

Harvest recommendations for barren-ground caribou based on herd risk status:

A rule of thumb approach

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1. Background

The Advisory Committee for the Cooperation on Wildlife Management (ACCWM)'s draft management plan for the Cape Bathurst, Bluenose-West and Bluenose-East caribou herds identifies an approach to hunter harvest management that assumes each herd will cycle between high and low numbers. Four coloured zones are defined for each herd as (a) low (red), (b) decreasing (orange), (c) increasing (yellow), or high (green). Thresholds for transitions between these zones are defined based on the range of estimated herd sizes for the three herds, and harvest recommendations are proposed based on which zone the herd is in.

This approach is intuitive and pragmatic. However, there are two potential issues with this approach: (1) herds do not always cycle predictably, and (2) at best, reliable population estimates for the three herds only extend back to the late 1980s. Consequently, the basis for defining historic high and low levels and the associated thresholds between zones is limited¹. Environment and Natural Resources (ENR) has developed additional rules of thumb to help refine harvest recommendations based on a herd's risk status, particularly its size and trend. The harvest recommendations are meant to be revisited as new information on a given herd's risk status becomes available.

2. Harvest management context in the NWT

In the NWT, management of barren-ground caribou harvest is a shared responsibility between governments, co-management boards and communities. Recommendations and decisions about caribou harvest should in part reflect biological realities; that is, what the herd can tolerate. Management plans may also define varying priorities or goals for a herd; for example, recommended harvest for a herd might be different if the priority is maximizing hunting opportunities than if the priority is herd growth. The purpose of the approach described here is to help define a range of acceptable harvest options for a caribou herd based on its risk status. These options should be revisited in an adaptive manner when new information on the herd's risk status becomes available. Recommendations and decisions on harvest management will ultimately reflect a range of considerations, in particular the requirements of land claims and treaties, and management priorities defined through co-management.

3. Harvest modeling for caribou

Population modeling was conducted to help guide general rules of thumb for harvest depending on a herd's risk status. This included assessing the effect of various levels and sex ratio of harvest on caribou herd size and trend. Some modeling was specific to the Bluenose-East and

¹ The Fortymile herd in Alaska/Yukon numbered an estimated 568,000 in 1920, then declined rapidly and between 1940 and 1990 (50 years) remained between about 6,000 and 50,000 (Valkenburg et al. 1994). Bergerud et al. (2008) re-constructed approximate numbers of the George River (GR) herd in Labrador/Quebec from various sources and concluded that the herd reached high numbers around 1800, 1890, and 1990. Between 1890 and 1950, the GR herd was thought to have had two smaller peaks in numbers in about 1910 and 1925, with successively lower low numbers around 1900, 1920 and then 1940-1950. What constitutes a "high" and "low" herd size is less easily defined under these conditions.

Bathurst herds while other modeling was for a generic herd (Boulanger and Adamczewski 2010, Boulanger 2013, Adamczewski and Boulanger 2013).

4. Significance of harvest to barren-ground caribou herds

How harvest affects a caribou herd depends on a number of factors. Key ones are:

- a) the herd's trend (increasing, stable, declining);
- b) the rate (%) of the harvest in relation to herd size;
- c) the sex ratio of the harvest (proportion of cows in the harvest).

Herd trend: Increasing herds usually have high calf productivity and high adult survival rates; consequently, they are best able to withstand substantial hunter harvest. Modeling suggests that herds with high cow survival, sustained high calf productivity, and rapid rates of increase can tolerate annual harvest rates of up to 5-8% and continue to grow or be stable. These demographic conditions have not been observed in NWT's herds since the early 1980s. Conversely, herds with a declining natural trend usually have low calf productivity and low adult survival; consequently, mortality rates already exceed the rate at which yearling caribou are added to the herd. Under these conditions, harvest rates as low as 1-2% may increase the rate of decline.

For example, modeling of the Bluenose-East herd suggested that if the herd's increasing trend and good calf recruitment continued, a harvest of 3,000 (2.5% of the 2010 herd size estimate of 122,000) was likely compatible with a stable herd. However, a decline in herd size was likely with a harvest of 5,000-6,000 (4-5% of estimated herd size in 2010).

Harvest as % of herd size: A harvest of 5,000 cows from a large and stable herd of 350,000 caribou is expected to have relatively little impact on the herd, since only a small fraction of the herd is harvested (just over 1%). However, a harvest of 5,000 cows from a herd of 30,000 would be 16.7% of the herd. A caribou herd could never produce enough young to sustain this level of harvest.

Harvest management plans or actions taken for a number of herds across Canada (e.g., Porcupine, George River, Cape Bathurst, Bluenose-West, Bluenose-East, and Bathurst) include harvest closure at very low numbers for conservation to allow the herd its greatest opportunity to recover.

Harvest of cows and bulls: Harvest of cows affects herds more strongly than harvest of bulls. Removing a breeding cow takes out the cow, the calf she is carrying, and all future calves she may produce. Although over-harvesting bulls is also not desirable, a healthy bull can breed many cows, while each cow typically only carries one fetus. The effect of harvesting a high proportion of cows is strongest in declining herds and the least in increasing herds with high calf productivity. Emphasis on bull harvest over cow harvest should be greatest in declining herds and/or herds at low numbers, and least in herds increasing and/or at high numbers.

Sustainable and acceptable harvest: Sustainable harvest from wildlife populations can be defined as harvest that does not cause a population to decline. By this definition, no harvest is sustainable from a caribou herd that has a declining natural trend. A limited harvest may be still be considered acceptable for declining caribou herds, with the understanding that substantial harvest (particularly that of cows) from a declining herd increases the risk of more rapid and extensive decline.

5. Rule of thumb approach to harvest based on herd risk status

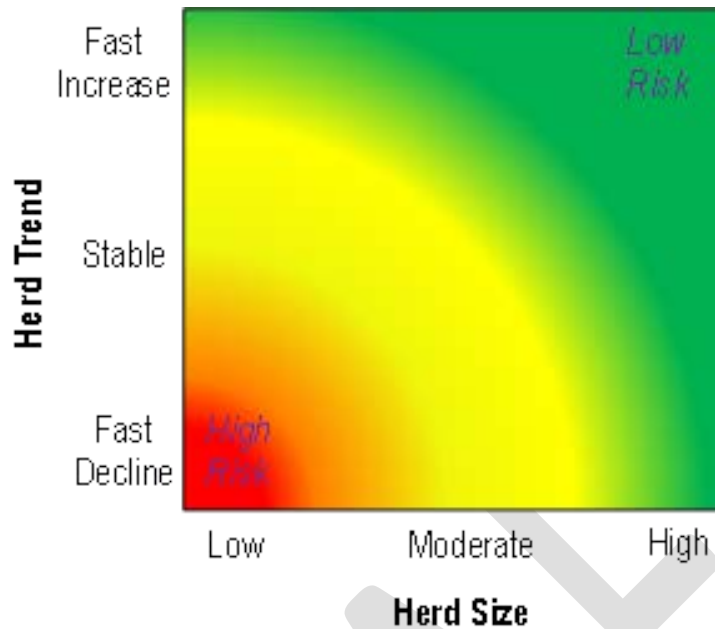


Figure 1. Assessment of risk status based on herd size and trend.

Herd risk status based on size and trend: Figure 1 shows how risk status of a caribou herd could be defined based on its size and trend (red - high risk; yellow - medium risk; green - low risk). A herd at relatively high numbers and increasing rapidly is at low risk of significant decline (green), while a herd already at low numbers and declining rapidly is at high risk of further significant decline (red). Recommendations on harvest would begin with a risk assessment of the herd.

Other measures of herd risk status: As described in the draft ACCWM caribou management plan, monitoring of caribou includes other indicators such as late-winter calf:cow ratios, fall bull:cow ratios, health and condition assessment, harvest, and information about predator numbers, herd accessibility, environmental indicators, and disturbance on the landscape. Information from people on the land is often the first indicator of change on the caribou range. These indicators could serve as additional ways of assessing the herd's risk status after herd size and trend are considered. Sustained low calf:cow ratios, caribou in consistently poor condition, high wolf numbers and increased levels of disturbance might be used to assess a herd as being at greater risk.

Basing harvest level and sex ratio on herd risk status: Figure 2 (below) shows how the rate (% of herd) and sex ratio of harvest could be adjusted to the herd's risk status. Acceptable harvest as a percentage of the herd should be limited in high-risk herds (1% or less of the herd) and increase to 2, 3 and 4% of the herd in lower-risk herds. In herds at very low risk and high numbers, harvest of 5% or greater would be acceptable. Emphasis on harvest of bulls-only or a high percentage of bulls in the harvest would be greatest in high-risk herds, while either-sex harvest would be acceptable in low-risk herds. A higher overall harvest rate could be considered in medium-high risk herds if it is predominantly a bull harvest; for example, this approach was

used in harvest recommended for the Bluenose-West herd in 2007 (harvest rate of 4% and a bull biased harvest (80% bulls)).

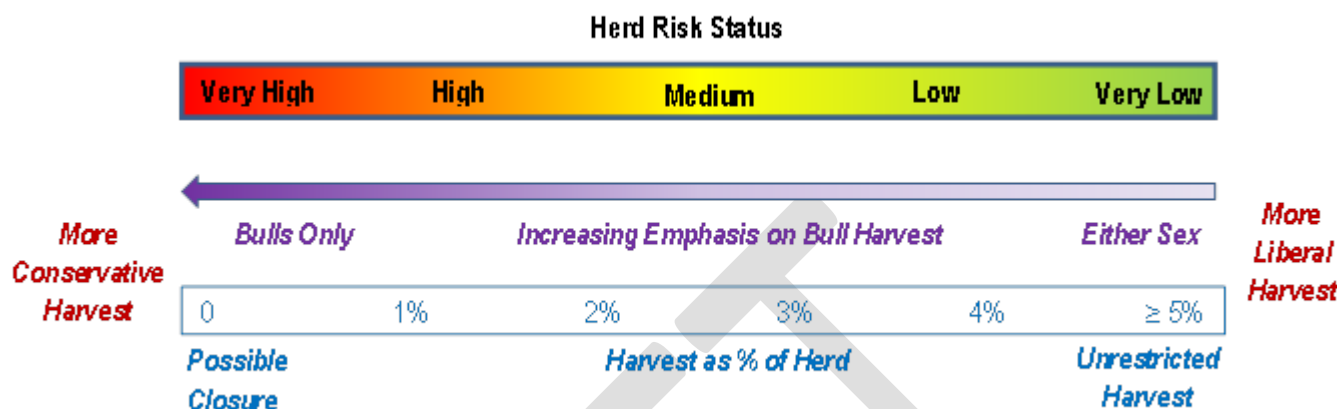


Figure 2. Suggested approach to recommending rate and sex ratio of harvest depending on a herd's risk status.

This approach could be used to define a range of options for harvest rate (% of herd) and harvest sex ratios appropriate to a herd of a particular size and trend, with consideration of other indicators. Additional indicators suggesting high risk might be low calf recruitment, poor condition assessed by hunters, accessibility of the herd's range to hunters, and substantial disturbance on key parts of the herd's range. In addition, consideration should be given to objectives for the herd: an emphasis on herd growth would be consistent with a lower harvest rate and a higher emphasis on bull harvest. An adaptive approach would include regular reviews of up-to-date information on herd status and reported harvest, and adjusting recommended harvest as needed. This approach would rely on on-going reliable reporting of harvest (numbers and sex ratio) by all hunters, whether the herds are large or small, and increasing, stable or declining.

6. Examples of rule of thumb approach applied to harvest recommendations:

In 2009, the Cape Bathurst herd was at very low numbers compared to earlier estimates (less than 2,000), with a stable trend and improving recruitment. All harvest had been closed for this herd in 2007. The herd's range is small and easily accessed by hunters. This herd's status could be assessed as High Risk given its very low numbers or Very High Risk based on its very low numbers and continued high accessibility. Continued harvest closure would help maximize the herd's opportunity to recover. If harvest was considered, it would likely be at a low rate (1% or less of the herd) with a high emphasis on a bull-only or predominantly bull harvest.

In 2010, the Bluenose-East herd was estimated at about 122,000 with an increasing trend and good recruitment. Based on the herd's trend and relatively large size, it would likely be assessed as being at Low-Medium Risk. If the management goal was to give priority to a stable trend and a strong chance of continued herd growth, a conservative approach to harvest would be 2-3% of herd size with strong promotion of bull harvest. A more liberal approach to harvest

would be 4% of the herd with a sex ratio including a substantial percentage of cows. This approach would give priority to maximizing harvest opportunities but would carry a higher risk of population decline.

Table 1 (below) includes a summary of the rule of thumb approach that includes possible approaches to resident and commercial harvest of caribou. The underlying elements of the summary are borrowed from management plans or proposed harvest management for the Porcupine, George River, Bathurst, Beverly, Qamanirjuaq, Bluenose-West, Bluenose-East and Cape Bathurst herds, and harvest modeling carried out by ENR for the Bathurst and Bluenose-East herds.

Table 1. Rule of thumb approach to recommending rate and sex ratio of harvest for barren-ground caribou based on risk status, with possible approaches to aboriginal, resident and commercial harvest.

		Suggested Acceptable Harvest (% of herd)	Recommended Aboriginal Harvest	Recommended Resident Harvest (assuming unrestricted aboriginal harvest)	Recommended Commercial/Outfitter Harvest (assuming unrestricted aboriginal harvest)
Herd Risk Status	Very Low	5 % or higher	Unrestricted, Either Sex	≥ 2 bull tags/hunter	Limited commercial tags
	Low	3-5 %	Unrestricted, Promote Bull Harvest	2 bull tags/hunter	Limited commercial tags
	Medium	2-3 %	Unrestricted, Promote Bull Harvest	1 bull tag/hunter; possible limit on tags	Either no commercial tags or small numbers of tags
	High	<2 %	Promote Conservation, Voluntary Bulls Only	1 bull tag/hunter; possible limit on tags	No commercial tags
	Very High	<1 %	Consider Mandatory Bulls Only	No resident tags	No commercial tags
	Very High	0.01 %	Consider Closure; Harvest for Social/Ceremonial Reasons	No resident tags	No commercial tags

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