



CARIBOU

IN CRISIS



WHAT IT TAKES TO SAVE THIS CANADIAN ICON



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No animal better represents our country than Canada's majestic caribou. Its signature widespread antlers have graced the front of our 25-cent coin since 1937. Images of barren-ground caribou, migrating on the tundra in vast numbers that stretch to the horizon, have become a symbol of our enduring wilderness.

My first encounter with wild caribou 25 years ago remains a vivid memory. In a remote boreal forest in northeastern BC, a pair of caribou stepped into the clearing. I watched in wonder as they wandered past me, browsing slowly, their hooves clicking along before they slipped into the forest. Little did I know how rare this experience would become.

Caribou are fascinating creatures. They are the only member of the deer family in which both males and females grow antlers. To aid travel in soft snow and bogs, the hooves of caribou spread out wide

when they step down, like built-in snowshoes. When they lift their foot, their hooves come back together, making a clicking sound.

Caribou are found around the world in northern forests, on the tundra and in wild mountainous regions. Known as reindeer in Europe and Asia, caribou and reindeer are recognized as a single species. However, several subspecies with different traits have evolved across North America and are "irreplaceable components of Canada's biodiversity."

The elusive forest dwelling woodland caribou are rarely seen. It is these grey ghosts of the forest, in particular the boreal forest population of woodland caribou, that urgently need our attention.

Known as boreal caribou, this population is found across a huge swath of Canada's boreal forest, from the foothills of the Richardson Mountains in the Yukon to Labrador's Atlantic shores. These caribou need large tracts of undisturbed boreal forest to thrive.

This caribou's forest home is a

life support system for us as well.

Stretching around the top of the northern hemisphere like a crown, the vast boreal region is one of the greatest sources of freshwater on earth. It filters our air and provides us with oxygen. It stores an incredible amount of carbon, which helps us mitigate against a rapidly changing climate.

Yet boreal caribou and their home are in trouble. Caribou are sensitive to disturbances and the relentless push for industrial development in these forests has fragmented and destroyed much of their habitat. According to the federal government, the boreal caribou population has declined 30 per cent in the last 20 years, mostly due to habitat degradation.²

Boreal caribou desperately need intact forested habitat in order to survive.

There is a way forward but progress has been slow. Boreal caribou are listed as threatened under Canada's Species at Risk Act (SARA), which provides the necessary tools to protect them. What we need now is political will.

Boreal caribou desperately need intact forested habitat in order to survive.



Photo top: Woodland caribou (Art Wolfe).

Photos: Mountain caribou, Barren-ground caribou (John E. Marriott).

In 2012, the federal government gave the provinces and territories, which control most of the lands where the boreal caribou live, five years to develop plans that protect at least 65 per cent of their habitat.³ But most have yet to act.

Even if the provinces protect 65 per cent of a population's habitat, caribou still only have a 60 per cent chance of surviving. **We must do more – and do it quickly.**

Read on and find out more about boreal caribou and how to raise your voice to safeguard them.



WHO ASSESSES THE STATUS OF SPECIES IN CANADA?

The Committee for the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) assesses species and determines their status. Animals that are categorized as “threatened”, “endangered” or of “special concern” are recommended for listing under the Species at Risk Act.

The Species at Risk Act (SARA) is Canada’s endangered species legislation. Introduced in 2003, the purposes of SARA are: “to prevent wildlife species from being extirpated or becoming extinct, to provide for the recovery of wildlife species that are extirpated, endangered or threatened as a result of human activity and to manage species of special concern to prevent them from becoming endangered or threatened.”⁴

Enacted with much fanfare, on the ground SARA is a different story.

Over the last 14 years, the legislation has been plagued by lengthy and unlawful delays in recovery planning, political interference, grossly inadequate identification and protection of critical habitat,⁵ and serious delays in the listing of species at risk.⁶

Additionally, SARA applies automatically to just a small sub-group of species at risk that the federal government considers to be under its jurisdiction⁷, leaving the vast majority of land-based species at risk in Canada struggling under a patchwork quilt of weak provincial or territorial regulations and laws.



Photos: Crossbill (Glen and Rebecca Grambo), Small white Lady's-slipper (Mike Grandmaison), Mountain caribou (Roberta Olenick), Wolverine (Glen and Rebecca Grambo).

CARIBOU OF THE BOREAL FOREST

Over millennia boreal caribou have adapted their behaviours to live in the boreal forest. At different times of the year boreal caribou will utilize shady evergreen forests with tall old trees, islands in lakes or bogs and open rock ridges thick with lichens – a critical food source for caribou. Their movements are most often based upon predator avoidance.

In undisturbed boreal regions, small herds of five to 25 animals are sprinkled through immense expanses of old coniferous forests, with several herds living in a common geographic area, referred to as a range.⁸ These large spaces are key, as boreal caribou enhance their chances of survival by putting space between themselves and predators.⁹

When a female caribou is ready to give birth, she leaves the herd and secludes herself on a remote island in a bog or lake to keep predators away from the newborn calf for the crucial first few weeks of life. Boreal caribou have a lower reproduction rate than other members of the deer family – known as ungulates – taking several years to reach breeding age and only ever giving birth to a single calf at a time.

The boreal forest is prone to natural disturbances such as frequent forest fires – an essential and normal forest renewal process. Fires destroy the lichens that caribou require for nourishment and replace older boreal forest with a regenerating young



Photo: Lichen in caribou habitat (Eric Reder).

forest that has harder and deeper snow cover and more predators. Recent research in northern Saskatchewan has shown that boreal caribou can handle significant natural forest disturbance without a resulting population decline – as long as there aren't additional human disturbances.¹⁰

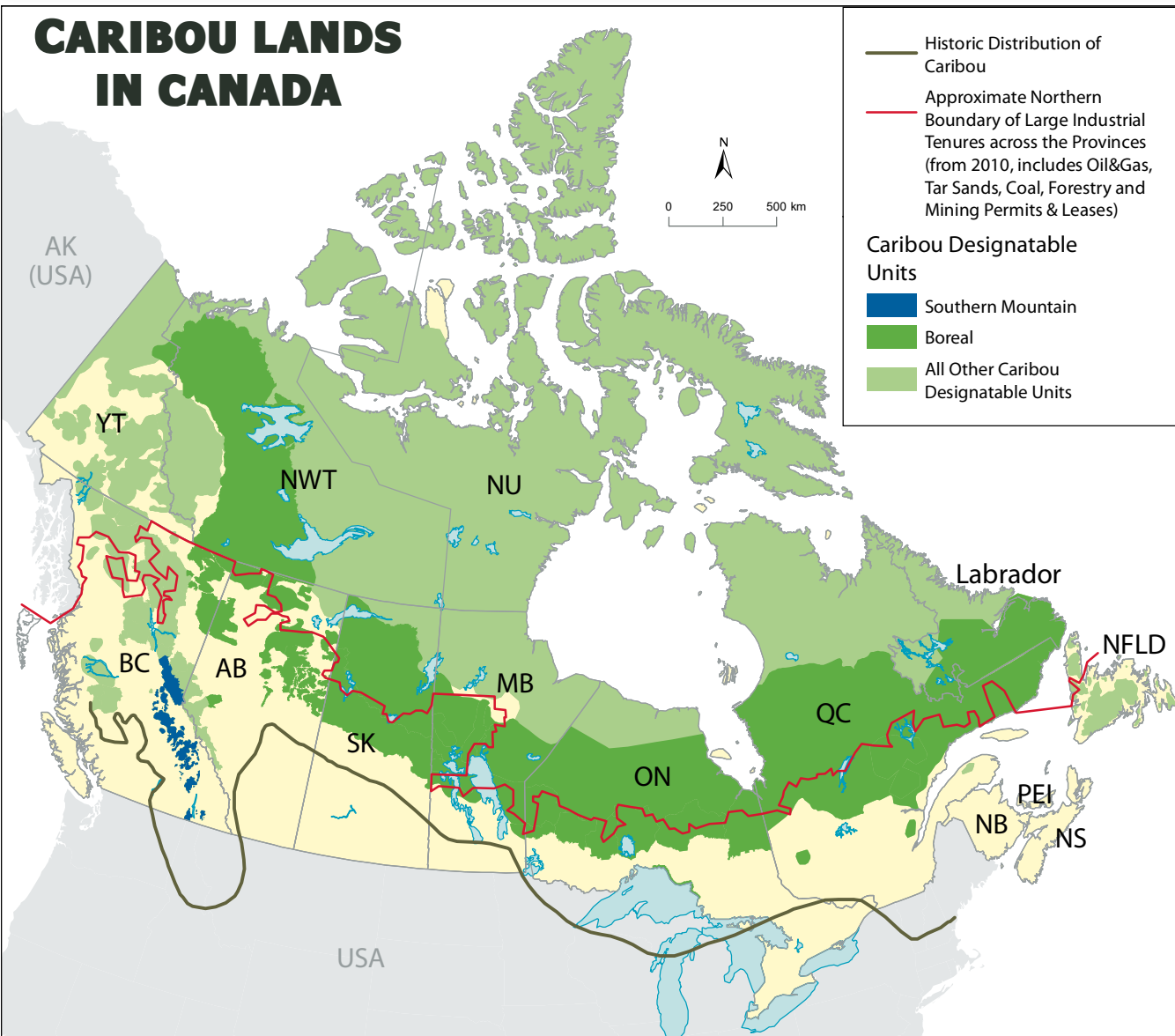
The challenge for caribou comes when a clearcut or a roadway destroys their habitat. A young forest provides leafy saplings and tasty young trees that are inviting to deer and moose. Additional clearing and road construction from industrial activity and the increased population of these other ungulates entices predators like wolves to move in. This leads to increased predation of caribou.

Given the biological traits that limit caribou numbers and make them vulnerable to elevated levels of predation, human-caused habitat destruction is their greatest threat.



Photo: Mountain caribou, Canadian Rockies (John E. Marriott).

CARIBOU LANDS IN CANADA



THE CARIBOU FAMILY

In 1961, native caribou living in North America were divided into four subspecies: barren-ground, woodland, Peary, and Grant's. A fifth caribou subspecies, Dawson's caribou, was already extinct. In 2011, the Committee on the Status of Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) undertook the daunting task of a deeper investigation into caribou classifications in order to facilitate management and recovery efforts. COSEWIC now lists 12 Designatable Units in Canada, including three separate mountain caribou groups (southern, central and northern), Peary, Gaspésie, barren-ground, and boreal caribou. Four of these are protected under SARA.¹¹ **In 2016, COSEWIC recommended that barren-ground caribou be listed as threatened and Tornjat caribou as endangered, as these once mighty herds have suffered serious declines.**¹²



Photos: Barren-ground caribou, Woodland caribou (Roberta Olenick).



THE HUMAN THREAT TO CARIBOU

Boreal caribou once lived in evergreen forests across much of North America, even stretching down into Minnesota and Wisconsin in the US. Today, they have disappeared from much of their original forest range and populations can only be found further north.

It is the human-caused disturbances which pose the greatest threat to this distinguished animal. As development has pushed into the remote boreal forest in a hunt for resources, and to a lesser extent recreation, caribou have declined and disappeared.

The largest footprint on their habitat is from industry. Oil and gas seismic lines in Alberta, mining exploration in Quebec, hydro transmission corridors in Manitoba, and logging activity across the country are disturbing what little

remains of the caribou forests.

Boreal caribou need old forests rich with lichen to survive and it's these same forests that logging companies target. Unfortunately, the industry is very reluctant to relinquish their commercial interests in boreal caribou habitat. In fact, in 2015, the Ontario Forest Industries Association (OFIA) – which includes Weyerhaeuser and Resolute Forest Products as members – challenged the need to preserve boreal caribou,¹³ ignoring scientific consensus that has existed for decades.



Photos: Hydro lines through caribou habitat (John E. Marriott), Tar sands in Alberta (Garth Lenz).

WOLVES PAY THE PRICE

Although we know that the destruction and fragmentation of caribou habitat has been the primary reason for their dramatic population decline,¹⁴ governments are averse to protecting adequate habitat and thereby ruffling industry feathers.

Rather than safeguarding caribou forests in a timely manner, they have promoted barbaric and extreme “recovery” measures, among them predator culls.

Both the Alberta and BC governments have undertaken controversial wolf and predator culls as a supposed means to protect dwindling caribou populations. BC government scientists have admitted that the aerial hunting and killing of wolves is “inhumane.”¹⁵ And there is yet another reason to oppose these controversial predator culls: they don't work.



Photo: Wild wolf in Canadian Rockies (John E. Marriott).

Although there is evidence that fewer wolves is beneficial to caribou populations, a 2014 study in the Canadian Journal of Zoology found that Alberta's wolf cull “failed to achieve any improvement in boreal woodland caribou adult female survival, or any improvement in calf survival, and as such had no effect on population dynamics.”¹⁶

CLIMATE IMPACTS

Like all Canadian wildlife, boreal caribou also need protection from the worsening impact of climate change. As the world warms, animals move to respond to shifts in temperature, precipitation, and the arrival of other species. Caribou will need even more space to adapt to their changing habitat, so that they can find their place in an increasingly altered forest. To save this at-risk species, we need to protect more forest habitat to give them a fighting chance to survive climate change.



Photo: Mountain caribou bull (Robert McCaw).

ENDANGERED SOUTHERN MOUNTAIN CARIBOU

Years ago, mountain caribou extended south of the Canadian border into the United States. However, as resource extraction expanded, the caribou's range has contracted steadily northward and in many areas these caribou are now struggling to survive. Nowhere is this struggle more apparent than with the southern mountain caribou population, who are found in the old-growth forests of southeastern BC.¹⁷ Today, these caribou have almost disappeared completely from the continental US, except in the very northeastern part of Washington and the far north of Idaho. SARA has listed them as endangered in Canada.

The southern mountain caribou are old-growth specialists whose winter diet consists almost entirely of lichens that grow on older trees. Unfortunately, as logging companies have targeted the old-growth forests that the southern mountain caribou rely on for nourishment and protection, their numbers have declined from roughly 2,500 animals in 1995 to just 1,540 today.¹⁸

(Check out our film on mountain caribou at: <https://vimeo.com/205445075>)



Photos: West Moberly mountain caribou (Isabelle Groc), Ancient western cedar forest (Don Johnston), Mountain caribou (Terry Parker).

FOREST PROTECTION NEEDED

Scientists recognize that the most important thing species at risk need is the protection of their habitat: the places where they travel, forage, reproduce and raise their young.

The 2012 federal recovery strategy for boreal caribou takes some first steps towards applying good science to the survival and recovery of this species. It notes that at least 65 per cent of each local caribou population's boreal forest habitat must be intact for them to have even a moderate chance of survival.¹⁹ **In reality, the recovery strategy science shows 80 per cent of boreal caribou forest needs to be undisturbed to give caribou an 80 per cent chance of survival.**

Even with this conservative recommendation, many of the boreal caribou ranges across Canada have far less intact area remaining. Unfortunately, provincial and territorial governments have been reluctant to set aside habitat for caribou for fear of alienating resource-extraction industries. And the federal government has been hesitant to intervene, although the powers of SARA allow them to do just that.²⁰

The most horrific habitat stories are found in Alberta, where boreal forests

have been decimated for oil and gas exploration. Today, the Little Smoky caribou range has only five per cent undisturbed forest.²¹ Nearly all of the caribou ranges in Alberta as well as northeastern BC are in dire straights because of industrial development.

The good news is northern Saskatchewan, eastern Manitoba and the northern parts of Ontario and Quebec all have boreal caribou ranges that could maintain their populations – as long as we prevent any further forest disturbance.

For ranges where industrial activity is persisting, the future is uncertain.

Due to forest disturbances from human activity, as well as the natural process of

fire, caribou need to have new adjacent forest to call home. This habitat is an essential component of keeping boreal caribou on the land. Planning for where caribou are now and where they need to go in 25 years means we need to leave a large part of our remaining boreal forest undisturbed.

A moratorium on all new development in undisturbed boreal forest is essential now if we are to protect caribou for future generations.



Photo: Black spruce found in boreal forests (All Canada Photos).



BC CAVES TO INDUSTRY PRESSURE

The BC government recently announced it will spend \$27 million over three years to “enhance” recovery of the 51 woodland caribou populations in the province.²² This may sound like good news, but there is a danger that the focus will continue to be on the unethical and unsuccessful wolf cull and a maternal penning program rather than habitat protection.

This concern was supported by a Freedom of Information request the Wilderness Committee received in the fall of 2015, which confirmed that logging companies didn't want to forgo harvesting opportunities inside caribou habitat.

A government briefing note prepared for the BC Environment Minister on the caribou recovery plan stated: “Actions within the MCRIP [Mountain Caribou Recovery Implementation Plan] have largely been implemented with the exception of effectively managing wolf populations. Industry has criticized government for failing to effectively implement this recovery action and will be very reluctant to forgo additional harvesting opportunities to meet any additional habitat targets imposed by the federal recovery strategy.”²³

Within months of this note being issued, the government began the wolf cull.

POWER IS WITH THE FEDS, ACTIONS ARE WITH THE PROVINCES

In October 2012, the federal government, under intense pressure from environmental groups such as the Wilderness Committee as well as tens of thousands of Canadians, produced a recovery strategy for boreal caribou under SARA.²⁴ The plan required the provinces to create range plans for each boreal caribou range in their jurisdiction, delaying action for another five years.

Now with the five-year deadline looming in October, some provinces have begun to act. Others lag far behind in protecting caribou habitat as required.²⁵

Here's how the provinces are doing so far:

- Alberta, where caribou forest has been the most disturbed, has laid out the strongest actions and is

attempting to meet their range plan targets.²⁶

- Quebec has promised protection for 90 per cent of intact northern forests but little action for the at-risk boreal caribou ranges in logging country.²⁷
- Ontario has published a great deal of information regarding boreal caribou since 2012, but they have also weakened their provincial endangered species legislation recently to allow for boreal caribou habitat destruction.²⁸
- BC – a province with no provincial endangered species legislation – appears more concerned with promoting opportunities for industry than setting aside enough habitat to give the caribou even a moderate chance of recovery.²⁹
- Manitoba, one of the major

laggards, has refused to even attempt to meet their deadlines.³⁰

If the provinces and territories don't do the right thing by October, only strong federal action will ensure caribou survive.



Photo: Woodland caribou (Wayne Lynch).



Photo: Boreal woodland caribou (Wayne Lynch).



The science in the recovery strategy states that for boreal caribou to have an 80 per cent chance of survival, they need 80 per cent of each caribou population's habitat undisturbed. It is time to demand that the federal government ensures all provinces and territories take strong action to protect the habitat – and the future – of Canada's boreal caribou.

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TAKE ACTION TWO FOR THE 'BOU!

- 1 Please write to the Prime Minister of Canada and let him know that we need concrete action to protect boreal caribou – as required under the Species at Risk Act – rather than more delays. Remind him that the federal government must ensure the provinces implement strong action plans to protect boreal caribou and their boreal forest home by October 2017.

Office of the Prime Minister

80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2



- 2 Write to your provincial and territorial government and let them know that they must produce strong action plans to protect boreal caribou and their boreal forest home, and they need to do it now.

You can visit our website to get the contact information for your provincial or territorial government at: wildernesscommittee.org/premiercontacts



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YES! I WILL DEFEND CANADA'S CARIBOU

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