

Bunches of Caribou

Caribou live in the arctic tundra, mountain tundra and northern forests of Alaska. There are 32 herds and approximately 900,000 wild caribou in Alaska (compare that to only about 700,000 people)!

Caribou calving areas, where baby caribou are born, are usually located in the mountains or on open coastal tundra. In the early summer, after calves are born, caribou gather together in large aggregations (see photo on the right). Scientists believe caribou do this to avoid insects and minimize predation on calves. It is an ideal time for biologists to conduct a census, or population count. After the aggregation period, caribou disperse to find food for the summer. Then in the fall, they begin migrating to the winter areas.

Once caribou begin to migrate, they can travel up to 50 miles a day. Caribou apparently have a built-in compass, like migratory birds, and can travel through areas that are unfamiliar to them to reach their calving grounds.

Caribou populations are somewhat cyclic but the size to which a herd grows is not very predictable. Today, factors such as varying weather patterns (climate), disease outbreaks and predation by wolves and grizzly bears determine whether most herds increase or decrease.

Human activities may also adversely affect caribou. Biologists managing caribou herds must consider the habitat needs of caribou to ensure caribou remain a healthy part of our landscape.

Many people confuse caribou with reindeer. They are the same species; a reindeer is simply a domesticated form of caribou.



Fun Caribou Facts

Flexible Munchers: In summer, caribou eat leaves of willows, sedges, flowering plants and even mushrooms. In the winter they switch to a diet mostly consisting of lichen, a hearty plant that gives them adequate nutrients when other plants are not available. Caribou use their shovel shaped hooves to dig for lichen under the snow.

Hooves and Antlers: Caribou have large, concave hoofs that spread widely to support them in snow and soft tundra. Caribou are the only member of the deer family in which both sexes grow antlers. Antlers of bulls are large and massive, those of cows are much shorter and are usually slender and irregular. Adult bulls average 350-400 pounds. Adult cows are smaller and average 175-225 pounds.



Have you seen these sign of caribou?
Caribou scat (poop) left, and a caribou track (right)