

Caribou Recovery and Winter Recreation in the South Peace

The **Central Group of Southern Mountain Caribou** in the South Peace region uses a variety of habitat types, including subalpine and alpine environments in this part of British Columbia. Their large, round hooves help them move through snow, and their main winter diet of lichen allows them to survive winters on windswept slopes and in subalpine forests.



There have been documented declines in the Central Group caribou populations since the 1990s due to human-caused and natural disturbances, with fewer than 300 caribou observed in 2013. Intense conservation efforts have been made by First Nations communities and the B.C. government to help stabilize and recover these threatened subpopulations. The short-term population trend of the Central Group herds is now increasing or stable due to intensive management actions such as **maternity penning, supplemental feeding and predator reduction**. More than 500 caribou were observed or estimated to be present by biologists in 2024.

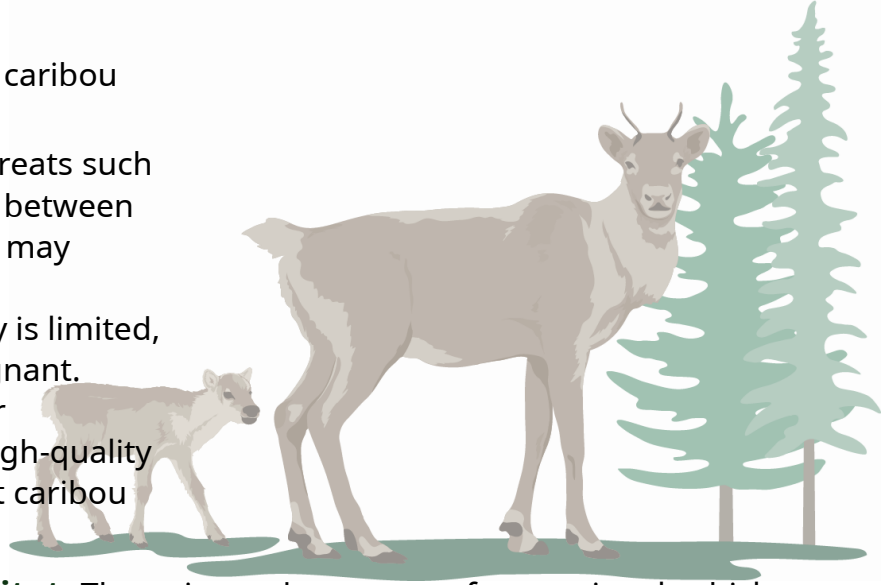
For Central Group caribou populations to expeditiously grow and become self-sustaining, the habitat that they rely upon must return closer to its natural state prior to human disturbances. Mid-term and long-term recovery actions being used include interim **protection** of over 700,000 hectares of important caribou habitat, **habitat restoration** and **recreation management**.



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Although not the primary or sole threat to caribou recovery, impacts of **winter motorized recreation** are cumulative with other threats such as habitat loss and changing relationships between predators and prey. Recreational activities may impact caribou survival and reproduction, particularly in the winter when food supply is limited, travel is difficult, and cow caribou are pregnant. Subalpine and alpine areas used for winter motorized recreation often overlap with high-quality caribou habitat. This can negatively impact caribou by:



- **Displacing caribou into poor habitat:** The noise and presence of recreational vehicles can frighten caribou, causing them to flee from ideal habitat into marginal or poor habitat. Displaced caribou can face increased risks, including a higher likelihood of death from avalanches, larger energy losses from moving through deeper snow or steeper areas, and being forced into regions with reduced food supply.
- **Disturbing caribou:** The noise created by human presence or recreational vehicles can increase stress or cause caribou to use more energy. This may negatively impact caribou survival rates or their ability to reproduce.
- **Increasing predation:** Snow can become compacted in areas and along trails frequently used by snowmobiles, making it easier for predators to more efficiently access caribou habitat at all elevations. Caribou may also be displaced into less suitable habitat where there is a higher risk of predation.

To address these impacts, **snowmobile use restrictions** (including full-season closures, partial-season closures, and active management areas) were put in place in December 2021. As part of the associated public engagement process, opportunities for **recreation enhancement** were identified with the aim of offsetting the social and economic impacts of closures without increasing the risk to caribou. The approach is to adapt to new information, and to partner with local organizations to improve the quality, access, and safety of visitor experiences within open recreation areas.

If you are fortunate enough to encounter caribou during your adventures, please give them lots of space and leave the area. Thank you for your contribution to caribou recovery efforts!



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