

## **Caribou: New Wildland Park, Missing Conservation Agreement, New Provincial Government**

Before going down to defeat in the April provincial election, the Notley government offered some good news for a couple of Alberta's woodland caribou populations. In mid-March the government decided to establish the Kitaskino Nuwenêné Wildland Provincial Park. Better protection of the Ronald Lake wood bison population was a central goal of this protected area, located on two parcels of land south of Wood Buffalo National Park. The Red Earth and Richardson woodland caribou populations also will receive some additional protected territory through this new park.

AWA congratulated the First Nations, Alberta government, and industry for collaborating to create Kitaskino Nuwenêné Wildland Provincial Park. We also urged implementing a 'Phase 2' process to add additional lands to the Park that would further connect and protect important wood bison, woodland caribou, and migratory bird habitat.

By now we had hoped to be able to describe to readers an Alberta-Canada draft conservation agreement for woodland caribou. Since 2017, the federal government has talked up the conservation agreements it was negotiating with provinces under section 11 of the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). This was apparently their fall-back plan. It was needed because Alberta and other provinces failed to develop habitat-focused range plans under the federal government's 2012 woodland caribou recovery strategy; the recovery strategy itself was five years overdue from SARA 'mandatory' timelines.

In its December 2018 progress report on steps taken to protect critical habitat for boreal woodland caribou, Environment and Climate Change Canada stated that section 11 conservation agreements "aim to codify incremental concrete measures to support the conservation of the species and the protection of its critical habitat". Even with that modest goal, the previous government failed to put forward an Alberta conservation

agreement for public consultation.

Provinces have the responsibility to manage wildlife and natural resources, and the federal government has the responsibility to protect species-at-risk habitat if provinces fail to do so. That is why in January 2019, Ecojustice lawyers, acting on behalf of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, Alberta Wilderness Association, and David Suzuki Foundation, filed a lawsuit against the federal minister of environment and climate change. In the absence of adequate measures from the province, the groups are arguing that the federal minister must step in and recommend federal protections for the five herds under the *Species at Risk Act*.

From Alberta's newly elected government, we have a mixture of policy indications. The United Conservative Party included these caribou-relevant replies in the Alberta Environmental Network's election period survey of major Alberta parties, released April 9: "We will restore Alberta's reputation as a world leader in developing resources responsibly" and "A United Conservative government will address the continuing decline of wildlife populations, namely the [woodland] caribou. We recognize the federally-mandated need to propose a caribou range protection plan, but this must be done in close collaboration with all who are affected, and must be based on science and common-sense conservation policies."

Most of the intact older forests and peatlands habitat that Alberta caribou depend upon have no limits on intensive cumulative development impacts. These forests and peatlands continue to be fragmented and degraded by a myriad of overlapping industrial and recreation pressures. This is not responsible development. Alberta caribou continue to be in real peril; other valued wildlife species such as native fish, furbearers and migratory birds that rely on intact older forests will also greatly benefit if Alberta caribou can recover to be self-sustaining. AWA will continue to advocate for the responsible forest management solutions compatible with caribou recovery that are within reach.

- Carolyn Campbell

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