



Backgrounder

The Survival of Boreal Woodland Caribou in Ontario

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 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.

What are the chances that boreal caribou will survive in Ontario?

Noting the limited existing information for Ontario, the report found that with one exception Boreal Woodland Caribou populations in the province are likely to remain self-sustaining. This means that IF we can refrain from creating further threats in these ranges, these populations are expected to survive. This is a critical IF, as extensive human developments are planned in these areas at this time that will need to be reconsidered in light of these findings.

The report found that the exception in Ontario is the North East Superior population of Boreal Woodland Caribou which is already considered to have low probability of long term survival.

New research about discrete ranges in the broader boreal forest may reveal that there is also already too much habitat disturbance in some individual ranges for populations to remain self-sustaining.

Q. What is the extent of disturbed habitat in Ontario?

Ontario is estimated to have already lost 50% of its historic woodland caribou range. Other research indicates that, if the established pattern of range recession persists, this wide-ranging species could be extinct in less than 80 years.

On average, a further 7% (an area equivalent to nearly 29,000 sq. km.) of the total area of currently occupied boreal caribou range has been disturbed by humans. This area is concentrated along the southern fringe of the continuous caribou range which is the northern limit of the existing road network, including logging roads. Further work mapping populations within the broader boreal region may well reveal more ranges that have been unacceptably disturbed by human activity.

Q. What numbers and proportions of caribou and ranges exist in Ontario?

Approximately 15% of Canada's boreal caribou reside in Ontario, the majority within the continuous range within the boreal forest. Boreal caribou ranges cover approximately 455,000 km² of Ontario's boreal forest, or over 40% of the province. Historically the extent of the species' range was about double this figure.

Q. What key actions are needed?

According to current information, the small North East Superior range requires restoration. All of the identified ranges require effective range maintenance that involves conserving the boreal wilderness that the

species requires. The exception is the small North East Superior range which requires active restoration to make it possible to be self-sustaining.

More research is needed into habitat range and other factors that influence caribou survival. Study is needed to identify discrete ranges within the broad boreal forest. This information may point out the need for more habitat restoration.

Q. What habitat maintenance is required to sustain populations?

Overall, experts consider the current range size and condition “adequate” for self-sustaining caribou populations in Ontario. However, they point out that the caribou’s ultimate survival depends on conserving the boreal wilderness and avoiding creating additional anthropogenic threats to these populations and their habitat.

Q. What extent of disturbance would be permissible and still allow caribou to survive?

Without better information on caribou population ranges and the extent of disturbance in each, additional human disturbance should only be contemplated in areas where the population is increasing.

The only range identified in the report that shows the likelihood of a population increase is on Michipicoten Island. One factor in this group’s favor is the low level of human disturbance. However, more human activity might be dangerous because the population resides on an island and literally has no where to retreat.

CPAWS Wildlands League recommendations for Ontario:

1. Ontario must pause logging, road building and other development in intact areas of the commercial forest (the commercial forest is also known as the ‘Area of the Undertaking’ in Ontario). This would help “anchor” self-sustaining caribou populations.
 - Aboriginal people need to have a meaningful say in the location of these areas.
 - Federal and provincial science reports should be compared with Aboriginal traditional knowledge.
2. The Ontario government should undertake the research necessary to fill gaps in knowledge of caribou populations and trends. Meanwhile all populations in Ontario should be considered at their threat maximum until better information can be produced to verify their range condition. In particular, the government needs to:
 - Identify caribou population units, collect population trend data and characterize range conditions for each of these ranges within the remainder of Ontario’s Boreal Forest;
 - Identify factors driving the decline of the North East Superior range;
 - Research population trends for the Slate Islands range;
 - Undertake ongoing monitoring of caribou habitat use and trends to evaluate the effectiveness of current land use and management strategies, and to plan for the future.
3. Industry and government must act to conserve critical habitat and assure survival of boreal woodland caribou.
 - Industry leaders and the government should agree to a halt to industrial forestry within Ontario’s remaining intact contiguous range for this species. This would protect against further range loss while researchers collect data, map particular ranges, and assess range conditions.

- Ontario's "mosaic" or "clear-cutting for caribou" approach to woodland caribou management should be revised to accommodate the best available science, including the new science of this review, and must not be used in remaining intact boreal forest habitat until the critical research gaps are filled and a credible assessment of these impacts can be made.
- Planning should focus on maintaining current caribou range first and then strategically recovering range lost to human disturbance.
- No more human disturbance should be permitted on island ranges.

For more information including media release, map, national summary, images and B-Roll visit:
www.caribouandyou.ca

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