

Woodland Caribou

BC Caribou Who's Who

Caribou across the world (they are known as reindeer of Europe) belong to the same species *Rangifer tarandus*. The caribou of British Columbia are Woodland Caribou *Rangifer tarandus* subspecies *caribou*. There are 54 herds of caribou in the province. These are divided into three ecotypes, based on their behaviour and the habitat they live in.

- **Boreal caribou:** Occurs throughout boreal (northern) forests. They primarily use large peatlands and open, old forests throughout the year. Listed as "threatened" under the Species At Risk Act (SARA).
- **Northern Mountain caribou:** Occurs throughout the mountainous regions of north-central and northwestern BC. They spend the summer on alpine and upper subalpine ranges. In winter, some herds move down to coniferous forests and lower subalpine areas. Listed as a "special concern" under SARA.
- **Southern Mountain caribou:** Herds live in the interior wet belt. Most of these caribou remain at mid to high elevations year-round, but some herds move to lower elevations seasonally. They spend some of the winter in low-elevation pine forests feeding on terrestrial lichens and spend other portions of the winter in high-elevation ranges, feeding on arboreal lichens or on terrestrial lichens. These caribou are listed as "threatened" under SARA.

Did you know?

- The word *caribou* originates from the early French explorers who likely converted the Mi'kmaq word *xaibu*, which means "pawer" or "shoveler," to describe the species. This refers to the way caribou dig for food under the snow.
- Across their range, caribou are an important part of the lives of Indigenous Peoples. Traditional uses of caribou include warm winter clothing, shelters, food, tools, antler carvings, rawhide for drums, boats, and more. Caribou are featured in art, storytelling, and song. As caribou numbers in BC have decreased, these traditions have been deeply affected.
- Caribou are the only members of the deer family whose females as well as males grow antlers. Males and females grow and shed antlers at different times, but both produce a new pair annually.
- Caribou are herbivores. In the warmer months they eat a variety of green plants. In winter, caribou rely on a diet of lichens. Lichens are tough, plant-like organisms which can survive freezing and dry conditions.



Lichens are communities. The structures are created by fungi, but also house cyanobacteria and algae. These partners are capable of photosynthesis and share the food they make with the fungi. Some lichens grow on the ground or on rocks, while others grow on tree branches. Caribou must dig through snow to reach the lichens.

Have you seen a caribou?

You probably have on the Canadian quarter!



Rudolph the red-nosed caribou

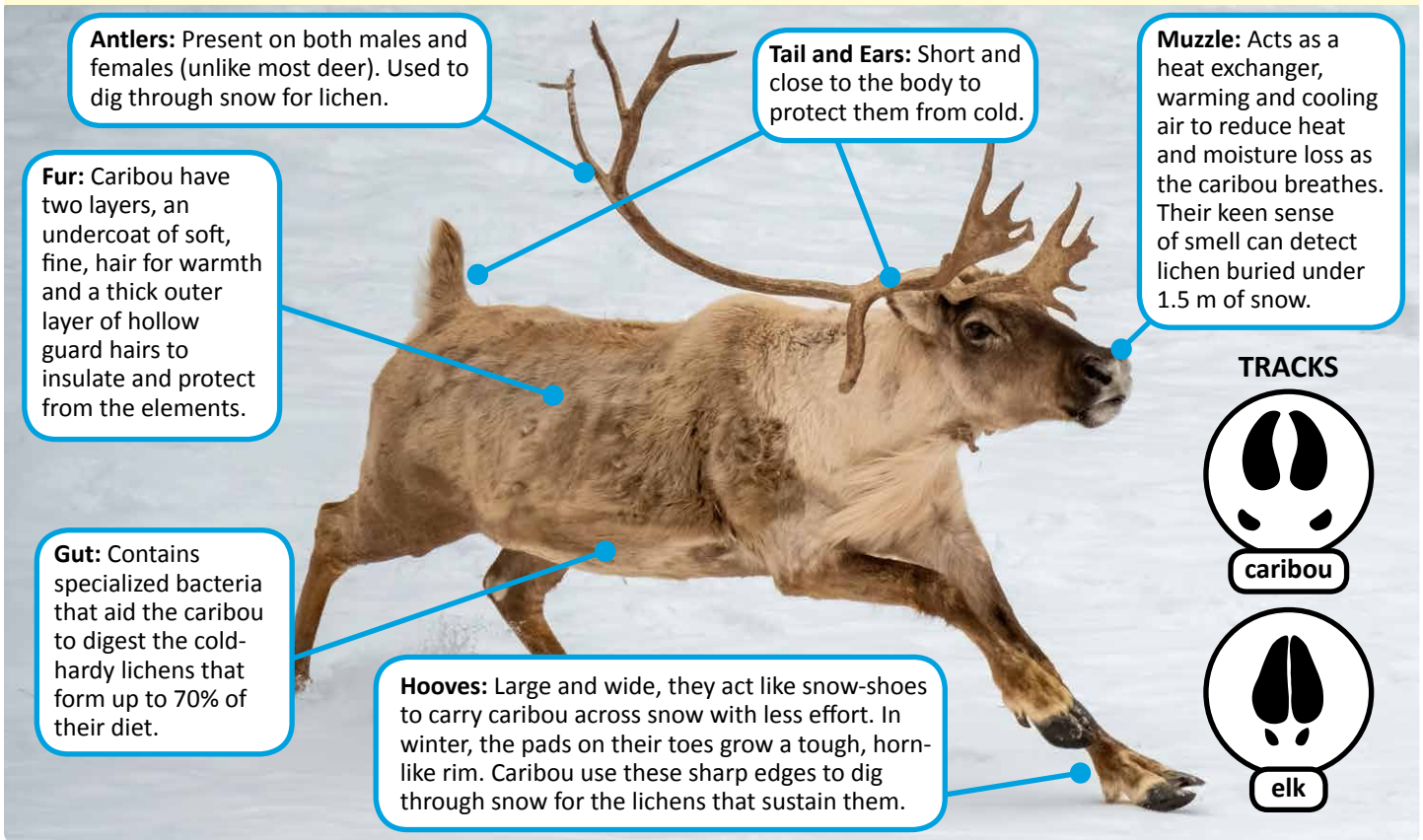
The range of the caribou species wraps around the northern part of the globe, across both North America and Eurasia. In Eurasia, the species is called "reindeer". Some are wild, while others have been domesticated. The word *reindeer* comes from the Lapland word "reino" meaning young reindeer.

You could say that Santa's sleigh is pulled by flying caribou! Since Santa's reindeer all have antlers in December, this would suggest that they are all female. Males shed their antlers in the fall and grow a new set in the spring.



Caribou are snow specialists

Caribou have many adaptations that keep them warm through winters and ice ages! Caribou once shared North America with woolly mammoths and caribou fossils as old as 1.5 million years have been found in the Yukon. Here are some of the features that allow caribou to be "*chionophiles*," a term for organisms that thrive in cold conditions.



TRY THIS!

Build a caribou designed for the cold

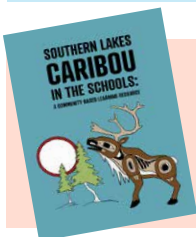
Use your imagination and creative materials to build a caribou model that highlights their adaptations for life in the cold and snow.

Suggested Materials: Pipe cleaners, pop cans, toilet paper roles, twigs, fake fur, felt, bottle caps, glue, white wool or cotton "snow" to display the models on.

1. Consider the information above (and other things you've learned) when designing your caribou. What would make a good barrel-shaped body? What do their specialized hooves look like? What shapes will you make the antlers – every antler is unique.
2. Assemble your caribou.
3. Create a wintry habitat for your caribou.
Add craters in the snow to show where the caribou has been digging for lichen.

Go further:

Imagine a different habitat. Is it hot? cold? swampy? sandy? What adaptations would help an live animal there? Design and create an animal that would thrive in this habitat!



Want to learn more about caribou? Check out the Southern Lakes Caribou in the Schools Project. This resource is being advised with representation from six Yukon and BC First Nations and features activities for K-12. www.southernlakescaribou.com/educators/

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