

Where did the Caribou Go

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Sketchy records indicate that northern Maine was once home to hundreds of thousands of Caribou. The virgin forests of the Allagash were home to the largest of the caribou subspecies – the Woodland Caribou. Mature bulls tipped the scales at 700 pounds, and cows could reach 250 pounds in weight.

These ungulates were well suited for travel in deep snow conditions, because they have large concave hooves that are especially adept at pawing the snow to expose ground lichens. Their primary diet consists of ground and tree lichens, but they will also eat shrubs, grasses and willows. It takes 80 to 150 years to grow the type of mature coniferous forest that would produce enough lichen to support caribou.

Historically, woodland caribou inhabited the forests of the northern United States from Maine to Washington State. Today the woodland caribou is one of the most critically endangered mammals in the U.S. There is a tiny population in northern Idaho and northwest Washington, of about 40 animals.

Maine still had a healthy population of caribou into the late 1800's. Because the meat was highly favored, these herds of caribou were often slaughtered by unscrupulous "market hunters" and shipped to the cities as table fare. It is reported that caribou would gather in large herds on the big lakes of northern Maine during the winter. When shot at, the herd would not run away but would often circle around and around until the whole herd had been devastated.

It has been illegal to hunt caribou in Maine since 1899. Before that, they were one of the state's most important big game animals, attracting "sports" from all over the country. Ironically, the person credited with killing the last legal caribou in Maine was the infamous Fly Rod Crosby, the first registered Maine Guide.

Reports persisted of a small herd in the Katahdin region until 1914. In 1911– a small herd was seen at Burntland Brook along the Allagash River by a local Game Warden, Bert Spencer. Exactly when these sightings ended is uncertain.

Efforts to reintroduce small herds of caribou back into Maine were undertaken in 1963 and again in 1993. Both of these reintroduction programs failed miserably. In both of these efforts, the Maine caribou were reintroduced from the Avalon Peninsula herd in Newfoundland, Canada. In the 1963, 23 caribou were released in Baxter State Park- they dispersed after 3 or 4 years and were never seen again. In 1993, 12 caribou were again released in Baxter State Park. This time the caribou were fitted with radio collars, they all died or migrated out of the area.

The consensus is that Maine will never again support a caribou herd because the woodlands have changed from old growth to a relatively young forest. The fragmentation of the Maine woods with camp lots, woods roads, and the widespread presence of whitetail deer, which carry a brain worm that does not harm the deer, but is deadly to moose and caribou, are also barriers to reintroduction.

When we took a family vacation to Newfoundland a few years ago, one of the things on our “to do list” was to see a caribou in the wild. While staying at a provincial park near Gander, we asked one of the rangers where we could see a caribou. He told us to take a ride up on a nearby high tableland in the evening. We did so, and were thrilled to see two bulls that night- one being a very large specimen at close range! My wife Ruth and I got quite the chuckle when we looked back at our vehicle with both doors open, sitting in the middle of the road. Just like the tourists back home- when they see a moose!

Wouldn't it be awesome to be ice fishing out on Chamberlain Lake and have a small group of Caribou come out on the lake? You never know what the future might hold.

For general information on the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, go to: www.maine.gov/allagash for an information packet call 207-941-4014; or write to the Bureau of Parks and Lands, 106 Hogan Road, Bangor, ME 04401.