

Backgrounder

The Survival of Boreal Woodland Caribou in Saskatchewan

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.

Q. What are the chances that boreal caribou will survive in Saskatchewan?

Eight boreal caribou ranges are recognized in Saskatchewan, though multiple local caribou populations reside within these ranges. Population trends for the majority of these ranges are unknown; however, all ranges with known population trends are in decline.

At present, the extent and condition of four caribou ranges are not of sufficient quality to support self-sustaining caribou populations, including Clearwater range, Primrose-Cold Lake range, Smoothstone-Wapawekka range and Pasquia-Bog range.

The range size and condition is "borderline" for three ranges. In other words, the probability of these ranges supporting self-sustaining caribou populations is 50% and, consequently, cannot be definitively designated as "self-sustaining" or "not self-sustaining." These include Davy-Athabasca range, Highrock-Key range and Steephill-Foster range.

One boreal caribou range in Saskatchewan – the Suggi-Amisk-Kississing range – is considered self-sustaining.

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

The extent of disturbance in Saskatchewan ranges from 20% (or approx. 5000 km²) in the Suggi-Amisk Kississing range to over 50% (or approx. 42000 km²) in the Clearwater and Primrose-Cold Lake ranges. Collectively, over 40% of Woodland Caribou Habitat in Saskatchewan has been disturbed.

The extent of human disturbance within boreal caribou range in Saskatchewan is low compared to that in neighbouring Alberta. On average, 10% of the area in caribou ranges is directly affected by human disturbance. A total of 22,101 km² of caribou range has been disturbed by humans in this jurisdiction.

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

Approximately 4,381 boreal caribou reside in Saskatchewan, and there is considerable variability in population numbers among ranges. Boreal caribou ranges cover 278,994 km² of Saskatchewan's land base.

Q. What key actions are needed?

Restoration efforts are warranted for two Saskatchewan boreal caribou ranges (Smoothstone-Wapawekka and Pasquia-Bog), as the current range extent and habitat quality do not support self-sustaining caribou populations.

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?

The present extent and condition of four Saskatchewan boreal caribou ranges are currently capable of supporting self-sustaining caribou populations. However, 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 Suggi-Amisk-Kississing range may be capable of withstanding additional human disturbance, as this population is self-sustaining, has low human footprint (8%) within its boundaries, and has a moderate-sized caribou population. However, the extent of disturbance that would negatively impact the sustainability of this range is not known.

CPAWS-Saskatchewan recommendations for Saskatchewan:

1. Saskatchewan must pause logging, road building and other development in critical Woodland Caribou habitat and develop a strategy to protect these areas.
 - Federal and provincial science reports should be compared with Aboriginal traditional knowledge
 - Aboriginal traditional knowledge should be consulted to identify core areas of caribou habitat use and identify caribou subpopulations within the general range areas to guide placement of protected areas
 - The very low human footprint within the Davy-Athabasca, Highrock-Key, Steephill-Foster and Suggi-Amisk-Kississing ranges present the opportunity to establish large protected areas that will "anchor" caribou populations in northern Saskatchewan
 - Aboriginal people need to have a meaningful say in the location of these areas.

2. The Saskatchewan government should undertake the research necessary to fill gaps in knowledge of caribou populations and trends. Meanwhile all populations in Saskatchewan 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 factors driving the decline of the Pasquia-Bog and Smoothstone Wapawekka ranges;
 - Research population trends for the Clearwater, Davy-Athabasca, Highrock-Key, Steephill Foster and Primrose-Lake ranges;
 - 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.

- Additional industrial disturbance should not proceed in the Smoothstone-Wapawekka and Pasquia-Bog ranges. These populations are not self-sustaining and further disturbance will likely hasten the demise of these populations.
- Additional industrial disturbance should not occur in the Primrose-Cold Lake and Clearwater ranges, as population trends are not known for these areas. However, the ranges have already experienced a high level of habitat disturbance, making it extremely likely that these populations are not self-sustaining.
- Additional industrial disturbance should not occur within the Davy-Athabasca, Highrock-Key or Steephill-Foster ranges, because it is unclear whether or not these ranges are self-sustaining, and further disturbance is likely to shift these ranges to be not self-sustaining.
- Experimental testing of critical thresholds for industrial disturbance and caribou persistence may be possible in the Suggi-Amisk-Kississing range; however, ongoing monitoring of population size and habitat use will be necessary to assess the efficacy of thresholds.
- While maintenance of all existing boreal caribou range will improve the probability of these ranges attaining self-sustainability, restoration efforts must be emphasized for the Smoothstone-Wapawekka and Pasquia-Bog ranges.
- Population monitoring is necessary for all herds to gather accurate population trend data.

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

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