

With the Maligne Herd Gone...Jasper's Caribou Crisis Deepens

By Carolyn Campbell, *AWA Conservation Specialist*



They're gone. Jasper's Maligne caribou herd are officially extirpated from Jasper National Park's landscape. The Tonquin and Brazeau herds, the two remaining caribou populations managed by Parks Canada, are in a perilous condition. Their total numbers and numbers of breeding females are so low now that they cannot recover on their own.

Therefore, AWA is calling on Parks Canada to prevent the extirpation of Jasper's Tonquin and Brazeau caribou by urgently and transparently considering an emergency population augmentation program

for these caribou. Furthermore, AWA is calling on Parks Canada to manage Maligne range access for eventual caribou re-introduction there.

A captive breeding program is a desperate measure that is under consideration because existing regulations and management regimes failed the Maligne herd and are failing the Tonquin and Brazeau herds. In 1984, the Tonquin and Brazeau herds were estimated to each have 115 members. In 2019, the Tonquin population was estimated to have shrank to only 24 members; the Brazeau herd had collapsed to just 8 animals.

The die off of Jasper's entire Maligne caribou population and the steep, rapid decline of the Brazeau and Tonquin herds are tragic, predictable results of decades-long habitat and wildlife errors. Those errors were reinforced in the last decisive decade by Parks Canada's decision to still cater to the recreation desires of a few above the habitat needs of endangered wildlife. Parks Canada must not let the remaining magnificent caribou under its care in Jasper be lost to future generations of Canadians.

There is tremendous urgency for Parks Canada to take action, by launching captive



The few remaining caribou in Jasper National Park face dire circumstances. PHOTO: © C. CAMPBELL

breeding if viable, and crucially, by managing habitat appropriately for caribou re-occupation. The hard-won winter ski trail limits in the Maligne range must remain, and winter plowing of the Maligne Lake road into prime winter habitat areas must end. It is possible that caribou could re-connect to Maligne from the adjacent Brazeau or Tonquin ranges with strong winter access rules. Further measures should be considered for Tonquin and Brazeau winter access to support caribou recovery. A captive breeding program only makes sense if caribou have secure critical habitat to return to once they are released. If Parks Canada allows more winter access or infrastructure that is harmful to caribou viability, we believe it will be far too difficult for decision makers to reverse course later.

Canadians may see Jasper Park as a pristine area for caribou, but human land-use decisions have been disastrous for them. These are 'mountain' caribou, which need to migrate in the winter to secure foothills areas, which were destroyed decades ago. Caribou that once were distributed through southern Canadian mountains and foothills

right down into Idaho had their winter ranges outside the Park fragmented in the 20th century by roads, dams, mines, and other industrial incursions. Many caribou died off or stopped migrating; the latter remained inside national parks. Even though winter conditions were poorer than what they were adapted to, they probably survived far longer than they would have without the Parks.

Meanwhile, people made disastrous decisions for caribou inside Jasper Park too. Artificially high elk populations were encouraged in the 20th century, eventually leading to a boom in wolf numbers. Many decisions creating and maintaining human access on winter roads, trails and ski hills in key caribou areas robbed caribou of their natural ability to avoid overlap with wolves, and wolf predation became too high for them to tolerate.

In 2002, a temporary winter closure of Maligne Lake Road, approved by Jasper's superintendent based on extensive evidence, was immediately overturned. Keeping the entire stretch of the Maligne Lake winter road open every subsequent winter to recreation traffic, up to today, was a death

sentence for Maligne caribou, giving wolves easy predation access as caribou numbers spiraled down. The 'four month per year' ski trail closures since 2014 were overdue measures that unfortunately proved too late to recover the tiny remaining population.

Parks Canada has declared that, since about 2013, Jasper's elk and wolf populations are low enough, and far enough away from caribou, that they no longer pose a risk to the remaining caribou herds. Provided there's ongoing habitat/access management, captive breeding may be the necessary means for Jasper caribou to survive and recover.

Crisis describes well the state of caribou in Jasper National Park. Populations have declined so far, so quickly, that only an extraordinary measure such as captive breeding may hold any promise of keeping this iconic species in an iconic National Park. Let's see Parks Canada's caribou re-population and access management plans, and if they're sound, let's get on with it. There isn't a second to lose. ▲

Featured Artist Tyler Los-Jones

As Lichens no. 7
Archival inkjet print on rag paper
30.5 cm x 35.6cm, 2017
PHOTO: © T. LOS-JONES



Aggregates no.2
Archival inkjet print on rag paper
61cm x 61cm, 2018
PHOTO: © T. LOS-JONES

