

RECENT HISTORY

Caribou were the prevalent large mammal all around Lake Superior before European settlement. But in the last two centuries, caribou have declined steadily, and they now occupy only half of their former range in Ontario. A few caribou are still found in the northeast corner of Lake Superior. They are now the southernmost caribou in Ontario, and are isolated from the main caribou range to the north.

Where the Lake Superior caribou remain today are among the most beautiful places in Canada. They include the Slate Islands, Michipicoten Island, and Caribou Island. These offshore islands are usually free of large predators and, as a result, have had the highest densities of woodland caribou in the world. The Slate Islands, off the middle of the north shore, originated from a meteor impact and are covered by boreal forest. Michipicoten Island, in the northeast corner of the lake, is a large island with high hills covered in sugar maples. Caribou Island is south of Michipicoten Island and in the middle of the lake. It is small and flat, with boreal forest and bogs, and almost tropical sand beaches.

Caribou have also been sparsely distributed on the rugged mainland and nearshore islands in the northeast part of Lake Superior in the last few decades. Up to about ten years ago, a restored population of caribou was present on the mainland of Lake Superior Provincial Park in the Great Lakes forest type on the east side of the lake. Caribou also remained in the boreal forest of Pukaskwa National Park in the northeast corner of the lake until just under ten years ago. A very small population of caribou may still be present along the far north shore of Lake Superior – the area made famous by Lawren Harris and the Group of Seven in their paintings of almost a century ago.

2018

The Lake Superior island caribou were very nearly lost in 2018. Wolves reached both the Slate Islands and Michipicoten Island on the ice that formed in the cold winter of 2014. From over 1000 caribou on these islands in 2014, only 17 remained by 2018. The wolves had such a drastic effect because caribou normally space out on the land to avoid their predators, something they can't do on islands.

On the Slate Islands, roughly 100 caribou were functionally extirpated by a small pack and then 2 wolves from 2014 to 2017. Functional extirpation means the population could not rebuild because only 2 caribou remained and they were both males.

On Michipicoten Island, the initial 3 or 4 wolves in 2014 increased to 18 to 20 and completely extirpated the projected 920 caribou by early 2018. These were the last caribou in the Great Lakes temperate forest. Caribou once occupied this forest from south of Lake Superior, the north shore of Lake Huron and Manitoulin Island, all the way to the Ottawa River. Only 15 caribou were rescued from Michipicoten Island to restart the Slate Islands population and create a backup population on Caribou Island.

On the mainland, only a few caribou remained along the far north shore of Lake Superior, mainly between Marathon and Schreiber. An intensive survey done in late winter 2019 found several locations with caribou sign but no caribou were seen. It was thought that no more than 20 caribou were present.

By early 2018, the Lake Superior caribou were down over 95% from over 1000 caribou in 2014. There were likely less than 40 caribou left in the entire Lake Superior area, divided in three small and isolated populations. For minimum population security and genetic diversity, each of these populations should have at least 50 caribou, and 100 is the minimum objective for individual caribou populations in Ontario.

The public response to this catastrophic loss motivated a rescue of the last remaining island caribou in 2018. But nothing was done for the few remaining mainland caribou. These last Lake Superior mainland caribou are now at the point where they need urgent help. Otherwise they will be eliminated from this area which has been their home since the glaciers left – and through no fault of their own. The mainland range of caribou will then recede much further north, and their steady decline to extinction will continue at this new edge of their range.

If you want to prevent this, please write the Ontario Government and request them to rescue the Lake Superior mainland caribou immediately. This worked to rescue the Lake Superior island caribou in 2018.

THE GOOD NEWS

Slate Islands - The 2 surviving adult male caribou on the Slates were augmented by 8 adult females and 1 adult male from Michipicoten Island in winter 2018. The population is growing and is up to about 30 in 2020. There should be enough caribou by winter 2021-2022 to start moving some to restore the caribou populations on Michipicoten Island and the mainland. An ecologically sustainable population for the Slates should be about 90 caribou. That is about half the food carrying capacity for caribou, which should retain good habitat for caribou and moderate their impact on the rest of the ecosystem.

Caribou Island - This backup population was started with 4 adult females and 2 adult males from Michipicoten Island in winter 2018. This population is also growing and is likely about 16 animals now. There should also be enough caribou there by winter 2021-2022 to move to restore other caribou populations. Because of the small size of Caribou Island, the sustainable number of caribou is also small – no more than 20 wintering animals should be suitable while the island is being used to provide caribou for restoration, and then back to about 16.

Michipicoten Island - Although the Michipicoten Island caribou are gone, there is a plan to restore caribou there. This is one of the environmental conditions for the twinning of the main power line north of Lake Superior. This will also return caribou to the Great Lakes temperate forest type. The plan is to relocate caribou to Michipicoten Island as soon as winter 2021-2022. However, this past spring there were still 2 wolves on Michipicoten Island. Caribou cannot be moved back until the wolves are gone. These wolves have already survived two years without caribou. There are still a few beavers left on the island for the wolves to eat, and snowshoe hares are at the high end of their cycle.

THE NOT SO GOOD NEWS

The caribou on the mainland along Lake Superior are in serious trouble. An aerial survey conducted this past winter found no caribou or caribou sign. The survey was not as intensive as the survey conducted in 2019, so some caribou may have been missed. If there are any left, they will be few, and they may not survive another year. They need to be rescued now if they are to be conserved.

These caribou are very important. They are the southernmost mainland caribou in Ontario. Once they are lost, the range of caribou on the mainland recedes north about 100 km. This type of population loss and range recession is the process of extinction. Loss of the once dominant land animal in this area also indicates that we are not managing the land sustainably.

Any remaining caribou in this area are also extremely valuable for their unique genetics and their survival behaviour. They have persisted where all others have perished. Therefore, their traits will be very useful in the animals used to restore caribou to the northeast mainland of Lake Superior. Such population restoration and range re-occupation reverses the process of extinction. It also indicates that we are managing the land more sustainably – at least in this small part of the earth. This is what we must do everywhere for the benefit of future generations and the survival of all species.

Our government legislation and policies on caribou say that we are to protect all caribou populations, prevent their range from receding, rebuild their numbers, and restore them to their recent range. Parks Canada wants to restore caribou to Pukaskwa National Park as part of preserving the natural heritage of this part of Canada. Caribou are also very important in the history of the Michipicoten First Nation people, and they want to restore caribou in their traditional area along Lake Superior. A large number of local residents and people across the continent also want to keep caribou along this beautiful part of Lake Superior. So we must keep these caribou around and begin restoring them.

The main problem is that the Ontario Government has shown no willingness to act to conserve the last of the Lake Superior mainland caribou. This is despite its conservation mandate, the broad public interest in not letting these caribou go extinct, and the value of these caribou for future restoration.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Conserve the last of the Lake Superior mainland caribou immediately. This is currently the most urgent caribou conservation requirement in Ontario. The Ontario Government needs to arrange for an intensive aerial survey of the north shore area early this winter. Any caribou found will then need to be moved to an island secure from predators to allow them to rebuild. It is urgent that this be done early this coming winter – further delaying action seriously risks that these caribou will be lost.

Restore caribou to the Lake Superior mainland. The Ontario Government must arrange for this to begin as soon as the rescued caribou have increased enough. This restoration is both possible and feasible.

WHAT CAN YOU DO

If you want the last of the Lake Superior mainland caribou to be conserved, please write today to Premier Ford at premier@ontario.ca and Minister Yurek of the Ministry of Environment, Conservation, and Parks at minister.mecp@ontario.ca . Request the rescue of any remaining north shore caribou this winter for use in the future restoration of caribou along Lake Superior. Every letter, email, and tweet will help. Public pressure worked to rescue the last of the Lake Superior island caribou in 2018.

Thank you.

For more information and updates see www.LakeSuperiorCaribou.ca or Twitter @SuperiorCaribou.