

THE LONG ROAD TO CARIBOU RECOVERY

Bringing a Native Montana Species
Back From the Brink of Extinction

By Alison Grey



Photo by Wayne Sawchuck

The mountain caribou are threatened with the prospect of disappearing forever. With only 42 animals in the South Selkirk herd and less than 20 in the South Purcell herd, these animals are the final species of their kind to cross into the continental U.S.

These trans-boundary herds, also referred to as woodland caribou, are the remnants of an ever decreasing population that once spanned much of the northern part of the lower 48. Today, there are about 1,900 animals in 18 different herds, the majority living in British Columbia, down significantly from around 2,500 in the mid-1980s.

Dave Quinn, program manager for Wildsight, a British Columbia conservation group that has partnered with other organizations to create the Mountain Caribou Project, notes that seven of these herds have less than 25 animals and the remaining 11 have less than 50. At least 75 animals are required in a herd to withstand habitat fluctuations like fires, global warming and predators, he said.

Mountain caribou are one of the most endangered mammals in North America and the only species of its kind globally. Living in the dense, old-growth forests spanning across the mountainous landscapes of northwestern Montana, the Idaho Panhandle, northeastern Washington and British Columbia, this species lives further south than any other caribou in the world.

Quinn warns that as unsustainable logging, uncontrolled winter recreation like snowmobiling, roads and other industry encroaches further into these forests, the mountain caribou are increasingly at risk of disappearing with their habitat.

Joe Scott, international programs director for Conservation Northwest, based in Washington and part of the Mountain Caribou Project, said caribou habitat is incredibly bio-diverse. Mountain caribou rely on high-altitude, old-growth forests to survive. These ancient trees provide lichen, shelter and protection, he said.

"They're an indicator of how well we are stewarding this very unique environment," said Scott. "As unique as the caribou are, they're habitat is equally unique. It's the only inland rainforest in the world."

While not the classic rainforest seen in other coastal areas, this eco-system has been described as an inland temperate rainforest because it is wetter than other surrounding areas, said Sara Canepa, forest watch coordinator for the Yaak Valley Forest Council in Northwest Montana.

Montana's Yaak Valley, nestled in the Kootenai National Forest, is vitally important. It acts as a corridor for species to move in from Canada, which increases genetic diversity, and is why grizzlies and other species, like caribou, can still live here, Canepa said.

The South Selkirk and South Purcell herds live in and around the Caribou Recovery Zone, a 2,200 square-mile area in the U.S. and British Columbia that was set aside when the species was listed as endangered in 1984. The Selkirk Caribou Recovery Plan was enacted around that time, collaring and transplanting caribou from northern Canadian herds in hopes of creating a self-sustaining population. But, the plan was ultimately hindered by

unhealthy habitat and the resulting small and polarized herds.

"What used to be one large population of caribou has now been fragmented into 18 or so herds, and those herds may or may not have any interaction with each other, and that makes them prone to extinction," said Scott.

Mike Garrity, executive director of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies said that creating connecting corridors throughout the entire Northern Rockies is imperative for caribou survival. When caribou habitat is protected, other threatened species that still reside in Montana, grizzly bears, wolverines, lynx and bull trout, are protected as well, he said.

"Protect the umbrella species and you'll protect the rest," said Garrity.

Scott said the biggest hope for caribou recovery is the Draft Strategy Option, a plan that is currently being drafted by the British Columbia Species at Risk Office (SARCO). Working with a team of scientists, SARCO is consulting with forest industry groups, conservation organizations, motorized vehicle groups and others to create a final caribou recovery plan.

The plan, encompassing some seven million acres, considers different management options including predator control, habitat recovery, recreation and industry management and maternity pens, enclosures to protect pregnant caribou and their off-spring, said Scott.

However, both Scott and Quinn are concerned that the science team is basing too much emphasis on predator control, some of which are threatened themselves, like the grizzly bear and wolverine, and not enough on habitat protection.

Because the plan is still being drafted and is open to public comment until the end of February, it is vitally important that citizens, both in the U.S. and British Columbia, stress the importance of protecting the habitat, said Quinn.

"U.S. organizations need to weigh in on this to ensure that both southern herds (the Purcells and the South Selkirks) get the strongest protection," he said, warning that under the current plan, these herds are only receiving minimum protection.

And some Montana voices are raising concern. Last year, Gov. Brian Schweitzer wrote a letter to British Columbia's Premier Gordon Campbell, stressing the importance of caribou recovery and continued trans-boundary cooperation.

"The mountain ecotype of woodland caribou is the only historical native species missing from Montana's vast array of wildlife. Although occasional sightings of caribou that have wandered south of British Columbia do occur in remote corners in northwestern Montana, caribou are officially considered extirpated from the state," he wrote.

The time to act is now, said Scott.

"If British Columbia doesn't come up with a scientifically defensible recovery plan, there will not be caribou in Northwestern Montana in the future," said Scott. "They'll be gone."

For more information about the Mountain Caribou Project and links to other related organizations and efforts, visit; www.mountaincaribou.ca.