



Jasper National Park Takes Next Step to Help Caribou Survive Winters



Jasper caribou. *Photo © John E. Marriott.*

October 15, 2021 - Conservation groups welcome Parks Canada's [decision](#) to extend backcountry access closures for the entire snow season in Jasper's Tonquin and Brazeau caribou ranges, where caribou are on the brink of extirpation.

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA), the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) and CPAWS Northern Alberta Chapter, the Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society (ACTWS), the David Suzuki Foundation (DSF), and the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) strongly support Parks

Canada's decision to prevent predator access via snow season backcountry trails in two caribou ranges, and to expand the area where these restrictions apply in the Brazeau caribou range.

The groups support this evidence-based and precautionary approach by Parks Canada to manage snow season access so that as many wild caribou as possible can continue to live in Jasper National Park. At their current herd numbers, which are dangerously low, every additional protective action helps.

"We welcome Jasper's Tonquin and Brazeau backcountry winter closure decisions based upon Parks Canada's obligations to protect species at risk and ecological integrity," says Carolyn Campbell of Alberta Wilderness Association. "As Parks Canada notes, 'research shows that trails packed by backcountry skiers, snowboarders, and snowshoers from the valley bottom to high elevation areas can lead wolves to prey on caribou in the very places caribou go to avoid predators'."

"On the heels of the recent extirpation of the Maligne caribou herd in Jasper, we are relieved to see the prioritization of caribou safety for the remaining shrinking herds," says Gillian Chow-Fraser with CPAWS Northern Alberta. "Managing backcountry access pressures will help provide the added safety net these caribou need to survive near-term."

"We applaud the winter closure decision for the Brazeau and Tonquin herds, but Jasper National Park should also uphold its access restrictions in the Maligne range," says Rachel Plotkin of the David Suzuki Foundation. "Maintaining viable habitat will be a critical condition to support future caribou reoccupation."

"Limited closures are one example of how small changes in human behaviour can help sensitive wildlife. One other national park success is overnight closures in the spring on parts of the Bow Valley Parkway in Banff to help breeding wildlife," says Y2Y conservation scientist Aerin Jacob, who participated in Jasper's recent scientific review of caribou conservation options. "Even small-scale actions at the right times of year, in the right places, can help improve connectivity and habitat quality for wildlife."

Jasper's monitoring data, in addition to advice from an independent panel of experts, have helped inform Parks Canada's decision to extend backcountry closures. Although fewer wolves have been documented in Jasper caribou habitat since 2016 compared to prior years, a GPS-collared wolf was detected this summer in the Tonquin caribou range.

The conservation groups also support backcountry winter restrictions because packed snow trails bringing people into high quality caribou habitat can stress caribou, and can displace them from the best habitat. During winter, caribou eat mostly low-protein lichens and need to conserve energy, and the consequences of avoiding people or trails in good habitat could be high. Caribou cows are also pregnant in winter and they need to stay healthy so they can give birth to strong calves in late spring.

In August 2021, these conservation groups described the federal government's decision to continue exploring a Jasper caribou conservation breeding as a tragic, yet necessary, interim recovery measure for caribou within the Rocky Mountain national parks. In the 1960s, southern Jasper National Park was home to hundreds of caribou. Today there are fewer than 60 of them left. The Maligne herd was declared extirpated in 2020, while the Tonquin and Brazeau herds are at such low numbers that they might not last much longer. The Tonquin herd is the largest herd left; it only has 45 caribou, including no more than 10 breeding females.

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