

Give caribou a break

by John Morton

Very soon, motorists in the Kenai-Soldotna area should be seeing some of the 130 or so caribou of the Kenai Lowland herd. Caribou are commonly seen on the Spur Highway, Bridge Access Road, and Kalifornsky Beach Road, where road signs caution motorists to watch for crossing animals. I often see them grazing in the gravel pit next to the Alaska Division of Forestry headquarters on the Sterling Highway east of the Mackie Lake Road intersection.

Of the four herds recognized on the peninsula, the Kenai Lowland herd is the only one that does not spend time feeding on lichens above treeline in the Kenai Mountains. Instead, this herd winters east of the Moose River, feeding on lichens that have regenerated in the spruce forests since the 1947 fire that burned 310,000 acres. In the latter part of May, cows from this herd calve near the Cook Inlet, from the Kenai Airport down through the Kenai Flats and south towards Kasilof along K-Beach Road.

Many folks new to the area may not be aware of the origin of these caribou. Caribou were traditionally hunted by the Dena'ina, who called them "vejex." Caribou from the peninsula were first described in the scientific literature in 1901 by Joel Allen from the American Museum of Natural History. He reports that caribou were "already very scarce on the Kenai Peninsula, and will doubtless soon be exterminated, the region being greatly frequented by visiting sportsmen, while native hunters kill [them] for their heads, disposing of them at good prices for shipment to San Francisco."

Truer words couldn't have been spoken. In 1912, Andrew Berg shot 13 caribou near Ptarmigan Head in the Caribou Hills, the last authentic report of caribou on the peninsula.

By the early 1950s, biologists from the Kenai National Moose Range (now the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge) and the Alaska Game Commission (now the Alaska Department of Fish and Game) were entertaining the idea of re-introducing caribou to the peninsula. The first 15 caribou were captured from the Nelchina herd near Glenallen and released at an airstrip near the Chickaloon River in 1965. Another 29 caribou were prematurely released at Watson Lake on the east fork of the Moose River in 1966 after the transport vehicle

broke down. These two translocations resulted in the establishment of the Kenai Mountain and Kenai Lowland herds, respectively.

Additional releases of 80 caribou in 1985 and 1986 at Emma Lake, Green Lake, Tustumena Glacier Flats, and Caribou Lake eventually became the Killey (Twin Lakes) and Fox River herds. Despite the fact that the Caribou Hills (the last known site for native caribou) were deliberately targeted for reintroduction efforts, caribou failed to establish there, perhaps due to snow-machine traffic. Caribou Hills is the only area on the refuge where snowmachines are allowed above treeline.

The Kenai Lowland herd has remained around 130-150 caribou since 1998, although domestic dogs and vehicle collisions are looming problems as the Kenai-Soldotna area becomes urbanized. Two caribou were killed this past winter on the Sterling Highway in two separate collisions and as many as five have been killed in a single incident on Bridge Access Road.

The Kenai Mountain herd has stabilized at around 400 caribou over the past two decades. The Killey River herd exceeded 700 in 2001 until three snow avalanches killed almost 200 caribou, mostly cows, in 2002 and 2003. The Fox River herd peaked at 98 animals in 1998 but declined to fewer than 40 caribou in 2003, perhaps due to overgrazing and trampling of alpine feeding areas. In July 2004, two sightings of groups of caribou near Exit Glacier in Kenai Fjords National Park suggest that caribou are continuing to expand into new areas on the Kenai Peninsula.

Although caribou have been legally harvested for over 30 years in the Kenai Mountains, the Kenai Lowland herd has been closed to hunting since 1993. A permitted hunt was first held for this herd in 1972. Permits were not issued for harvest again until 1988 when animals were harvested for the next 5 years. Permits are currently issued for only the Killey River and Kenai Mountain herds.

In addition to dogs, vehicle traffic, overgrazing, and human disturbance, Kenai Peninsula caribou may ultimately be threatened by accelerated climate change. Treeline in the Kenai Mountains has risen a meter per year over the last 50 years, encroaching

into alpine tundra that three of the four caribou herds on the peninsula prefer. Although the recent caribou mortalities due to avalanches may be simply a fluke, they may also be a sign that snow pack in the mountains is more prone to slide because of more frequent thawing.

So the next time you see caribou along the highway, give them a break. Slow down and enjoy them. They represent one of the few successful reintroduc-

tion efforts for caribou in North America, and certainly help remind us of a wilder heritage on the Kenai.

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