

Caribou

By Dr. Vince Crichton

David Thompson, in 1792 gave the following description of caribou crossing the Nelson River: "...the herd the first day stretched to 120 miles in length and the herd of the second day to half as much more, making the whole length of the herd to be 180 miles in length, by 100 yards in breadth....by the above space, allowing each deer 10 feet by 8 feet, and area of 80 square feet, the number of reindeer that passed was 3,564,000, an immense number". Such assemblages stagger the imagination.

There is little doubt that Thompson was referring to barren ground caribou which occupy the northern barrens for at least a portion of the year and which are different from the woodland caribou which are found in much smaller numbers and in the boreal forested areas.

Manitoba is home to both subspecies with the barren ground animals spending their summers in the Northwest Territories and wintering in Manitoba. At one time, these large herds extended as far south in winter to about the north end of Lake Winnipeg. Two additional herds of caribou are found in north-eastern Manitoba, namely the Pen Island herd which migrates between Manitoba and Ontario and the Cape Churchill herd. It has been suggested that these are a separate subspecies but in fact may represent a hybrid between the barren ground and woodland. They possess features and habitats of both.

Although definitive surveys for woodland caribou have not been carried out, it is suggested that the total population is about 3,000. The Pen Island herd numbers about 5,000 while the Cape Churchill herd is about 1,200. As more work is done on these herds and their biology studied more definitive populations will be possible. The primary barren ground caribou herd which enters Manitoba is the Kaminuriak herd and its numbers have been as low as 50,000 to in excess of 200,000 in the last 25 years.

Woodland caribou herds are found east of Lake Winnipeg and occur as far south as Nopoming Provincial Park. They are found in the Interlake as far south as the Chitek lake area and west of Lake Winnipegosis as far south as Pelican Lake. Historically, woodland caribou extended south along the east side of Manitoba and into Minnesota. But, the northward extension of whitetail deer who are harbingers of the brainworm which is pathogenic to caribou has pushed caribou back to the northern limits of range carrying infected deer.

Woodland caribou are a mature forests animal. They have

universal tastes eating a wider variety of plants than other deer species. During the summer they feed on new leaves of willow, birch, blueberry, various sedges, herbs and horsetail or scouring rush. Following freeze-up, they switch to terrestrial and arboreal lichens as staples.

Two biological requirements stand out above all others, namely the need to find relief from biting insects during the summer period and the need to find food though deep snow in winter.

A substantial amount of work has been done on woodland caribou east of lake Winnipeg. These animals generally winter in the string bogs east of the lake and summer in the somewhat higher lake country to the east and into Ontario. Calving takes place on islands in lakes and bogs which is a predator avoidance mechanism. The primary predators are wolves although it is suspected that black bears take calves in summer when available. Lynx are also known to prey on calves.

Although no definitive breeding dates have been determined, based on field observations it appears that breeding occurs in early October with calves being born in May and early June but, breeding can be later and there are records of calves being born in July.

Antlers are shed by mature bulls beginning in December with most being dropped by mid January. Unlike other members of the deer family, many female caribou carry antlers, albeit smaller ones than males and with a different architecture. Prime bulls can weigh about 400 pounds in summer while mature cows can reach 250 pounds. Prior to the rut it is suggested that some bulls reach close to 700 pounds. The weight gain over the summer is significant with some bulls putting on 12 inches in neck circumference in 45 days.

The impediments to woodland caribou in Manitoba are over hunting, barriers which fragment habitat and prohibit use of all the potential range, disruption of natural predator-prey interactions, increased mortality from disease such as brainworm and destruction of essential habitats as a result of logging activities. As with other species it is essential that all Manitobans work together to ensure that these nomads of the boreal forest and tundra continue to be a part of our ecosystems and are able to meet the demands of present day society and that of the future. In other words, we should all be in the same canoe paddling in the same direction.