

## National background

### The Survival of Boreal Woodland Caribou in Canada

A landmark scientific review, conducted under Canada's Species at Risk Act, reveals a startling story about Boreal woodland caribou, a wide-ranging species threatened with extinction in nearly every part of Canada where it is still found, except the island of Newfoundland. The most comprehensive assessment to date of the state of the species in Canada, the review is entitled **Scientific Review for the Identification of Critical Habitat for Woodland Caribou**. Its authors assessed nearly 60 Boreal woodland caribou ranges across the country for the quality of habitat and the chances of the species' survival. The science confirms the need to protect at least half of the carbon-rich Boreal forest to ensure the caribou's long-term survival and slow the effects of climate change.

### What are the concerns?

- **Half of caribou range has been lost.** Boreal woodland caribou were once prevalent throughout most of Canada, but they have already been eliminated from 50% of their range. They have totally disappeared from PEI, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia and the eastern United States. These creatures, "harbingers" of the health of our remaining Boreal forest wilderness, only thrive in intact landscapes.
- **Habitat loss** is the main reason woodland caribou populations are threatened. Historically, wildfires have been the key natural disturbance in the Boreal forest, but human activities and industrial development are disrupting the fine balance of predators and prey, as well as natural vegetation patterns.
- Across Canada, human-caused habitat loss results from logging, roads, mines, hydro-electric developments, and utility corridors. Disturbances from oil and gas production, such as seismic lines and well sites, have caused extensive habitat loss in Alberta and northeastern British Columbia.
- **Caribou have a poor chance of survival in more than half of their remaining ranges** because their habitat there is in poor condition. Thirty ranges are so extensively disturbed that they will not permit existing caribou to be **self-sustaining**.
- Only 17 ranges are considered sufficiently intact to support **self-sustaining** caribou populations.
- **The study identified gaps in knowledge** about the locations of woodland caribou ranges, especially in northern Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec.

### What is the extent of disturbed habitat nationwide?

- On average, 12% (approximately **290,000 km<sup>2</sup>**) of the remaining habitat for Boreal woodland caribou has been affected by human disturbance. Generally, more caribou habitat has been disturbed in the West than in other parts of Canada.
- The Boreal woodland caribou habitat on Ontario's Slate Islands has been least disturbed (0% disturbance).
- At the highest end, 82% of the Boreal woodland caribou habitat of the Little Smokey population of caribou in Alberta has been disturbed.
- In nearly 40 of the remaining woodland caribou ranges, more than 10% of the habitat has been disturbed by humans.

## How many Boreal woodland caribou are there, and how large are their ranges?

- Scientists estimate about 36,000 Boreal woodland caribou remain in Canada.
- They range over forest and wetlands comprising roughly 2.5 million km<sup>2</sup>, nearly half of Canada's entire Boreal forest. That is an area equivalent to the whole of Ontario and Quebec combined.
- The largest proportion of Boreal woodland caribou range is found in Quebec (28%) and Ontario (19%). The least amount of range lies within British Columbia (1%).

## What restoration efforts are needed?

- The most disturbed ranges need **extensive range restoration efforts**. The study found 21 ranges where current habitat quality and quantity must be improved if caribou populations are to become self-sustaining.
- Conditions are especially poor in Alberta, where 12 of 13 ranges need restoration.
- No restoration efforts are currently needed in Manitoba or Labrador.

## What habitat maintenance is required to sustain populations?

- **Active conservation of habitat** is needed for 25 ranges where conditions of the forest are adequate to maintain self-sustaining caribou populations.
- The majority of these ranges are in eastern Canada, including Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and Labrador. This suggests that caribou have a good chance of survival in these areas, if their habitat remains largely undisturbed by humans.
- However, scientists are concerned about the health of caribou populations that have not yet been fully studied. They expect that once they identify discrete ranges for local populations in Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec, they will find southern populations that are "non self-sustaining."

## What extent of disturbance would be permissible and still allow woodland caribou to survive?

- The scientists described a method to identify how much disturbance of ranges is permissible without damaging the caribou's chance to survive over the long term. The review advises caution before allowing any further disturbance within caribou ranges until these limits for disturbance are identified. CPAWS recommends a pause in development to allow action planning to identify appropriate disturbance limits for each range.
- The study shows that 11 caribou ranges in the Northwest Territories, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and Labrador have sufficiently large populations and small human footprint that they may withstand limited additional human disturbance.

## CPAWS recommendations for protecting Boreal woodland caribou:

- Industry should pause development within Boreal woodland caribou critical habitat range until action plans identifying appropriate disturbance levels and protecting appropriate habitat are implemented at the range-level

## The federal government should take immediate next steps:

- Release a Boreal woodland caribou recovery strategy that incorporates the findings of the Scientific Review by fall 2009.

- Conduct meaningful consultations with Aboriginal Canadians during revision of the recovery strategy to take into account matters such as Aboriginal traditional knowledge.
- Assume leadership in coordinating actions to conserve the Boreal woodland caribou's critical habitat in working with provinces, industry, conservation organizations and First Nations.
- Immediately coordinate national action planning following an "active adaptive management approach" that will enable scientists to determine and experimentally test how much development of a range will permit the survival of Boreal woodland caribou, and implement action plans based on this approach in priority ranges across Canada within two years

For more information, including media release, map, national survey, provincial backgrounders and photos, visit [www.caribouandyou.ca](http://www.caribouandyou.ca)