

# A 2016 OVERVIEW: Another Slow Year for Boreal Woodland Caribou Conservation

Fourth annual report  
on governments' efforts  
to conserve Canada's  
boreal caribou

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## Another Slow Year for Boreal Woodland Caribou Conservation: A 2016 Overview

Before October 2017, the federal government will need to report on the progress that has been made by all governments in implementing, and meeting the objectives of, the [national boreal woodland caribou recovery strategy](#) released in 2012 under the *Species-at-risk Act* (SARA). Earlier this year, CPAWS started a one-year clock, hoping to inspire governments to act before this first report. Looking across Canada today, it will be difficult to demonstrate that sufficient action has been taken to protect caribou.

Boreal caribou are estimated to occupy 2.4 million km<sup>2</sup> of Canada's boreal forest – less than half of their North American range in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Scientists consider boreal caribou as bellwethers of the health of the boreal forest, which also cleanses our air and water, and stores vast amounts of carbon within its soils, moderating climate change. Protecting Canada's remaining boreal caribou habitat is one of the most important means we have of maintaining fully functioning ecosystems within boreal forests and wetlands for generations to come. The biggest threat to caribou's survival today is habitat fragmentation, usually due to industrial activity, which increases access by predators.

The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) has been conducting annual reviews of progress by federal, provincial and territorial governments to protect and recover Canada's remaining boreal woodland caribou<sup>1</sup> populations since 2013. This year again, concrete progress to protect boreal caribou habitat has been limited and far from sufficient to protect this iconic species.

One of the few positive outcomes for boreal caribou habitat conservation by government actors in 2016, was the acceptance of a new forest management plan by the Saskatchewan government that includes a 20-year deferral for 2,230 km<sup>2</sup> of caribou habitat on one forestry tenure. In addition, Alberta and Quebec committed to protecting large areas of caribou habitat in action plans released earlier this year. If implemented, these commitments would result in almost 28,000 km<sup>2</sup> of boreal caribou habitat conservation, but to date, these protected areas have not been created. Finally, the Alberta government has announced they will invest more than a \$1 million to restore linear disturbances in the most disturbed ranges in Canada. Planting is scheduled to begin in the spring.

More troubling, however, is the continued threat to existing caribou habitat, despite commitments to protect caribou across many jurisdictions, as well as under SARA. In BC, for example, the possibility of accelerated natural gas development for LNG export remains a habitat concern for boreal caribou, who are already living in highly disturbed ranges. Meanwhile, in a recently released range plan from Alberta, there seem to be no measures in place to conserve existing habitat in the Little Smoky and A la Pêche ranges, despite the extremely high level of disturbance and how little habitat currently remains.

Also disappointing was a decision from the Ontario Court of Appeal, which upheld the Ontario government's 2013 regulation exempting many harmful industrial activities from complying with core protections of the *Endangered Species Act, 2007*. Meanwhile, in Quebec, CPAWS Quebec compelled the government to publicly release four reports of great importance to caribou recovery. These reports reveal that the socio-economic impacts of boreal caribou recovery at the provincial scale are in fact far lower than portrayed and propose concrete steps to achieve caribou recovery in Quebec.

Finally, at the federal level, work is also advancing slowly. Although Environment and Climate Change Canada released 9 long standing SARA policy documents for review, which was an important first step in

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter boreal caribou.

moving towards implementation, they remain behind on a) identifying which portions of critical boreal woodland caribou habitat is still unprotected and what steps are being taken to protect that habitat as called for in section 63 of SARA, and b) the creation of action plans, the first of which was supposed to be completed in 2015.

Our assessment of progress made in protecting boreal caribou habitat is that while some actions have been taken in 2016, including through collaborative efforts by forestry companies and NGOs working with local governments, Indigenous peoples and stakeholders, most of the habitat that boreal caribou need to survive and thrive remains unprotected.<sup>2</sup> Some provinces and territories have identified strategies for conserving caribou habitat, few have developed specific plans or are implementing the identified measures. As a result, one of the first milestones in the federal recovery strategy -- completing the plans to conserve critical habitat for each herd (range plans) by October 2017 -- will likely not be achieved. Few provinces or territories appear on track to effectively protect boreal caribou habitat on provincial lands by 2017.<sup>3</sup>

In more detail, from west to east, here is what we found:

- The **Northwest Territories** has not released a new version of the draft 2015 boreal caribou recovery strategy. The proposed completion date is now February 17, 2017. The strategy will be key to determining how protection will be achieved throughout the territory. Plans for boreal caribou conservation are being considered regionally and need to be coordinated across the range. As capacity remains a significant challenge, management should be targeted first in areas where disturbance exists and development is being planned such as in the South Slave and Dehcho where disturbance is high and further disturbance by forestry and oil and gas development is being proposed. In all parts of the territory, we continue to have concerns about harvest monitoring and reporting. The declines in other caribou populations could result in increased harvesting pressures on the woodland caribou, and these will need to be managed.
- In **British Columbia**, an increased investment in research and monitoring is now producing adequate data and a new proposed draft implementation plan that would bring BC somewhat closer to alignment with federal range planning guidance. However, concerns remain around achieving the 65% undisturbed habitat threshold and it is unclear how modified future forestry and habitat recovery/restoration activities would contribute to self-sustaining populations over time. Range planning details, projections, and timelines, including for the management of transboundary herds with Alberta and the NWT, are lacking.
- This year, **Alberta** announced they would protect 18,000 km<sup>2</sup> of woodland caribou habitat in the northwest ranges of the province. If implemented, this announcement, combined with the deferral of sales of energy leases within all caribou habitat in the province – which started in July 2015 – are two constructive, though not sufficient, steps for caribou habitat conservation. But not all caribou-related policies in Alberta are as forward-thinking. Alberta released the first range plan available for public review since the release of the national recovery strategies for boreal and mountain woodland caribou. While the draft plan commits resources to restore

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<sup>2</sup> As defined in the federal recovery strategy.

<sup>3</sup> 2017 is the first year that a report on the implementation of the recovery strategy and progress on meeting its objectives should be completed.

historic seismic lines in one of two ranges, it fails to meet federal recommendations for boreal or mountain woodland caribou recovery by adequately restricting industry in caribou habitat, or protecting existing habitat. The plan also relies heavily on alternate management strategies, like penning caribou, and continued predator and alternate prey control.

- This year, **Saskatchewan** approved a forest management plan created through a collaboration of provincial, municipal and Indigenous governments, communities and stakeholders, initiated by the company and NGOs under the Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement. It includes a 20-year deferral on harvesting on 2,230 km<sup>2</sup> of caribou habitat as well as conservation practices throughout the tenure. In addition, the government has been hosting meetings for range planning in the central and western part of the province. Range planning for the Eastern portion will begin in early 2017. Peat mining, linear disturbances and forestry impacts are all under discussion. Meanwhile, scientists looking at boreal woodland caribou in the northern range have found this population to be in good health, which is an important first step towards understanding what needs to be done from a management perspective.
- In October 2015, the **Manitoba** government released a recovery strategy with a strong commitment to the precautionary principle that includes identifying the need to not delay actions deemed essential to caribou recovery. In contrast is the strategy's total disregard for meeting the federal timeline of October 2017 to produce caribou range plans. The provincial strategy's strength is its assertion that protection and forest management planning will support conservation of large caribou habitats with a specific commitment to protect and manage 65-80% of suitable intact caribou habitat in each caribou management unit.
- In April 2016, the **Québec** government released a "Woodland Caribou Habitat Stewardship Plan." It included some "immediate" measures to be taken, most of which have still not occurred, most notably the creation of a large protected area around the "Montagnes Blanches". Moreover, no specific timetables have been established for the various stages of this action plan. In November, CPAWS Quebec compelled the government to publicly release four reports of describing the socio-economic impacts for boreal caribou recovery and concrete steps to achieve recovery in Quebec. Given the lack of clarity on the implementation of the Stewardship Plan and the continuing threats to caribou habitat, the situation in Quebec remains highly problematic.
- **Ontario** took no meaningful action on caribou habitat protection in 2016. CPAWS and others are asking the Supreme Court of Canada to hear an appeal regarding the province's regulation exempting industries from legal protections against being killed and against the destruction of their habitats under its *Endangered Species Act, 2007*. Meanwhile, Ontario's own assessments from earlier this year show that, since the 2012 Recovery Strategy, critical habitat degradation has worsened in all seven ranges where forest management occurs. In ranges further north, several have declining population trends even though they are below the management threshold of 35% disturbance.
- In **Labrador**, there are several monitoring and recovery efforts for Boreal caribou. The government's main efforts have focused on determining population size, trend and

demography; identifying core areas and their habitat characteristics, assessing and prioritizing existing threats; and fostering stewardship. However, 4 of the 5 populations are in decline. The Red Wine boreal caribou population listed under SARA is further jeopardized by the approved inundation of calving and wintering habitat from the controversial Muskrat Falls hydroelectric development. Also in Labrador, the Torngat Mountain population has just been designated “endangered” by COSEWIC. Meanwhile, the **Newfoundland** caribou population continues to decline and is listed by COSEWIC as a species of “special concern”. There are some indications that the health of this population overall may be improving, but it is too early to draw conclusions. The province has yet to implement an effective caribou action plan for the Newfoundland population, despite several years of intensive research to support such decision making.



The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) is Canada's only nationwide charity dedicated solely to the protection of our public land and water, and ensuring our parks are managed to protect the nature within them. In the past 50+ years, we've played a lead role in protecting over half a million square kilometres – an area bigger than the entire Yukon Territory! Our vision is to protect at least half of our public land and water so that future generations can experience Canada's irreplaceable wilderness.

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