

CANADIAN ENVIRONMENT WEEK MAY 31-JUNE 6, 2009

Natural Balance



Woodland Caribou

Woodland caribou are native to both Newfoundland & Labrador and are part of the **Boreal Population**, which is sub-divided into two distinct groups: **migratory forest tundra** and **sedentary forest-dwelling** caribou.

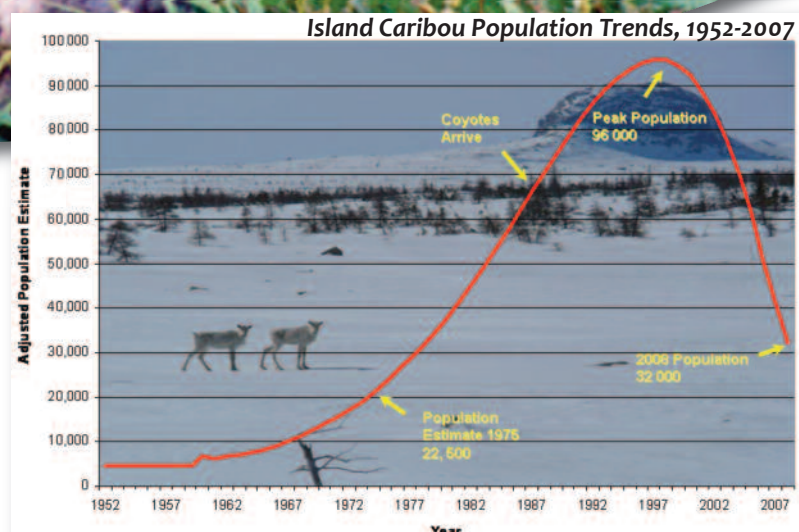
Migratory forest-tundra caribou includes Labrador's George River Herd, which migrates between forest and tundra in Quebec and Labrador, and is estimated at about 385,000 animals (2001 estimate). Labrador's sedentary forest-dwelling group includes the Lac Joseph herd (pop. estimate 1,200), the Red Wine Mountains herd (100), and the Mealy Mountains herd (2,500). These woodland caribou are listed as threatened under the provincial *Endangered Species Act* and the federal *Species at Risk Act*.

Due to the migratory nature of the George River herd, whose range overlaps that of the protected sedentary herds, a special management strategy is in place in Labrador to reduce accidental harvest of animals from protected herds during hunting season.

Insular Newfoundland's woodland caribou population also belongs to the sedentary forest-dwelling group, but unlike Labrador's sedentary population, Island caribou are not listed as threatened. While the estimated density of sedentary caribou in Labrador is 3 caribou per 100 km², the current density on the Island is much higher, at approximately 30 caribou per 100 km².

According to earlier documents and writings, insular Newfoundland caribou populations were once believed to be moderately high around the early 1900s. Between 1915-1930, caribou herds rapidly declined and nearly became extinct. Legal hunting was prohibited from 1924-1934, and a limited hunt resumed in 1935. Populations remained low into the 1960s and further caribou studies were expanded in order to understand their biology and improve their status on the Island's landscape. In the 1970s caribou numbers began to increase and up until the late 1990s, numbers were well over 90,000. After the late 1990s, caribou numbers again experienced a rapid decline. Current populations are now estimated to be 32,000 caribou.

There are, at present, very limited opportunities to hunt Newfoundland caribou; known to be one of the few populations of sedentary woodland caribou in the world that can be legally harvested. Future hunting opportunities rely greatly on the annual health and status of populations.



Research

The Department of Environment & Conservation is undertaking a five-year Caribou Strategy. Its purpose is to investigate the causes of the recent woodland caribou decline on the Island of Newfoundland, while continuing to effectively monitor herd population status and adopt appropriate management strategies. This includes population and classification surveys designed to determine animal numbers, sex ratio, and calf survival. We are investigating factors that may be contributing to the decline, such as caribou health, habitat use and availability, and predation.

Caribou-Predator Relationships



Many factors contribute to animal population growth and decline; predation is one factor. Others include disease, and habitat loss, fragmentation or degradation. Preliminary research has shown that among radio-collared caribou calves, as much as 30% of deaths were caused by black bear predation, while coyote predation accounted for 15%. The Department of Environment & Conservation is continuing to research predator ecology, including total population estimates, diet, reproduction rates, and home range.

Managing predator interactions with caribou is difficult due to the fact predators have extensive territories. Preliminary results indicate black bear home ranges on the Island are approximately 863km² for males and 257 km² for females. Coyote ranges are averaging about 258 km² for males and 232 km² for females.



Wildlife Division staff net-gunning caribou on the Gaff Topsails. Captured caribou are radio-collared, tagged and released, providing the Wildlife Division with a wealth of information about caribou health and habitat use. Wildlife Division photos

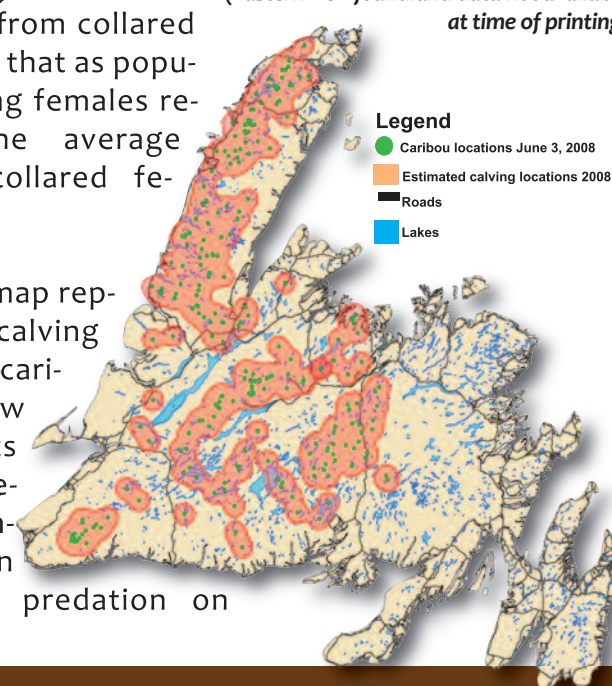


Calving Grounds

Traditionally, calving females would congregate in distinct areas to give birth. This has changed in recent years. Location data from collared female caribou shows that as populations decline, calving females remain dispersed; the average distance between collared females is 5-10 km.

Shaded areas on the map represent estimated calving areas based on 2008 caribou locations. This new information highlights the difficulties the Department of Environment & Conservation faces in addressing predation on "calving grounds."

Caribou Calving Locations
Northern, Southern and Central Island, June 3, 2008
(Eastern Newfoundland data not available at time of printing)



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