

Chronology of the Decline of the Telkwa Caribou Herd

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Historically – Caribou were widely distributed throughout the Bulkley Valley and adjacent mountain ranges, according to Wet'suwet'en elders and historic government records; by the mid-1940s, caribou were **largely** absent from the Babine Mtns.

1943 - Telkwa caribou pop'n estimated at 250 (Munro 1947).

1956 - First aerial survey yield a min. estimate of 100 Telkwa caribou (Cox 1970). Wide scale wolf control was conducted in the 1950s and the early 1960s in much of central and northern BC (Hoffos 1987, Bergerud & Elliot 1998).

1965 - 271 caribou counted in the Telkwa Mountains, these being a remnant of a herd that historically had a much wider distribution in north central BC (Cox 1970, Theberge & Oosenburg 1977). Intensive helicopter traffic in the Telkwa Mtns in the fall of 1965 due to aerial support of mineral claim staking (Cox 1970).

1966 - 166 caribou counted (Cox 1970, Theberge & Oosenburg 1977).

1967 - 34 caribou counted, a population reduction of 237 caribou or 87% of the population within 2 years!

1968 - 40 caribou counted (Cox 1970, Theberge & Oosenburg 1977). This significant decline was attributed to suspected high levels of helicopter hunting (Cox 1970). No survey information is available from 1969 to 1974.

1971 - The use of helicopters for hunting caribou was prohibited throughout BC (van Drimmelen 1985).

1973 - Licence hunting of Telkwa caribou is prohibited.

1975-1987 - Survey counts ranged from 40 to 70 caribou with the highest numbers occurring between 1982 and 1985. With the collapse of the mining interests (which reduced the number of people accessing the area) the herd appeared to be making a slow recovery.

1981 - To assist this recovery, recreation access restrictions were proposed in the subalpine, approved by the Deputy Minister of Parks and reached Order in Council stage. However, due to strong lobbying by snowmobilers, local MLA Jack Kempf, lobbied against the proposal and it was dropped.

1984 - 64 caribou counted; an increase of 3%/yr

1993, 1994 & 1996 - Herd down to 11 animals in 1993 which remained at a steady state of approximately 1 dozen through to 1996.

1997 - Only 6 caribou (no calves) observed. This second major collapse was in conjunction with increased recreational use into the area as well as advances in all terrain vehicle and snowmobile technology which allowed motorized vehicles to penetrate more deeply into caribou core habitat (personal observations by BV Outdoor Recreation Society directors).

Ministry of Water Land and Air Protection, under direction of the Bulkley Land and Resource Management Plan, developed the *Telkwa Mountains Caribou Herd Recovery Plan*. Potential liabilities to the herd were identified as: reduced productivity and recruitment to the herd because of disturbance caused by recreationists; reduced habitat effectiveness due to human caused displacement and harassment, and increased winter predation due to the creation of hard packed trails (by snowmobiles and to a minor extent by back-country skiers) over which wolves could effectively move, thus negating the caribou's natural evolutionary advantage of being able to escape from their predators in deep snow.

Recovery plan launched with community support.

Nov., 1997 - BC Environment, under the recommendation of Len Vanderstar, relocated 12 caribou from the Sustut-Chase herd and released them into the Telkwa Mtns., with the intent of the remaining resident Telkwa caribou being able to "show the ropes" to the translocated newcomers so that they would stay in the Telkwa Mtns.

Mar., 1988 - Bulkley Land & Resource Management Plan (Bulkley LRMP) provides the official signed-off social licence to recovery the Telkwa caribou herd.

Fall 1998 - 20 more caribou translocated from the Sustut-Chase herd. To address recreational impacts to the herd, these relocation efforts were augmented by community backed voluntary access restrictions.

Apr. 1, 1999 - Interim Timber Harvesting Guidelines were adopted by the Forest Service and forest licensees through extensive discussion/negotiations with BC Environment personnel (Len Vanderstar and Rick Keim) and facilitation assistance by Andrew Wheatley (Forest Service).

2000 - The *Voluntary Recreational Access Management Group* (VRAMG), a multi-stakeholder group consisting of snowmobilers, backpackers, trappers, hunters, quad-riders, prospectors, naturalists and back-country horsemen, amongst others, was established to help guide recovery efforts. Initially there was good response from the public and the recovery project seemed to be working well (Mel Coulson, VRAMG member 2004 to 2015).

Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) lists the Telkwa caribou herd as **Threatened**, and reaffirmed in 2002.

2003 - Federal Species at Risk Act is fully enacted. Voluntary recreation access restrictions are up-dated for the Telkwa caribou herd.

2004 - A recovery strategy for Northern Caribou in BC (includes the Telkwa herd) is completed by the Federal government, but not endorsed by the provincial government.

Over one half of a million dollars spent to date on Telkwa caribou recovery efforts: \$235,000 from Habitat Conservation Trust Fund (HCTF) and \$310,000 from Forest Resources BC, not including full time Habitat Protection and Wildlife personnel salary and support.

75 caribou were classified during a spring survey, an 11%/yr. recruitment since the 1997/98 herd augmentation completion.

2005 - Telkwa Caribou Herd estimated at 95 animals, including 23 calves.

Jul. 19, 2006 - A fixed wing telemetry flight records 114 caribou (approx. a 15%/yr. recruitment since 1998). This marks the only other successful caribou recovery initiative in North America at that time.

With herd numbers at their peak, voluntary compliance with the access restrictions by the public appeared to be eroding. Concerns expressed by the VRAMG were:

- Increased use of motorized vehicles in the non-motorized area;
- Increased number of dogs being taken into the CORE area;
- The amount of winter-motorized use in the non-motorized area (including use as per agreement with clubs) may be reducing caribou habitat use.
- Non-motorized user activities may be displacing caribou from preferential habitat;
- Increased forest development creating more potential access points, making it logistically harder to control users.

The VRAMG countered by publishing articles in the *Interior News*, printing fliers for distribution and talking to people who were not complying. Unfortunately, this seemed to have little effect.

Summer 2006 - concerned about the lack of voluntary compliance, VRAMG undertook a survey to document noncompliance (complete with photographs) and questioned the people involved asking them if they were aware of the guidelines and, if so, why they were ignoring them. Some claimed ignorance, but most people said they were aware of the access restrictions but chose to ignore them. This included people on quads, 4x4 trucks and people taking their dogs into the Recovery Area.

Sept. 20th, 2006 - Based on this survey, the VRAMG made a unanimous recommendation that Ministry of Environment pursue legislated summer closures to help maintain the herd. The provincial government did not implement this call.

2006 - 2008 - The herd began a steady decline and monitoring flights that were funded by HCTF ceased because of lack of funds due to the “successful” Bulkley Valley Rod & Gun Club lobby to stop funding Telkwa Caribou recovery if wolf control was not being implemented.

Len Vanderstar recovered 3 caribou collars as a result of avalanche mortalities, but this can be expected under reasonable population abundance during heavy snow years.

Summer/Fall 2008 - Mtn Goat hunting was re-introduced into portions of the Telkwa Caribou Recovery Area against the advice of the VRMAG due to perceived threats to caribou.

Feb. 2007 - Morice LRMP comes into effect, which lends support to Telkwa caribou recovery within the Morice Timber Supply Area (TSA).

Nov. 10, 2008 - only 47 animals (only 2 calves) were sighted.

Mar., 2009 - VRAMG made the same request of the new Regional Manager, Tom Bell, that legislated summer closures be put in place. Tom responded that the closures would be easier to implement after the Wildlife Habitat Area being proposed for the area was in place, a process estimated to take about a year to 18 months. No immediate action was taken.

Mar. 09, 2009 - only 22 animals sighted (including 4 calves), the lowest March count on record since the recovery project began. It is difficult to state what specifically caused this third significant population decline due to lack of monitoring funds during the population decline, but it is suspected that it was the cumulative effect of increased human intrusion, predators such as wolves and grizzly bears dialing into caribou abundance, predator efficiency, and perhaps harsh winter conditions hampering access to lichens, all leading to poor calf recruitment (personal opinion Len Vanderstar 2009).

2013 - Funding re-secured from HCTF up to 2017 for: installing more collars, conduct monitoring flights, investigating the role of wolf predation (including attempts to collar wolves), and monitoring of motorized recreational access in the recovery area.

Mar., 2013 - Only 11 caribou observed during monitoring flight despite an extensive search. During the flights, extensive snowmobile tracks were observed in the non-motorized area and the caribou seemed to have moved away from tracked areas (BC MFLNRO observations).

Summer, 2013 - Multiple access sensors were placed along trails into Telkwas to better assess voluntary compliance. These included buried magnetic detectors for recording vehicles that passed over them, and remote cameras to capture people, vehicle and animal images.

Oct., 2013 - 25 caribou estimate based on a 16 caribou aerial survey count (BC Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, unpublished data).

2014 - The HCTF funding promised in 2013 was reduced for year 2014 and cancelled for years 2015-2017. Caribou estimate was 16 animals.

Telkwa caribou are listed as Endangered by Environment Canada.

Nov. 30, 2015 - Telkwa Caribou Wildlife Habitat Area (WHA) is officially signed off by the MFLNRO's Regional Executive Director Eamon O'Donoghue. This Government Action Regulation Order under the Forest & Range Practices Act directs forestry and range activities, inclusive of Forest Act permits required by mineral and coal exploration and development. The WHA was many years in the making by Ecosystem (Habitat) personnel, involving extensive timber supply analysis, inter-agency and forest licensee discussions.

Feb., 2015 - Snowmobile tracks found in areas of the Telkwa Caribou Recovery Area seldom or never used for winter-motorized recreation in past years. Wildlife personnel called for a temporary (voluntary) closure of the area to snowmobilers.

16th Mar., 2015 - Fixed-wing flights documented more snowmobile activity in the core recovery area, with fresh snowmobile tracks seen on Glacis Peak and in Hunters Basin.

17th Mar., 2015 - 16 caribou counted during monitoring flight, 5 of which were calves.

2017 - Minimum aerial count of 22 caribou.

Dec., 2017 - B.C. Government and the Houston Snowmobile Club signs a stewardship agreement.

May 4, 2018 - Catherine McKenna, Federal Minister of Environment and Climate Change, declares the Telkwa Caribou herd, along with nine other Southern Mountain caribou herds (Central Kootenay, Southwest Kootenay, Southeast Kootenay, Kinbasket, South Monashee, Quintette, Narraway, Jasper-Banff, Redrock / Prairie Creek) as **facing imminent threats to recovery** (i.e. facing imminent threat of extirpation based on a thorough threat assessment).

July 1, 2018 - Wildlife Act Motor Vehicle Closure in portions of the Telkwa Range came into effect. This legislated recreational vehicle access closure allows for vehicle permits in some areas when caribou are not in the vicinity. This is based on recommendations put by the facilitated TRAM Group (Telkwa Recreation Access Management Group) for Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development (MFLNRORD) consideration.

Mar. 20, 2018 - 22 caribou counted during a monitoring flight: 5 calves, 12 cows & 5 bulls.

Mar. 25, 2019 - 25 caribou counted during a monitoring flight: 7 calves, 8 cows, 7 bulls & 3 unknown.

Oct. 10, 2019 - 32 caribou counted during a monitoring flight: 9 calves, 16 cows, 7 bulls.

Oct. 14, 2020 - 33 caribou counted during a monitoring flight: 6 calves, 19 cows, 8 bulls

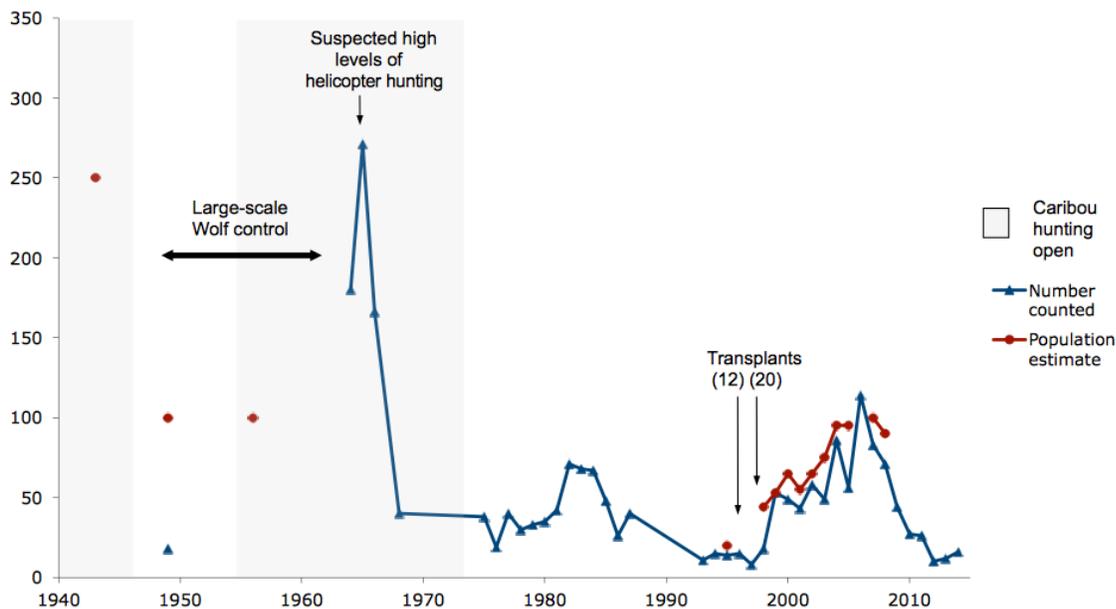


Figure 4. Highest number of caribou counted in a given year during flights conducted in the Telkwa caribou population range, and reported population estimates.

Graph from: Deborah Cichowski June 12, 201 - Telkwa Caribou Population Status and Background Information Summary
Latest count in Mar. 25, 2019 was 25 caribou, suggesting that the herd is slowly rebuilding.