

Updates

Jasper Caribou are More Secure this Winter

Today, Jasper National Park caribou have a better chance to survive and recover thanks to the many Albertans and Canadians who spoke up for them over the past several months.

To protect caribou, Parks Canada announced on October 8 that there will no longer be backcountry access for any part of the snow season in Jasper's Tonquin and Brazeau caribou ranges. That season runs November 1 to May 15. Parks Canada also expanded the area where these restrictions apply in the Brazeau range.

Before, backcountry access in Tonquin was allowed from February 16 and in Brazeau from March 1. A 2017 Parks Canada caribou planning draft report obtained by the Canadian Press in late 2020 had described the February 16 re-opening of Tonquin to backcountry access as a "compromise to offer some protection to caribou while still allowing the existing stakeholders to operate during a shorter portion of the winter season." With these caribou on the brink of extirpation, AWA strongly objected to this compromise.

Alpine Club of Canada (ACC) deserves praise for taking voluntary measures to support caribou last winter. In January 2021, ACC announced it was suspending bookings at its Tonquin backcountry hut for the rest of the winter. Further, it joined AWA and other conservation groups in calling for all backcountry winter recreationists to lead by example and to ask their peers to stay out of the Tonquin backcountry for the entire snow season to support caribou survival.

To its credit, Parks Canada has acknowledged that "research shows that trails packed by backcountry skiers, snowboarders, and snowshoers from the valley bottom to high elevation areas can lead wolves to prey on caribou in the very places caribou go to avoid predators." AWA sought exactly this evidence-based and precautionary measure. We announced our firm support for Jasper's



Jasper National Park's remaining caribou will benefit from Parks Canada's recent decision to close backcountry access within their ranges for the entire snow season. PHOTO: © JOHN E. MARRIOTT

decision for its Tonquin and Brazeau caribou since it upheld Parks Canada's obligations to protect species at risk and ecological integrity.

A second change for Jasper caribou is that a caribou conservation breeding proposal is advancing. The proposal considers establishing a multi-year captive breeding program in a purpose-built facility at an unobtrusive site within Jasper Park. It should never have come to this, but it has. In September 2020, Jasper National Park declared that the Maligne caribou population were officially extirpated and that there were too few breeding females in Tonquin and Brazeau to sustain the herds.

Weighing the alternatives, AWA decided that Parks Canada must do its utmost to not let the remaining magnificent caribou under its care in Jasper be lost to future generations of Canadians. We urged Parks Canada to promptly and transparently conclude its many years of 'considering' caribou population augmentation measures. During those years caribou numbers spiraled down. We further stated that, if there was a viable conservation breeding plan supported by strong access and habitat management in its caribou ranges, Parks Canada should proceed quickly while as many wild caribou as possible remained in those ranges.

In early 2021 Parks Canada convened a thorough review by independent scientific experts of caribou conservation options. In May 2021 they published the expert review-

ers' findings which strongly supported using conservation breeding to recover populations. On August 10, the Environment and Climate Change Canada Minister committed \$24 million to design a potential conservation breeding facility and to consult with Indigenous communities and the public about the proposal. AWA and several other conservation groups issued a joint statement describing the decision to continue exploring a Jasper caribou conservation breeding as a tragic, yet necessary, interim recovery measure for caribou within the Rocky Mountain national parks.

To be viable and ethical, the dire approach of conservation breeding must be preceded by stringent precautionary access measures. AWA will continue to ask Parks Canada to re-assess and reduce Tonquin summer-fall access impacts with urgency. Our demand is informed by Dr. Fiona Schmiegelow's 2014 expert findings that substantial high quality summer-fall caribou habitat is transected by busy recreation trails. AWA will also continue to advocate for Parks Canada to manage the prime Maligne caribou range for caribou re-occupation as soon as possible. This should be a key part of their responsibility to recover Jasper caribou. While Jasper caribou are still on the brink of extirpation, we hope more secure winter ranges will bode well for their future.

- Carolyn Campbell