



British Columbia's Mountain Caribou

BC Market Outreach Network

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BC FOREST *facts*

BRITISH COLUMBIA'S MOUNTAIN CARIBOU



Mountain caribou are a unique population of woodland caribou found in the mountain ranges of southeastern and central British Columbia.

British Columbia will protect 95 per cent of the most suitable winter habitat within identified mountain caribou herd areas by spring 2008. Currently, no timber harvesting is allowed in 65 per cent of the high suitability habitat.

The majestic mountain ranges of southeastern and central British Columbia are home to a unique population of woodland caribou known as mountain caribou. Except for one subpopulation that ranges south into the United States, mountain caribou exist nowhere else on Earth.

Woodland caribou occur across Canada, and there are three ecotypes in British Columbia – mountain, boreal and northern – that are genetically indistinguishable but have different habitats, diets and seasonal movements.

Mountain caribou live in old-growth forests in British Columbia's interior wet belt. Their present distribution includes the mountain ranges of the Cariboo, the Selkirks, the Purcells, the Monashees and the Rockies north and east of Prince George.



They favour large, contiguous areas of suitable summer and winter habitat, principally in high-elevation parkland areas except during spring and early winter when some herds use low-elevation forests. When the snowpack is deep, their late winter diet is made up almost exclusively of lichens that grow primarily on the dead limbs of trees more than 100 years old.

Mountain caribou range over a wide elevation through the year, and this creates the potential for conflicts with human activities ranging from winter backcountry recreation to timber harvesting to mining.

SUPPORTING MOUNTAIN CARIBOU

While caribou populations across Canada are declining, mountain caribou face unique pressures as most of the existing 12 small subpopulations or herds are already isolated in mountain habitats that have been fragmented by human activities. Today, mountain caribou occupy about 60 per cent of their historic range in the central and southern half of British Columbia, and their population has dropped from about 2,500 individuals in 1995 to about 1,900 animals today.

Mountain caribou are classified as threatened under Canada's Species at Risk Act. In British Columbia, they are on the provincial red list and are included under the Identified Wildlife Management Strategy, which provides special consideration under British Columbia's forestry legislation for species at risk.

Scientists working with mountain caribou recognize that challenging and overlapping threats are leading to the population decline. New, young forests draw species such as moose and deer to traditional mountain caribou habitat, bringing with them predators such as wolves and cougars, which also prey on the caribou. Logging can reduce the



amount of older forest needed for winter forage, and disrupt seasonal travel patterns. Caribou can be disturbed by the sight, sound or scent of humans so recreational activities such as snowmobiling can disrupt them and busy highways and railroads can become formidable barriers.



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most suitable winter habitat and there is a moratorium on new commercial backcountry applications in southern mountain caribou habitats.

The plan calls for management of populations of predators such as cougars and wolves, as well as their primary prey (deer and moose), where there is a scientific determination of immediate threat to the recovery of mountain caribou herds. Measures include changes to increase hunting allocations as well as non-lethal actions such as wolf sterilization or targeted removal of individuals or packs.

In 2007, the British Columbia government launched a collaborative plan to recover mountain caribou herds and restore the population to the pre-1995 level of 2,500 animals throughout their existing range in the province. The plan addresses recommendations of the independent Mountain Caribou Science Team, consisting of experts from Alberta, British Columbia and Idaho State.

Recovery actions include legally protecting 95 per cent of the most suitable winter habitat within identified herd areas by spring 2008, and further managing winter recreation activities such as snowmobiling and heli-skiing in these areas. Currently, no harvesting is allowed in 65 per cent of the

In addition, caribou numbers in small herds will be boosted by transplanting animals from more robust herds to achieve critical mass for self-sufficiency. Implementation of the recovery plan will be backed by effectiveness monitoring plans for habitat, recreation and predator-prey management efforts, and \$1 million a year for three years will be provided by government to support adaptive management plans.

The plan has been designed to address the findings of the science team while balancing socio-economic considerations brought forward through stakeholder consultation. It is consistent with recommendations in a 2004 report by the independent Forest Practices Board, which called for regulatory, research and communications actions by government, industry and recreation users to focus efforts on conserving mountain caribou.

FORESTRY AND MOUNTAIN CARIBOU

Where timber harvesting will still be allowed in low suitability habitats, the British Columbia government and the forest industry are working to reduce impacts on the animals. The forest industry has actively participated on mountain caribou recovery teams and in land use planning processes that identified and protected key habitat areas.

Forest companies have deferred harvesting, modified harvesting practices or used alternate silvicultural systems to benefit mountain caribou, and have hired experts to help develop plans and review proposed treatments.

The industry has also financed caribou habitat research and population censuses to improve information guiding forest management. Activities to conserve mountain caribou habitat are aided by the fact that forest professionals in British Columbia are held accountable under law for their decisions when working in areas with species at risk such as the mountain caribou.



CARIBOU PHOTOS: GARRY BEAUDRY, MINISTRY OF FORESTS AND RANGE

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