

PLIGHT OF THE CARIBOU

What lies behind the crisis of the north-land's vanishing caribou? To try to find out, mobile teams of wildlife officers are going into the barrens to live with the herds.

The Canadian Wildlife Service of the Northern Affairs and National Resources Department has announced plans for the most intensive survey ever made to get to the root of what lies behind the alarming decline in the North's most essential game animal, and one of its few renewable resources. To carry out the study, two-man teams will spell one another in keeping a large herd of caribou under continuous observation for a period of 18 months. As the herds move, mammalogists will move with them.

Stressing the thoroughgoing nature of the survey W.W. Mair, Chief of the Canadian Wildlife Service, said, "We shall study the life-cycle of the caribou, particularly the effects of spring weather on calving, and the rut in the autumn. All aspects of caribou mortality will be checked--death by disease, predators, weather and extent of kill by native hunters. Animal behaviour and range studies may give some clues to the changes in migration patterns. The present study will be the first to keep a herd under year-round observation."

Co-operating with the Canadian Wildlife Service are the Game Departments of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Alberta, the Administration of the Northwest Territories, the Indian Affairs Branch of Citizenship and Immigration, and the R.C.M.P.

To track down and follow the herds, teams will travel thousands of miles over some of Canada's most difficult sub-Arctic terrain. They will move by almost every type of transport feasible in the North, primitive and modern--ski and pontoon equipped aircraft, helicopter, dog team and canoe. Field camps will be set up and contact will be maintained by radio and aircraft. Jumping off point is the tiny settlement of Stony Rapids near the east end of Lake Athabasca in far northern Saskatchewan. Stony Rapids lies close to the wintering grounds. Here, in early spring, the animals gather for the long trek north. The survey will get underway early in April. Heading the field project is mammalogist J.P. Kelsall of the Canadian Wildlife Service, assisted by mammalogist A.G. Loughrey and

others still to be assigned by Federal and Provincial agencies. Teams will follow the caribou in a series of leap-frog movements designed to maintain contact in all weather. Periodic counts will be made from the air.

Means of transport will not be the only meeting ground for primitive and modern in the project. One purpose is to ear-mark a proportion of animals as a guide to migration patterns. To do this a modified tagging technique will be tried, adapted from methods used by South American jungle tribes, who for centuries have hunted game with poisoned darts. Air guns or other devices practical in low temperatures will shoot a narcotic-dipped dart into the rump of the caribou, rendering it unconscious. Animals are expected to remain "out" for about an hour giving time to examine thoroughly and check for disease and parasites. A metal identification tag will be attached to the ear. The animal will then be released, with no after effects from its experience.

Throughout the summer the herd may lead the men across the barrens as far north as Thelon Game Sanctuary and the Back River, near the Arctic Circle. As cold weather returns the herds drift south to winter feeding grounds below treeline.

Concern for the plight of the caribou was intensified after the Second World War when the tempo of economic development in the western sub-Arctic greatly increased. A 1949 survey showed about 670,000 animals between Hudson Bay and the Mackenzie Valley; a re-survey in 1955 revealed a drop to about 277,000 caribou. Factors in the rapid decline may have been a low birth-rate in the years following 1950, late winter blizzards that caused severe loss among new born calves, attack by wolves and wasteful hunting. In some areas it has been established that human utilization exceeds the caribou's rate of increase. A game conservation programme to deal with this difficult aspect of the problem is already in operation in the North. Biologists stress, however, that before final solutions can be found to the mystery of the diminished herds still more knowledge is urgently needed. The first year-round study of the herds' life-cycle may provide the answer.

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VENEZUELAN VENTURE. Four specially fitted aircraft and 30-odd resources experts from Toronto and Oshawa are currently working in Venezuela in co-operation with its Government and various exploration companies to develop the South American country's rich oil and hydro-electric power potential.

These aircraft and experts are working on more than half-a-dozen separate survey jobs in Venezuela. The jobs cover an area of 25,000

square miles all over Venezuela and are worth over half-a-million dollars. They include magnetometer searches for oil, airborne profile recorder work, topographic mapping, aerial photography and general engineering.

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AUTOMOBILES. About 58 per cent of Canadian households had automobiles in 1956 versus 56 per cent in the preceding year, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics reports.