
Jasper Consults on Caribou Conservation Breeding Plan

In summer 2022 Parks Canada requested public comments on its proposal to capture, breed and release mountain caribou over 20 years in an effort to re-populate Jasper's caribou ranges.

In the 1960s, southern Jasper National Park was home to hundreds of caribou. Today there are less than sixty, with too few females remaining to recover the herds on their own. The Maligne herd is recently extirpated, Tonquin has about 45 caribou including only nine females,

Brazeau has only three females and a handful of males.

With Jasper's elk and wolves now largely concentrated within valley bottoms, predation risks have been much reduced, though not eliminated, in the higher elevation caribou ranges. AWA remains concerned about infrastructure and recreation access pressures reducing prime habitat availability in these ranges.

While caribou populations spiralled down, Jasper has been 'considering' conservation breeding for years. In 2020, when Maligne caribou were declared extirpated, AWA urged Parks Canada to transparently review conservation breeding, and proceed if it was viable and accompanied by improved range management. In spring 2021, an external scientific review concluded conservation breeding was necessary for Jasper caribou to survive.

Parks Canada proposes to build a breeding facility of roughly 70 hectares. The focus is to minimize mortality at all stages and keep the animals as wild as possible, primarily in outdoor pens at relatively low density. Up to 40 females would be captured in several stages, including the last Brazeau females. Parks Canada has yet to confirm whether Alberta's A La Peche herd might be one of the donor populations. Adult males would be rotated in for genetic diversity.

Once the program gets going in the mid-2020s, yearlings born in the facility would be released into the Tonquin range annually, possibly via temporary pens to aid acclimatization. The projection is for 200 or more caribou to be in Tonquin six years after the first captures, then another 6 to 10 years for similar numbers in Brazeau and Maligne. These timelines seem overly optimistic, but AWA strongly supports the intent to re-occupy all three ranges. AWA has reluctantly concluded that this program is a tragic but necessary interim measure to keep wild caribou in Jasper National Park, where they belong.

It was only in October 2021, at the urging of many conservation groups including AWA, that Parks Canada at last removed recreation access into the

Tonquin and Brazeau backcountry for the entire snow season. We welcomed that decision. AWA will remain outspoken about the need to further reduce recreation access impacts and improve habitat connectivity in Jasper caribou ranges, to buy survival time and support successful re-occupation of caribou ranges.

- By Carolyn Campbell
