



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

For Release January 10, 1983

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LAST HERD OF CARIBOU IN LOWER 48 DECLARED ENDANGERED

The last herd of woodland caribou still occurring in the United States outside of Alaska, Idaho's southern Selkirk Mountain herd, will be added to the endangered species list under an emergency rule, Interior Secretary James Watt announced today.

"Listing the caribou as endangered has been under consideration for nearly 10 years," Watt said, "but no action to protect the species was taken by previous administrations."

Only 13 to 20 animals survive in the population in Washington, Idaho, and southern British Columbia, making the woodland caribou the most critically endangered mammal in the "Lower 48."

The caribou occur primarily on National Forest lands administered by the U.S. Forest Service, which has taken necessary steps to protect the caribou's habitat. The population is threatened by poaching, wildfire, and collisions with vehicles. Poachers killed at least one animal from the herd annually from 1980 through 1982. Calf survival is low, possibly due to inbreeding in the small herd, and the herd is not being replenished by the immigration of woodland caribou from other populations in Canada, which also have been declining.

Woodland caribou (a different subspecies from the caribou of northern Alaska) once occupied nearly the entire forested region from southeastern Alaska and British Columbia to Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. In the "Lower 48," they were found in Washington, Idaho, Montana, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan,

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Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. Largely because of illegal hunting and massive habitat alteration, caribou disappeared from New England by about 1908 and from the Great Lakes States by 1940. Woodland caribou populations in Alaska and Canada are not presently considered to be endangered or threatened.

The southern Selkirk Mountain herd is eligible for protection under a provision of the Endangered Species Act that provides for listing of a "distinct population" of a vertebrate species that is endangered or threatened in a particular area, even though the species may be more numerous elsewhere.

Listing of the woodland caribou as "endangered" should improve coordination and management of Federal agency actions that could affect the herd, facilitate international cooperation on the caribou's behalf, and provide for development of a caribou recovery plan that spells out actions that need to be taken to conserve the caribou.

The listing will also provide additional Federal law enforcement protection for the herd. Poachers will be subject to penalties under the Endangered Species Act, which can range up to \$20,000 in fines, one year in prison, and forfeiture of vehicles and equipment used in the violation.

The emergency rule protects the caribou as "endangered" for 240 days, during which time the Fish and Wildlife Service intends to propose permanent endangered status for this population. No critical habitat was designated for the caribou under the emergency rule.

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