LEADING THE WAY

THE CONSERVATION OF NORTH AMERICA'S WILDLIFE

PART I:

Big game species in North America have fascinating survival strategies and few are more interesting than the mountain caribou of the Pacific Northwest. Mountain caribou live in a region that receives snowfall in amounts better measured in feet than inches; 30 or more feet each winter. Unlike most deer species, mountain caribou in these high snowpack ecosystems do not migrate to lower elevations to escape the snow, but instead ascend from early winter habitat in lower elevation cedar-hemlock forests to high elevation spruce-fir forests. The caribou then use the snow to lift them up into the branches of trees where they subsist on a diet comprised entirely of arboreal lichen.

ABOVE: In 1976 Garry Beaubien harvested this mountain caribou, scoring 452 points, near the Turnagain River in British Columbia. He was given the Sagamore Hill Award for this outstanding trophy. Read more about the Sagamore Hill Award on page 35.

MOUNTAIN CARIBOU

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Because of abundant rain and snowfall, forest fires are rare in this region and prior to extensive timber harvest, old-growth forest dominated. Old growth spruce-fir forest produces the slow growing arboreal lichens eaten by woodland caribou during winter, but does not produce a lot of other forages that large herbivores can eat after the snow melts. An environment with a limited variety of food would appear to be a bad place to live, but if you are a species adapted to a diet composed only of lichens for over 6 months per year, it can be a good location. An area that cannot support many large herbivores can support even fewer large predators, which is why the old-growth forest and alpine tundra in the mountains of British Columbia, Idaho, and Washington support caribou populations.

This fine balance between prodigious snowfall, old-growth forest, low predator density, and mountain caribou works as long as the system remains intact. However, populations of mountain caribou across much of their range are in trouble. The precarious state of mountain caribou in southwestern British Columbia has stimulated research which suggests that human-caused changes to the system may have triggered a cascade of events detrimental to caribou.

A large body of research in British Columbia suggests the following scenario. Old growth timber has been logged during the past 50 or more years. Harvest of old-growth timber generally favors browsing herbivores, like caribou, by promoting growth of nutritious forbs, shrubs, and seedlings on the forest floor. At the same time, timber harvest reduces the amount of old growth timber and therefore the arboreal lichen caribou need during winter. In 2011 studies suggest there was sufficient old growth timber remaining to meet the winter nutritional needs of the caribou.

So, why are caribou having problems when the only change in their environment was logging of old growth forest, which generally favors browsing herbivores? A clue comes from caribou mortality patterns. In declining caribou populations, most mortality of adult caribou is during summer and predation is the primary cause. Not only is adult mortality unsustainably high, but survival of calves is exceedingly low. The most likely reason mortality has increased is that logging did exactly what would be predicted; it favored browsing herbivores. In this instance, the herbivores favored were moose, elk, and deer. With increasing numbers of these other deer species, large predators, particularly cougars and wolves, were

Bart George, Conservation Director at ICF and a wildlife biologist for the Kalispel Tribe, with what is very likely the last "trophy" bull from the Selkirk herd. It was struck by a vehicle on the Kootenay Pass, killed by wolves while injured near the highway, then scavenged by bears.

INTERNATIONAL CARIBOU FOUNDATION

MEET THE FOUNDERS

For husband and wife John Lind and Cheryl Conibear Lind of Bozeman, the silver-maned mountain deer—the caribou—has helped them to heal. In return, they hope to help restore the species, which has been extirpated from the Lower 48 and remains vulnerable in its more northern homelands.

During the 2019 Backcountry Hunters and Anglers Rendezvous in Boise, Idaho, from May 1-4, the couple and a cohort of fellow conservationists launched the Bozeman-based International Caribou Foundation, an organization seeking to raise awareness and provide on-the-ground measures to enhance caribou populations and protect habitat.

For the Linds, these efforts are personal.

It was on a trip to Alaska in 2016 while living in Hawaii when John and Cheryl became enamored with the gray ghost of the mountains. They visited a wildlife sanctuary in Fairbanks that's home to a group of caribou, at a critical juncture in their own lives: they were searching for healing after watching their premature son pass away following 36 hours in the newborn intensive care unit. Cheryl's uterus had ruptured—a serious medical emergency for both mother and child. "Alex just lost too much blood, " she said. "I was very, very lucky and very blessed to survive. It just opens your eyes to the fact that life is short.

"In that sense, [the foundation] has been very healing because we're working on something that has a purpose and has given us a purpose," she added.

Spurred by John's personal desire to aid in positive change after serving five years in active duty with the Navy, the couple moved to Bozeman shortly after and he began volunteering with conservation organizations like the Rocky Mountain Goat Alliance and the Wild Sheep Foundation. When they realized there wasn't an organization solely dedicated to caribou, the Linds recognized their calling.

"I want to make the world a better place for future generations," John said, adding that he believes experiences with wild animals are an integral part of human happiness.

Excerpt from an article published online at ExploreBigSky.com, June 11, 2019, by Jessianne Castle.

able to increase. Larger predator populations increased predation on caribou, and because caribou were never in high densities, even incidental killing of caribou by predators has caused caribou populations to decline.

Interestingly, without knowledge of predation's role in this story, the decline of caribou with increasing moose, elk, and deer populations could be incorrectly interpreted as competition between caribou and these other deer species. However, several studies clearly show food resources are sufficient for stable or growing mountain caribou populations and that predation is the root cause of the caribou's decline.

Thus, a change in habitat may have short-circuited the mountain caribou's strategy of surviving in an area with little food by having high adult survival, sufficient reproduction to offset low mortality rates, and too few caribou to support more than low densities of predators. Now that we understand the problem, the challenge will be to determine how to manage the system so that needs of people, predators, and caribou can be balanced.

A research paper by Kinley and Apps suggest the following in areas managed for mountain caribou:

- Change hunting regulations to liberalize harvest of predators, elk, moose, and deer;
- Alter forest management practices to favor older forests; and
- Transplant caribou into areas capable of supporting them.

GOING FORWARD

In 2019 the sole surviving member of the South Selkirk caribou herd was captured by Canadian officials.

The capture marks the end of the only herd that still occasionally crossed back and forth between Canada and the Lower 48 states.

"You know it's sad. We're still in mourning over the whole situation," said Bart George, a wildlife biologist for the Kalispel Tribe. "The Selkirks lost some of their magic."

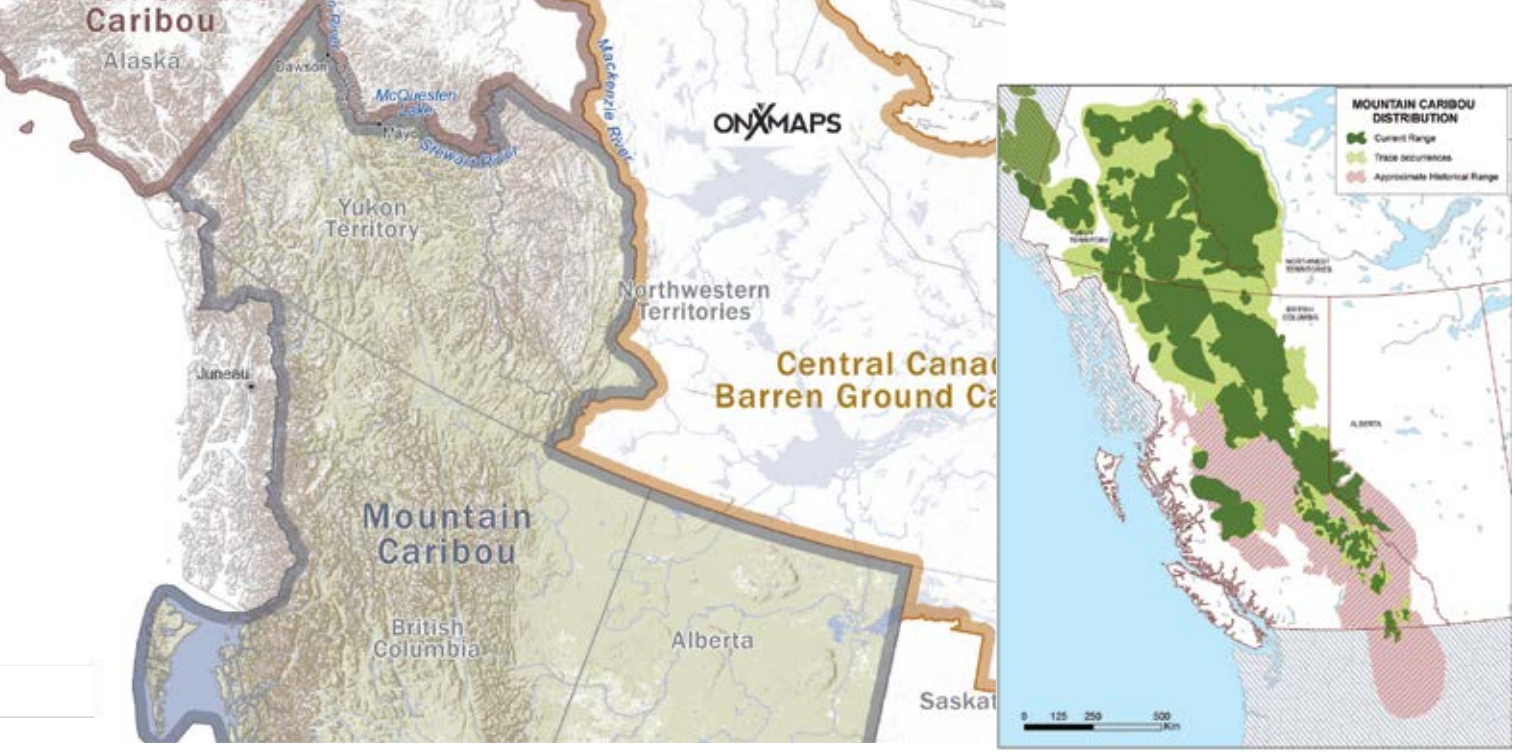
That's despite multiple efforts over the years to revive the struggling species including an expensive multi-agency and multinational effort to transplant caribou into the Idaho and Washington Selkirk Mountains in the 1990s and in 2012.

"We're hopeful for the future but pretty disappointed with the whole situation," George said. "The caribou didn't have many allies."

One of the animals' few allies in the United States was the Kalispel Tribe. In 2017, the tribe helped organize a maternal pen project aimed at capturing pregnant cows and letting them calve in the security of a 19-acre enclosure. The tribe raised roughly $225,000 toward that effort but the caribou population declined before they could implement anything. Then in November, Canadian officials announced their plans to move the surviving members of the South Selkirk herd farther north.

George said the Kalispel Tribe will remain involved in caribou recovery, although he's not sure exactly how that will look. ■

This mountain caribou was taken by Kresimir P. Lackovic in 2019 in the Mackenzie Mountains, Northwest Territories.

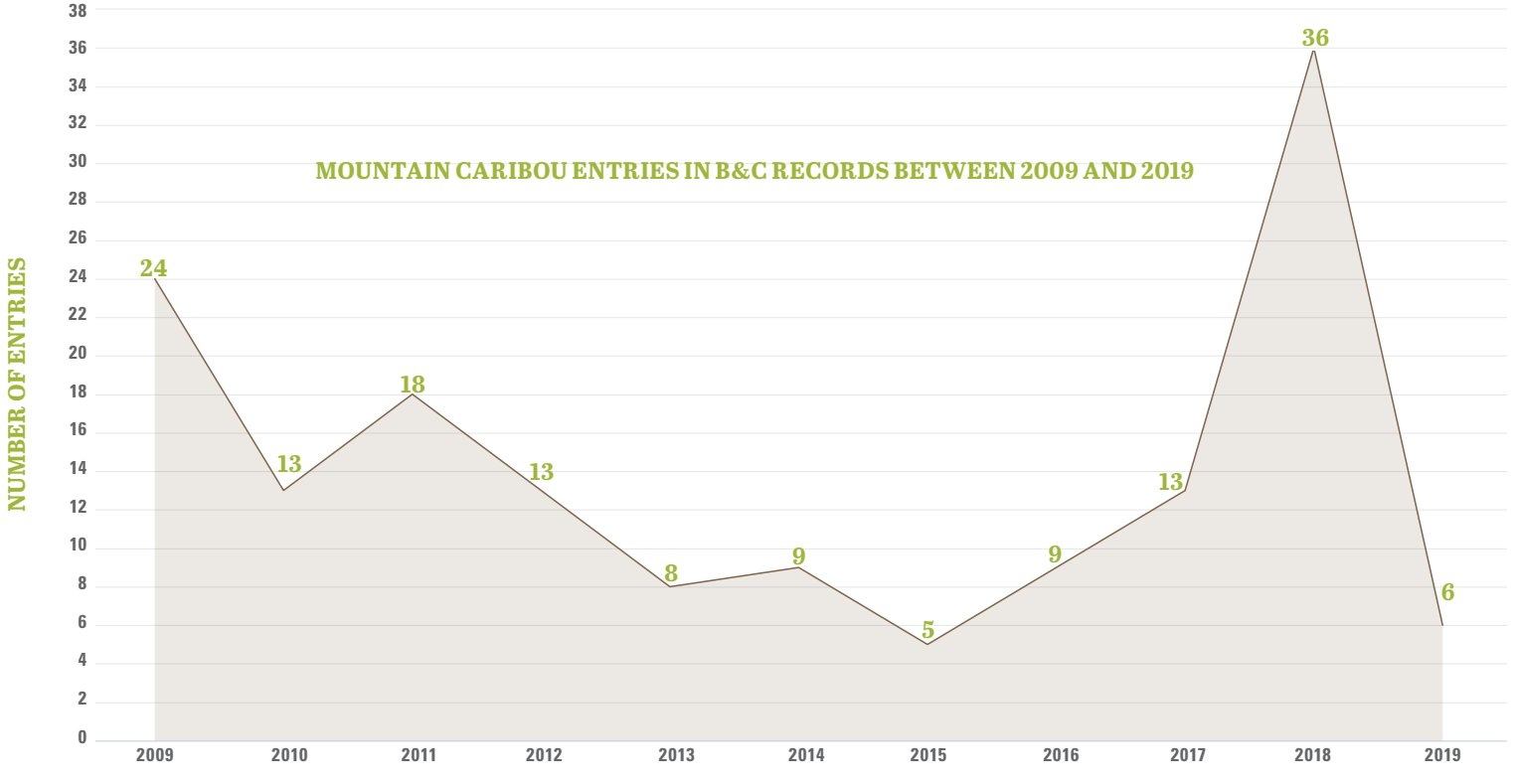


MAP CREATED BY BONNIE FOURNIER (ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES, GOVERNMENT OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES, 2013).

B&C BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION VS. CURRENT POPULATIONS

People are often alarmed that the hunting of mountain caribou continues, but one must remember this species stretches from the Yukon Territory to the northern border of the United States. While the southern herds in the Pacific Northwest had a survival strategy contingent on mature old growth forest that have now been heavily logged, the northern herds have survived due to less marketable spruce forests that currently remaining intact. As such, entry of mountain caribou into the records program as a whole is a positive indication their populations appear to be doing well in the northern part of their range. Since the southern herds are not hunted nor have they been for quite some time, the lack of record entries from this region fail to accurately reflect this herds population decline.

Ryler R. Hunter took this mountain caribou in 2018 while on a hunt in the Cassiar Mountains in British Columbia.



WORLD'S RECORD

TROPHY STATS

SCORE: 459-3/8

LOCATION:
PELLY MTS., YUKON TERRITORY

HUNTER: PAUL T. DEULING

OWNER: PAUL T. DEULING

DATE: 1988

KEY MEASUREMENTS:

LENGTH OF MAIN BEAM:
RIGHT 51 7/8 - LEFT 48 7/8

INSIDE SPREAD: 40

LENGTH OF BROW POINTS:
RIGHT 21 - LEFT 21 5/8

NUMBER OF POINTS:
RIGHT 18 - LEFT 20

Paul T. Deuling received B&C's coveted Sagamore Hill Award for his World's Record mountain caribou scoring 459-3/8 points.

Following is Paul Deuling's story on taking the world's record mountain caribou. It's reprinted with permission from *Of Man and Beast,* an Amboca publication.

A lovely blonde lady from Vancouver (British Columbia) was visiting our family and quizzically asked, "Is that a very big moose you have on the wall there, Paul?" She had shown some interest in the taxidermy mounts in my basement as I explained what the various animals were and generally where they were found in the Yukon. I replied that the animal she was referring to was a mountain caribou and that yes, it was a fairly large one.

"Oh," she replied, "does he have a name?"

This took me by surprise until she followed with, "I'm a vegetarian and the only way I can deal with seeing these animals is by giving them a name." She added, "His name is Clancy. Clancy the caribou." And so, after all those years spent roaming the Pelly Mountains, and a few more spent on my wall, "Clancy" finally received his name.

My hunt for "Clancy" was incidental to a Stone's sheep hunt that I had planned in late August of 1988, for the Yukon's northern Pelly Mountains. All of my boys had either returned to school or hockey training camp, so I decided to head out for a week's solitary Stone's sheep hunt before I, too, resumed my high-school teaching duties. And I was frantic to go—that season had been a wet one and already I had made several trips after sheep, but either did not find them or sat in the tent for days (weathered in) before heading down the mountain for home.

With my old GMC 4x4 loaded down with a camper and extra gasoline, I headed for the Ketza country where I would have a walk of nearly a day before reaching my sheep area. The weather was absolutely beautiful with sunshine, a gentle breeze, and best of all, no bugs. Upon arriving that afternoon at my camp spot—a tiny sidehill bench—I kicked out a seat in the shale and chewed on some trail mix while watching a cow caribou in the basin below. She was foraging on lichen, shaking her head and rubbing her back legs against one another in an effort, I suppose, to be rid of the bugs that were appearing as the heat dissipated. I watched her for a few minutes before she suddenly bolted across the basin with head held high. And, just as caribou are apt to do, a few moments later she pranced right back to the origin of her fright. A wolverine was meandering in and out of the rocks and bushes, snooping into everything before loping off in hunched-back fashion. The caribou was apparently fascinated by this, as she repeatedly ran off a short distance before turning, sniffing, and trotting right back to the disinterested mustelid, who continued to snoop for food. All this made great entertainment for a weary packer who was still sitting in sweat-soaked clothes and had yet to set up camp.

After pitching my tent, building a water pool from a tiny stream, and setting out clothing to dry, I spent the next two hours having a snooze. Later that evening, I left my rifle in the tent and hiked up the knob behind camp where my boys had spotted rams on previous trips. Halfway up I remembered the silly cow and stopped to peer into the basin to see what she was up to. She had left the basin and climbed the very ridge I was on and was grazing about 900 meters north of me. About 50 yards away from her was a large animal that appeared to have a black oak tree growing from its head. The huge bull caribou immediately grabbed my attention and I set up my spotting scope to have a better look at him. After a quick calculation of the number of days I had to pack this guy out if I shot him, I decided he was worth taking home. Big sheep could wait until next year.

The hike down to the tent became a scramble, as the closer I got to my rifle, the more excited I became. I'd seen a lot of good bulls in the Pellys over the years, but nothing quite matched what this guy was wearing. A quick drop off of the scope and a snatch

of the .270 rifle sent me on my way, formulating a plan as I crept between boulders. Dropping off the ridge and paralleling it seemed the sensible thing to do, and a distinct dip in the topography made the stalk much easier. I was able to walk onto a ridge-cut that contained a pretty little tarn, and then climbed about 40 feet to the rim where the bull was feeding. My last step was only enough to clear the ridge and allow viewing through my rifle scope. Just 10 yards away, the large bull, resplendent in black velvet antlers and a summer coat, could be heard munching on the lichen. I could see only a black mass through the scope, so I lowered it for a moment to assure his shoulder was filling the aperture. At the shot, the caribou bolted away and headed downhill toward the cow while I stood there, dumbfounded, that he would run at all. A second shot at 50 yards quickly brought him down.

I had not packed a camera, since weight is an important factor in a solitary hunt, so I just sat beside the big fellow and stared at him. For how long, I don't know, but it was getting dark before I got around to caping and cleaning him. Few words can describe the feeling after killing such a magnificent animal, and I stopped many times to stand back and view the scene.

The real work began the next morning when, loaded with meat, I began the first of three trips back to the truck. The loads were heavy, much heavier than I should have made them, but a 12-mile round trip up hills and over ridges is easier three times, rather than four. The next five days were spent pushing through willow brush and shin-tangle with many a cuss word explaining my experience. "What a stupid, stupid thing to do!" was the most muttered phrase.

Fortunately, the trip was worth the effort and my family dined on very tender caribou that winter. Taxidermist Tony Grabowski did a super job on a shoulder mount and "Clancy" continues to impress hunters with his tremendous antlers.

And, from time to time, when the urbanites visit, I still receive a "That's a fine looking moose you have there."

Eldon Buckner, chairman of the Boone and Crockett Club's Records of North American Big Game Committee, interviewed a Yukon Territory game officer about Deuling's great hunt. "(That officer) told me that Paul was the only person he knew who would have tackled that job, as the area where Paul killed his caribou is extremely tough country to get around in."

Buckner added,"Along with being a hunter of the highest ethics, Paul also is an extremely modest man. It's a story in itself, but he was finally persuaded to strip the hardened velvet from the antlers and have the caribou measured."

After doing so, Deuling was honored on June 26, 2010, at the Boone and Crockett Club's 27th Awards Banquet in Reno, Nevada, where he received the Sagamore Hill Award, the Boone and Crockett Club's highest honor. Though Deuling harvested his world's record caribou more than 20 years ago, he was unable to participate in the Club's triennial awards celebrations until 2010. The Sagamore Hill Award was created in 1948 in memory of Theodore Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., and Kermit Roosevelt, and honors outstanding trophies worthy of great distinction. Only one Sagamore Hill may be given in any three-year period, but the actual frequency is less often. Deuling is only the 17th recipient of a Sagamore Hill Award.

In 1946 Chas W. Rossi harvested this mountain caribou near the upper region of White River, Yukon Territory.

Deuling received the award for taking a world's record mountain caribou in a hunt that exemplifies the sporting values that Roosevelt championed—fair chase, self reliance, perseverance, selective hunting, and mastery of challenges. The bull scores 459-3/8 points, which is more than six inches larger than the second largest mountain caribou in the Boone and Crockett Club's records book. ■

MOUNTAIN CARIBOU IN IDAHO THE TALE OF BILLY HOUSTON

Billy Houston was the central figure in the book I was then in the process of editing, "The Klockmann Diary: The Quest for North Idaho's Legendary Continental Mine." The diary is the personal memoir of a German immigrant named Albert Klockmann, and it tells how Klockmann came to Idaho in the year 1890, heard an old Indian legend about a possible silver bonanza in the mountains above Priest Lake, and devoted virtually the rest of his life to finding and developing the Continental Mine.

Klockmann himself was not a prospector, but rather a businessman and bon vivant who grubstaked prospectors or bought up the claims of others. Although two prospectors on his payroll spent more than a year searching for the lead-and-silver outcropping of Indian legend, it was another pair, Billy Houston and Fred Sutter, who found the site and staked their claim in 1891. Late that fall, when Klockmann was making a vain attempt to reach the mine site, Fred Sutter staggered down from Continental Mountain through early snows. The men met by chance and by winter's end Sutter had sold his share of the claim to Klockmann.

Billy Houston, however, was not heard from that winter. The following spring Klockmann again mounted an attempt to reach the mine, and he relates in his memoirs his first meeting with Houston. On the hike in, Klockmann and a companion spotted "a walking object in the distance, coming toward us, slowly nearer after a long wait, we realized that it was a man clad entirely in caribou hides, even his headpiece covering up part of his face. Stepping out to meet him we discovered it was no other than Billy Houston in pitiful physical condition from exposure in the deep snow all winter, with nothing but caribou meat to live on."

Houston, out of fear that a claim jumper might steal his strike, had wintered over at the mine site in a caribou-hide shelter. The high Selkirk Mountains experience winters of near-Arctic proportions; today it is difficult to imagine that Houston spent the winter buried deep beneath the snow in such a crude shelter. His is surely one of the remarkable, if little known, feats of survival in frontier America.

Excerpt from "Back to the Continental Mine" by Chris Bessler, in Sandpoint Magazine, Summer 1994. www.sandpointmagazine.com