



Caribou in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Caribou of Porcupine Herd,
Wilbur Mills

There are two separate caribou herds found in the Arctic Refuge. The Porcupine Caribou Herd – named after the Porcupine River found within its range – which numbers about 128,000 and makes long migrations each year between winter habitat in Canada and Alaska south of the Brooks Range, and summer habitat (calving and post-calving) on the Arctic Refuge coastal plain.¹ The second herd is the Central Arctic Herd, which uses the central portion of the North Slope including the area around Prudhoe Bay and the western part of the Refuge, and numbers about 27,000 animals.^{2,3} Almost 30 years of data have shown that the concentrated calving and post-calving area of the Porcupine herd is located within the Refuge's coastal plain nearly every year.⁴ Both herds frequently use the northwest portion of the Refuge during the post-calving period for insect relief habitat.

One of the greatest myths concerning caribou is that oil development has caused an increase in the Central Arctic herd's numbers. Before development, the herd contained about 5,000 animals.^{1,5} Today it numbers around 27,000. This increase is largely attributable to several years with mild weather and has nothing to do with development. In truth, the Central Arctic herd's calving activity has shifted away from developed areas to alternative calving grounds with poorer quality habitat.^{6,7,8,9,10,11}

The Porcupine herd has no alternative calving areas to shift to because of the densities of the herd and the narrowness of the coastal plain within the Arctic Refuge; there are 5 times more caribou in about one-fifth the area compared to Prudhoe Bay.¹² On the few occasions when weather has prevented the Porcupine herd from reaching the coastal plain before calving, calf survival was significantly diminished.¹³ The caribou need the coastal plain during the calving and post-calving periods because the core calving area of the Arctic Refuge coastal plain provides the highest quality forage, lowest density of predators, and optimal insect relief. Should they be forced to shift their calving activities away from the region because of oil development, calves would be vulnerable to higher predation and lower quality forage possibly leading to a decline in their numbers. Numerous scientific articles written by leading caribou researchers clearly document that industrial development has resulted in changing caribou movements and distribution within the oil fields displacing caribou from the highest quality habitat.^{14,15,16}

Audubon Alaska
907-276-7034

[http://www.audubon.org/
chapter/ak/ak](http://www.audubon.org/chapter/ak/ak)

Alaska Conservation Alliance
907-258-6171
www.akvoice.org

Alaska Wilderness League
202-544-5205
www.alaskawild.org

Arctic Connections
907-272-1909

Defenders of Wildlife
202-682-9400
www.savearcticrefuge.org

League of Conservation Voters
Education Fund
202-785-0730
www.voteenvironment.org

Natural Resources
Defense Council
202-289-6868
www.savebiogems.org/arctic/

Trustees for Alaska
907-276-4244
www.trustees.org

U.S. PIRG
202-546-9707
<http://www.SaveTheArctic.org>

The Wilderness Society
202-833-2300
www.tws.org/wild/arctic



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Porcupine Herd in late June,
US Fish and Wildlife Service

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