



Canada's Boreal icon at risk: a ranking of the most threatened herd ranges of woodland caribou

Edmonton, December 11, 2014.

Woodland caribou are in trouble throughout their range in Canada. Their numbers are dropping because of habitat loss and high levels of predation by wolves, the result of vast changes in their herd ranges caused by a variety of industrial pressures.

“Thanks to new high-resolution global satellite data developed by Dr. Matthew Hansen at the University of Maryland, we can systematically and accurately determine the rate of forest change across all the range of Canada’s woodland caribou and pinpoint exactly where in the boreal forest these animals are most under threat,” said Peter Lee, co-author of the study and Executive Director of GFWC.

GFWC used a “triage” approach similar to that used in medical emergencies during war-time or pandemics to decide the order of treatment of a large number of patients or casualties where the approach assigns degrees of urgency to wounds or illnesses.

Lee continued, “we analyzed the Hansen data and other key data, such as Environment Canada’s Recovery Strategy for boreal caribou, to ask a series of questions about forest loss and industrial activity in caribou herd ranges across Canada, in order to assign degrees of urgency to the health of Canada’s boreal caribou.”

GFWC’s triage approach determined that 10 herds are the ones most at immediate risk due to industrial activities and recent acceleration of forest loss in their ranges:

- Bistcho (Alberta)
- Little Smoky (Alberta)
- Chinchaga (Alberta and British Columbia)
- Richardson (Alberta)
- Maxhamish (British Columbia)
- Red Earth (Alberta)
- Nipisi (Alberta)
- West Side Athabasca River (Alberta)
- Calendar (British Columbia)
- Nipigon (Ontario)

“Seven of the ten most-at-risk herds are in Alberta and are generally well-known to be under severe threat,” said Lee. “The rapid expansion of oil and gas and logging activities into Alberta’s caribou range has led the Government of Canada to list these and other boreal caribou as threatened. Something needs to be done to reverse their path to extirpation or extinction. This is a dire situation for an iconic animal that Canadians consider important enough to put on the face of their Quarter coin.”

Lee concluded, “the primary threat to most boreal caribou populations is unnaturally high predation rates as a result of habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation. This threat can be avoided or mitigated through coordinated land use planning, and habitat restoration and management, in conjunction with predator/alternate prey management where local population conditions warrant such action. Our analysis can aid decision-making regarding what recovery techniques are key for caribou recovery in different herd ranges that are most affected by industrial activities, and thereby achieve the population and distribution objectives for boreal caribou, and in particular, which herd ranges are in most need of habitat protection and reductions in forest loss. Our analysis could be used by governments in Canada as a ‘triage’ approach: the assignment of degrees of urgency can help identify top priorities for habitat protection in order to save Canada’s boreal caribou herds.”

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