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Secret food habits of caribou suggest habitat improvements

Sustainable Forestry Initiative
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Woodland caribou are considered threatened throughout much of Canada's vast boreal forest. [SFI Conservation Grants](#) grantee, the [National Council for Air and Stream Improvement \(NCASI\)](#) followed a small herd of caribou over nine years to determine what role – if any – nutrition plays in maintaining caribou populations. Data was collected from Fairbanks, Alaska to Fort St-John, British Columbia, to Dryden, Ontario. Some interesting results have recently come in.

A key finding was that caribou eat as little as 25% of the forage available to them. They have very distinct preferences for what they will consume and what they will avoid. In other words, they are picky eaters. Unlike previously thought, lichen is not necessarily a caribou's preferred food. Surprisingly, expectant caribou moms tend to hold off for leafy green vegetation with more nutritional value.

This new knowledge presents new opportunities for forest managers and habitat conservationists to work together to improve the menu and support survival.

"Conservation is an integral aspect of our work at SFI and we strive every day to make the research we support relevant. One of the ways SFI is contributing to conservation in Canada is through collaborating on woodland caribou research," said Darren Sleep, Ph.D. CWB®, Senior Director, Conservation Science and Strategy, SFI. "We are engaged in several diverse research projects that have made it clear that caribou have varied and important relationships with their habitat and our work has helped improve understanding and develop tools to help conserve caribou across their range."

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative is a close partner on the project with NCASI. Additionally, SFI Program Participants Domtar, EACOM Timber Corporation, and Weyerhaeuser all contributed to the caribou project with additional financial and in-kind support. Project Learning Tree Canada, an initiative of SFI, matched the wages of student workers 50% via the Green Jobs program, which was funded in part by the Government of Canada's Youth Employment Strategy.

The research received significant community support, as well. According to Janet Lane, an SFI team leader who hosted the caribou on her property for the last two years, local engagement was extraordinary.

"We had lots of interest and visits from the neighborhood," said Lane, "including local citizens and neighbors, and Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry staff. We could hardly go to the grocery store without someone asking us about the caribou and how they were doing."

For more on this and related projects, see SFI's blog, [Doing Research that Matters for Caribou](#). And visit [sfiprogram.org](#) to learn more about wildlife conservation and how you can support sustainable forestry by looking for the SFI Label.



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