

Backgrounder for Columbia South Caribou Translocation

This backgrounder was co-developed by several members of The Revelstoke Complex and Central Selkirks Caribou Technical Working Group.

Between March 2020 and April 2022, the Columbia South subpopulation (herd) of Southern Mountain caribou had declined to a single female caribou due, ultimately, to ongoing habitat loss and fragmentation, predation, and disturbance. On her own, the caribou had a low chance of survival and no chance of having calves. A collaborative process guided by technical advisors from multiple governments led to a collective decision to translocate this lone female caribou to a maternity pen within the Central Selkirks caribou herd range.

Caribou are listed as “threatened” under the federal Species at Risk Act, and the BC government is committed to conserving caribou in partnership with First Nations governments and the Government of Canada. In February 2020, British Columbia and Canada signed a bilateral Section 11 agreement under the Species at Risk Act. This agreement establishes a framework for cooperation and sets out immediate and long-term measures to support the conservation and recovery of Southern Mountain Caribou. The agreement states that Canada and BC will collaborate directly with affected Indigenous peoples regarding Southern Mountain Caribou recovery in the Province of BC.

The Revelstoke Complex and Central Selkirks Caribou Technical Working Group (RCCSCTWG) is an inter-governmental partnership established to work collaboratively to address caribou recovery and stewardship. The RCCSCTWG has been meeting for two years to consider and advise on various scenarios for habitat protection and restoration, herd planning, predator management, primary prey management, hunting, recreation management, maternal pens, captive breeding and monitoring activities.

The RCCSCTWG partnership consists of technical representatives designated by the Province of BC, the Government of Canada and several First Nations governments including the Ktunaxa Nation Council, Simpcw First Nation, Splatshin, Shuswap Band, Adams Lake Indian Band, Skwłáx te Secwepemc (formerly Little Shuswap Lake Band) and the Okanagan Nation Alliance on behalf of Syilx member communities. Technical support for Secwépemc communities is provided by the Qwelmin te Secwepemc. The Province of BC is represented by the Caribou Recovery Program and the Government of Canada is represented by Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada.

In the winter of 2022/23, this last remaining female caribou from the Columbia South herd moved into a federally designated park (Mount Revelstoke National Park). In winter and

early spring, mountain caribou are in the alpine. For translocation, this is the ideal time as they are in more open areas. Once they descend into denser subalpine forest, capture is no longer possible and the risks to the caribou from predation and roadway traffic may increase. Therefore, on March 6, 2023, the RCCSCTWG reached a collective decision to move this last remaining caribou from her current location in the Columbia South herd range to the Central Selkirks herd range via the existing maternity pen. This move was successfully carried out by the BC Caribou Recovery Program in late March and was done in a manner that respects all protocols and traditions with cultural and ceremonial guidance by Indigenous representatives.

The discussion leading up to this decision was held in a “what’s best for caribou?” space, using best available evidence derived from Western wildlife science professionals combined with the Indigenous Knowledge and cultural customs of the participating Indigenous Communities. The decision to translocate this female caribou was made with the aim of increasing her likelihood of survival, breeding and calf retention, as well as bolstering the population and genetic diversity of the Central Selkirks herd.

The predicament of extirpating the Columbia South caribou herd and the urgent decision to translocate her is difficult and has caused a sense of grief for many people. The challenges facing caribou recovery are numerous and our success will be dependent on our ability to work together to break down systemic barriers and create innovative solutions.

To be clear, it should be stated that Southern Mountain Caribou are not at risk because of First Nations and the actions of Indigenous people. In a similar way, caribou and habitat protection are not being forced on other communities by First Nations. There is a large body of evidence that confirms we urgently need a substantial paradigm shift in the way we think about landscape-level management and protection for all important ecosystem and wildlife values.

Caribou recovery is a collaborative responsibility and commitment by multiple governments. First Nation governments have been responding to declining caribou populations by leading with evidence-based approaches supported by strong partnerships with provincial and federal governments. Input from local governments, communities, and stakeholders are equally integral as we learn together and imagine a better future for all.

Caribou recovery is possible, and this decision was made under difficult circumstances with a view towards the long-term recovery of Southern Mountain caribou in the RCCSCTWG area . Protection of caribou habitat is critical to the future health of caribou

populations and the potential re-establishment of the South Columbia herd. The provincial government has made a commitment to uphold all current land-use protections applicable in the Columbia South herd range even after the translocation of the last caribou from this herd. The ecosystem and cultural values protected under these measures are of utmost importance to Indigenous communities as well as the future of caribou in this landscape.

Moving forward, a collaborative and a respectful approach is incredibly necessary, if not vital, to caribou recovery and the ongoing protection of other at-risk values. This requires the building and strengthening of relationships between all organizations and agencies responsible for caribou recovery, respectful collaboration amongst multiple governments, and the meaningful involvement of many Indigenous and other communities, as we move the dial forward for caribou recovery.

This group continues to collaborate and develop recovery recommendations for all governments to consider, with a focus on caribou habitat protection.
