

Viewing Caribou

by James L. Davis

Does that passage from George Calef's book, *Caribou and the Barren Lands*, whet your appetite for viewing caribou? Would you like to learn where, when, and how to view Alaska's majestic deer of the north? If the answer is yes, read on. There are many choices.

WHERE

Let's start by identifying those parts of Alaska's geography that caribou call home. Alaska is currently the year-round or seasonal home to about the same number of caribou and people—something over one-half million. Although the number of people and caribou are similar, the locations of abundance are dissimilar. The caribou that reside year-round in Alaska are members of 26 more-or-less distinct subpopulations or herds. These herds range in size from as few as 100 in the Kenai Lowlands to about 250,000 in the Western Arctic. An additional three herds fail to recognize one of mankind's great inventions—the U.S./Canada border. Caribou from the Chisana, Fortymile, and Porcupine Herds cross the border annually, and hence are only seasonal residents of Alaska.

The goal of most viewers will probably be to learn where they can most conveniently and reliably see caribou. With that in mind, a glance at the map will identify the herds that are potentially accessible to the road system traveler.

Once the viewer has decided which herd is closest, easiest, or least expensive to get to, it's possible to consider coordinating caribou observing with other activities. As an example, for the person starting from Anchorage and hoping to combine a salmon or halibut fishing trip with caribou viewing, the Kenai Lowlands Herd would be the best possibility. On the other hand, a person planning to view Mt. McKinley in Denali National Park will be in a position for prime viewing of the Denali Caribou Herd.

Let's consider the specialized goal of seeing a truly huge aggregation of tens of thousands of caribou, and let's assume that money, time, and enthusiasm are not limited. A glance at the herd population sizes will quickly reveal that the largest herds are not accessible from the road system. The remote Porcupine and Western Arctic Herds in the far north are the best bets.

The map and table will allow the uninitiated caribou viewer to compare expectations with realities imposed by the nomadic nature of the caribou. Such study is important to avoid unnecessary disappointment. For example, knowledge that the Porcupine Herd ranges near the Dempster Highway (in adjacent Yukon Territory, Canada) has enticed many to the area only to be disappointed; their expectations for viewing vast numbers of the 170,000 member Porcupine Herd were not met.

The following paraphrased summary from George Calef's travel guide, *Journey the Dempster Highway* (available from the Yukon Conservation Society, Box 4163, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada Y1A 3T3) speaks to the realities of caribou viewing along the Dempster Highway:

"Summer travelers along the Dempster Highway will not see any part of the Porcupine Caribou Herd. At this season, the Porcupine Caribou are far to the north in both the Yukon and Alaska where the cows calve. The annual journey to the calving ground begins in late March or early April. Porcupine Herd caribou are most apt to be near the Dempster Highway in winter. No one knows why caribou choose a particular winter range in one year and another the next year. Caribou can be absent from the Dempster area for several years and then suddenly turn up by the thousands. In years when the caribou winter near the Dempster, they generally arrive by early October. The open tundra of the southern Ogilvie Mountains and the Ogilvie River Basin are the most likely regions to view wintering caribou."

The pronounced seasonal presence or absence of caribou described for the Porcupine Herd along the Dempster Highway and the between-year variation in scarcity or abundance is similar for the many other roadside viewing opportunities found along the Alaska road system.

Before moving on to the when's and how's of caribou viewing, let's review Alaska's most popular caribou viewing areas. During summer (May-September), Denali Park and the Kenai Airport vicinity are most popular. The majority of the 3,000 caribou in the Denali Herd are seldom viewable from the Denali Park Road, but it is common for small numbers (primarily bulls) to be near the road. In my dozen or so summer trips to Denali Park I've always seen at least one caribou and often up to 100.

For its small size (100 caribou), the Kenai Lowlands Herd offers lots of viewing opportunity. Size for size, this is Alaska's most viewable caribou herd. Good caribou viewing is almost assured at any time from early May to mid-October. Access is from the road system near the City of Kenai.

The 30,000 strong Nelchina Caribou Herd is the closest large caribou herd to Alaska's population center, the Greater Anchorage area. Hundreds or thousands of Nelchina caribou annually cross the several highways within the herd's range. In some years caribou winter near roads. Both Nelchina and Yanert Herd caribou have frequented the Cantwell vicinity in recent springs.

WILDLIFE VIEWING

CARIBOU

Annual cycle of caribou behavior and movements
with associated viewing highlights.

Time of Year	Phase of the annual cycle	Relative degree of social aggregation (expected group size)	Special viewing highlights
April-May	Spring migration	Highly aggregated (50-1,000/group)	Long columns, light-colored, long pelage; largest bulls with short but rapidly growing new velvet-antlers; cows with hard, polished antlers; body condition showing signs of winter
Late May-early June	Calving, calving pause	Scattered, cows often alone at birth (1-20 group)	Mother-offspring pairs, groups of cows and calves; cows lose antlers, motley pelage as winter coat shed; bulls becoming sleek, cows look thin
Late June-July	Postcalving aggregation, postcalving shift	Most aggregated of any time in the year (\pm 10,000 group, some bulls and yearlings scattered)	Huge aggregations; caribou seeking relief from insects on snowbanks, gravel bars, sea and lake shores, windy ridges
August	Summer dispersal, summer shift	Very scattered (1-100, many singles)	Short, dark pelage, large velvet-covered antlers on bulls; beginning of fall colors
September	Fall shuffle, fall shift	moderate aggregation (10-50 up to hundreds)	Peak fall colors; subsistence harvests; shed antler velvet; bulls and cows coming together; river crossings; sleek winter coats, long white neck manes; body condition good
October	Rut, fall pause	Highly aggregated (20-100 up to hundreds)	Sparring, fighting, courting, copulation; subsistence harvest
October-November	Fall migration	Highly aggregated long columns (up to many thousands/group)	Long columns, large numbers, snow scenes
December-March	Winter pause	Widely scattered but local concentrations (10 to hundreds or thousands)	Cratering (pawing) in snow for food; bulls and cows segregated; bulls without antlers; wolf interactions

The Steese and Taylor Highways in interior Alaska offer potential viewing. The 20,000-member Fortymile Herd is increasing and caribou are being seen more frequently in summer from the Steese Highway. In many years, thousands of caribou cross the Taylor Highway during fall and spring migrations. Caribou sometimes spend the winter in the area adjacent to the Taylor Highway.

The Dalton Highway extends from the Yukon River to the Arctic Ocean and is Alaska's only road to the Arctic. Between the Yukon River and the Brooks Range, caribou viewing is best in winter when migratory caribou from the Western Arctic Herd, and occasionally the Porcupine Herd, may be near the highway. During the snow-free periods, caribou are infrequently seen, as fewer than 1,000 resident caribou inhabit the adjacent tundra areas.

From the Brooks Range to Prudhoe Bay on the Arctic Coast, travel on the Dalton Highway is restricted to tour buses and other commercial vehicles. For those fortunate enough to travel this section of the Dalton Highway, viewing caribou is essentially assured. Bull caribou are common year-round. The mountains and foothills contain most caribou in winter while the coastal areas support most caribou in summer.

In Alaska's neighboring Yukon Territory, some of the 1,500 mountain caribou of the Hart River Herd remain year-round near the Dempster Highway. These caribou range east and west of the highway in the Hart and Blackstone River drainages. Hart River caribou sometimes may be spotted from the Dempster near the West Hart River in summer and autumn, but hikers who venture into the mountains farther east have a greater chance of encountering them.

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Caribou

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WHEN

Caribou are accessible for viewing from Alaska's road system, but there is more to know. Because caribou are gregarious animals and forage heavily on slow-growing lichens, they have developed a nomadic nature. Although caribou seem to be constantly on the move, they do pause periodically where conditions are temporarily favorable. The tabular outline on page 8 summarizes the caribou's annual cycle of behavior and movements. It also highlights the notable viewing opportunities for each time of the year. For example, August is the poorest time to see a large aggregation of caribou. A long file of caribou plodding through the tundra will most likely occur in mid-March to mid-May, and the awesome aggregations numbering tens of thousands form in late June and throughout July.

HOW

The "where" and "when" sections have summarized much of the general "how-to" of caribou viewing, but the successful viewer will need to consider some specifics. Learning whom to contact is essential for tips on gear and techniques. The aspiring caribou viewer who reviews some reference material will be able to identify bulls, cows, and calves; will know which habitats are best to visit during a given season; and will

recognize the many peculiar behavior characteristics of caribou, such as the excitement leap, threat and attack poses, head bobbing pose, bush gazing, bush thrashing, and others.

To avoid possible disappointments, prospective caribou viewers, both resident Alaskans and visitors, should do their homework. There is no better preparation for viewing caribou than communicating with others who have first-hand knowledge of the area or the caribou herd that the viewer wants to watch. Prime contacts will include local biologists working for ADF&G, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, or U.S. Forest Service. Additional contacts might include friends and acquaintances who have been there before (or, better yet, who are "there" now). Travel consultants, and the many guides, outfitters, and tour organizers who are familiar with specific areas can be invaluable sources of information and advice. For those who can afford it, local air taxi operators often know exactly where and when to put viewers in contact with caribou.

Many viewers will find their caribou-related experiences more fulfilling if they are knowledgeable about the natural history of caribou. Fortunately, there are several informative books which should be available in local bookstores or libraries.

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Play by Their Rules

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has been located. Don't expect the bear to know you mean it no harm; if it feels threatened, it is going to react. The aggressive reactions reported in the news media are rare. Generally, the bear just quietly leaves. In either case, the viewing opportunity is frustrated. The most common mistake is to approach the bear to get a better view. If at all possible, select a site that is safe for you and let the bear move to you. If your presence is not "threatening," the bear will generally continue its activity but not approach so close that either party will be in danger. The assumption that a nearby bear doesn't know you are there is generally false. The bear may be ignoring you but, at the first hostile sign, it will be gone. Frequently it is the need to feed that outweighs the bear's concern for your presence.

Attempts to improve the situation almost always result in failure. The window of your car, cabin, or home can be an excellent and safe place to bear watch but just opening the door and stepping out often sends the bear into nearby cover. An open hillside above a salmon stream 100 yards away may allow the bear to fish and feed while you watch. The visibility across a narrow valley or ravine is generally superior because brush or topographic features are less likely to hide the bear. If you must move, the rule is, "Closer isn't necessarily better." The order of priority is: your safety, the bear's safety, visibility.

After determining where the preferred habitats are and when they are in use, consider the visibility aspects of the habitats themselves. Black bears feeding on devil's club or salmonber-

ries in the dense coniferous forest are difficult to see under the best of conditions. The same bear feeding on alpine blueberries can often be spotted from great distance. Nocturnal bears are best seen at dawn or dusk unless the situation lends itself to artificial lights. Small brushy salmon streams are not visually as good as their larger counterparts. The time taken to scout for areas in the preferred seasonal habitat pays off.

Bears are unique big game animals because they don't seem to do things halfway to accommodate viewers: They're either too shy or they're too bold. Behavior of wild bears makes viewing opportunities few and easily lost. However, because they are opportunistic feeders, they easily become addicted to human foods and become bold and aggressive. Shortsighted actions by humans, either by feeding wild bears to accommodate viewing or accidentally providing food (garbage, improper food storage while camping, etc.) are dangerous to all parties. While they last, these bears provide risky viewing opportunities. In the end they make the news by destroying property, mauling people, and ultimately being killed themselves.

Wild bears are there to see if you want. They are busy being bear and nothing—this article included—will convince them that people should be allowed to watch them. Therefore, success means looking for bears where they want to be, conforming your actions to theirs in a non-threatening manner, and either making the opportunity happen or capitalizing on a chance nature has given you. Above all, safe and successful viewing results from playing by the bears' rules.

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