

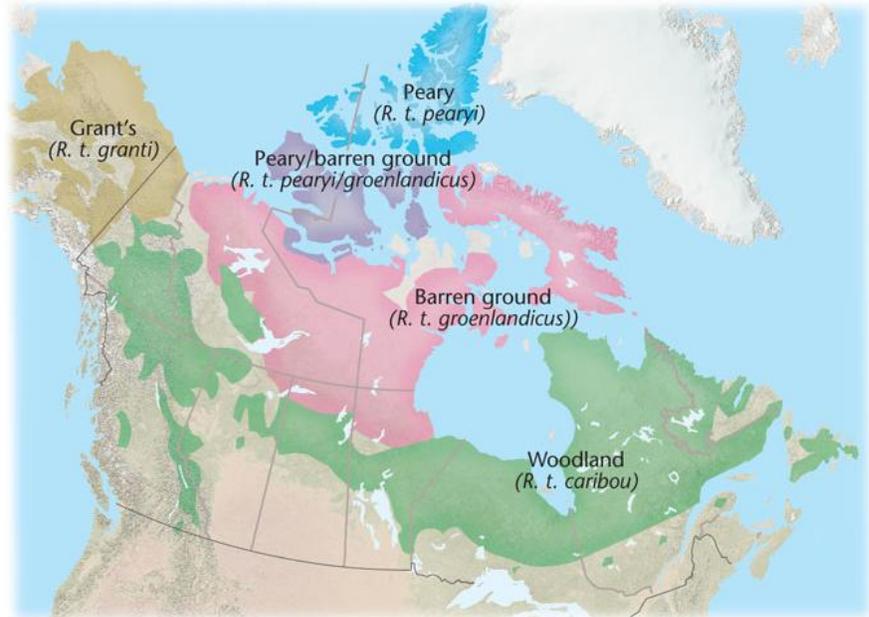


## Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*)

Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) are medium-sized members of the deer family (*Cervidae*) with a distribution that extends from landmasses above the Arctic Circle southward to the southern extent of the boreal forests and adjacent forested ecosystems in Eurasia and North America.

All caribou in the world are one species (*Rangifer tarandus*). There are five recognized subspecies of caribou in North America. Woodland caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*) are the southern-most subspecies in North America, historically ranging throughout most of southern Canada and portions of the United States.

Currently, Southern Mountain Caribou are the only distinct population of woodland caribou to occasionally occur in the continental United States in extreme north east Washington and northern Idaho. Southern Mountain Caribou are geographically and reproductively isolated from other woodland caribou. Their distribution coincides with the mountainous regions of the inland temperate rainforest, which extends from east-central B.C. to the southern Selkirk Mountains of Idaho and Washington.



Extant caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) subspecies after Banfield (1961; as depicted in [COSEWIC's 2011 Report on Designatable Units for Caribou](#)).

Southern Mountain Caribou are behaviorally unique from other woodland caribou to the north and east because they do not make the long distance migrations of other woodland caribou, rather they migrate vertically up and down the mountains several times a year between seasonal use areas.

They inhabit high elevation, forested areas with deep snowfall and steep, mountainous terrain. During the winter, they feed solely on lichen growing from certain forest trees. The deep snowpack lifts caribou up to 5 meters into the canopy of the spruce-fir (*Picea engelmannii* and *Abies lasiocarpa*) and cedar-hemlock (*Thuja plicata* and *Tsuga heterophylla*) forests to reach this lichen. All other caribou feed primarily by “cratering” or pawing at lichens buried in shallow snow at lower elevations.

Both the distribution and abundance of caribou, in general, have declined substantially since the time of European settlement, with the range of Southern Mountain Caribou decreasing by at least 60 percent and their current abundance estimated at fewer than 1,200 animals.

Historically, Southern Mountain Caribou existed in an interconnected population, but currently, this population has been fragmented into 17 isolated subpopulations, two of which no longer exist.

Subpopulations are comprised of one or more herds; those with few individuals are at risk of being completely eliminated by random environmental events, such as avalanches.

According to the experts, Southern Mountain Caribou are declining primarily due to the interrelated effects of habitat alteration (i.e., habitat loss and fragmentation) and predation.

Human-caused (e.g., timber harvest) and natural (e.g., forest fires) events convert mature forests to younger stands that benefit other ungulates, such as deer, elk and moose. As the abundance and distribution of other ungulates increase, so do their predators, with wolves, cougars, and bears being able to access areas that once separated them from Southern Mountain Caribou. Generally, caribou are not the primary prey for these predators, but rather a secondary prey when the opportunity presents itself.

In 1983, South Selkirk Caribou were listed as endangered in Idaho, Washington, and B.C. under emergency provisions of the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA), and fully listed under the ESA in 1984.

In response to receiving a public petition to remove South Selkirk Caribou from the list of threatened and endangered species in 2012, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducted an updated status review of the subpopulation within the context of the [distinct population segment \(DPS\) policy](#). This policy considers a population a DPS if it is discrete from other populations of the species (e.g., geographically and reproductively isolated) and significant in relation to the entire species (e.g., behaviorally unique). The status review concluded that the South Selkirk subpopulation did not meet the definition of a DPS under the ESA (and, therefore, was not a “listable” entity).



However, the status review also concluded that the subpopulation was part of the larger distinct population of Southern Mountain Caribou.

The 2014 proposed rule to amend the current listing to include the DPS has not yet been finalized and, until then, provides no ESA protective measures for Southern Mountain Caribou. However, until such time as a final rule for Southern Mountain Caribou is published, the protective measures for the South Selkirk Subpopulation provided by the 1984 ESA listing action remain in place.

Since 2003, Southern Mountain Caribou have been formally recognized as threatened under the [Species at Risk Act \(SARA\)](#) in Canada. However, this formal designation includes other woodland caribou populations in central British Columbia and Alberta (namely, the Northern Group, Central Group, and Southern Group).

In 2011, the [Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada](#) (COSEWIC) recognized that Southern Mountain Caribou were an entirely separate Designatable Unit (DU9; i.e., comparable to the Southern Group), and in 2014, recommended that DU9 be designated as endangered under SARA.

The recommended change in legal status under SARA is pending review and decision by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada. The proposed Southern Mountain Caribou DPS is consistent with Canadian recognition of the Southern Mountain Caribou DU.

For more information about Southern Mountain Caribou and their federal designations in the U.S. and Canada, please visit: [ECOS](#), [IFWO](#), [SARA](#) registry.

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