

Breaking the Cycle: AWA's Persistent Push for Caribou Recovery

By Pamela Narváez-Torres, AWA Conservation Specialist

The history of caribou conservation in Alberta might surprise you ... but honestly, it probably won't. That's the problem. AWA has been pushing for caribou conservation since the 1970s, and some days it feels like we've been trapped in an endless loop, repeating the same warnings, seeing the same reports, fighting battles that feel too similar. There have been victories along the way, but the big one — healthy caribou populations safely roaming in connected habitats — remains out of reach.

So, let's take a walk through six decades of caribou conservation in Alberta, as seen through AWA's advocacy work.

Before AWA's battle began

Before the 20th century, caribou were distributed across more than two-thirds of Alberta, thriving in mixed coniferous and boreal forests as well as mountainous areas north of Banff National Park. Early reports from the 1900s indicated stable populations, but by 1937, provincial records acknowledged widespread declines, particularly in areas where logging was expanding. In 1949, the province imposed a hunting ban due to low numbers, only to reverse it a year later. By 1957, research was already linking habitat loss from logging to population declines, noting caribou's reliance on mature forests.

1960s–1970s: The warnings start piling up

A late-1960s provincial status report warned that rising interest in caribou hunting should come with a better management plan. By the 1970s, populations were again in decline, now also pressured by growing oil

and gas exploration and the backcountry roads which increased hunting and poaching access. In 1978, provincial biologists, AWA, and other conservation groups produced the *Caribou Management Outline for Alberta*, calling for dedicated funding, action on causes of decline, and regional access management. Hunting still continued, and in 1979, government biologist Michael Bloomfield wrote that logging, oil and gas activity, and recreation were destroying critical areas, disrupting movement, and leading to overharvest in accessible zones.

1980s: Caribou protection recognized, but not enforced

At the end of the 1970s, AWA and the Alberta Fish and Game Association were leading the charge in calling for the suspension of caribou hunting. The government acknowledged the need for protection, with the Associate Minister of Public Lands and Wildlife assuring AWA that caribou were “a high priority” for the province. Federally, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) recognized woodland caribou as a rare species, and in 1986, Alberta listed caribou as Endangered under its *Wildlife Act* and drafted the *Woodland Caribou Provincial Restoration Plan*. This plan called for predator control (a 70 percent wolf reduction), improved population data, reduction of human-caused mortality, habitat protection, and public awareness. The wolf cull recommendation was strongly opposed by AWA. As with the previous 1978 plan, recommendations were not adopted.

Caribou face extinction, warns wildlife expert

By Peter Morton

(Herald staff writer)

Alberta's rapidly diminishing Creek and Berland forest manage- He said little is known about the As well, the season further north ho

1990s: More plans, same cycle

In 1991, Alberta Energy issued guidelines IL 91-17, allowing oil and gas activity in caribou range "provided that the integrity of the habitat is maintained." AWA continued advocacy, raising concerns about caribou-vehicle collisions along Highway 40 in 1992 and urging changes to road salting practices.

Through the 1990s, the cycle of drafting but not implementing strategies continued. The 1993 *Strategy for Conservation of Woodland Caribou in Alberta* identified logging as the greatest threat, stating that no proven method existed to maintain populations alongside timber harvest. The 1996 *Woodland Caribou Conservation Strategy* echoed this, advising against new forest clearing until habitat supply analyses were completed and recommending wolf culls only as a last resort. Neither strategy was implemented. In 1997, Alberta amended the *Wildlife Act* to create separate Endangered and Threatened categories, placing woodland caribou in the latter.

The 2000s: Recovery plans without recovery

At this point, while some of us had been worried about the potential end of the world, AWA continued work to protect caribou, fighting to keep them from facing their end. At the federal level, in 2000, COSEWIC re-designated caribou as Threatened. That year, AWA, CPAWS (Northern Alberta), and WWF Canada sent a letter to Alberta's Environment Minister, warning that new research showed the oil and gas industry had already violated government guidelines meant to protect caribou habitat (IL 91-17). The data was clear: caribou were avoiding roads, wells, and seismic lines at such a scale that cumulative



WILDERNESS ALBERTA

Vol. 16, #4 Winter 1986

ISSN 0830-8284

\$1.00

MOUNTAIN - WOODLAND

CARIBOU



Is time running out?

habitat loss was already severe. AWA pushed hard for major policy changes and urged the province to start curbing industry activity in critical caribou ranges.

But by 2001, not much had changed. The recommendations from the 1996 Woodland Caribou Conservation Strategy Development Committee were still collecting dust. The provincial *Status of the Woodland Caribou (Rangifer tarandus caribou) in Alberta* acknowledged that some populations were shrinking and ranges contracting, but no one knew exactly how many caribou were left. In 2003, the federal *Species at Risk Act (SARA)* listed both boreal and southern mountain caribou as Threatened.

In 2004, Weyerhaeuser, a logging company, announced a five-year logging pause on 82,000 hectares in west-central Alberta. AWA and other environmental groups pushed for a full, multi-sector management plan and called for the postponement of industrial activities in core

habitats until the herds recovered to healthy numbers. Permanent habitat protection was the ultimate goal.

By 2005, research from the University of Alberta confirmed industry was breaking habitat guidelines again. AWA and partners hammered the government with nine public statements demanding it stick to its conservation commitments. The Government of Alberta announced the creation of the Alberta Caribou Committee and later that year released the *Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan*. This plan aimed for self-sustaining herds, and it was adopted by the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. However, the recommended moratorium on new mineral and timber allocations on specific caribou ranges was skipped. Instead, Alberta started annual wolf culls in key ranges while allowing industrial activity to continue.

In the second half of this decade, AWA kept pushing back against government action and inaction. AWA released nine more public statements, including strongly opposing wolf culls that seemed designed to clear the way for energy extraction.

One of the most notorious events of this period was the extirpation of Banff's last caribou herd in 2009. The last four individuals of this herd were tragically all killed by an avalanche, and this became the first extirpation of a large mammal in a Canadian National Park in more than a century.

Despite decades of clear evidence about what was driving caribou declines, that same year, Alberta released its *Action Plan for West-Central Alberta Caribou Recovery*. The title of the plan promised "recovery," but the actual content of the document delivered more of the same, allowing ongoing logging and oil and gas development in the caribou ranges north of Hinton and Grande Cache.

The 2010s: Legal action and partnering with First Nations

By 2010, Alberta's caribou continued to be in serious trouble. The Alberta government published an update on the *Status of the Woodland Caribou in Alberta*, which, after 23 years of "recovery" efforts, painted a stark picture: 10 of the 13 populations with enough population data were in decline, industrial disturbance remained high across most ranges, and the forecast was for even more industrial expansion.

That same year, Ecojustice, on behalf of AWA, the Pembina Institute, and Sierra Club Prairie Chapter, petitioned the federal Environment Minister to trigger emergency measures under SARA to protect caribou herds in northeastern Alberta. The petition called for an immediate halt to further industrial expansion in critical ranges until a recovery plan and habitat protection measures were actually in place. This petition also supported a demand made by local First Nations, who demanded that the minister



Southern Mountain Caribou in Jasper National Park. Photo © M. Bradley



provide emergency protection to herds on their traditional lands.

In October 2012, and five years behind schedule, the federal government finally released the final version of the *Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou, Boreal Population in Canada*, giving provinces five years to develop range plans outlining how they planned to maintain at least 65 percent undisturbed habitat in each range. Thanks to public pressure including AWA's, this final plan focused more on protecting habitat than on predator culls. But Alberta's caribou habitat was still far below target in most ranges.

Over the next several years, more recovery plans and updates were released, and AWA kept calling out the provincial government for leasing oil and gas rights in already devastated ranges like the Little Smoky and Redrock-Prairie Creek. There were a few wins at this time, like postponed lease sales in 2015 and four new wildland provincial parks in 2018. However, these were undercut by ongoing disturbances and frozen habitat protections. Meanwhile, federal assessments kept sounding the alarm, with mountain caribou listed as Endangered in 2014 and a 2017 progress report showing rising habitat loss.

AWA didn't back down. We, along with the David Suzuki Foundation and Ontario

Nature, mapped industrial "hot spots" in three provinces. AWA also co-launched caribou4ever.ca to create an information resource accessible to everyone, and we weighed in on draft provincial range plans that lacked enforceable timelines or interim protections. Through court battles and public campaigns, AWA and allies pushed hard for real action, including a 2019 lawsuit.

Ecojustice on behalf of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, AWA and David Suzuki Foundation, filed a lawsuit against the federal Environment Minister for failing to protect the critical habitat for five boreal populations in northeastern Alberta. That same year, sub-regional task forces, with AWA at the table, and a draft *Agreement for the Conservation and Recovery of the Woodland Caribou*, were announced. While the agreement promised enforceable plans and Indigenous collaboration, it lacked timelines, funding, and safeguards, leaving caribou survival still far from certain as the decade closed.

2020-2025: The last five years

In September 2020, the bad news came: Parks Canada confirmed Jasper National Park's Maligne caribou were extirpated, and the Tonquin and Brazeau herds were too small to recover without help. A conservation breeding program was announced to help recover these herds.

That October, AWA, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, and the David Suzuki Foundation ended their legal case for northeast Alberta boreal caribou habitat protection after being told the federal Minister recommended a SARA “safety net” order, only for the federal government to reject it the very next day. Instead, Canada and Alberta signed a Section 11 Conservation Agreement committing Alberta to SARA-compliant range plans for all herds on provincial lands within five years. AWA warned that without interim federal protections, disturbance would continue.

By 2021, only two draft sub-regional plans (Bistcho and Cold Lake) had been released for public comment. These plans lacked protected areas, Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas, short- or medium-term objectives, and credible paths to achieving the 65 percent undisturbed habitat required under SARA. AWA encouraged public engagement in their review.

In 2022, Alberta approved the first two sub-regional plans, but progress slowed again. By 2023, nine plans remained unfinished. That March, Parks Canada confirmed a conservation breeding program for Jasper’s herds, which AWA supported as a temporary lifeline paired with habitat

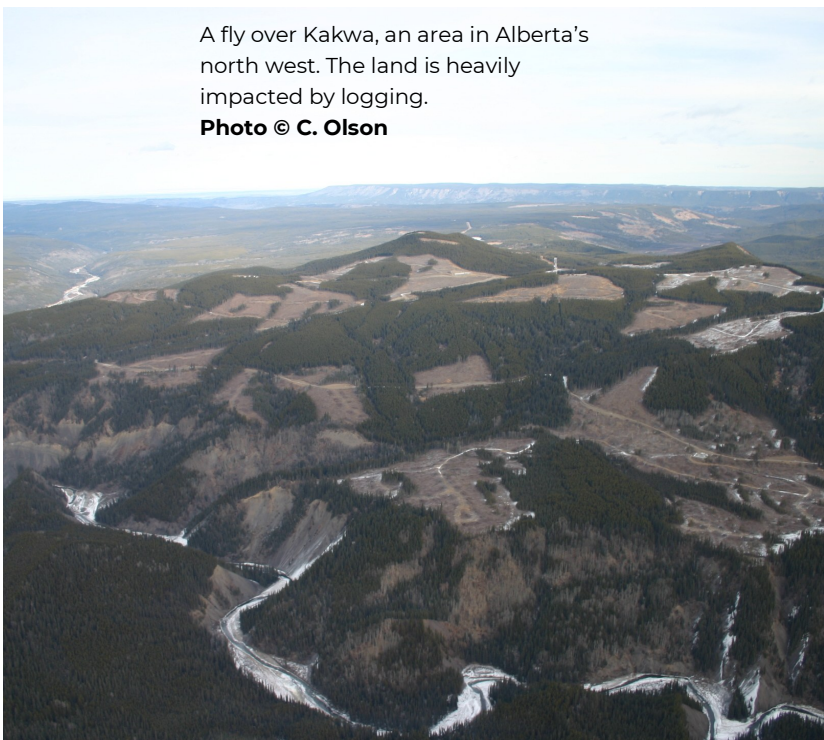
protections, calling it a tragic necessity. In October, frustrated environmental organizations, including AWA, urged both Alberta and Canada to speed up and make the sub-regional planning process more transparent as industrial habitat loss continued.

In 2024, Alberta finally released the long-awaited 2021 report on the implementation of the Alberta-Canada caribou conservation agreement, but the data was already three years old, making it challenging to assess the current conditions. Up-to-date habitat and population data were and still are urgently needed.

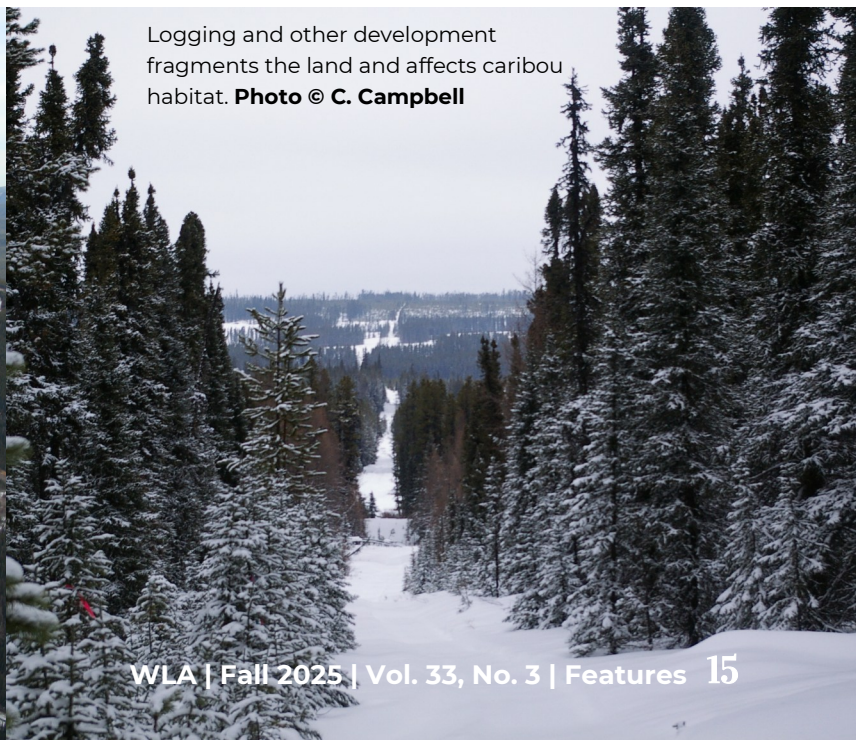
Then, in 2025, Alberta released another highly anticipated plan, the draft *Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan*. This draft plan would allow clear-cutting in nearly all remaining winter critical habitat for two southern mountain populations, virtually ensuring their extirpation from public lands. AWA, with CPAWS NAB and the Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society, published a report on the impacts of this plan on caribou. We attended government engagement sessions and formally submitted feedback opposing the plan. With the October 2025 Section 11 deadline looming and eight plans still missing, AWA continues to call for stronger federal involvement and urgent

A fly over Kakwa, an area in Alberta’s north west. The land is heavily impacted by logging.

Photo © C. Olson



Logging and other development fragments the land and affects caribou habitat. **Photo © C. Campbell**



action before Alberta's caribou reaches the point of no return.

Caribou can't keep waiting

If the last 60 years have taught us anything, it's this: industry and caribou do not mix. Somehow, Alberta's elected government still hasn't gotten the memo. How else can we explain a new sub-regional plan that would allow clearcutting across most of the remaining winter critical habitat for two southern mountain populations? The government's data says it could take over 100 years to meet the minimum 65 percent undisturbed habitat target. Caribou cannot wait a century. This never-ending loop can't keep spinning for another 100 years.

We've seen the same story: strong science from government biologists, decades of consistent recommendations from conservationists and Indigenous knowledge holders, and even broad agreement on what's needed: habitat protection. Many people, from government staff to Indigenous communities, environmental organizations and the public, have poured countless hours and years into trying to secure a future for caribou. Yet elected governments — the ones with the power to act — keep choosing industry-friendly half-measures over caribou survival.

When I spoke with long-time AWA board

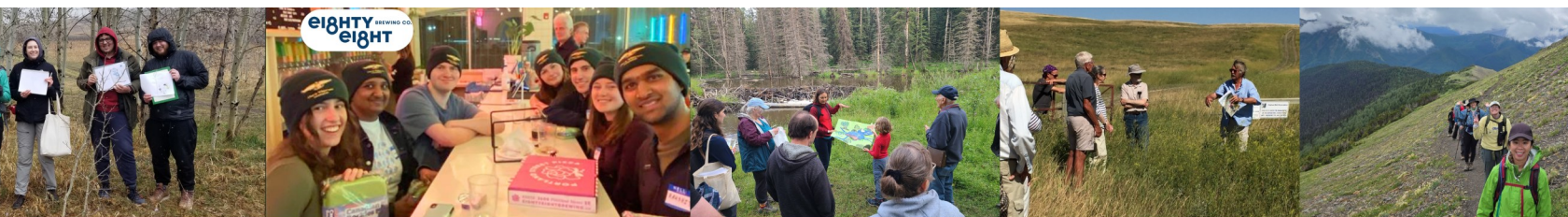
member Cliff Wallis, he told me we have what we need to help caribou, but politics gets in the way.

"We have the stepping stones to finally getting somewhere, but government moves at glacial speed while industry moves at lightning speed," he said. "That's the constant battle"

Short-term fixes, like temporary logging pauses and prolonged wolf culls, have failed every time because they avoid the real problem: habitat loss. Until governments stop passing responsibility to "the next administration" and choose caribou survival over short-term profits, the decline will continue.

AWA will keep holding the government accountable and exposing the gap between what they promise and what they deliver. And while some might argue that environmental groups haven't scored enough "big wins," I can't help but think: without decades of pressure from AWA, our members and allies, where would caribou be right now? Perhaps not here at all.

The fight isn't over. With relentless advocacy, public engagement, and genuine government actions, we can still break this never-ending loop. It's time for governments, organizations, and the public to finally give Alberta's caribou the future they deserve. 🌿



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