

# B.C.'s Endangered Mountain Caribou

## What are mountain caribou?

Caribou, also known as reindeer (*rangifer tarandus*), are featured on Canada's 25 cent coin. Reindeer herds worldwide are in sharp decline, largely due to climate change and industrial development.

Mountain caribou are red-listed (endangered) in British Columbia. B.C.'s remaining mountain caribou population is estimated at about 1,900 animals—a drop of about 25 percent from approximately 2,500 animals in 1995. They have been extirpated from almost one-half of their historic range in B.C.

B.C.'s mountain caribou are a unique ecotype of woodland caribou, and the only type of caribou to subsist on tree lichens during winter. They are also the only type of caribou that depends on both low and high elevation mature forests. In late winter, when valley bottoms are covered in snow, mountain caribou move up into sub-alpine forests to feed on lichens high in trees.

Mountain caribou are sensitive to habitat disturbances caused by road-building, logging and winter recreation (snowmobiling and cat-skiing), and are also threatened by predation from wolves and cougars (exacerbated by road-building).

## Caribou threatened by double-standard

In October, 2007, B.C.'s Mountain Caribou Recovery Implementation Plan designated 2.2 million hectares (22,000 square kilometres) in south eastern B.C. for mountain caribou recovery. The goal of the plan was to restore B.C.'s mountain caribou to pre-1995 population levels. The 2.2 million hectares included about 500,000 hectares staked by mining exploration companies.

When B.C. Environment Minister Barry Penner announced the recovery plan, he said the 2.2 million hectares would be off limits to road-building and logging.

However, B.C.'s 125-year-old Mining Act creates a double-standard because the "free entry" system allows mining companies to stake claim to any land outside of designated parks.

Logging companies must provide information from a Qualified Registered Professional (QRP) who is a knowledgeable expert on caribou, if they wish to request special permission for activities in designated caribou habitat, but mining exploration companies are allowed to build road and cut trees within newly established thresholds without the requirement of professional oversight by a knowledgeable expert on caribou.

In December 2009, the B.C. government created relaxed rules for mining exploration in designated caribou habitat by issuing a blanket exception to the "no-logging, no road-building" rule.

Mineral exploration companies are now able to log trees and build roads up to "thresholds" that the Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources (MEMPR) determines are of "acceptable risk" to caribou. There is no required assessment of cumulative impacts, or required review by qualified caribou professionals or the Ministry of Environment (MOE) unless the area is also covered by a motorized recreation closure. In areas covered by recreation closures, an exemption can be requested from MOE.

## Steps necessary to protect our endangered mountain caribou

- B.C. must follow the lead of Ontario and modernize the provincial Mining Act to abolish "free entry" for mineral activity on all B.C. lands outside of parks.
- New B.C. mining legislation must include the need for environmental and First Nations review before any exploration activity is undertaken.
- Mining companies must abide by the same rules as forestry companies in endangered mountain caribou habitat. A Qualified Registered Professional knowledgeable about caribou recovery habitat must review and approve any plans for road-building and logging by mining exploration companies.
- There should be no blanket exception granted by the B.C. government for mining exploration activity in critical mountain caribou habitat that will permit mining exploration companies to log and mine up to thresholds determined by the Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources and without the input of a Qualified Registered Professional knowledgeable about caribou recovery habitat.
- The B.C. government must make public the details of work permits and all exemptions granted to the forest and mining industry companies for road-building and logging in designated caribou recovery habitat.