

# Caribou Sightings

By Alistair Des Moulins



**A**re they sheep? No, too big for sheep. Moose? No, they look smaller than moose. We get a bit closer. Wow! They are caribou! That is the sequence of thoughts that usually goes through my head prior to recognizing caribou when I am in the Rocky Mountains.

Enjoying the natural environment is a main purpose of hiking according to more than 98 percent of participants in a survey conducted by the Alberta Hiking Association in the spring of 2020; having the opportunity to see wildlife in its natural habitat is a major part of that enjoyment for many of them. People come from all over the world to the mountain parks with the hope of seeing all the major mammal species during their visit. In my 30+ years of hiking and backpacking in the Rockies I have enjoyed seeing wildlife of many species. I enjoy watching mountain goats move up and down mountains and wish I was as nimble as them. Also I like watching pikas, usually heard but not seen, scurry about rockpiles carrying grass to add to their winter larders in their homes under the rocks. The rarer kind of wildlife sightings really stand out as memories of certain trips - like watching a mother grizzly and her 2 cubs frolicking in a late season snowpatch on the side of Scapegoat Mountain, Montana or the wolverine bum-sliding down a snow slope above Murtle Lake, BC. Caribou are also among the rarer kind of wildlife sightings in the Rocky Mountains.

I saw my first caribou on the way to do a backpack to Glacier Lake in November 1988. Four of them are just grazing by the

highway just north of Waterfowl Lakes. Just like tourists seeing their first elk I am thrilled to see them. The next summer three of us are on one of our favourite backpacks from Helen Lake to Silverhorn Creek. On the first day we see a large grizzly bear 400 metres away. On the second day, as we head up towards Silverhorn Pass, we see five animals ahead – at first we think they are sheep but then we see they are caribou and I wonder whether four of them are the ones I saw the previous November. They see us and hurry up to the pass then on up the ridge to the east. Will says he had seen a larger herd of about 15 when he was here a few years earlier. He also recalls the time in 1984 when he was on a nine-day backpack at the Miette passes on the boundary of Jasper and Robson Parks. He saw about 12 caribou. One was an old male who was obviously unwell as he did not even get up and move so Will and the group did not go nearer to him.

It was just over three weeks later when five of us are in the northern branch of the McDonald Creek valley in the White Goat Wilderness as part of a nine-day backpack trip. We put up our tents on the east side of the valley and notice there were about eight caribou on the west side not far away. We make supper and head to our tents. The next morning is wet and we do not venture far. The caribou are still grazing across the valley. It is pleasant to feel that they sense we are not a threat to them. Those caribou, along with a larger group that joins them later, allow us to share their valley that day.

Over three years pass before our next

sighting. I am scheduled to lead an Alpine Club of Canada two day ski trip up Mosquito Creek, north of Lake Louise, for the weekend of 12-13 December 1992. While seven people sign up, five are forced to cancel, leaving just me and my wife Gail to make the trip. The snow is unconsolidated so it is not good skiing. We camp by some trees just before Mosquito Lake. The next morning we ski then walk up to the ridge south of the lake. From the ridge I see five animals on the north side of the lake. Again: sheep? No, moose or elk? No, we realize they are caribou. Of course the binoculars are back down in the tent. Back at the tent we enjoy watching them slowly move up from the lake towards North Molar Pass. Again I wonder whether they are the ones we had seen over three years earlier. That sighting, that brief encounter from afar, more than makes up for the unconsolidated snow we have to deal with on this trip. Back in Calgary the next day, I phone Parks Canada to report our sighting. I am directed to speak to consultant, John Kansas. He is pleased to hear of our sighting. He tells me there are 25 animals south of the David Thompson highway and that they have been seen on the Highway 1A between Banff and Lake Louise.

In March 2001, two Scottish friends visit for some ski touring. We go to Snow Bowl between the Shovel Passes in Jasper National Park. We do see some caribou tracks. However, on the return journey to Calgary we see a lynx cross the highway near Sunwapta falls and we stop to watch four caribou on the flats near Beauty Creek – marvelous visual treats for the

locals and visitors alike.

In the Spring of 2009 I am really saddened to hear that the last of the southerly Caribou herd have been killed in an avalanche in the Molar Creek area of Banff National Park not far from where

we saw caribou in December 1992. I feel as though I have lost some dear friends. I wonder what had caused the 25 to dwindle to five before their sad demise. I hope appropriate steps are taken immediately so that the remnants of the herds further

north can thrive and provide an opportunity for all of us to see them in future. 🐾

*Alistair Des Moulins and his wife Gail are experienced hikers and backpackers. When not on the trail they live in Coleman. Alistair has spent over eight years of nights in a tent.*



Caribou in Jasper National Park Along Sunwapta Flats PHOTO: © A. DES MOULINS