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Woodland caribou prefer older forests that provide both cover from predators and an abundance of lichen. The conversion of natural forested regions into open fields has led to the expansion of the white-tailed deer into the caribou's habitat. The deer not only compete with the caribou for the same food in spring and summer, but they

also carry deadly diseases into the caribou herds.

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Their status in Ontario is considered to be threatened, meaning that this species is likely to continue to decline and perhaps become endangered if nothing is done to reverse the factors

that are limiting its survival in its natural habitat. Unfortunately, caribou recover slowly from a decline in population because of the species' low birth rate and the high mortality (death rate) of the calves.

Many people and organizations are trying to prevent further destruction of the woodland caribou's natural habitat so that future generations will be able to see this animal in the wild and not just on the back of a quarter!

The caribou has a long and significant history in Ontario

It was vital to the survival of Aboriginal people. The species provided not only food but also warm clothing, soft bedding and strong shelter. Caribou bones were made into a number of different types of utensils, the animal's fat was burned in lamps to give light, and the sinew (tendons) was used as thread.

Did you know... the term for caribou digging in the snow for food is "cratering," which can take up to two hours in deep or ice-covered snow?

In 1937, the caribou was chosen to be on the "tail" of the Canadian quarter and, except for special edition coins, has remained there ever since.

Woodland Caribou

The caribou is a member of the deer family but, unlike many, it is able to live in the harsh, northern regions of the province.

Caribou are **ungulates**, which means they have a cloven or split hoof and they chew their cud just like a cow, swallowing and then regurgitating food and chewing it again.

The scientific name for the deer family is *Cervidae*, and in Canada we are fortunate to have five native species of moose, white-tailed deer, elk, mule deer and caribou.

Three different types of caribou live in Canada: the barren-ground, Peary and woodland caribou. The Peary are the smallest of the three and live on the isolated islands of the Canadian Arctic. The barren-ground caribou are larger than the Peary. This species is the most numerous of the three. Hundreds of thousands of barren-ground caribou live on the

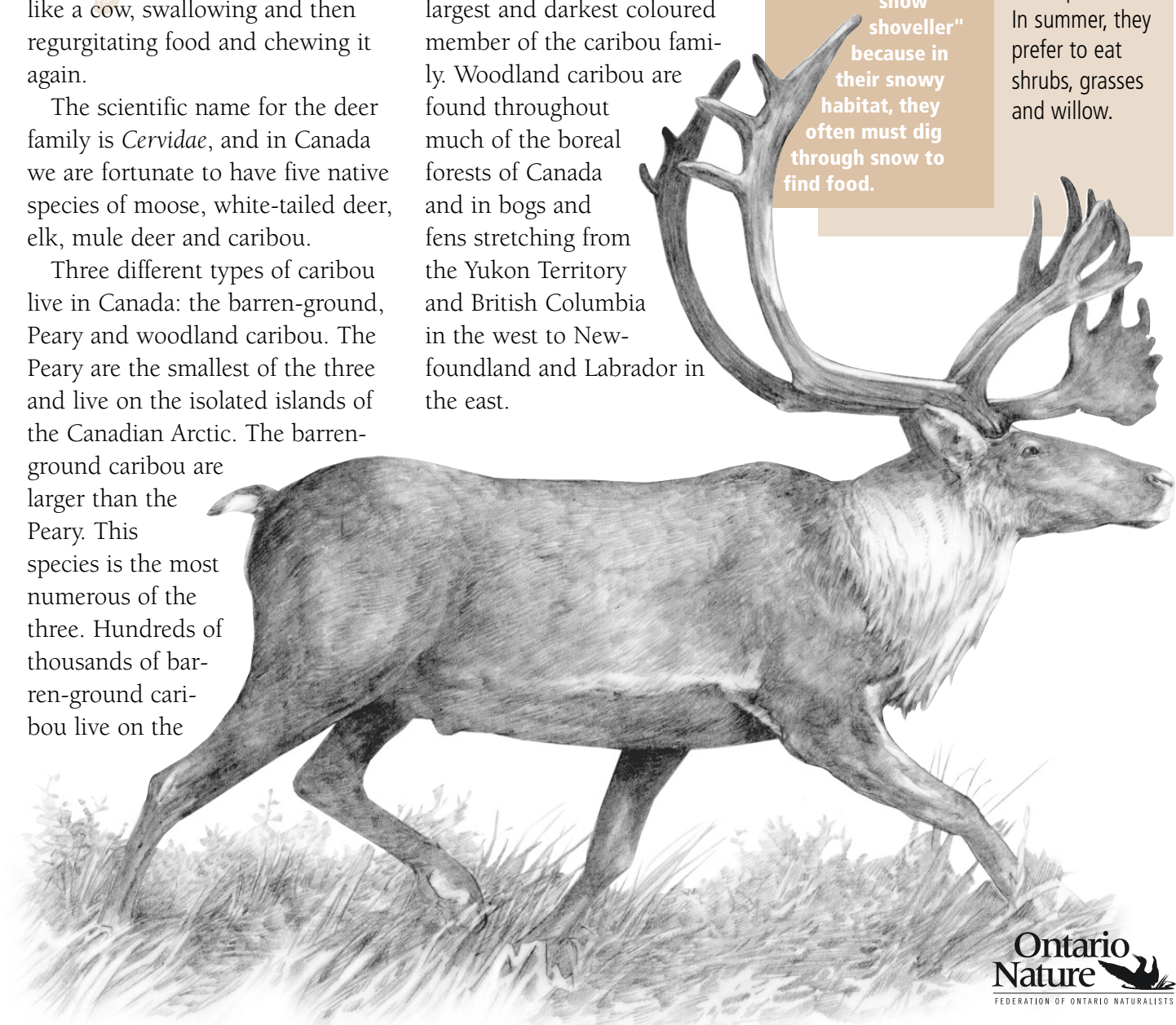
tundra from Alaska in the west to Baffin Island in the east.

The woodland caribou is the largest and darkest coloured member of the caribou family. Woodland caribou are found throughout much of the boreal forests of Canada and in bogs and fens stretching from the Yukon Territory and British Columbia in the west to Newfoundland and Labrador in the east.

Caribou are the only large mammal that can use small plants called lichen as a main food source.

This is an important adaptation, as lichen is available in winter when other vegetation is not. Caribou have a highly developed sense of smell and can find lichen in deep snow. In summer, they prefer to eat shrubs, grasses and willow.

Did you know... The name "caribou" comes from the Mi'kmaq word for "snow shoveller" because in their snowy habitat, they often must dig through snow to find food.



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Although both male and female woodland caribou have antlers, those of the males are much larger, a characteristic that becomes important during the mating season.

Antlers are bony outgrowths from the skull that, unlike horns, are not covered in keratin, the same material that forms your hair and finger- and toenails. While antlers are growing, they are covered with a fuzzy layer called velvet that supplies oxygen and nutrients. Once the antlers have reached their full size, the velvet is shed and the bone dies. The antlers of the males begin to grow in spring and continue until August. By then they are very large and imposing. Adult males usually shed their massive antlers in November or December, but the females keep their smaller antlers longer, even throughout winter. When a male caribou's antlers are full grown in late September and early October, the rut, or mating season, begins. Male caribou have furious battles with each other, using their antlers as weapons. The winner mates with one of the females, which will give birth to a single calf in May or early June.

The survival rate is low for newborn and young caribou. Less than half of the newborns survive past

Did you know ...
The caribou's antlers act like a large hearing aid, channelling quiet sounds toward its ears.

their first year. Life is difficult when food is scarce, temperatures dip to well below freezing and there are predators such as wolves, bears, coyotes, lynx and cougars in the area.



Although woodland caribou are generally quiet, during rutting season or when in danger, they may give a loud bellow. Females and their newborn calves keep in constant communication with one another through a snorting sound that is much like the noise pigs make.

When food is plentiful in spring and summer, the woodland caribou feeds on sedges, grasses, shrubs and flowers. As autumn approaches and the food supply dwindles, the animal switches to energy-rich lichens as its main food source. These small plants, found growing on tree bark and rocks, are high in carbohydrates that help sustain the caribou during winter. The woodland caribou uses its highly developed sense of smell to locate lichens under the thick blanket of snow and then, using its long, powerful legs and hooves, digs through the snow to expose its food.

Did you know...
The caribou is perfectly suited to its habitat. Its long legs help it move easily through deep snowdrifts and its long, dense coat insulates it against the cold on even the coldest winter days.

Hooves

The caribou's hooves are made of keratin. In winter, the hooves grow very long, giving the caribou extra stability in icy conditions and acting like a snowshoe in deep drifts. In spring and summer, when the hard rocky ground is exposed, the caribou's hooves gradually wear down. They act as paddles, making this animal an excellent swimmer.

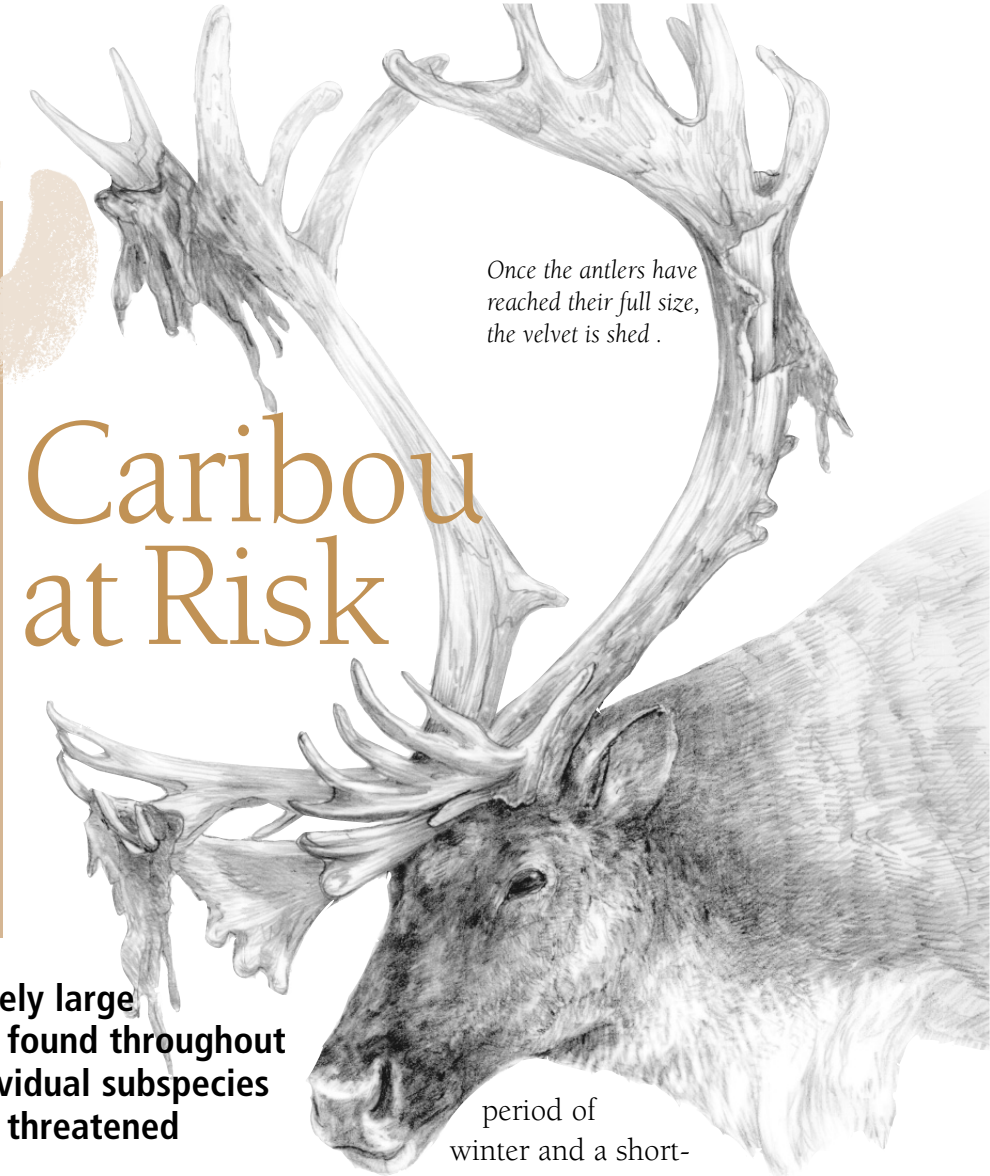
Caribou at Risk

Despite the relatively large number of caribou found throughout Canada, many individual subspecies or populations are threatened with extinction.

The Dawson's, or Queen Charlotte Islands, population of woodland caribou died out in the 1930s and was officially declared extinct in 1984. Although little is known of the reason for the extinction, climate change and overhunting have been blamed.

Climate change is a broad term often used to mean global warming, which can lead to changes in temperature and precipitation, both of which directly affect plant growth and the availability of food. If food is scarce in summer and the caribou are unable to put on a layer of fat to help sustain them over the harsh winter, they may starve. In some areas, winter is becoming colder and snow deeper, too deep for the caribou to dig through to find food. Some regions are also experiencing an extended

Once the antlers have reached their full size, the velvet is shed.



period of winter and a shortened spring, meaning that

the caribou must live a longer time without the protein-rich tender spring saplings. Although lichen contains many calories, it is poor in protein. To have healthy offspring, pregnant females must consume large amounts of protein in the early spring and summer.

The population of woodland caribou is declining due to the loss and fragmentation of their habitat, overhunting in the past, disease and predation. The caribou's natural habitat is lost because of logging, mining operations, oil and gas exploration, the creation of agricultural lands, hydroelectric development, the expansion of cities and towns, and through forest fires. The term "fragmentation" refers to the loss of old-growth areas and the connecting pathways between the caribou's summer and winter habitats that may result from the construction of roads and oil pipelines.

