

## Captive Breeding of Jasper Caribou Gets the Green Light

On February 27, 2023, the federal government approved a program to capture, breed, and release mountain caribou over 20 years to re-populate caribou ranges in south Jasper National Park. This followed consultation last year with Indigenous communities, stakeholders, and the public. Caribou have occupied these areas for millennia, but the Maligne population has been recently extirpated, while Tonquin and Brazeau caribou are on the brink.

A 'conservation breeding' facility will be built in a quiet area of Jasper Park, not open to the public. It will mainly consist of secure outdoor pens, with some indoor veterinary areas. After that, source animals from Brazeau, Tonquin and other (as yet undetermined) populations will be captured, in several rounds over several years. The program will try to keep the animals as wild as possible. It aims to introduce captive-born yearling caribou into Jasper's Tonquin valley as early as 2026.

Despite AWA's intense frustrations with Parks Canada's caribou range access decisions in recent decades — which too often appeared to prioritize local

recreation interests over habitat security, while caribou numbers continued to spiral downwards — AWA accepts that the remaining Tonquin and Brazeau caribou populations are now too small to recover on their own.

Leading up to this proposal, AWA urged Parks Canada to complete a transparent review of whether a breeding program was indeed the only thing that could save south Jasper caribou. A rigorous review in early 2021 by independent scientists concluded this was the case.

We reluctantly agree. AWA supports Parks Canada pursuing this conservation breeding program, combined with continuing precautionary habitat management actions, as a tragic but necessary interim measure to keep wild caribou in Jasper National Park, where they belong.

AWA is encouraged by Parks Canada's recent positive actions to improve Tonquin Valley caribou habitat. In October 2021, Parks Canada finally ended backcountry recreation for the entire snow season in Tonquin and Brazeau, which will reduce caribou predation risk and winter stress. In autumn 2022, Parks Canada bought out licences of two horse-based Tonquin Valley backcountry lodges, reducing

summer-fall recreation pressure. In December 2022 they announced that no new licences of occupation would be issued in Tonquin. AWA also recognizes that since the early 2000s, Parks Canada has managed for more sustainable elk and wolf populations focused in Jasper's valley bottoms, reducing caribou predation risk.

AWA has requested that Jasper Park continue to raise public awareness of human impacts upon caribou, including ongoing engagement with local and regional tourism and recreational groups. A very positive aspect of Jasper's caribou recovery program is the collaboration with Indigenous rights holders.

AWA will continue to seek precautionary recreation measures from Parks Canada. In Tonquin, for example, Marmot Basin ski hill's current range-shrinking impacts should be reduced, and summer/fall backcountry visitor impacts carefully monitored. As well, it is Parks Canada's responsibility to ensure that the prime caribou habitat of the Maligne valley is maintained and protected for caribou to re-populate as soon as possible.

- By Carolyn Campbell