



FAST FACTS

Name: Caribou

Scientific name: *Rangifer tarandus*

Average weight: 55 to 318 kg

Average lifespan: 4.5 years

Did you know? Caribou have scent glands at the base of their ankles that are used when the animal is in danger. It will rear up on its hind legs to release a scent that alerts the other caribou to the danger it is facing.

PHYSIOLOGY

Caribou are ungulates, which means they are cloven-hoofed and chew cud. The caribou has a short, stocky body that conserves heat, but its legs are long to help it move through the deep snow. Its winter coat provides insulation from the cold, and its muzzle and tail are short and covered in hair. The caribou's large and concave hooves support it through the snow or muskeg, and it uses them as a scoop when looking for lichen and other plants in the snow. Although the caribou can withstand the cold temperatures and hard terrain, it has a tough time coping with insects in the summer. It has been known to run for kilometres, just to escape the hordes of pesky bugs.

The caribou belongs to the deer family and is the only member where both male and female counterparts carry antlers. The antlers of the female are smaller than those of the male, but they are carried for a longer period of time. Caribou start growing their antlers each spring and are normally done the process by August. Male caribou shed their antlers in November or December, after mating, while females will often carry them until June, after they have given birth. Antlers are a sign of dominance, and it is usually only the pregnant caribou that keep the antlers that late. It allows them to defend their feed and displace large caribou from favoured sites while nourishing their babies.

HABITAT/BEHAVIOUR

There are many subspecies of caribou. They can be found dwelling in forests, on mountains, in the tundra, and even migrating each year between the forests and tundra of the Far North. Approximately half of Canadian caribou are barren-ground caribou. This means they spend almost all of the year, sometimes even the full year, on the tundra from Alaska to Baffin Island.

The woodland caribou, the largest and darkest of the species, can be found in the boreal, or northern, forests from British Columbia and the Yukon Territory to Newfoundland and Labrador. In mountainous western areas the woodland caribou make seasonal movements from their winter range on the mountainside to their summer range on the tundra. Those in eastern areas occupy mature forest and open bogs and ferns, or low-lying wet areas.

The Peary caribou are a smaller subspecies and are light-coloured. They can only be found on the islands of the Canadian arctic archipelago and their population is numbered at 10,000. This subspecies does not normally have significant migrations.

RANGE

Canadian caribou can be found from the United States-Canada border to northern Ellesmere Island, and from British Columbia and the Yukon Territory to the island of Newfoundland. There are 2.4 million caribou in Canada. But many are subspecies and populations that are threatened or extinct.