

LANGUISHING SPECIES: NORTHWEST

WOODLAND CARIBOU

A relative of reindeer, the woodland caribou once ranged throughout much of Canada and the northern tier of states along the border as far south as Salmon, Idaho. Today it survives in the United States only in the Selkirk Mountains on the Washington-Idaho border, where it lives in mature and old-growth stands of cedar/hemlock and spruce/fir, feeding on mushrooms, flowering plants, grasses, sedges and soft shrubs and showing a marked preference for huckleberry leaves. In winter, woodland caribou seek higher elevations where deep snow allows them to reach lichens, a staple winter food that grows high up in trees. Listed as endangered in 1983, the woodland caribou is one of the most severely jeopardized mammals in the Lower 48.

The woodland caribou is vulnerable to extinction because its habitat needs are specialized and its reproductive rate one of the slowest for a member of the deer family.

Females typically do not breed until three and a half years old and produce only one calf yearly. Calf mortality during the first few months of life is high, often approaching 50 percent. Although calves typically make up 27 to 30 percent of the population at birth, by one year of age their proportion is generally less than 20 percent. Loss of habitat to logging and wildfires and the inroads of uncontrolled hunting a century ago cut down their numbers.

The bulk of the woodland caribou population, comprised of an estimated at 37 animals, stays primarily in the British Columbia portion of the Selkirk ecosystem, although a few animals range into Washington and Idaho. One of the chief causes of direct mortality is predation by mountain lions in late summer. Idaho, Washington and British Columbia wildlife agencies have increased mountain lion hunting within caribou range, and this source of mortality has declined. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in cooperation with other federal, state and provincial agencies, has augmented the Selkirk population using animals from

British Columbia. While the effort has helped maintain the existing herd, it has not resulted in the establishment of a viable, self-sustaining population.

Snowmobiles, which can stress the animals during a crucial time of year, pose a threat to woodland caribou survival and distribution in the United States. In response to recent litigation, the U.S. Forest Service is seeking to reduce this threat by developing a winter travel plan to manage snowmobile activity within caribou habitat.

Funding from all government sources for woodland caribou recovery nationwide ranks the species at 277 out of 1,311 species, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fiscal year 2004 report (the most recent available) to Congress, *Federal and State Endangered and Threatened Species Expenditures*.^{*} Total recovery funding from all government sources that year was about \$131,000, with \$66,200 coming from the Service.

^{*} The U.S. Fish and Wildlife *Federal and State Endangered and Threatened Species Expenditures* report incorporates subjective estimates provided by regulated entities without any independent verification and without effort to segregate Endangered Species Act expenditures from other related expenditures. However, for most listed species, no other funding data is available.



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