

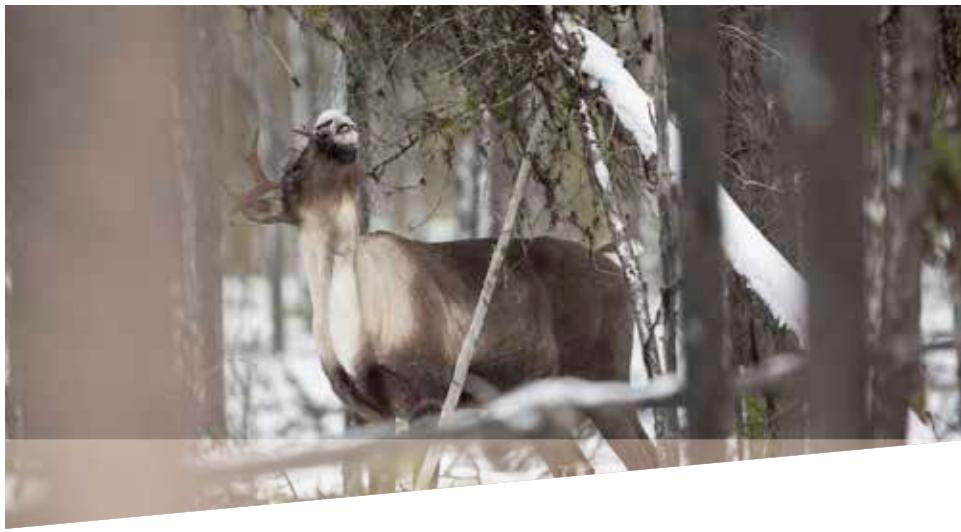


Caribou facts for local governments to consider

FACT BOOKLET | FEBRUARY 2020



Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative



Caribou Ecology Basics

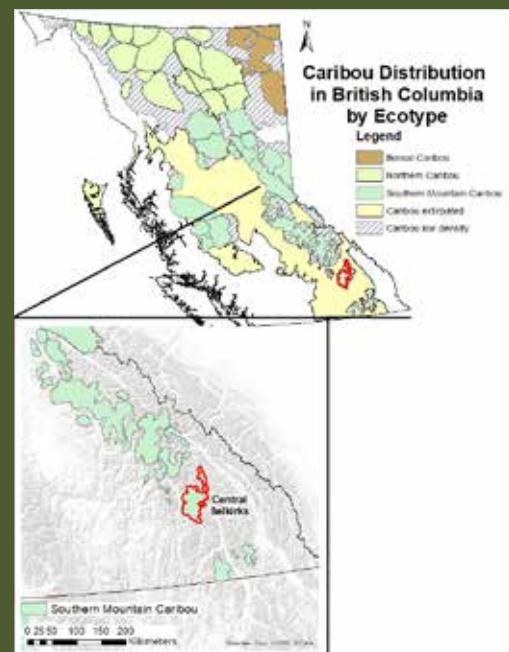
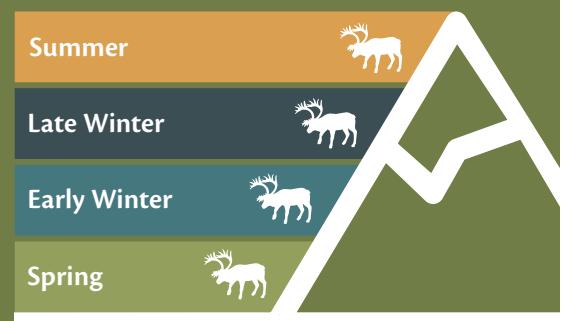
Southern mountain caribou are a sub-species of woodland caribou that rely on lichen that grow in trees (arboreal), found primarily in old-growth forests. Mountain caribou have evolved to rely on deep snow-packs and make distinct seasonal elevation migrations. They have an unusual double migration, descending from their summer alpine habitat in early winter as snow accumulates to eat arboreal lichens. As the snow deepens and hardens, they return to higher elevations, but then descend again to valley bottoms in early spring to graze on early-greening vegetation and lichen litterfall. They then go back to the alpine meadows to give birth and spend the summer.

Mountain caribou have evolved to live in the mountains and are an indicator species of ecosystem health. Conserving caribou benefits a myriad of other species co-occurring in old-growth forests.

Historically mountain caribou were abundant in the Interior Temperate Rainforest region and were an important food source for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Today, southern mountain caribou are at serious risk of extinction. Southern mountain caribou require large tracts of undisturbed habitat to thrive. The steep decline in populations is a result of cumulative effects, beginning with historic over-hunting, and in recent decades, major habitat loss from intensive industrial forestry, mining, and associated road building. Compounding effects have changed predator-prey dynamics, resulting in increased predation. Adventure tourism and motorized recreation are causing disturbance to an already stressed animal. Climate change is further affecting the species with changes in snowpack reliability, limiting access to food. Low reproductive rates are a related challenge as caribou cannot quickly recover or adapt to these significant disturbances.

As of 2019 counts, the Central Selkirks herd is now only about 24 animals, down from 268 in the early 2000s. This herd has a high probability of extinction if appropriate management actions are not taken.

MOUNTAIN CARIBOU MIGRATION PATTERN



The geographical location of the Central Selkirks subpopulation of southern mountain caribou.

The 2788 km² range (inset: red outline) is situated within the Kootenay Region of southeastern British Columbia.



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The Legal Situation

BRITISH COLUMBIA IS ONE OF FOUR PROVINCES THAT DOES NOT HAVE SPECIFIC LAWS TO PROTECT ENDANGERED WILDLIFE WITHIN ITS BORDERS.

Since 2003, southern mountain caribou have been federally designated as Threatened under the Canadian Species at Risk Act (SARA).

FACTS ABOUT SARA

Prevents wildlife species in Canada from disappearing

Provides for recovery of species endangered as a result of human activity

Encourages cooperation of governments, makes engagement with Indigenous peoples essential

Requires permanent protection mechanisms for critical habitat and does not allow for destruction of this habitat

In 2014 Canada issued a Recovery Action Plan, calling for habitat protection and other recovery measures to achieve self-sustaining populations of mountain caribou in all population units.

UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Canada and B.C. have made commitments to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which includes confirming the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination and subsistence rights and rights to lands, territories and resources. An important court case in 2011 confirmed the right of Treaty 8 nations to hunt caribou, one they have been unable to exercise for decades now. UNDRIP has several articles about Indigenous participation in decision making.



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A SUCCESSFULLY RECOVERED SPECIES WILL:

have healthy populations

be self-sustaining

be genetically robust

have representative populations across historic range

be resilient across the range

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations from the B.C. Mountain Caribou Technical Advisory Committees (2002, 2004), Mountain Caribou Science Team (2006), and the 2014 federal Recovery Strategy all identify the importance of protecting and restoring habitat, including managing recreational activities.

The 2014 federal Recovery Strategy suggests that caribou populations have a higher probability of being self-sustaining when their range contains at least 65 per cent undisturbed habitat.

A recent independent analysis indicates that habitat for more than 80 per cent of the herds does not meet this threshold.

Status of Recovery Planning

TO DATE, PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT ACTIONS HAVE BEEN LARGELY INEFFECTIVE AT ADDRESSING THE LOSS OF CARIBOU AND HABITAT.

The Province of B.C. developed a Mountain Caribou Recovery Implementation Plan in 2007 that included some habitat protections, as well as some snowmobile closures, and predator-prey management. Provincial government actions, however, have been largely ineffective at halting the decline of caribou numbers. Since 2007 several herds, including the South Selkirk and South Purcell, have become extirpated.

In May 2018, after several petitions from scientists and non-profits, the federal Minister of Environment and Climate Change determined that there is an 'imminent threat' to caribou recovery in B.C. Under SARA, the Minister is required to recommend to Cabinet an 'emergency order' to protect critical habitat, or to agree on another proposal. The current proposed solution is to employ a Section 11 conservation agreement under SARA. A Draft Section 11 Agreement between Canada and B.C. for all southern mountain caribou, and a draft Partnership Agreement between Canada, B.C., West Moberly and Saulteau First Nations for the Peace region, was announced in March 2019.

After announcing the draft agreements, the Province of B.C. hosted a series of public community meetings and an online feedback form. The public engagement process resulted in community divisions and protest by non-Indigenous interests, including the logging industry agitating about the potential job losses. In an apparent effort to try to tamp down the growing controversy, the Premier announced a four-week extension for the public engagement process, and received an associated report in June 2019 with 14 recommendations. This has delayed the signing of the agreements while B.C. negotiates with industry and local politicians in the Peace. As of publication of this fact booklet, neither of the agreements have been signed.

The Section 11 agreement between Canada and B.C. focuses on herd planning for other parts of the province and engagement with First Nations, local governments, and stakeholders is part of the process. Despite the Section 11 agreement not yet being signed, B.C. has embarked on engagement for caribou herds, including the Central Selkirks.

MUNICIPAL RESOLUTIONS

The City of Nelson passed a resolution and brought it to the UBCM Convention in fall 2019, declaring support for the Section 11 Agreement, including provisions for habitat protection. The City of Rossland passed a similar resolution.



What should local governments take into account?

INFORMATION AND QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

In order to make recommendations on behalf of your jurisdiction, ensure you have complete and accurate information. This issue is complex and can be controversial. Make sure you get a qualified wildlife biologist to provide up-to-date information on your herd.

While a suite of measures is required in this emergency situation, legally designated permanent habitat protection must be included if recovery of this species is to be successful. Are short-term measures like predator control being considered in the context of a full suite of commitments, including habitat protection and human activity management?

While plans are made, there must be commitments to protect habitat in the interim so if recovery is successful, there is somewhere for these animals to go.

People are highly concerned and most want to see caribou remain on the landscape. Public support for controversial management actions such as predator control and maternity penning may be limited if a commitment to protection and restoration of habitat is not also in the plan.

Good process is incredibly important with the complexities of a highly endangered animal and many land-use interests. How will the Province develop potential scenarios? Will the socio-economic costs and benefits be calculated? How will final decisions be made? Get clarity on the process to ensure it is transparent and fair.

Much of the Central Selkirks herd range is covered in commercial heli-ski tenures, and recreation interests continue to rise. Conflict is also on the rise between user groups. Will this process consider land use planning and access management?

The controversy in the Peace was partially due to misunderstanding regarding processes: the government-to-government Partnership Agreement was being negotiated with First Nations while a different process was underway with stakeholders, who also thought they had a decision-making role. Will B.C. do a better job here in the south, bringing stakeholder information into government-to-government discussions? First Nations are decision-makers, not stakeholders.

Timing is everything. The Central Selkirks herd is literally on the brink of being lost. Will we get bogged down in process or will we take timely action — including habitat protections, at least on an interim basis — to meet the goals of recovering this species to a self-sustaining population?



LEARN MORE

This fact booklet was prepared by Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative in February 2020. Learn more about our work at y2y.net

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