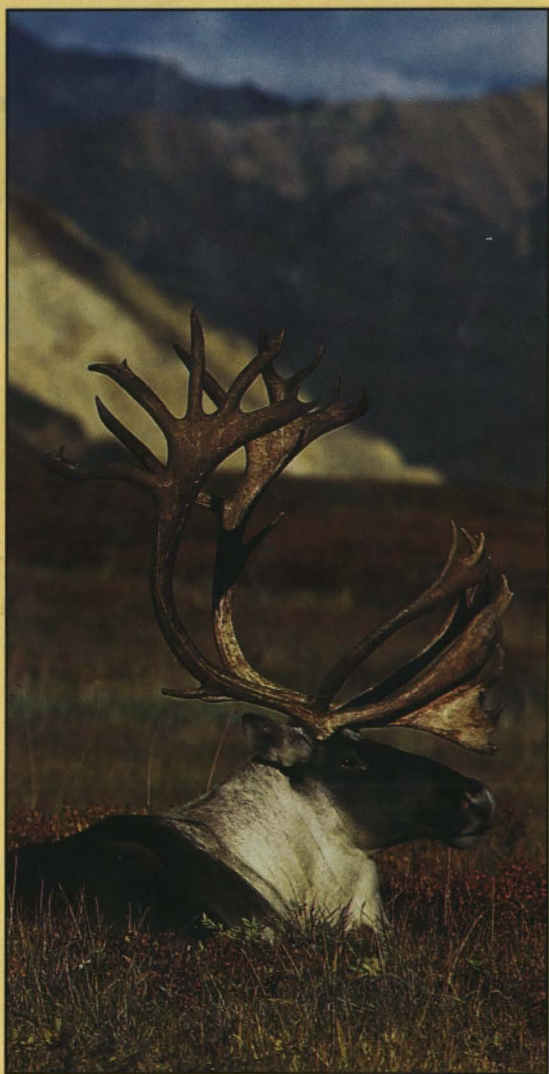


# Caribou

in Alaska



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## Description

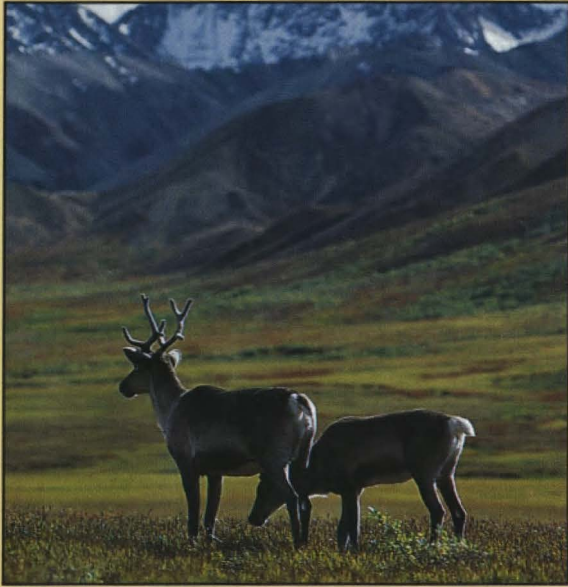


Caribou are large, stout members of the deer family, with concave hoofs that spread widely to support the animal in snow and soft tundra. Their feet also function as paddles when they swim across cold lakes and rivers during migration. Caribou are the only member of the deer family in which both sexes grow antlers. The antlers of adult bulls are large and massive; those of cows are much smaller and more spindly. In late fall, caribou are clove-brown with a white neck, rump and feet and often have a white flank stripe. The hair of newborn calves is generally reddish-brown.

Newborn calves weigh about 15 pounds and usually double their weight in 20 days. The weight of adult bulls averages 400 pounds; females average 250 pounds. Biologists estimate there are close to a million caribou in Alaska.



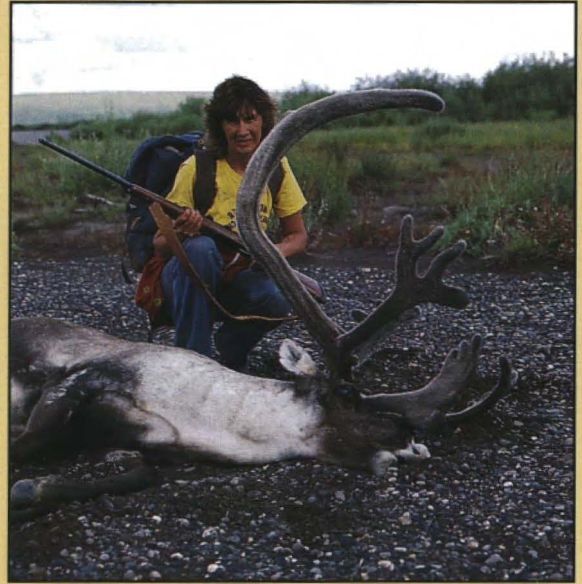
## Habitat



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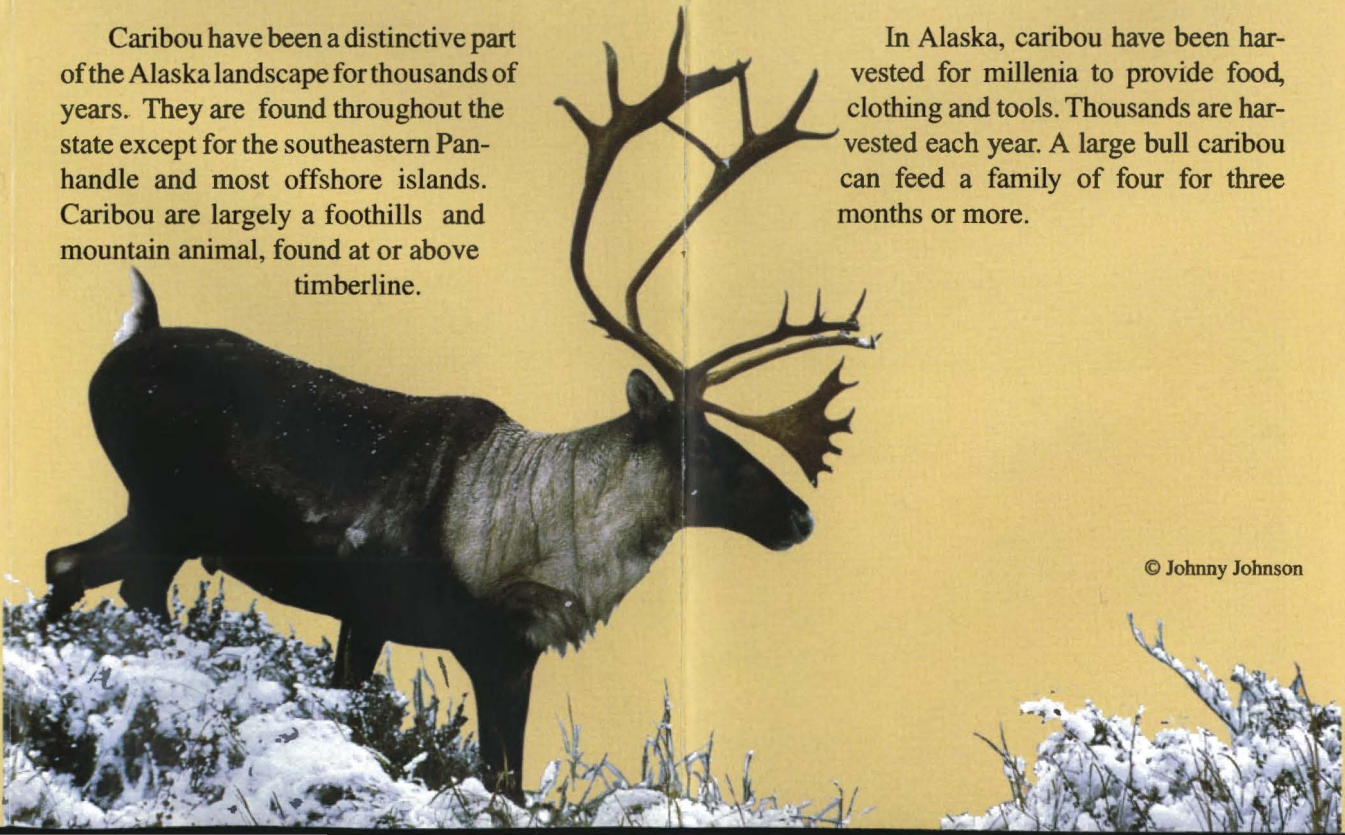
Caribou have been a distinctive part of the Alaska landscape for thousands of years. They are found throughout the state except for the southeastern Panhandle and most offshore islands. Caribou are largely a foothills and mountain animal, found at or above timberline.

## Human Use



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In Alaska, caribou have been harvested for millenia to provide food, clothing and tools. Thousands are harvested each year. A large bull caribou can feed a family of four for three months or more.



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## Life History

After a summer of grazing on succulent vegetation, caribou enter the fall in prime condition. Mature bulls frequently have more than three inches of fat on the back and rump. The shedding of antler velvet in early September marks the approach of the breeding (rutting) season. The bulls cease feeding and show increasing aggressiveness that soon results in combat. Most fights between bulls are brief bouts, but injuries are not uncommon. Most females do not breed until their third fall. The largest bulls shed their antlers soon after the rut, but smaller bulls keep their antlers until late winter. Pregnant females usually retain their antlers until calves are born.

As the spring migration begins, females and many calves of the previous year congregate as they move to the calving grounds. In late May or early June, a single calf is born; twins are very rare. Newborn calves can walk within an hour of birth. After a few days, they can outrun a person and swim across lakes and rivers.

Like most herd animals, caribou must keep moving to find adequate food. This tends to prevent overgrazing. Caribou are great wanderers and are very good at traveling across boggy and rugged terrain.

In summer, caribou eat a wide variety of plants, including the leaves of willows and dwarf birch, as well as herbaceous and flowering plants. They switch to lichens, "reindeer moss," and dried sedges during winter.



## Research

Alaska is a leader in caribou research and management. Over the past four decades, biologists with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game have investigated many aspects of caribou biology to help manage the state's herds more effectively. They have developed new techniques to monitor the nutritional status and overall health of caribou herds and intensively studied the causes of caribou declines and the factors limiting recovery. They have also investigated the impacts of development on calving, of predation on herd growth, and of overgrazing on population size. Biologists have also studied caribou habitat use and movement patterns. Knowledge gained through these studies will help ensure the continued health and productivity of these herds, which are treasured both as an important source of food and a natural wonder.

## Management

The management of caribou involves tracking wide swings in the size of some herds. Wildlife biologists monitor about 32 distinct herds in Alaska, ranging in size from only a few hundred to more than half a million caribou. As herds decline, hunting is restricted. As they increase, more hunting can be allowed.

One challenge wildlife managers face is protection of the vast areas used by caribou. For instance, studies show that oil development in the Arctic can have an adverse effect on caribou populations unless oil fields are developed carefully. Females with young calves are particularly sensitive to disturbance and tend to avoid areas of intensive development and human activity.

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## Dollars for Wildlife

Each year, hunters pay a 10 to 11% federal excise tax on the purchase of firearms, ammunition and archery equipment. These funds are distributed to the states for wildlife conservation programs. Since this system was created in 1937, Alaska has received more than \$108 million in revenue from the tax on hunting equipment. This critical source of funding, called the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program, provides roughly half of the state's wildlife management budget, including nearly a million dollars a year for caribou research and management. In addition, all proceeds from the sale of hunting licenses are used to support research and management programs. License and tags sales generate more than \$5 million annually.

This brochure was produced by the Division of Wildlife Conservation, Department of Fish and Game.



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