

2015 UPDATE: Boreal Woodland Caribou Conservation in Canada

*Third annual report
on government's efforts
to conserve Canada's
boreal caribou*

December 2015





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2015 CPAWS' Boreal Woodland Caribou Conservation Overview

Executive Summary

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 caribou¹ populations since 2013, the year after the *Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou (Rangifer tarandus caribou), Boreal population, in Canada*² was issued by the federal government under the *Species at Risk Act (SARA)*.

CPAWS' cross-Canada review of progress in protecting these boreal caribou, as well as new threats to their habitat, reveals that while some actions were taken, most of the habitat that boreal caribou need to survive and thrive remains unprotected.³

In the three years since the release of the *Federal Recovery Strategy*, which identifies the critical habitat for the boreal caribou, some provinces and territories have put in place processes to identify the measures that could be used to conserve caribou habitat. However, as was found in our reviews from previous years, governments have taken few steps to incorporate these measures into specific plans, or to implement the measures. As a result, one of the first milestones identified in the *Federal Recovery Strategy* will not be achieved. Also, only a few provinces appear on track to effectively protect boreal caribou habitat on provincial lands by 2017.⁴

Boreal caribou are estimated to now occupy 2.4 million km² of Canada's boreal forest – less than half of their North American range in the 19th 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. Conserving Canada's remaining boreal caribou habitat is one of the most



¹Hereafter boreal caribou.

²Hereafter *Federal Recovery Strategy*.

³As defined in the *Federal Recovery Strategy*.

⁴2017 is the first year that a report on the implementation of the recovery strategy and progress on meeting its objectives should be completed.

Photo: Karen Stroebel

Executive Summary

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. (See CPAWS' 2014 report)

In our assessment, the most positive policy actions in 2015 on boreal caribou conservation occurred in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. We also noted early positive signs of change by Alberta's new government in that province's approach to woodland caribou⁵ habitat conservation. In other jurisdictions the reviews are more mixed. Our biggest concerns are reserved for British Columbia and Ontario.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, Québec and Manitoba, new protected areas were established in 2015 that will cover approximately 16,900 km² of caribou habitat in total – 16 times more than was protected last year. However, this represents only about 1% of the total area of boreal caribou habitat identified as "critical" in the *Federal Recovery Strategy*.

Unless all levels of government immediately set much larger areas of critical caribou habitat off limits to industrial activity, we are concerned that boreal woodland caribou populations will continue to decline.

From west to east, here is what we found. For more information see the attached updates:

- **NORTHWEST TERRITORIES** released a draft boreal caribou recovery strategy in 2015. While an important milestone, CPAWS submitted comments on how the draft can be strengthened. Meanwhile new pressures continue to arise - two new forest management agreements will increase future disturbance and two intense fire seasons have further reduced available habitat. Hunting regulations and the NWT harvest tracking system also need to be updated.
- **BRITISH COLUMBIA** continued to conduct caribou research, and has consulted with First Nations and others to revise the provincial caribou management plan. However, it also approved new LNG projects that could adversely impact caribou habitat. Overall, any measures by the province seem focused on limiting caribou's decline, rather than meeting the federal requirements to recover the species.
- Shortly after the spring election, **ALBERTA's** new government announced a deferral of sales of energy leases within all caribou habitat in the province– a first for this province. There have been no new energy lease sales since July. However, Alberta's other long-awaited caribou habitat protection and restoration activities, reported on in 2014, appear to be stalled.
- **SASKATCHEWAN** now requires new forest management plans to state how they will contribute to meeting the federal guidelines for caribou habitat protection. In addition the province is making steady progress conducting research, consultation and policy development towards getting caribou recovery plans in place by 2017.
- In October, **MANITOBA** issued a caribou recovery strategy with a strong commitment to conserving large intact boreal caribou habitat. In November, the province announced the 90,000-hectare Red Deer Wildlife Management Area, which is a fully protected area that lies fully within The Bog caribou range. However, the province has also announced that it will push back by a year its deadlines for developing plans for each caribou management unit, raising concerns about the level of resources it is committing to this issue.
- **ONTARIO** took no meaningful action on caribou habitat protection in 2015. CPAWS and others are continuing a court case against the province for exempting industries

⁵ The deferral of sales on new energy leases in the province has a positive impact for both boreal woodland and mountain woodland caribou habitat.

from core protection provisions under its Endangered Species Act. Meanwhile, data released this year by the province – after our request and others - show only two of Ontario’s 13 ranges have sufficient remaining habitat to sustain caribou.

- QUÉBEC made some progress in caribou conservation in 2015 by establishing a 5,000 km² protected area in the Broadback River region. They also have reconvened the multi-sector recovery team after a one-year hiatus. However, our assessment is that the pace in the province is too slow to ensure recovery of caribou populations, given continuing industrial pressures.
- NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR’s Mealy Mountains National Park Reserve, finalized in 2015, will protect most of the important habitat for one of the boreal woodland caribou herds, though threats the habitat of the other herds continue. On the island of Newfoundland a new sustainable forest management strategy that defers forestry across a significant part of the Island’s forests could open the door to new protection measures for the island caribou population.

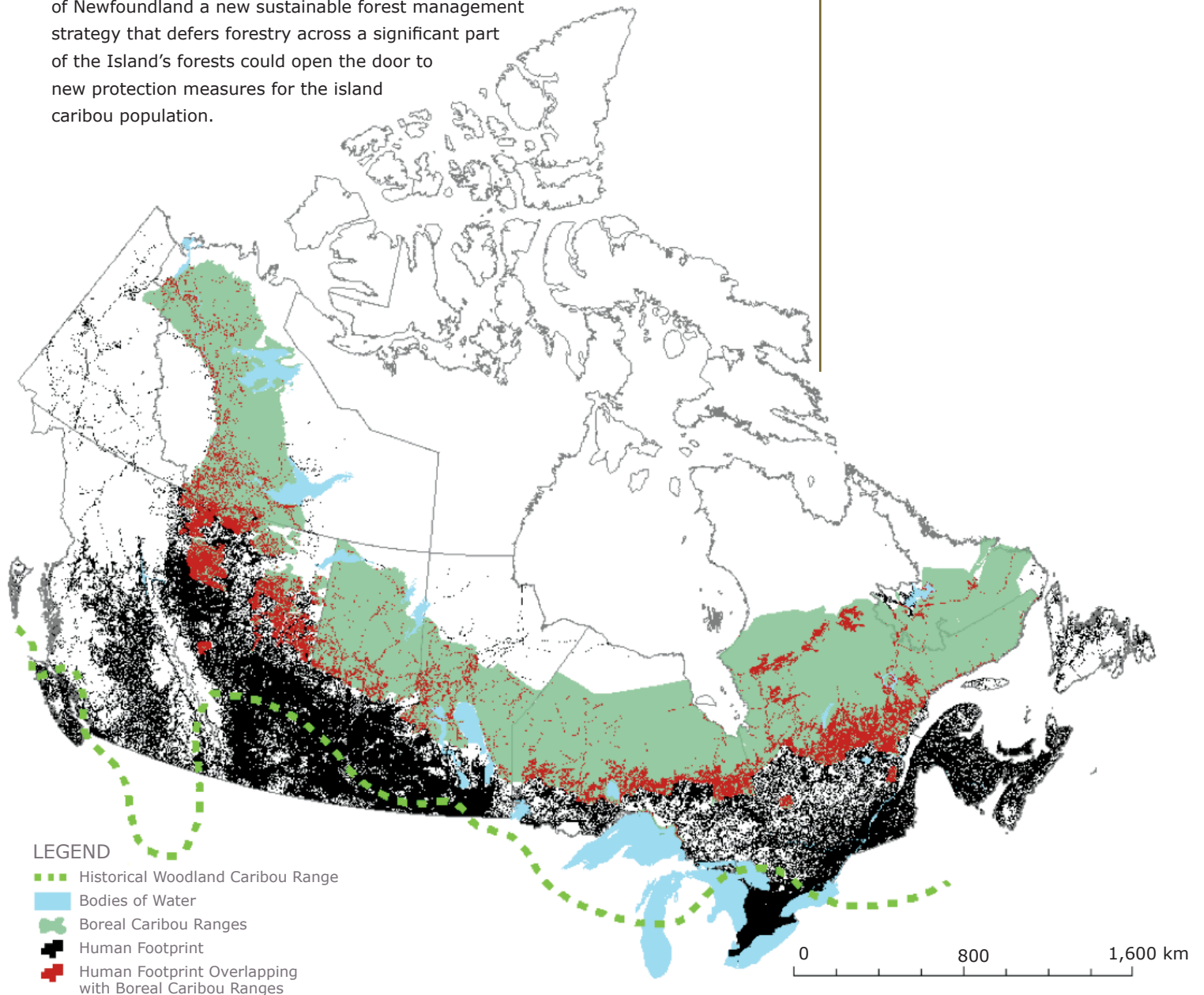


Figure 1: Human Impact on Canada’s Boreal Caribou Ranges

Compiled by CPAWS using information from Global Forest Watch Canada’s data set on *Canada’s Industrial Concession 2013* <http://www.globalforestwatch.ca/node/201> and *Canada’s Intact Forest Landscape: A Partial Update to 2010* <http://www.globalforestwatch.ca/node/190>; and COSEWIC. 2002. Assessment and Update Status Report on the Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*) in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. Xi+98

Introduction

CPAWS has been tracking the actions taken by jurisdictions to protect boreal woodland caribou (boreal caribou⁶) habitat since December 2013, more than a year after the release of the boreal woodland caribou recovery strategy was issued by the federal government under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). This year's update includes all jurisdictions except for the Yukon where there was no change from our 2014 report.

As part of our review, we track five types of actions. First, we monitor actions that conserve boreal caribou habitat, such as the creation of a protected area, or that require that industrial actors take mitigation measures when operating in their habitat. These actions contribute to the effective protection of boreal caribou habitat and demonstrate a more sustainable management of the boreal forest ecosystem. Such actions are required across the 51 caribou ranges in Canada if boreal caribou are to be conserved.

Second, we track the steps that jurisdictions are taking to develop plans for how to keep the disturbance in boreal caribou habitat at levels that will allow these caribou to be self-sustaining and meet the requirements outlined in the "*Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou (Rangifer tarandus caribou), Boreal population, in Canada*" (hereafter, *Federal Recovery Strategy*).⁷ These plans, called range plans, will be helpful to the Minister of Environment who, under the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA), needs to assess whether the critical caribou habitat described in the *Federal Recovery Strategy* is being effectively protected or whether further action is needed. In the *Federal Recovery Strategy*, the government requested that jurisdictions complete range plans by 2017.

Third, we review actions that are being taken as precursors to or in support of the first two types of actions, such as provincial recovery strategies, further studies on boreal caribou habitat and its disturbance, or the development of provincial endangered species laws. These differ in every province and territory, but often provide the underpinnings for effective protection.

Fourth, we track where activities are being planned or implemented that may have a negative impact on boreal caribou habitat as this can help assess where effective protection is likely not yet in place. Both the *Federal Recovery Strategy* and subsequent assessments highlight that most of the boreal caribou ranges in Canada are disturbed to levels well above the minimum threshold put forward in the *Federal Recovery Strategy*, that disturbance is likely increasing, and that caribou populations are declining.⁸ Given the situation across Canada, it is urgent that jurisdictions take actions now to ensure effective protection as well as develop range plans, as delay will only make the process increasingly difficult.

Finally, we are tracking the steps being taken by federal government to ensure that the *Federal Recovery Strategy* is implemented.

The following is an update of what occurred in 2015. For more information about boreal caribou and the SARA process, please read our 2013 and 2014 reports (available at www.caribouandyou.ca).

⁶ In this document we use "boreal caribou" as short hand for boreal woodland caribou. Where other types of caribou, such as boreal mountain caribou, are referenced, their full name will be used to distinguish between the sub-species.

⁷ These are described in more detail in section 7.4 of the *Federal Recovery Strategy*. However in order to be adopted in whole or in part as an action plan by the Minister of the Environment, the range plan and the process used to develop it will need to meet the requirements of section 48 (cooperation) and section 49 (content) of the SARA.

⁸ See for example Global Forest Watch Canada 2014 publication, *Canada's Boreal icon at risk: A ranking of the most threatened herd ranges of woodland caribou* or Ontario's recently released range assessments.

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) met an important milestone this year, releasing their draft territorial boreal caribou recovery strategy (draft GNWT strategy) for comment. We are encouraged that the GNWT has committed to implementing its responsibilities required by the *Species-at-Risk (NWT) Act* and the *Federal Recovery Strategy*. However, the content of the draft GNWT strategy demonstrates some of the challenges to conserving caribou habitat still to come.

The draft GNWT strategy, for example, does not include habitat protection as an approach for ensuring that there is adequate intact habitat across the range. It uses tentative language suggesting, rather than requiring, that the level of disturbance in caribou habitat be considered when deciding whether to approve new development. It also does not set a disturbance threshold. As a result, the draft GNWT strategy falls short of the recovery strategies developed in other provinces and territories, and what will be required to achieve the goals of maintaining a self-sustaining herd in the territory.

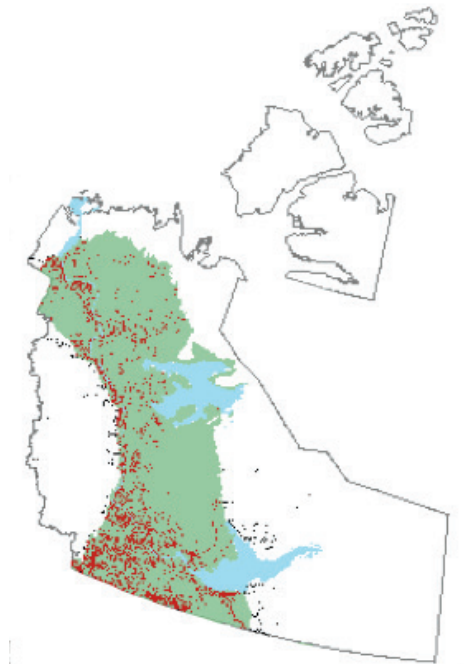
Not long after the release of the draft GNWT strategy, Timberworks Inc. requested a permit to harvest wood within a portion of the South Slave region of the NWT boreal caribou range. It was approved by the Mackenzie Valley Land and Water Board. During the review of the application, a number of concerns arose with regards to boreal caribou habitat. For example, the accompanying Forest Management Plan (FMA) written by the territorial government uses a 40-year time period for estimating when a given area of cleared forest would be again counted as habitat. Given the slow growth of forests in the area, the lack of evidence that boreal caribou return to areas once they have been cleared – let alone after 40 years even in more productive parts of the boreal forest – and the risk of fires, this approach will likely result in more harvesting than is sustainable for boreal caribou. The management plan therefore sets a bad precedent for other NWT forest management plans that overlap boreal caribou habitat.

In addition, this new industrial activity will create increased access for hunting. Currently, the GNWT hunting regulations are inadequate to address an increase in traditional and non-aboriginal resident harvest. Harvest reporting data is limited; it does not distinguish boreal woodland and boreal mountain caribou as separate populations and reporting is not yet mandatory. The hunting season is also too lengthy (July 15 – January 31) and harvest management is not considerate of regional population trends or conservation concerns.

In the meantime, requests by regional Aboriginal governments to Environment Canada for the establishment of Edézhíe (Horn Plateau) and progress to establish Ts'ude niline Tu'eyeta (The Ramparts) have all but stalled. Each encompasses more than 10,000 km² and includes boreal caribou habitat.

The opportunity exists in the NWT to prioritize sound management and the conservation of habitat necessary for sustaining a healthy population of boreal caribou. However, as the time passes, it will become increasingly difficult to do so, especially if clear guidelines are not developed now. It is critical that range plans and the recovery strategy include a robust approach to prioritizing boreal caribou habitat, so that a real change will occur on the ground as a result.

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- Human Footprint
- Human Footprint Overlapping with Boreal Caribou Ranges

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Boreal caribou habitat in northeastern BC has some of the highest road densities in the country, mainly due to extensive development of natural gas resources in the area. Over 75% of the habitat is already allocated to the natural gas industry, and the Province of BC has made expansion of this industry a top priority in order to support the export of liquefied natural gas (LNG). This planned expansion will require thousands of new hydraulic fracturing (or “fracking”) wells to be constructed, posing additional threats to our remaining boreal caribou. Given that boreal caribou require at least 65% of their habitat be left undisturbed to have even a 60% chance of survival, and that the ranges had between 13 and 42% of undisturbed habitat in 2012,⁹ the outlook for survival of the herds in the five BC ranges does not look good.

In 2014, the province of BC initiated a review of its management plan for boreal caribou, with a view to bringing it more in line with what is prescribed in the *Federal Recovery Strategy* as necessary for the protection and recovery of the species. However, little progress has been made since then towards improving the plan, despite initial consultations with First Nations and stakeholders.

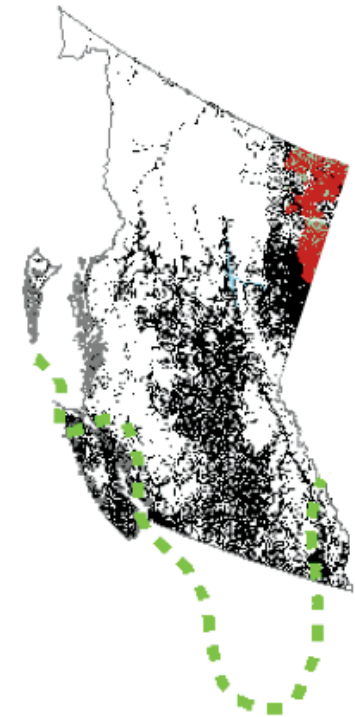
The Province has established the Northeast Strategic Advisory Group (NESAG), including major stakeholders and First Nations, which has been asked to provide guidance on a cumulative effects framework for decision making. CPAWS-BC has been participating in the NESAG, but is concerned that this framework does not consider caribou, and appears to be disconnected from the *Federal Recovery Strategy* requirements for boreal caribou.

Although the Province has yet to develop range plans for any of its six herds, research is being undertaken in support of revising their boreal caribou management plan, including new telemetry data that will be used to refine the mapping of core habitat. Additional work is being done to establish a guide to best practices in habitat restoration and prioritization.

There have been no new protected areas (permanent or temporary) for boreal caribou habitat in BC in the past year, and one form of temporary protections – Resource Review Areas, or RRAs – are currently being reassessed to determine whether or not they’ve been effective in the five years since their creation. Other temporary protections like Ungulate Winter Ranges (UWRs) and Wildlife Habitat Areas (WHAs) that have been put in place to protect boreal caribou may also need to be re-evaluated, as the new telemetry data being used to identify core habitat is indicating that some of these protected areas are located in habitat the boreal caribou aren’t necessarily using.

In order to meet the requirements of the *Federal Recovery Strategy* – to *recover the species, rather than to just limit the decline*¹⁰ – the province will need to begin implementing more proactive measures to limit the growth of industrial development in the region to within the limits of what caribou can sustain over the long term.

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⁹ See page 72 of the Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus* caribou), Boreal population, in Canada at http://www.registrelep-sararegistry.gc.ca/document/default_e.cfm?documentID=2253.

¹⁰ Implementation Plan for the Ongoing Management of Boreal Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus* caribou pop. 14) in British Columbia, 2011 <http://a100.gov.bc.ca/pub/eirs/finishDownloadDocument.do?sessionId=6BpLWpZbv26lGP6tBgw356YdcccpgmnJX2m49hJhLNF1QB7Xxk3Y4!221192518?subdocumentId=9121>

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ALBERTA

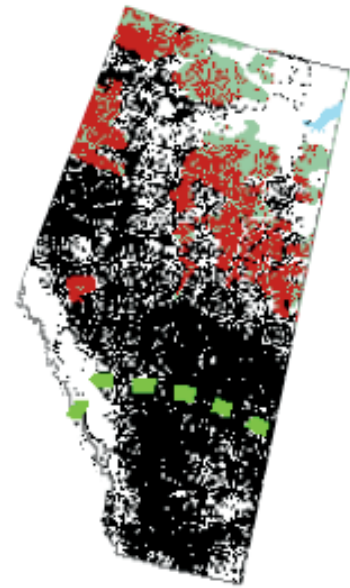
This summer, the government of Alberta made the announcement that they would defer the sale of energy leases in all caribou habitat¹¹ in Alberta. While the government has clarified that this is not a complete ban, there have been no new sales since July. This was a big step by a new government that has inherited a bad situation evolved over decades. However, the state of the boreal woodland and mountain caribou habitat in Alberta is such that while removing new pressures on the landscape is important, it is not sufficient for addressing the urgent challenge that the caribou in the province face. Unfortunately, steps towards developing and implementing any concrete plans to stop more immediate threats on the landscape and restore degraded habitat appear to have stalled, with deadlines constantly shifting.

As reported in 2014, the situation for Alberta's boreal woodland and mountain caribou is dire. A 2013 article in the *Canadian Journal of Zoology*¹² showed that eight of the province's local boreal herds had rapidly declining populations, while three more were precariously balanced. Of these, six herds were declining by about 10% per year, while overall their population is estimated to have declined by almost 50% in 8 years. With continued inaction, the loss of these herds from Alberta's landscape is simply a matter of time.

The pressures on boreal woodland and mountain caribou habitat in Alberta are well known. Development as a result of energy sector activities such as exploration and drilling, in addition to continued forest harvesting and fires, are fragmenting what is left of the province's old growth forests, leaving boreal caribou increasingly stressed and vulnerable to predators and other pressures.

Alberta has attempted a number of times to develop range plans that would conserve boreal caribou habitat, but with no clear resulting actions. If the new government is to stand out on this issue, the first step would be to bring First Nations and all stakeholders back to the table and be more open about the process moving forward. However, these steps are not enough. The government will need to take a stronger leadership role, which means taking the actions that no government before has been willing to take and conserving what remains of caribou habitat in the province. Conservation and restoration offer the best chance for the province's herds. While this may appear to be a significant task, there are many in the province willing to help a government which appears poised, finally, to take meaningful action.

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¹¹ This includes both boreal woodland and mountain caribou ranges.

¹² See Hervieux, D, et al. Widespread declines in woodland caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*) continue in Alberta. (*Can. J. Zool.* 91: 872-882 (2013) [dx.doi.org/10.1139/cjz-2013-0123](https://doi.org/10.1139/cjz-2013-0123)).

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SASKATCHEWAN

This year, the threats to boreal caribou around Prince Alberta National Park (called SK2 central) are becoming clearer, as is the need for government action to reduce those threats.

During this past summer, more than 700,000 hectares of forest in full response zones were impacted by the fires in Saskatchewan, 2 million hectare of land were impacted overall.¹³ Though the government has not completed their assessment of what impact the fires had on caribou habitat and forest management plans, the expectation is that this type of natural disturbance will happen again.

The Saskatchewan government has held a number of meetings in 2015 to discuss how to manage the caribou habitat found in and around Prince Albert National Park. So far, they have proposed a precautionary approach with regards to fire disturbances, which means the plan takes the potential loss of habitat from far-ranging fires when calculating how much land needs to be left undisturbed to ensure caribou remain self-sustaining. There is a concern however that if significant areas slated for logging in the near term have been burnt, companies may seek permission to harvest in caribou habitat. Given the current levels of disturbance, this may quickly result in there being insufficient in caribou habitat to ensure anywhere near a 60% chance of their being self-sustaining.

In addition to concerns about the fires, in October the government presented to the range plan taskforce that the level of disturbance around Prince Albert National Park is already much higher than 35%. Their work this year indicates that the area is 51% disturbed and with no intervention could quickly reach 60% disturbance. Even more surprising is that linear disturbances, including roads and transmission lines, make up 37 of the 51%

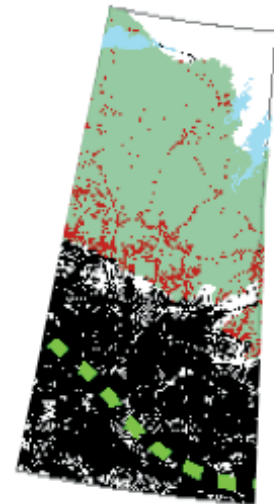
Finally, an 18 km² peat mining project in the Pasquia Bog is also still being discussed despite the disturbance level in area already being high.¹⁴ While the company has indicated they will do their best to find ways to mitigate their impact on the caribou, this project will also add to the high levels of disturbance in the area.

With pressures on caribou habitat continuing and potentially increasing, the need to develop range plans that will allow the government to meet their commitments even when unplanned disturbances occur, as well as the need to monitor the habitat and caribou populations when making future decisions, should remain a priority. So far Saskatchewan appears to be on track to achieving their goal to meet the deadlines, as well as the substantive requirements, outlined in the *Federal Recovery Strategy*.

In addition, the government now requires that any new forest management plans include a strategy for staying below the 35% disturbance maximum in the forest management area, which as it is implemented will become an important management tool. Currently two such plans are in review.

Finally, discussions continue between the government and stakeholders around the announcement of a new protected area in the eastern Boreal Plain that would also conserve boreal caribou habitat. Though there are still many stakeholders that need to be approached and steps to be taken, conversations continue to be positive. Protecting this large area would go a long way to bridging the gap between the existing levels of protected areas in the province and the provincial goal.

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¹³ <http://www.cifc.ca/firewire/current.php>

¹⁴ <http://www.environment.gov.sk.ca/2009-093TechnicalReviewComments>

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MANITOBA

This year saw the release of the long awaited Manitoba boreal woodland caribou recovery strategy (Manitoba Strategy). The Manitoba Strategy release comes on the heels of over 10,000 signatures provided to the province calling for a final recovery strategy that upholds the large habitat protection priority and urged swift, on-the-ground implementation.

At least half of that call has been met. The province's unprecedented commitment to protect large areas of caribou habitat with no forestry activity is good news for this threatened species. The strategy commits Manitoba to protecting and managing for 65-80% intact suitable boreal caribou habitat in each caribou management unit. If implemented correctly, this will likely exceed the *Federal Recovery Strategy* minimum threshold. CPAWS worked closely with the province to ensure these measures would be recognized as a cornerstone of recovery efforts.

Now, the implementation is key, and CPAWS is concerned that it may take too long.

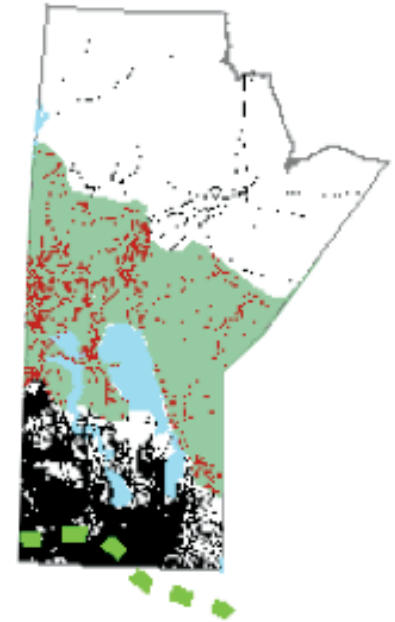
Although provincial biologists have been doing excellent work monitoring boreal caribou movements and assessing survival needs, CPAWS believes that a lack of government capacity is largely responsible for the province extending the timelines for boreal caribou action plans identified in the Manitoba Strategy compared to the 2014 draft. While the province had initially announced that it would try to meet the national requirements to develop action plans by 2017, the government has now confirmed that they will not release plans before 2018, and then only for units where the boreal caribou are considered at high risk of decline. The remainder will not be completed until 2020.

This is problematic because while boreal caribou still inhabit much of the boreal forest in Manitoba, they have been lost from much of the southern part of their range due to human encroachment, including industrial activity and their associated road networks. The most notable area where they no longer occur is Whiteshell Provincial Park. Given the rate at which new disturbances are occurring, the 2018 and 2020 timelines will make a successful implementation and outcome more difficult.

Only by planning quickly and wisely together can what has happened in the south be prevented in the north, and a healthy boreal forest maintained for us and future generations. CPAWS is urging the province to put the resources in place to accelerate this process. In particular, resources should go to planning for boreal caribou and the future of the boreal in partnership with Indigenous Peoples, recognizing the treaties and rights outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and with free, prior, and informed consent.

In addition, protecting large scale woodland caribou habitat will help Manitoba to do its part to reach the international commitment made by Canada in the UN Convention on Biological Diversity 2010 10-year plan to protect at least 17% of our land and fresh water by 2020, and to improve the quality of our protected areas. The Manitoba Protected Areas Strategy, which CPAWS played a significant role in developing, was released in November and commits the province to this target. Along with the strategy's release, the Red Deer Wildlife Management Area, which is fully within The Bog caribou management unit, and expansion of the Lake Winnipegosis Salt Flats was announced. 11% of the province is currently protected.

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ONTARIO

Ontario has lost 40-50% of its historic distribution of boreal woodland caribou. The province's Caribou Conservation Plan (CCP) requires it to manage and limit cumulative disturbances within identified boreal woodland caribou ranges. Implementation on range management has been slow and we have observed little to no difference in how permits are being handed out or industrial activities approved over the last six years. A bright spot since last year's report is that Ontario publically released the State of the Woodland Caribou Resource Report and the Integrated Range Assessments for the 13 caribou ranges in the Continuous Distribution Zone.

We welcomed the release and the transparency of these range assessments, although note that they are based on field data that are already several years old. They contain important and new information such as:

- Only 2 ranges of 13 in Ontario are classified as 'sufficient to sustain caribou' (Swan and Ozhiski);
- At least 3 populations in the south (with long history of forestry, road building & other development) are in a long-term decline;
- Human-caused disturbance levels due in this case to early mineral Ring of Fire exploration activities are 9.4%, almost twice the natural level 5% in Missisa Range (location of the Ring of Fire); and
- Overall, MNR says caribou may be in a 'short-term decline' in Ontario.

The reference to 'short term' decline may not matter as there is no circumstance in Canada where there has been recovery, given society's propensity to consume and drive up disturbance levels. The elevated levels of human caused disturbance in the Missisa Range start to tell a story of the cumulative impact that mineral exploration alone can have on one range even before a single mine is built. This is one of the more surprising aspects of the assessments.

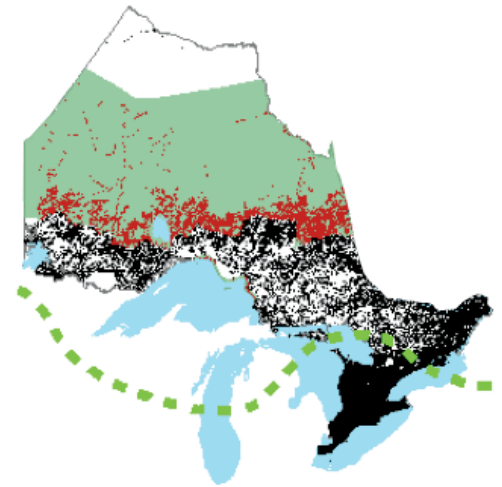
Early mining exploration was recently exempted from the core protective provisions of the *Endangered Species Act*, as is forestry. The exemption for forestry is particularly troubling for woodland caribou because it enshrines the status quo. Prohibitions around harming or harassing caribou or damaging or destroying caribou habitat do not apply if companies are operating under an existing, approved forest management plan.

In 2015, lawyers on behalf of CPAWS Wildlands League and Ontario Nature argued in court that the exemptions allowing major industries to avoid the strict standards intended to protect endangered and threatened species such as boreal caribou and their habitats are unlawful. While the Divisional Court upheld the provincial regulation in May that puts already threatened species like boreal caribou at further risk of extinction, a few months later, we won the right to appeal the lower court ruling. This marks the first time environmental groups have won the right to appeal to the Ontario Court of Appeal on a case about the *Endangered Species Act* (ESA).

There is sufficient knowledge now about the high-risk situations facing caribou in at least six ranges in Ontario that there should be no expansion of the industrial footprint here until such time as peer-reviewed science demonstrates positive trends in population condition at the range level, and improved range conditions.

Until the province stops threats to caribou habitat and gets serious about recovery measures, the long-term survival of this species is in jeopardy. Not one of more than 150 species including boreal caribou has full protections under the Endangered Species Act as it was originally intended. It's time for Ontario to change that and make good on its promise to at risk wildlife in Ontario.

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QUÉBEC

This year, Québec protected 5,436 km² of boreal caribou habitat in the Broadback River region. This is the first concrete measure taken by the government to legally protect boreal caribou habitat since the release of the provincial recovery plan (Québec Plan) in 2013. The new protected area was announced as part of an agreement made this July between the Québec government and the Grand Council of the Cree (Eeyou Istchee). The final agreement did not include the *Mishigamish* area – an area known to contain vital boreal caribou habitat and proposed by the Cree for protection – and falls short of the commitment made in the Québec Plan to create one or two 10,000 km² areas. However, the area protected is a first step in completing a broader network of protected areas in the region for the boreal caribou.

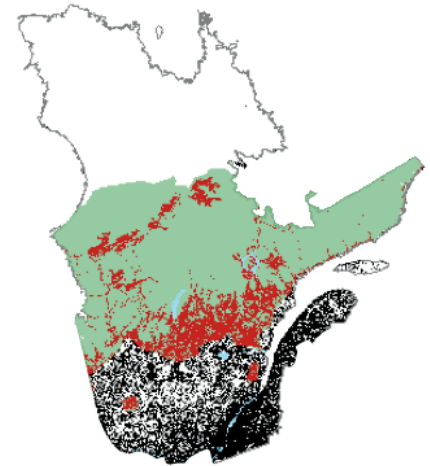
This past October, the Québec government finally reconvened the boreal woodland caribou recovery team after an 8-month hiatus. The team, mandated to provide advice to the Minister of Forest, Wildlife and Parks on the implementation of the Québec Plan, includes stakeholders from industry, environmental NGOs, and researchers, as well as First Nation representatives. While the protection of boreal caribou habitat in the Broadback region was a good first step for boreal woodland caribou in Québec, there is still much to be done. In the near term, protecting the Mishigamish region, as well as other important boreal caribou habitat areas such as the “Montagnes Blanches” area is vital and urgent. Developing and implementing an action plan, based on science and the precautionary principle is another important step for protecting this iconic species in Québec.

During the meeting, which CPAWS attended as a member, the government presented many of the materials that had been slated for completion last year, including a long-awaited analysis of the socio-economic impacts of different caribou protection scenarios. The analysis provides the information needed to develop and implement the action and range plans needed to meet the goals of the Québec plan and the federal boreal woodland recovery strategy.

A robust action plan will need to include:

- Boreal caribou habitat protection measures such as:
 - Large and connected protected areas in zones used by caribou and containing the best available habitat (intact forest tracts, etc.);
 - Implementing range plans that describe how the disturbance in caribou habitat will be kept under 35% over time as required by the scientific studies supporting the *Federal Recovery Strategy*;
- Measures to reduce boreal caribou mortality caused by predation or human activity;
- Measures to monitor the health of the boreal caribou population and their habitat, as well as the level of disturbance in their habitat.

2015 UPDATE: Boreal Caribou Conservation



LEGEND

- Historical Woodland Caribou Range
- Bodies of Water
- Boreal Caribou Ranges
- Human Footprint
- Human Footprint Overlapping with Boreal Caribou Ranges

NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

In July of 2015, the federal government and the government of Newfoundland and Labrador announced the creation of a new national park reserve in the Mealy Mountains. The agreement will transfer 10,700 km² from the province to the national government so that the park can be created.

Once legally designated, the Akami-uapishku - KakKasuak Mealy Mountains National Park Reserve will protect a significant portion of the Mealy Mountain boreal caribou herd's habitat, including key habitat along the coast and on offshore islands. If approved this will be the 46th National Park in Canada, and the largest park in Atlantic Canada.

Despite the finalization of this park reserve, the new government of Newfoundland and Labrador still has a lot of work to do if the province is to move forward on its commitments to protect boreal caribou. One action would be for the provincial government to move forward with the promised Eagle River Provincial Waterway Park, a proposed 3,000 km² protected area adjacent to the Mealy Mountain National Park Reserve. Another would be to act on and complete commitments made more than a decade ago¹⁵ in the provincial recovery plan for boreal caribou. In 2015, no further work was done to identify critical habitat for the three boreal woodland caribou herds in Labrador, nor have any steps been taken to develop range plans. This leaves the province with no clear explanation for how the province is taking steps to effectively protecting the boreal caribou habitat identified in the *Federal Recovery Strategy*.

In the meantime, there are new threats to the boreal caribou habitat. For example, the provincial government has approved a new reservoir for the Lower Churchill Hydro project that will destroy boreal caribou calving and wintering habitat. In addition, Nalcor Energy Inc. has proposed removing a portion of the Bay du Nord Wilderness Reserve for a transmission line right-of-way, though with a compensation that would extend the eastern section of the reserve.

Steps to manage the Island of Newfoundland populations of woodland caribou have also been slow to advance. While the province released a report in 2015 linking the decline of the island caribou population with the deteriorating quality of food and availability of sufficient habitat, it has not acknowledged the role that its own past management practices played in this situation. Nor did the government take steps to replace the staff in the Sustainable Development and Strategic Science Branch who retired in 2014. As a result, there has been little progress on developing an effective research and management strategy for the woodland caribou on the island.

Meanwhile, though threats to the island caribou habitat continue to advance, including the construction of the mineral exploration access road into the heart of the Avalon wilderness approved in 2014, the continued implementation of the province's 2014 sustainable forest management strategy has the potential to help arrest at least some of the threats.

The province's 2014 sustainable forest management strategy places four million hectares of landscape (or 35% of the island) off limits for industrial forestry for at least several years and will help protect large intact landscape values. The geographical overlap between these hectares and island caribou habitat is significant; about 75% of the important woodland caribou habitat remaining on the island will now be outside the commercial industrial forest area. Work is being undertaken by the provincial Forestry and Wildlife divisions to see how this large intact landscape deferral can be enhanced and integrated into land use planning to provide better and longer-term protection for the Newfoundland island population of woodland caribou.

2015 UPDATE: Boreal Caribou Conservation



¹⁵ The central Labrador populations of boreal caribou have been listed as threatened in the Newfoundland/Labrador *Endangered Species Act* since 2002. In 2004 the province developed a recovery document, but most of the activities remain uncompleted.

LEGEND

- Historical Woodland Caribou Range
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Federal Government

While most of the action this year with regards to boreal caribou conservation occurred at the provincial and territorial levels, the federal government took some steps in 2015 to support the implementation of the *SARA* and the *Federal Recovery Strategy*.

The former Environment Minister held two meetings to talk about collaborative approaches to implementing the *SARA*, including convening forest, wildlife and environment ministers to discuss how they might cooperate with each other to implement plans for threatened species that cross jurisdictions (such as caribou). In addition, Environment Canada which co-chairs the National Boreal Caribou Technical Committee (NBCTC)—a federal, provincial, and territorial government committee established to facilitate collaboration among jurisdictions in implementing the *Federal Recovery Strategy*—also convened a meeting this year to discuss technical aspects of developing spatially explicit plans for managing boreal caribou habitat (or range plans).

These implementation discussions are important, but not sufficient. The *Federal Recovery Strategy* requires the Minister of Environment to complete at least one action plan by the end of 2015. This plan must include details on how the federal government and others will implement the recovery strategy on the ground. As of mid-December, no such action plan has been publicly released. The *SARA* also requires that in the absence of such an action plan, the Minister publicly release a summary of what has been prepared on the plan to date.¹⁶ This summary has also not yet been publicly released.

The *SARA* also requires that every 6 months there should be reporting to the public of steps being taken to protect any habitat that remains unprotected 6 months after the document that identifies critical habitat is released.¹⁷ The *Federal Recovery Strategy* clearly identifies boreal caribou habitat. However, the former Environment Minister did not start the reporting, thereby not affording the public a clear understanding of actions being taken by all jurisdictions to protect boreal caribou.

As boreal woodland caribou continue to decline across Canada, and their habitat continues to be increasingly disturbed, CPAWS is encouraging the newly elected federal Minister of Environment to use all the tools available under the *Act* to accelerate action to protect critical habitat, including:

- providing a status report within 6 months on the steps taken to date to complete an action plan;
- immediately starting the long overdue reporting on the steps being taken to protect the critical caribou habitat that is still unprotected;
- releasing for public review in 2016 two long-standing policy documents that will be helpful to implementing the recovery strategy, namely a set of criteria for when boreal caribou habitat may be considered 'restored'; as well as a more general policy supporting the *SARA* work on all species describing what effective protection on non-federal lands could include;
- encouraging all jurisdictions to apply existing legal tools to effectively protect habitat in parallel with developing their range and action plans;
- reconvening the Species at Risk Advisory Committee (SARAC) which, provides an important forum for the federal government to work with industry and environmental organizations on implementing *SARA*.

In 2017, the Minister of Environment and Climate Change will need to report on the implementation of the *Federal Recovery Strategy* and progress made towards meeting its recovery objective, which is to achieve self-sustaining local populations in all boreal caribou ranges across Canada. There are many tools available to all jurisdictions for achieving this objective and rapidly increasing the probability of boreal caribou survival in Canada to levels that will assure the future of this iconic species. With a new federal government in place, we hope to see a more proactive approach that will infuse renewed energy into the recovery work, particularly in jurisdictions that are moving too slowly towards protecting boreal caribou habitat and are currently not on track to complete range and/or action plans by 2017.

¹⁶See section 50 (4) on action plans.

¹⁷See section 63 of the *SARA*. Critical habitat may be identified in a recovery strategy or an action plan. Reports are to be included in the public registry



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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