

woodland caribou

Unlike the barren-ground caribou, woodland caribou do not form vast herds nor do they migrate extensively or use core calving areas. However, although they do not migrate, woodland caribou do move seasonally within their ranges. Cow caribou have their calves in early summer, moving to the privacy of steep, confined valley sides and cirque basins. In winter, they tend to move below the tree line where access to food under the snow is easier. Preferred winter habitat is mature spruce-lichen forest, as can be found in the lowlands along the edges of rivers and lakes. They may also spend some time on windswept ridges where lichen can be easily accessed (J.S. Peepre and Associates, 1993). Conserving key habitat such as rutting areas, migration corridors and winter ranges is critical in maintaining a woodland caribou herd's health and abundance (Department of Renewable Resources, 2000).

There are approximately 22 distinct woodland caribou herds in the Yukon, with three of them occurring in the Peel River Watershed. The Hart River and Bonnet Plume herds, although not extensively studied, have for many years been known to occur here. In 2001, a third herd, the Clear Creek Herd, was identified in the region, overlapping with the Hart River Herd.

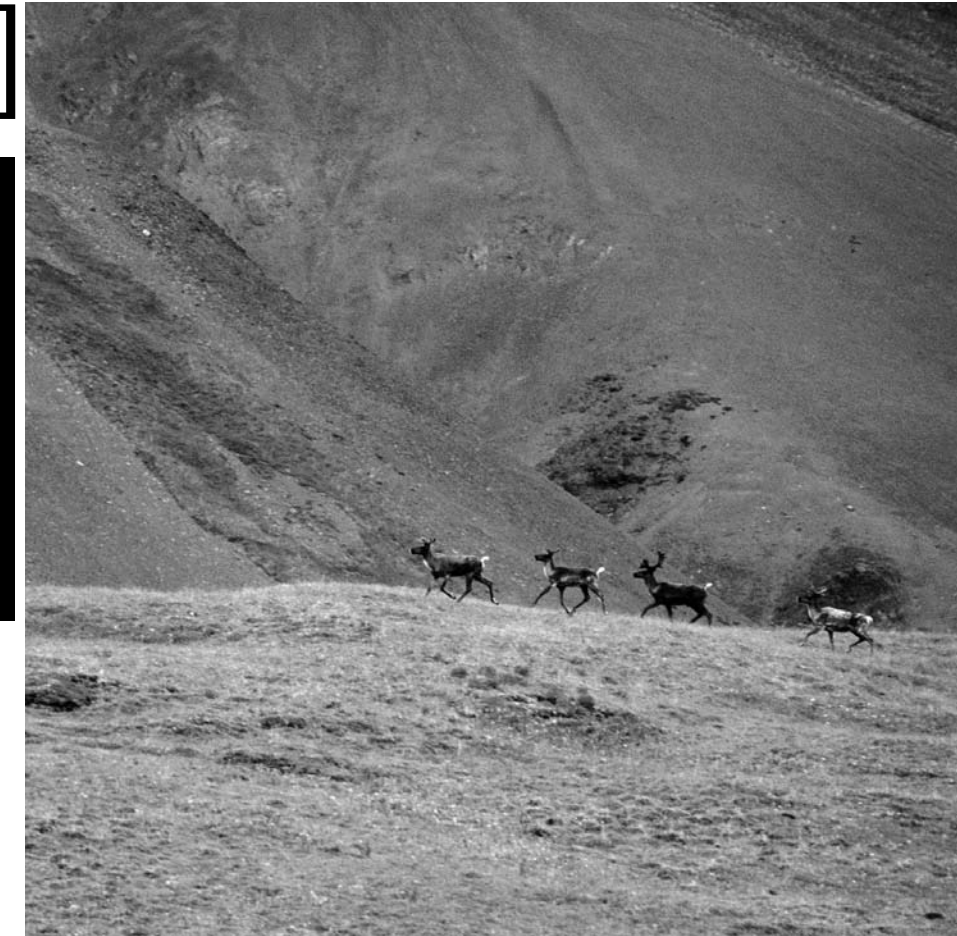
Hart River Herd

The last complete survey of the Hart River herd was conducted in September of 1978. Based on a total count of animals, the herd consisted of an estimated 1200 animals at that time. Due to mixing with the Porcupine caribou herd, there were some difficulties in getting an accurate count. The population is considered stable, meaning it is neither increasing nor decreasing (Department of Renewable Resources, 2002).

In general, the hunting pressure on the Hart River is considered minimal, due to the herd's remote location. However, in some winters they may be mixing with the Porcupine caribou herd and may be found along the Dempster Highway. This poses a concern because in those years, hunters may be mistakenly taking Hart River caribou instead of Porcupine caribou. The Hart River herd cannot sustain that type of intensive hunting pressure.

In the 1980's and 1990's, several Hart River caribou were fitted with satellite collars in order for biologists to get a better handle on where the herd ranged at different times in the year. The locations of these individuals each season is illustrated on Map 15.

[These caribou, likely of the Bonnet Plume herd, were seen in lush alpine meadows along the Snake River during one of the CPAWS community river trips. [JP]



Clear Creek Herd

As a result of a radio-tracking study, this herd was identified as being distinct from the Hart River herd in 2001. Map 15 shows a general outline of where this herd is believed to range. Further research is required, however, to refine our knowledge of the distinction between the Hart River and Clear Creek herds. The herd is estimated to consist of 900 individuals (Department of Renewable Resources, 2002).

Bonnet Plume Herd

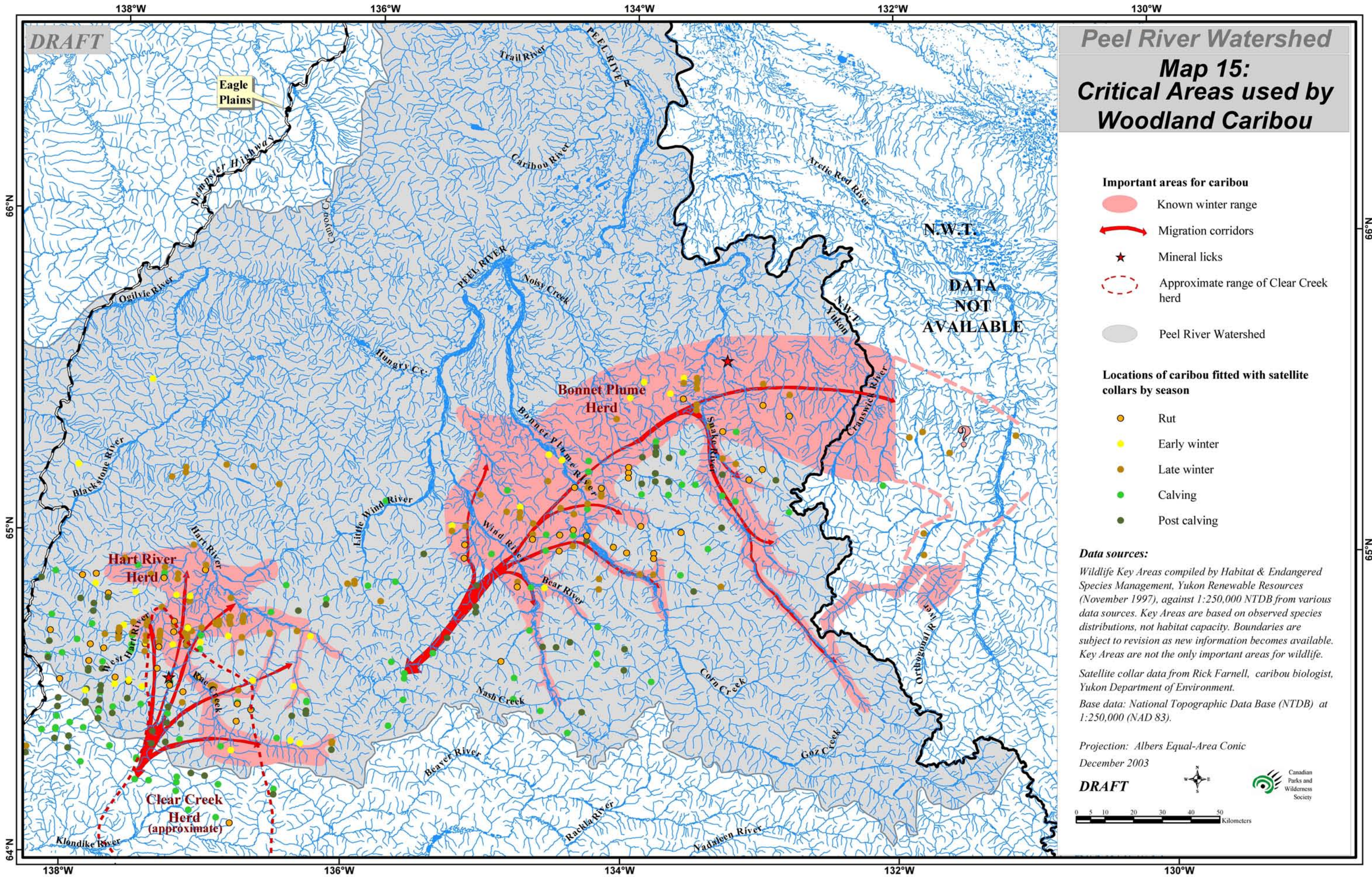
The Bonnet Plume herd was last surveyed in September 1982. At that time it was estimated to contain approximately 5,000 animals, making it one of the largest caribou herds in the Yukon. It is unknown whether the population is increasing, decreasing or stable. Hunting pressure is light, due to the inaccessibility of the herd (Department of Renewable Resources, 2002).

The Bonnet Plume herd winters in the area between the Wind and Arctic Red Rivers, in the snow shadow of the north flank of the Wernecke Mountains. The local big game outfitter has reported that in the winter, the caribou move

below Fairchild Lake and into the lower valley of the Bonnet Plume river, where snow depth is significantly lower (Government of Yukon, 1998).

The snow shadow effect and wind protection in the upper Snake River region also make it key winter range for woodland caribou. In spring, the herd generally migrates to the southwest towards calving sites and summer range. Direction and movement is dependent on snow depth. Like the Hart River herd, the movements of several individuals from the Bonnet Plume herd were tracked using satellite collars and their locations were plotted on Map 15.

Unlike many of the other caribou herds in the Yukon, the Bonnet Plume herd has not been encroached upon by human development activity and is still intact and fully functional. Woodland caribou are very vulnerable to external disturbances (such as roads) and tend to experience population declines when their habitat is altered.



Peel River Watershed
Map 15:
Critical Areas used by
Woodland Caribou

- Important areas for caribou**
- Known winter range
 - Migration corridors
 - Mineral licks
 - Approximate range of Clear Creek herd
 - Peel River Watershed

- Locations of caribou fitted with satellite collars by season**
- Rut
 - Early winter
 - Late winter
 - Calving
 - Post calving

Data sources:
 Wildlife Key Areas compiled by Habitat & Endangered Species Management, Yukon Renewable Resources (November 1997), against 1:250,000 NTDB from various data sources. Key Areas are based on observed species distributions, not habitat capacity. Boundaries are subject to revision as new information becomes available. Key Areas are not the only important areas for wildlife.
 Satellite collar data from Rick Farnell, caribou biologist, Yukon Department of Environment.
 Base data: National Topographic Data Base (NTDB) at 1:250,000 (NAD 83).

Projection: Albers Equal-Area Conic
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Kilometers