, protected areas can be assured to have no new industrial forestry impacts, and to have an energy industry surface footprint that is limited to existing tenures and then phased out. The proposed protected areas will achieve the most protection of caribou range for the least socio-economic cost to northwest communities.

It's good enough for companies to follow 'best practice' operating guidelines

Alberta caribou populations are declining almost everywhere that operating guidelines are in place, including in the Bistcho, Chinchaga, Caribou Mountains and Red Earth ranges in northwest Alberta. The Alberta government's own 2010 caribou status report stated that current project-level industrial guidelines are





inadequate as a sole tool in Alberta, as demonstrated in 1999 boreal research, and confirmed in 2008 and 2009 Alberta Caribou Committee research.

We need a lot more caribou research in each range before we act

It's true that local communities and all Albertans deserve good consultation and information about managing the important public lands that support our caribou. Local communities should participate in choosing optimal socio-economic actions that assure that caribou range requirements of at least 65% undisturbed habitat are achieved. But decades of conservation delays and ongoing habitat loss have made it very urgent to act, before we lose even more caribou habitat. We know caribou need large intact older forests and wetlands: let's get moving together on that without further delay. Let's get going on planning range access with indigenous communities, industry, hunters and trappers that is compatible with caribou recovery.

It's not habitat, the problem is too many wolves and other predators

The root cause of excessive caribou predation by wolves and other predators is fragmented and degraded habitat in caribou ranges. Cutblocks and poorly reclaimed seismic lines and well pads stimulate deer, moose and wolf populations, and create easy access to caribou by predators. This robs the caribou of their ability to avoid overlap with predators that they've co-existed with for thousands of years. In the most disturbed ranges, the dire measure of predator culls may be needed, but the only way this can possibly be justified is along-side very strong habitat protection and restoration, as an exceptional temporary measure while habitat regrows.

It's not human disturbance, the problem is fire

In most Alberta ranges industrial disturbance far outweighs fire, but yes, in a few, fire is the main source of habitat loss. It makes it even more important for us to minimize human disturbance in those ranges. And there should be fire suppression in caribou protected areas.

If Caribou Mountains caribou are declining even in Caribou Mountains Wildland Provincial Park, it's hopeless

Actually, the habitat disturbance levels of the overall Caribou Mountains range explain the declines. As of 2011, fire disturbance affected 44% of the range, and human-caused disturbance affected 23%, for a total of 57% disturbed. Best available evidence suggests caribou need at least 65% undisturbed habitat to have even a 60% chance of being self-sustaining. For the Caribou Mountains population, it's important to: avoid new human disturbance in their range, suppress fires, carefully manage access, and support jobs to properly reclaim as much legacy human-caused disturbance as possible, such as reclaiming old seismic lines that won't unduly affect trapping and hunting.

If caribou can't even make it in pristine Banff and Jasper national parks, it's hopeless

Actually, the basic habitat issues are the same, and caribou in the national parks were likely also harmed by the parks' elk-wolf policies. Unlike boreal woodland caribou of northern Alberta, these are mountain caribou who need to migrate from mountains (in summer) to foothills (in winter). During the 20th century, their foothills winter grounds outside the parks were blocked and fragmented by roads and industrial development. Inside the parks, artificially high elk populations together with roads and trails into some key caribou areas made caribou predation far easier when wolves were allowed to rebound.

Alberta grizzlies have recovered on 'working landscapes', so can caribou

Boreal caribou need relatively undisturbed old growth forests and wetland complexes in their home ranges, to minimize overlap with predators. Grizzlies are wide-ranging omnivores that adapt to many vegetated land covers, and greatly benefit if direct human conflicts are reduced. Caribou habitat recovery won't hinder grizzly populations, but grizzly recovery requirements aren't enough for caribou.

