

# FORTY MILE CARIBOU HERD

## MAIN MESSAGES

- The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and many other First Nations relied on the two annual migrations of the Fortymile Caribou Herd for food and other resources.
- The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in used a variety of hunting methods including bow and arrows, spears and caribou fences.
- The herd declined from an estimated high of about 568,000 animals in 1920 to a low of 5000 in 1976. Reasons for this include: over-hunting, loss of habitat, an increase in predators and poor game management.
- Due to the cooperative efforts of the Alaskan and Yukon governments, the herd has grown to 46,000 and expanded east into its traditional range area in the Yukon.



*When I was a boy, they tell me how to hunt. Oh we got caribou, millions of them around here . . . they stop the riverboat going up the river them days. Come down the other side of the hill. Millions going through, we just kill enough for keep us through the winter. In the fall, somewhere in November, they go across with the ice . . . They come, then we shoot them off. Kill some caribou, we make cache on top the island . . . Around November when the river freeze up, we look for our cache, we find it on scaffold. Leave the hair and everything alone. And very nice, just like fresh caribou when we start to peel them off, skin.*

– Archie Roberts, 1993

*. . . my dad say when they were kids they used to make a corral with wood, big place, and . . . they used to chase caribou into that. That's how they used to get their meat too, with bow and arrow, no gun.*

– Emma Kay, 1999

*We used to have a lot of caribou up on the summit, each family or friends get together and go back there every summer. It used to be a whole pile of caribou going through there and they'd get as much as they could and now you can't do that and there is no hardly no caribou.*

– Angela Harper (Malcolm), 1999



Caribou crossing Yukon River.  
Parks Canada/Townsend Coll., 31/037, 394.

## THE STORY

### **The Fortymile Caribou Herd**

The Fortymile Caribou Herd was one of the most important resources in the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in traditional territory. During the herd's two annual migrations in summer and fall, the Hän and many other First Nations hunted these animals for food and clothing. In the early 1900s, this was one of the largest herds in the world with a range extending southeast to Whitehorse, east beyond Mayo, southwest into the Kluane area, and northwest to the White Mountains, north of Fairbanks, Alaska — over 220,000 square kilometres (85,000 square miles). In 1920, the biologist Olaus Murie estimated that the herd's population was more than 568,000 animals.

There are many stories about the vast migrations. Sometimes the caribou took days to cross the Yukon River forcing sternwheelers to cut their engines or tie up to shore. Northern Tutchone elder Tom McGinty told a story of how the ground began shaking, signalling the arrival of the herd. He and his father then climbed a tree and watched a sea of caribou flow by.

### **Hunting Caribou**

A number of First Nations groups hunted together during the fall migration of the Fortymile caribou herd. Mary McLeod mentioned that people from Forty Mile and Dawson areas used to gather at a long caribou fence in the mountains near Chicken, Alaska, to the southwest of Tr'ochëk. While awaiting the caribou, they made any necessary repairs to the fence. Caribou were driven into this structure where they would be trapped by snares set into the fence then shot with bows and arrows or stabbed with spears. Other times, the caribou were driven into a ring of people, where the disoriented animals were easy prey for arrows.

Charlie Isaac told how his father, Chief Isaac, killed two caribou using just a knife:

*You grab the caribou by an antler and pull its head up. You have to watch its front legs. It tried to kick you with*

*its legs, and it could bust your chest in or kick out your guts. But you stand to one side and hold the head away from you, driving your knife into the side of its chest.*

*After the hunt, women cut up the meat on site. Following a feast of fresh meat to celebrate the successful hunt, the rest of the catch was either dried or, in late fall, frozen. Extra meat could be cached on scaffolds out of reach of animals. Frozen sections of meat were also stored right on the ground, covered with hides, then secured with rocks until the meat was needed.*

Once the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in began using rifles, the nature of the hunt changed. Hunting now became more of an individual rather than a group activity. From the early 1900s, market hunting became an important income source. Every year, tonnes of meat were sold to Dawson butchers. Chief Isaac protested many times about how non-native hunters were over-hunting the herd making it harder for First Nations people to earn a living.

### **The Fall and Rise of the Herd**

The size of the Fortymile Caribou Herd declined drastically throughout the twentieth century. It dipped to an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 caribou in the 1930s. Possible reasons for this were loss of winter habitat due to fires, food scarcity and overharvest. After the decline, the herd rarely used the eastern half of its range in the Yukon. During the 1950s, the Fortymile herd increased and may have reached 60,000 caribou by 1956.

The herd size dropped dramatically over the next 20 years and by 1975, there were only about 5,000 animals left in the herd, less than 1% of its maximum size. By this time, there were new roads that gave hunters easy access to the herd's range. As well as over-hunting, the herd suffered from some years of bad weather and high wolf numbers. Finally, there was poor management — herd numbers were over-estimated and governments allowed too many caribou to be hunted.

Alaskan and Yukon officials cooperated to study the caribou herd and to plan its recovery. They consulted elders to learn about the historic caribou populations. Hunting was severely limited or banned. Several measures were taken to control wolf populations and thereby ensure the survival of more caribou calves. These included relocating, sterilizing or killing animals. The sterilization program reduced wolf-pack sizes by sterilizing the dominant male or female, or both, and then killing or relocating pups and subordinate adults. This is a controversial program and many feel that the caribou are being saved at the expense of wolf populations.

By 2002, the herd had doubled in size over seven years to reach a population of 46,000. An important sign of the herd's recovery happened that fall, when caribou extended their range into the Yukon and crossed the Yukon River near Forty Mile for the first time in fifty years. Alaskan and Yukon officials are optimistic that, with proper management, the herd can eventually grow to 90,000 animals.

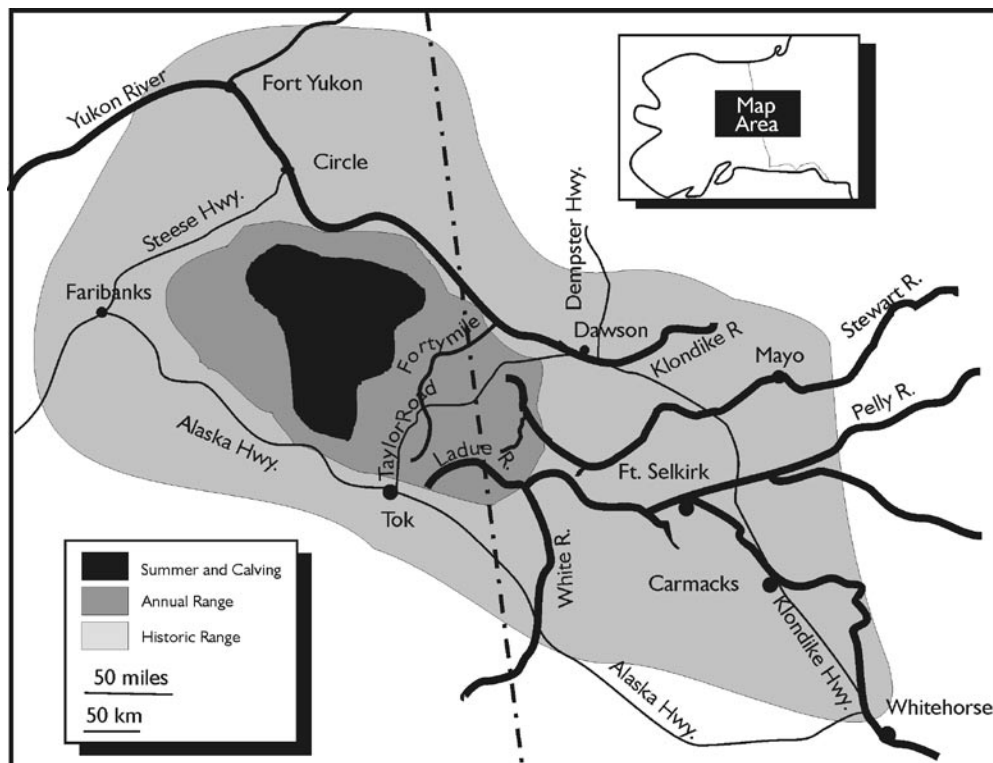


*. . . they moved to another place to spend the fall. By that time it's freezing, so they freeze meat for sale. At the time Dawson buy meat by the ton. After that, they bring the meat in and sell it. That's how things go in them days. After they bring the meat in and sell it, they buy what they need and buy some grub.*

– Annie Henry, 1990

*We have abused both the herd and the land. The land is waiting for an apology. Until then, the herd will not be productive and give itself to people.*

– Alex Van Bibber, in *Fortymile Caribou Herd Management Plan*, 1995



Historic range of the Fortymile Caribou Herd.

From: U. S. Government, *Fortymile Caribou Herd Management Plan*, October 1995.

## RELATED STORIES

- Nothing Wasted: Traditional Uses of Caribou
- Chief Isaac

## WAYS TO TELL THE STORY

### Graphics

- There are many photos of the Fortymile caribou herd crossing the Yukon River and ranging the hills near Dawson. Show some of these photos to illustrate the extent of the herd as well as some close-up images of individual caribou.
- Show a drawing or aerial photo of a caribou fence and explained how these were used.
- Use a map to illustrate the vast area covered by the historic range of the herd.
- Consider plotting a chart showing the rise and fall of the herd showing the years for which approximate figures are available.

### Show and Tell / Props

- Show reproductions of weapons used to kill caribou in the early days and explain how they worked.

### Talks

- Some of the methods used to increase the herd are controversial. Do some reading and be prepared to discuss the pros and cons of killing, relocating and sterilizing wolves.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

### Photographs

#### Dawson City Museum

Td 698; 2000.183.17 Dawson area dotted with the Fortymile Caribou Herd in 1913. Printed on front: "In the Land Where Caribou are Plentiful." Handwritten on back, "1913 Dawson, Y.T. West Dawson, Ensign W. Kerr. Vancouver, B.C."

Td 698; 2000.183.18 b & w photo of a West Dawson hillside with patches of snow and covered with the Fortymile Herd. Handwritten on back is: "The Famous Caribou trek [sic] at Dawson Y.T. 1913"

Td 698; 2000.183.19 Another view of above two scenes.

Td 698; 2000.183.20 Another view of Fortymile Caribou Herd near Dawson.

#### Parks Canada, Whitehorse

Townsend Coll., 31/037, nos. 392, 393 & 394.

Three good views of caribou crossing the Yukon River during the annual migration.

#### Yukon Archives

#### Catalogued Photos

- |         |   |
|---------|---|
| 7038    | A small herd of caribou crossing the Yukon River near Dawson, 1926. C. Tidd Coll.   |
| 7039    | A small herd of caribou swimming across the Yukon River near Dawson, 1926. C. Tidd Coll.  |
| 7040    | A small herd of caribou swimming across the Yukon River near Dawson, 1926. C. Tidd Coll.  |
| 7041    | A herd of caribou on the Yukon River shore near Dawson. C. Tidd Coll.   |
| 7151    | Small herd of caribou crossing the Yukon River, ca. 1930. C. Tidd Coll.   |
| 7691    | A herd of caribou on a grassy slope within a mile of Dawson. Spring 1921. Tidd Coll.  |
| 8174-78 | Five images of a small herd of caribou on the banks of the Yukon River at its confluence with the Fortymile River. The townsite of Forty Mile can be seen in the distance, ca. 1940. Tidd Coll. |
| 8179    | Four caribou wading into the river, ca. 1940. Tidd Coll.  |
| 8603    | A small herd of caribou fording the [Yukon] River, ca. 1930s. May Menzies Coll. (Note: For many years, Mrs. Menzies and her family lived in the Fort Selkirk / Selwyn area.)                    |
| 9214    | A caribou cow and her calf wander the hills near Dawson, ca. 1922. E. Pasley Coll.  |
| 9215    | Caribou herd 45 miles east of Dawson, ca. 1922. E. Pasley Coll.   |

**Forrest, Emile. 1898-1918. 80/60. PHO 130A**

f. 7, 27. Migrating caribou 20 miles west of Dawson.  
f. 7, 29. Migrating caribou, 60 Mile Road, Nov. 1917.

**Hamacher, E. J. ca. 1898-1910. 85/75. PHO 289**

Photo numbers: 61, 70, 71, 79, 94.

**Shilleto, Eileen. 1898-1920s. 81/31. PHO 145**

15. Caribou feeding on the hills. Photographer J. Doody, Dawson.

**Tompkins, Edna J. 1924-1928. 84/12 PHO 241**

Photo numbers: 31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 62, 170, 182, 202, 212, 216, 265.

**Whitehouse, J. Edward. 88/118. PHO 364**

4. Caribou on the Top of the World highway, 1930s.

### **Publications**

Adney, Tappan

1902 "The Indian Hunter of the Far Northwest, on the Trail to the Klondike," in *Outing*, Vol. XXXIX, March 1902.

Dobrowolsky, Helene

2001 *Hammerstones: A History of Tr'ochëk, Moosehide and the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in*. Draft ms. prepared for the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Parks Canada.

2000 *Tr'ochëk / Klondike City Bibliography*. (a compilation of sources relating to the Tr'ochëk / Lousetown / Klondike City settlements and the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation, most available from Yukon Archives).

2002 *Forty Mile Historic Site Bibliography*. Prepared for Yukon Gov't., Heritage Resources and Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in.

Henry, Joe and Annie

1992 Interviewed by Percy Henry, translated by Percy Henry and John Ritter. Yukon Native Language Centre. (copies available at Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Office).

McClellan, Catherine et al

1987 *Part of the Land, Part of the Water* Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre.

McDonald, Janet

c.1990 *The Historical Annual Range Use Patterns of the Fortymile Caribou Herd in Yukon*. (Draft)

Osgood, Cornelius

1971 *The Hän Indians: A Compilation of Ethnographic and Historical Data on the Alaska-Yukon Boundary Area*. New Haven, Yale University.

Schmitter, Ferdinand

1910 "Upper Yukon Native Customs and Folklore," *Smithsonian*, Vol. 56, no. 4, May 1910. (Reprinted by Eagle Historical Society, ca. 1985.)

United States

1995 *Fortymile Caribou Herd Management Plan*. Sponsored by: U.S. Bureau of Land Management, US Fish & Wildlife Service, U.S. National Parks Service, Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game.

Whitehorse Star

2002: Nov. 8. Chuck Tobin, "Wolf-sterilization helped herd swell."

2002: Nov. 1. Chuck Tobin, "Caribou herd's recovery called stunning."

2002: Oct. 31. Chuck Tobin, "Caribou herd storms back into territory."

Note: These articles can be found on the Whse. Star website: <http://www.whitehorsestar.com/>

Yukon News

1998: 9 Dec. "Fortymile herd making a comeback."

2000: 8 March. Clayton White, "Harvest Planned for 40 Mile Caribou Herd."

2002: 15 Nov. Bob Jickling, "Let's celebrate caribou without humiliating wolves."

Website:

The 40 Mile Caribou Herd Management Team:  
<http://aurora.ak.blm.gov/40milecaribou/default.htm>

Note: An excellent resource. In the 1995 Management Plan, the section on the history of the herd is especially useful.

