

Recovery of Boreal Caribou in Labrador

A Report on Government of Canada Support, April 2018



The decline of status of boreal caribou is an issue of national attention, deserving of spotlight by all levels of government, Indigenous governments and communities, non-government organizations, and citizens. The root cause of caribou declines appear consistent in most jurisdictions, but are not universal. This is the point of the Newfoundland and Labrador report on this issue.

Newfoundland and Labrador is home to several herds of caribou; the island population, the migratory George River caribou (northern Labrador), and perhaps the most sensitive, the boreal herds of southern Labrador. Boreal caribou found in southern Labrador, specifically the Lac Joseph, Red Wine Mountains and Mealy Mountains caribou herds, are considered Threatened and have been protected under the Newfoundland and Labrador Endangered Species Act since July 2002. The herds were also listed as Threatened under the federal Species at Risk Act in June 2003.

Unlike the situation in almost all other jurisdictions the habitat of boreal caribou of Labrador is effectively pristine. The average level of human disturbance across the range of all three herds is two per cent. The decline and continued low abundance of these herds has been driven by a combination of natural population cycles and unsustainable and unsanctioned harvesting. Over the years Newfoundland and Labrador enforcement officers have documented dozens of unsanctioned kills from these vulnerable herds annually, up to and including this past winter. Boreal herd recovery efforts in Labrador are hampered by the human and financial resource challenges that accompany the vastness and remoteness of the landscape. To maximize their effectiveness, all available resources must be carefully managed and address the primary threat to recovery: elimination of the unsanctioned harvest.



Federal government collaboration is critical to the successful recovery of boreal caribou; however, federal efforts to support recovery have focused on protecting habitat, leaving the pressing matter of the unsanctioned harvest unaddressed. Although well intended, the federal government's one-size-fits-all national strategy focusing on habitat protection, and range planning, rather than on addressing the unsanctioned harvest, may be counterproductive for the herds in Labrador. Resources available for recovery are limited and should be directed at pressing threats. Recovery success will require a nuanced approach and meaningful support from the federal government.

For many years Provincial officials have identified harvesting as the key threat to boreal caribou herds in Labrador, noting that the habitat for these animals is well above the federal guideline

of being 65 per cent intact. Despite this clear communication that the primary risk to the boreal herds of Labrador is unsanctioned harvesting, and at the expense of more relevant recovery actions, almost all federal government communications and actions have continued to focus on a habitat threat that does not exist.

Since 2009, Provincial officials have continually sought federal collaboration on enforcing the Endangered Species Act with respect to the harvesting of boreal caribou in Labrador, the movement of the harvested animals across the Quebec border, and on stakeholder engagement. Only in 2016 did the federal government agree to engage stakeholders on the status of boreal caribou and to start working with the Province on a stewardship-based approach to reduced harvesting.



The federal government's release of "Progress Report on Unprotected Critical Habitat for the Woodland Caribou Boreal Population, in Canada" will once again shift the focus for recovery. It is our government's view that boreal caribou conservation in Labrador can only be served by taking these steps:

- Environment and Climate Change Canada, in all its documents and reporting, must explicitly acknowledge the existence of threats beyond habitat loss, and for the relevant regions, reporting should focus on those threats (i.e., how much enforcement or engagement is in place for reduction of hunting?).
- The federal government must make substantial financial resources available to partner with provinces and territories on recovery actions relevant to regional threats. For Labrador, these should be stakeholder engagement, enforcement, monitoring, and research.

The Provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec have been working closely on the recovery of boreal caribou on the Ungava Peninsula, and Environment and Climate Change Canada has recently been active on stakeholder engagement and several research projects. However, a broader and deeper partnership with the federal government, focused on the realized threats to these herds, is the only way to prevent extinction. Because of the pristine habitat, there is an opportunity for success in Labrador that may not exist elsewhere in Canada. This success will only occur if the federal government recognizes the need for a regionally sensitive approach that considers threats beyond habitat. It is clear that a one-size-fits-all strategy is unlikely to halt the decline of the boreal caribou of Labrador.



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