

How Caribou Became Part of My Life



By Franco Alo

There are very few things I am sure of in life and that's fine by me. But, I am sure of one thing – I want to be involved with caribou recovery in Canada. For most Canadians the only time they will ever see a caribou is on the tails side of our quarter – that's right, it's a caribou, not a moose. So how did this professional biologist decide he wanted to be involved in one of the largest conservation issues in Canada? That's the question I tackle in this article.

Getting to Today

I will be 34 years old by the time this article is out and I think I've worked an astounding number and variety of jobs so far in my life. The fields I've touched include: salesman, carpenter, landscaper, musician, photographer, field technician, and kitchen

sous-chef. And now, my relationship with *Rangifer tarandus* joins the list. It all started when I decided to go back to school in my mid-20s after I pulled myself loose from being a touring musician. I didn't know much about caribou then (maybe I even believed a moose adorned our quarter). It was really by accident that *Rangifer tarandus* became part of my Master of Science degree.

When I chose my professor to pursue my M.Sc. in Biology with, I was dead set on studying elephants in Cameroon as my research project. Somehow though, and despite the fact I don't enjoy cold weather, Finland replaced Africa. I think I chose Finland because it was the opposite of what I thought would make me comfortable and I had already learned early on that, when you push yourself outside of your comfort zone, real learning occurs. I was excited for

a new adventure and had no idea what the outcome would be.

Finland: Reindeer Research

All research should start with diving into the background literature. I learned about reindeer biology and reproductive ecology, sexual competition as well as the status of some caribou herds in Canada. When I did this in 2014 I remember being shocked to find out that, in Canada, the caribou I read about in my research was a species at risk. As interesting as I found that, I had to stay focused on reindeer. My interest in caribou conservation had to take a back seat to sexual competition in Finland's reindeer.

My caribou love story, my passion for caribou conservation, started with a profound experience in Finland. I arrived at a Finnish Research Centre in northern Finland as the newbie on the research team. Immediately, I was told I had to help herd over 100 reindeer, quite intimidating! With that intimidation came excitement as I was going to work alongside the Sami Indigenous Peoples. This combination of intimidation and excitement produced one of the most visceral and intimate experiences of my life. It was like a fairy tale. I was encircled by dozens of reindeer in a corral who walked past me, brushed up against me, poked me. In this real-life fairy tale, I instantly cared about every single one of them. I found them all beautiful. I connected with them on a spiritual level.

Perhaps my fondest memory of connecting with reindeer happened during my first year of research in northern Finland. Like most field days, I was looking for reindeer using telemetry, on foot, over a large surface of



The majestic woodland caribou aka the gray ghost. With fewer and fewer on the natural landscape, will woodland caribou become the next zoo conservation story? PHOTO: © F. ALO



Portrait of Reindeer R26. If we take the time to connect with nature, we understand why we are trying to save it. PHOTO: © F. ALO

land. The morning was foggy and I needed my toque and fleece to stay warm. I tracked an individual through a Scots pine forest and into a meadow. I could hear a group of about 20 or more, clicking tendons in the distance. I caught a glimpse of the group and it appeared they were about to kneel down for a rest, one by one. My recording of observations was put on hold since reindeer can typically rest for 45 minutes or more. I decided to sit on a rock, in the fog, in the meadow and eat my lunch (a classic cold sausage with tasty Finnish honey mustard). A few moments passed and I heard the clicking of tendons again, this time moving towards me. I was sure they would avoid me...but, no, they walked right past

me. They encircled me, in the fog, like gray ghosts. I was hooked!

Canada: Caribou Conservation

After my formative experiences in Finland and, with my MSc. in hand, I started to apply for caribou research positions across the country. I moved to Edmonton shortly after graduating and my first taste of the Canadian caribou world was an opportunity made possible thanks to Melanie Dickie and Dr. Robert Serrouya with the Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute's (ABMI) Caribou Monitoring Unit. This position became my gateway into the land of caribou conservation. This is a land where researchers in this community are passionate about caribou and are tackling what seems like an insurmountable task. I quickly learned that caribou conservation was not only about caribou, but it was about people (more on this later).

My ABMI position had me trekking the boreal forest of Alberta/Saskatchewan setting up wildlife camera traps in both intact caribou habitat and disturbed caribou habitat (most of the disturbance came from wildfires). Woodland caribou in the boreal are naturally evasive and are listed as threatened under the federal *Species at Risk Act*. This makes them difficult to encounter in nature, especially in herds where their footprint is more remote i.e., further away from human settlements, think high up in the mountains or Nunavut for example. This is why wildlife cameras strategically placed within a caribou range and within habitat that is predicted to be used by this ungulate, offer valuable insights through the images we can obtain without being physically present on the landscape. By the end of my contract in October 2017, I had yet to see a caribou. My only view of woodland caribou in Alberta had been through the wildlife cameras. Those views keep me going. They revive my ability to bond again with the animal who touched me spiritually back in Finland.

From there, and through constant networking, I landed a position in November 2017 I was really proud of: Maternity Pen Project Operations Coordinator for the

South Selkirk herd in southern British Columbia. However, it was a job that highlighted the seemingly insurmountable task caribou recovery specialists face. A maternity pen in a herd that numbered only 11 individuals in June 2017, was a desperate, last gasp, effort to keep the South Selkirk herd on the land.

Working with the Government of British Columbia, Nature Conservancy of Canada and Ktunaxa First Nations in Cranbrook, one of the biggest challenges faced in saving one of the last southern mountain B.C. caribou herds was the fact that the South Selkirk herd was international. Its historical range included habitat in the states of Idaho and Washington.

Given the South Selkirk herd's international status, a collaborative group was formed called the Selkirk Caribou International Technical Work Group (SCITWG). It involved U.S. partnerships such as U.S. Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Forestry Service, Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, Kalispel Tribe and many others. The advantage of such a group was the diversity of experiences everyone brought to the table, especially relevant and useful in a dire situation with, at that time, only 11 individuals left in the herd.

One of the highlights from my time in that position was being invited with a few others from Canada to Idaho to speak to the SCITWG, among other things, about my plan for opening the maternity pen and what I needed financially to do that. I also spoke about the steps I was taking to advance our understanding of what we needed in place to be ready to receive some individuals from the South Selkirks in March 2018. I felt like I imagine a politician feels – speaking to a broad audience that included members of the federal government, First Nations, snowmobile community groups and even the local town councillor. It was empowering to feel like my opinion and statements were taken seriously among a high-profile attendance. Though I was told many times that my enthusiasm was due to being young and naïve!

The complications and challenges we faced turned out to be overwhelming. The

maternity pen, with 15-foot walls designed to mimic the Revelstoke maternity pen, was nearly completely buried by snow in February. In the aftermath of the buried pen debacle, the herd was essentially found to be functionally extirpated (<https://www.revelstokereview.com/news/u-s-caribou-near-revelstoke-survive-first-year/>). The last remaining member of this herd was captured in the Winter of 2019 and transported to the caribou maternity pen in Revelstoke.

From Disheartening to Encouraging

The next caribou contract position I landed was as a caribou recovery technician with the Government of Alberta in Peace River. If you remember, I had still never seen a caribou in the flesh when working for the ABMI. And, my experience with the South Selkirk herd left me quite disheartened as I essentially witnessed the demise of a herd we tried to save. But, stationed in Peace River, I saw caribou, and then more caribou, and then more caribou. By the end of my contract I was very encouraged by the fact I had seen probably more than one thousand caribou. This all happened thanks to the advantages of aerial surveys which took the form of mountain caribou scat sampling, caribou mortality investigations, and cow-calf recruitment surveys. It was the dreamiest five months of my career in caribou conservation. Finally, I had connected with the very species I wanted to help since that formative moment studying reindeer in Finland during my M.Sc. degree.

Today, I find myself involved with caribou conservation from a different angle. One can perhaps call it more political, it's certainly more concerned with communications. Now, I'm not on the ground collecting data; I'm not analyzing data; I'm not taking pictures of caribou. Instead, I'm involved in knowledge transfer and tool development as part of the National Boreal Caribou Knowledge Consortium (NBCKC). The strength of the NBCKC is that it supports a wide gamut of caribou conservation information and participants. I am pleased to see representation on the NBCKC from federal/

provincial government authorities, Indigenous communities, industry practitioners, research scientists, NGOs and more. This large community, with a diversity of voices, offers great perspective when reviewing methods or tools for caribou conservation across Canada.

The needs of caribou herds across Canada vary by location, political boundary, status, funding, remoteness, parties involved, etc. and information about the types of caribou monitoring techniques available across the country can really help caribou conservationists learn from and apply the lessons from previous undertakings. A lot of the NBCKC information can be found at <https://www.cclmportal.ca/portal/boreal-caribou>.

I am most attracted to caribou conservation because it is a complicated subject and one where learning to speak the language of conservation suited to a particular party is of utmost importance. We have the data and we acknowledge the problem. Now, how do we create the change required to address woodland caribou decline?

Politicians are uneasy talking about caribou conservation because typically what is good for caribou (intact landscapes, less anthropogenic activity near caribou ranges) is bad for business. Caribou conservation is fundamentally difficult because caribou are large mammals whose range contractions

are significant. They make us realize we have difficulty sharing the same habitat. We have transformed much of that habitat into concrete jungles. We don't see ourselves as a part of nature; we too often see ourselves as apart from nature. This mindset sees them as competitors, detracting from our ability to satisfy our needs or wants.

A brighter future for caribou depends on rethinking our place in nature. Make caribou conservation about human conservation. Do we want to plow down entire forests and build concrete jungles everywhere, or do we want to be able to balance our societal needs with the acknowledgment that we are not separate from nature but a part of it? To be a constructive part of nature, we need to make choices which value thriving landscapes, functioning ecosystems, and the priceless ecosystem services they provide for us. I am proud to be involved in this fight to allow caribou to continue to live in their wonderful homes and I hope to continue to find others who understand that when we destroy, when we take, there's a threshold where mother nature will simply not recover!

Franco Alo: Skilled in caribou-centric landscape management, making things look pretty, and a fieldwork veteran. Always interested in connecting with like-minded individuals at alo.francom@gmail.com. 🐾



I wonder sometimes what side of the fence we are on. PHOTO: © F. ALO