

Caribou

The caribou is the great survivor.

It resists summer swarms of mosquitoes and black flies, which hang on its eyes and lips and burrow beneath its hide. It outruns ravaging wolves and Inuit with rifles. It winters where temperatures drop to -60°C (-75°F), and it has shown an ability to cope with pipelines across its migration paths. It eats what is available — sedges, grasses, willow shoots, leaves, dwarf birches, horsetails, mushrooms and, most particularly, lichen, which grow in the most barren lands and take sustenance from the air.

The Porcupine herd, the major caribou herd in Canada and the United States, winters on the Ogilvie Range, straddling the Alaska-Yukon border. The coldest spot on the continent, the temperature may be below -50°C (-60°F) for a month at a time. The caribou, a member of the same species as the Lapland reindeer, survives because it maintains a body temperature of 39.4°C (103°F) except in its legs and hooves, which keep steady at 10°C (50°F) and insulate the rest of the body.

Caribou are seldom vulnerable to predators — cows birth on high, wind-swept hills in less than a half hour. The calves can stand and walk within minutes. In three days they can run with their mothers and outrun a wolf.

The herd's most difficult trial is in the summer when mosquitoes and black flies settle on all exposed flesh in literal blankets. The caribou gain relief by milling together and by submerging in tundra lakes.

There are three major varieties of caribou in North America — the barren-land, the wood and the Peary. A fourth sub-type has evolved in isolation on Slate Island in Ontario.

Caribou are powerful swimmers, as at home in the lakes as on the hills. When plagued by black flies, they submerge.



The wood caribou are larger than the others — males weigh up to 400 pounds. They spend summer and winter in the same forests. The Peary live on Queen Elizabeth Island in the Arctic. The severe winter of 1974 reduced their numbers drastically, from an estimated 25,000 to 2,500. The Slate Island caribou crossed the ice of Lake Superior some decades ago and became stranded on the island where, with an absence of wolves and insect swarms, they found life peaceful, though not abundant. They have evolved rapidly, their antlers becoming much smaller. They depend on arboreal lichen; and when the winds are slight and the lichen is not blown from the winter trees, many starve to death.

The migrating barren-land caribou are the ones with which conservationists are most concerned; and the United States and Canada have taken extraordinary measures to preserve them. The Porcupine herd of 170,000 animals moves year round, covering vast distances on the tundra, wintering in the Alaska-Yukon interior and birthing in the spring near the shore of the Beaufort Sea. Numerous sightings of the same great packs once led scientists to overestimate their number. One respected observer concluded that there might once have been as many as 30 million. He was very wrong. In 1900 there were probably between 2.5 million and 3 million. Today, after almost a century of decline, there are probably about 250,000.

It is clear that something has happened, but it is difficult to decide precisely what. There may be a natural, wide-range rise and fall in caribou populations, as there is, for example, among the arctic fox and the lemming on which it feeds. Some scientists believe that caribou numbers follow a thirty-year cycle.

Hunters equipped with rifles have contributed to the decline since the late 19th century when thousands were killed by wintering whaling crews. The caribou has been hunted by the Inuit for centuries: its meat has fed both humans and dogs; its hide has been used for shelters and boats; and its bones and antlers, made into tools and ornaments. The Inuit, using bow and arrow, had a variety of ingenious hunting methods; but the arrival of the automatic rifle made it easy to kill caribou, and many more were killed than were needed. The hunting has slackened off in recent years as Inuit families, for better or worse, moved from isolated groups to modern communities.

Conservationists have become increasingly concerned with the effect of gas and oil developments on migrating herds. A few years ago, a two-mile simulated surface pipeline was constructed across migration paths and the behaviour of some 5,599 migrating caribou observed. Nine hundred and ninety-four crossed over on gravel ramps. Some 300 used underpasses. About 2,500 went around the pipe and some 2,000 turned back. The test results were suggestive, but clearly not conclusive.

In 1977 Mr. Justice Thomas R. Berger and a Royal