

Woodland caribou

Elusive creatures of the forest

They have big, warm brown eyes.

Oversize feet help them to trot across bottomless muskeg and deep snow, and to dog paddle choppy lakes.

Hollow hair keeps them warm through brutal winters and afloat on the water.

They eat a monotonous diet of lichen, and those big feet feature sharp edges that dig through icy drifts to the ancient plants.

Like Greta Garbo, they prefer solitude.

And sensitive! Chances are, if you venture into their territory, the wild boreal forest of Ontario's far north, you'd neither hear nor see them. They'd have fled deep into the jackpine and black spruce before you got close. Scientists estimate there are several thousand, but even experts with years of experience in the bush achieve too few sightings for an accurate count.

Still, these elusive animals, without having a clue they're doing it, are causing quite a fuss.

They're woodland caribou.

They'll go extinct within 80 years if northern development continues at its current pace and style, says Trevor Hesselink, of the Wildlands League conservation group. "Without decisive action, this species is doomed."

While nothing decisive has happened yet, the animals have generated much activity:

► The province has announced a cautious strategy to protect them, and promises to strengthen its Endangered Species Act.

► A coalition of 13 environment groups — arguing the strategy is inadequate, and fearing an industry backlash will weaken a proposed "huge improvement" in the Species Act — said this week it would make protecting caribou, and their home turf, a priority in the coming provincial election campaign.

► The Wildlands League — the Ontario branch of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society — and Sierra Legal Defence Fund recently petitioned Ontario's environmental commissioner for better policies to protect caribou, and called for a moratorium on logging and road building in key territories.

► Several North American and European groups are urging consumers to boycott products from logging operations that damage caribou.

► The caribou are major, albeit silent, figures in a growing debate over whether to reroute a proposed massive transmission corridor that would carry electricity from Manitoba to the Toronto area, so that it could also tie in to hydro and wind sources in Northern Ontario.

"Woodland caribou are an allegory for the boreal forest, climate change and the future of the planet," says Janet Sumner, the Wildlands League's executive director.

They're not only "well-loved symbols of Canada's identity," but also a key sign of how well forests are doing, states a recent report from the group. "Where they are plentiful, our forests are in good health. Where they are threatened . . . nature has been thrown out of balance."

"Most people think we're moving toward an uncertain world," says Jim Schaeffer, an associate professor of biology at Peterborough's Trent University. "I tend to think of caribou in the forest

'I don't think a logging moratorium that would put thousands of people . . . out of work is the answer'

Bill Thornton, Ministry of Natural Resources

as a sign of security," that the forests can still provide us with the resources and services they always have.

"They have much to teach us at a very crucial juncture in the history of our species."

The major apparent lesson is sparking a debate over development in Ontario's far north. To date, it has been piecemeal. Critics say that can no longer be allowed because small projects add up to big impacts.

Separate provincial ministries oversee power, mines and logging, says Justina Ray, director of the Wildlife Conservation Society of Canada and adjunct professor in forestry at the University of Toronto. Ottawa controls some road building. First Nations and private companies make land-use decisions.

Incoherent planning didn't matter much while the area ex-

No one is exactly sure how many woodland caribou live in Ontario's north. But many people say they are threatened by development, *Peter Gorrie reports*

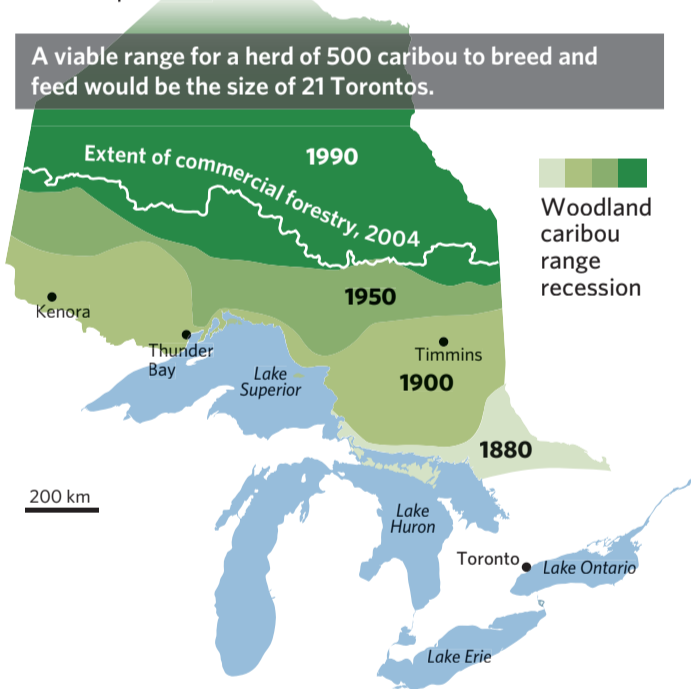


TED SIMONETT PHOTO

The shy woodland caribou of Ontario's far north are at the heart of a debate about proposed hydroelectric, forest and mine development in the vast region. One environmentalist warns that the animals could be extinct within 80 years.

Running out of room?

Since 1880, development has rapidly shrunk Ontario's undisturbed boreal forest, the only home for woodland caribou. Plans for mines, forestry and hydro corridors could wipe them out in the province.



SOURCE: Wildlands League

cited little interest. Now, though, in Ontario and across Canada, the north is viewed as a treasure trove of resources — diamonds and hydroelectric power here, other minerals or oil and gas elsewhere — so a new approach is needed.

"The public hasn't decided to get rid of caribou, and protecting them is part of provincial government policy," Ray says. "There's been a commitment to do so; so, we've got to figure out a way."

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Ontario's caribou are among several types that inhabit central and northern Canada. A portrait of one cousin graces our 25-cent coins.

The woodland version — which generally grow to no more than 200 kilograms for males, 115 for females, and lives a dozen or so years — is thinly spread throughout the boreal forest, which stretches from Yukon to Newfoundland and Labrador, and it's under pressure everywhere.

Its main survival strategy, particularly for females in the calving season, is to disperse. The difficulty in locating these widely scattered animals keeps the main predator, wolves, in check. But clear cuts and roads open territories to deer and moose, which attract wolves that then go after caribou in larger numbers.

The deeply imbedded desire for solitude means caribou simply don't like disturbance of any kind. Create a clear cut, for example, and they'll shy away at least 10 kilometres.

Each female occupies a home range that's about 6½ times the size of Toronto, Schaeffer says. Individuals' territories overlap, so a herd of 500 requires 21 "Torontos," or about 13,000 square kilometres.

Because their lichens take 50 to 150 years to establish, caribou can only live in forests at least half a century old. The dependence on large, mature forests is what puts them at risk.

About 125 years ago in Ontario, caribou ranged as far south as Georgian Bay and the Ottawa Valley. Over the years, the boundary of their range has retreated northward — at about 34 kilometres each decade — as highways, settlements, logging, mines, hydro corridors and other intrusions destroyed much of the forest and chopped what remained into small bits. Now, with 60 per cent of their original base gone, they're found only north of Lake Superior.

The animals inhabit two types of territory, divided roughly along the 51st parallel by what is known as the cut line.

To the south, there's urban and industrial development, and the remaining forest has been allocated to logging companies. A few caribou struggle in the patches that haven't yet been harvested.

North of the line, the land is, for now, mainly off limits to tree cutters. Small native communities dot the wilderness, and Ontario's first diamond mine is underway. But most of that vast, boggy expanse of trees, lakes and rivers remains untouched by humans. This is the province's final caribou sanctuary.

But this wilderness, too, is under pressure.

Conservationists want a last-ditch preservation effort south of the cut line. And they want the experience there to lead to a much different approach in the far north.

No development should occur

'Woodland caribou are an allegory for the boreal forest'

Janet Sumner, Wildlands League

in caribou areas on either side of the line until protection measures are in place, they say.

"We've managed to extirpate half of the caribou in 100 years, and development is accelerating," Hesselink says. "We're saying, 'let's relieve the pressure . . . until we sort out what needs to be done.'"

The province rejects that idea. It is spending millions of dollars to prop up the logging industry. And some native communities support development.

"I don't think a logging moratorium that would put thousands of people in northwestern Ontario out of work is the answer," says Bill Thornton, the assistant deputy for forestry in the Ministry of Natural Resources.

South of the line, environmentalists say, logging and road building would be banned in five important areas. To the north, all types of development would stop until an acceptable land-use plan for the entire area is completed.

Premier Dalton McGuinty backed the latter demand when he campaigned for the 2003 election. But his Liberal government soon abandoned the pledge and approved the Victor diamond mine, as well as a forestry project near the Manitoba border that's endorsed by the Pikangikum native community.

At a recent closed meeting of an advisory group called the Provincial Forest Policy Committee, Natural Resources Minister David Ramsay confirmed he won't "put in place any industrial deferrals while planning is ongoing," a meeting participant reports.

This isn't an academic debate. Additional diamond deposits have been found, exploration crews are criss-crossing the

north in search of other minerals, and forest companies are pushing for access to the untouched bush.

The province is also considering a \$4 billion plan for a hydro corridor across the top of the province that would carry what its proponents call green power — from hydroelectric projects in Manitoba and, possibly, Northern Ontario, and from wind turbines that could be built along the breezy west coast of Hudson Bay.

The line of towers and high-voltage wires is viewed as a potential alternative to nuclear generating stations. Native

leaders say it might create jobs and provide cleaner, more reliable power than their communities now get from diesel generators.

Environmentalists, though, suggest the benefits are being oversold and technical problems downplayed.

On top of that, all the projects would also bring permanent roads into the far north, further fragmenting the wilderness.

Thornton suggests the animals' demise might be inevitable. "At the end of the day, there will be human activity in northwestern Ontario that will bring negative consequences for caribou . . . Society won't accept stopping all industrial activity until we have a plan."

The solution, environmentalists say, is to put conservation first — figure out how much land must be set aside, then, carefully decide what else can happen.

One thing that must change, they say, is how forests are allocated to logging companies. The province designates forest management units. Increasingly, they're operated according to environmental standards established by the Forest Stewardship Council.

But even those measures aren't enough, the environmental groups say. Loggers are required to protect just part of each management unit, but the units themselves are far less than the 13,000 square kilometres needed to support the herd.

In fact, even the few parks and reserves the province has established are also smaller than the minimum required.

The wilderness covers about 400,000 square kilometres. How much must be set aside won't be certain until scientists learn more about caribou.

A balance must be found between protection and development, Schaeffer says. "If we take the business as usual approach, caribou are unlikely to be part of our future."