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LATE RECORDS OF CARIBOU IN MAINE

BY  
RALPH S. PALMER

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## LATE RECORDS OF CARIBOU IN MAINE

BY RALPH S. PALMER

A big-game questionnaire, sent to all Maine wardens in the summer of 1936 by C. M. Aldous of the Wildlife Conservation Department of the University of Maine, yielded interesting data on the larger mammals of this state. Particularly noteworthy was the fact that no woodland caribou (*Rangifer caribou caribou*) were reported as having occurred here since about the year 1908.

Because of the fact that so many supposed occurrences of caribou in Maine in the last 25 years have been published and given credence, I have entered into considerable correspondence in an endeavor to check various reports. Most of the literature on Maine caribou has been reviewed, but not all of it.

*Former abundance.*—The reports of the Commissioners of Inland Fisheries and Game, some of which were rendered annually and some biennially to the Governor, have yielded some data on former numbers. Caribou are first mentioned in the report for 1886 (p. 23) as follows: "Of caribou it is difficult to make any estimate of increase or decrease. The reports to us are of plenty and in all sections. We have heard of many being killed, but of all our game animals the caribou is the most capable of taking care of itself. . . ."

In the report for 1889-90 is (p. 18) the following: "We think moose and caribou have made no increase. Caribou, being migratory in their habits, cannot be depended on, often being plenty one year and none the next."

The report for 1895 (pp. 17-18) stated the matter thus: "From the same sources of information we learn that the shipment of caribou for 1895 was double that of 1894. These shipments represent a larger per cent of the whole number of these animals taken than the shipment of deer, for but few of them were consumed by our people, or in the forests, and most of them passed through the express offices. The whole number of these animals shipped was one hundred and five for the current year. And it will also be remembered that in 1894 a person might lawfully take two caribou while in 1895 he could take but one. The indications, therefore, seem to be in favor of an increase in caribou, . . . S. L. Crosby, Esq., the leading taxidermist at Bangor, who is familiar with this subject, in a paper read by him before the Maine Sportsman's Fish and Game Association at its last annual session, said, 'the caribou is a roving, migratory creature, here today and perhaps miles away tomorrow, and I well know that in some sections of the state where they were formerly abundant they are now very scarce, but they were not killed off; they merely changed their feeding grounds. This season we have received fifty-one heads for mounting as against twenty-eight last season, and in ten days three of my friends who hunted around Mt. Katahdin counted over seventy-five caribou, and in various other localities old hunters assure



me that they have never before seen them more abundant. Of course, owing to their roving nature, the supply will vary but rest assured that there will be good caribou hunting in Maine for many years to come.' "

A year later (1896) the report was decidedly not so favorable, for we find (p. 11) the following: "From the best information obtainable, from the most reliable sources, the caribou is fast disappearing, and will very soon be practically extinct, unless a closed time, for a series of years, is put on them, or more stringent laws enacted for their protection." On page 12 of the same report the number of caribou killed is given as 239.

The report for 1900 (p. 18) mentioned the closed season, later extended, which prohibited the killing of caribou before October 15, 1905. It continues as follows: "It appears certain that there are practically no caribou in the state. Many different reasons are given for their disappearance which appear plausible enough; that they are not here now is apparent. Where they have gone and why they went will continue to furnish fruitful topics for speculation for years to come. It is freely prophesied by guides, hunters, and others somewhat familiar with the haunts and habits of these valuable animals that they will as suddenly reappear in the near future as they disappeared but a few years ago. That they migrated before the muzzle of a Winchester rifle, or died in consequence of the great increase in deer is the prevailing opinion among those best qualified to give an opinion. The caribou seem inclined to isolate themselves from other large game."

The report for 1904 stated, in part (p. 21), as follows: "There is no indication that the caribou are returning or will ever return. . . ."

The report for 1906 stated (p. 26) briefly: "There are no indications of any caribou in the state."

I have not seen any reliable estimates of actual numbers of caribou in Maine at any time in the past.

*Reasons for the decline in numbers.*—The following 5 reasons for the absence of caribou have been mentioned in the literature or suggested to me in letters from wardens, old hunters, and other observers: (1) the great increase in the deer population produced a food shortage that caused the caribou to leave; (2) the food supply, for some unknown reason, suddenly vanished and the caribou moved eastward to New Brunswick; (3) the caribou migrated, temporarily, to New Brunswick, but will return in due time; (4) the caribou were shot at all seasons and could not stand the drain on their numbers; and (5) increasing occupation of the land in conjunction with lumbering, extensive forest fires, and overshooting, exterminated them. The last reason given is undoubtedly the most nearly correct.

There seems to have been no direct relationship between deer and caribou, but rather an indirect one; as the timber was cut the deer found the second growth more to their liking, while the caribou were less favored by lumbering. That the food supply "suddenly vanished", particularly over such a large

area as the northern half of Maine, is too obviously erroneous to need further comment. Little is known concerning the migrations of caribou in Maine. That a few late herds were reported to have travelled long distances would indicate that these animals were given to extended wandering. No general exodus in the direction of New Brunswick is sufficiently well established to be accepted unreservedly. As I am reliably informed that there have been no caribou in New Brunswick for at least 5 or 6 years, and as there are now none nearer Maine than the Gaspé Peninsula, it is unlikely, if caribou *did* migrate out of the state, that they will ever return over the intervening territory. This idea of a migration has been the subject of a number of written accounts, such as that of Elden (1927). The effects of hunting must have been very detrimental to the welfare of the caribou. The animals were given no protection in Maine prior to 1870, and from then until 1873 the open season included the months of October, November, December, and January. The season was then shortened to the months of October, November, and December, and remained thus until 1899, when hunting was prohibited, as it has been since that time. Until 1883 there was no bag limit; two animals could be taken each season from 1883 to 1894; and only one during each of the last 4 years of open season.

A really successful hunt in Maine in 1890, for ungulates only, would have yielded per person one bull moose, two caribou, and three deer. This was then the "bag limit." At the present time the legal limit on ungulates is one deer (either sex) per person, except on those infrequent occasions when there is also a brief open season on bull moose.

It might be pertinent at this point to mention some of the ideas of the Maine Indians concerning caribou. Judging by the number of legends and tales, told by the Penobscot Indians, in which the caribou is involved, this animal must formerly have been of great importance to them. The Penobscot explanation for the absence of caribou is that the deer "polluted" the woods and thus drove their larger relatives away. The wolf, they also say, followed the caribou and will return when the caribou come back, if ever. It is interesting to note in this connection that wolves apparently did cease to occur in Maine shortly before the passing of the caribou, and that to date no report of a wolf in Maine since the turn of the century has proved to be reliable after thorough investigation.

There is authority for the report that the Penobscot Indians of Old Town, and the Malecite Indians of Tobique, on the Maine-Canadian border, became incensed at the excessive shooting of game in Maine by so-called "sports" and others, and agreed among themselves, sometime during the decade following 1900, that they would get their share of game while it lasted. For a number of years thereafter the Indians shot game whenever and wherever the opportunity presented itself. This apparently occurred too late to have any drastic effect on caribou, since few of these animals were then left



in the state, but this killing is said to have had a considerable effect on the moose population. In one of the reports of the Commissioners of Inland Fisheries and Game, however, caribou shooting by the Malecites of Tobique is said to have been an important factor in the decline of the caribou.

*Late records.*—The following data, arranged chronologically, are gleaned from correspondence and published reports.

Lore Rogers, in an account of the first winter ascent of Mt. Katahdin (Forest and Stream, vol. 38, 1892, p. 395), recorded that 18 caribou were counted on the Katahdin tableland on February 8, 1892.

C. F. Jackson (1922, p. 14) mentioned an unconfirmed report of caribou in New Hampshire. He also referred to mention in "Recreation" (1896, p. 140) that a caribou was taken in 1893 at Houlton, Maine, and that tracks were seen there as late as 1896.

Warden Raymond L. Morse, of Ellsworth, sent me the details regarding the taking of a caribou on November 5, 1894, at Reed's Brook, the outlet of Green Lake. This is a short distance above Ellsworth in southern Hancock County. After the animal was killed it was sold and placed on display at the market owned by Arthur Shute of Ellsworth. This is the southernmost occurrence of caribou in Maine after 1890 on which I have accurate information.

Mr. Lebana Porter, fire guard on Burnt Mountain, told Arthur Stupka that he saw his last caribou on Mount Chase, near Patten, about 1897.

E. S. C. Smith (1926, p. 495) mentioned the following interesting fact: "So far as is known, the last caribou shot on Katahdin was a young bull bagged on the saddle by the late Dr. Charles Dennison Smith, of Portland, Maine, the head of which is preserved in the museum of the Portland Society of Natural History. This animal was killed in October, 1898, . . ."

While this animal was probably the last one to be taken on Katahdin, the last caribou taken legally anywhere in the state, as far as I have been able to ascertain, was one secured at Square Lake, Aroostook County, on December 10, 1898, by Miss Cornelia T. Crosby of Phillips, Maine. It was shot from a herd of 9 animals. The head, which is of approximately the same size as the Katahdin head last mentioned, is now in Miss Crosby's possession.

Another caribou was killed in Aroostook County sometime during the year 1898 by Frank Currier of Oxbow, Maine, according to information received from warden D. H. Franck of Oxbow.

Mr. Arthur Stupka informed me by letter that 6 caribou were seen near Harrow Lake, below Churchill, Maine, in the Burnt Dam Bogs region in the fall of 1901 by a party of 4 men, one of whom was Francis Stanislaus of Lincoln, Maine. According to Mr. Stanislaus, at least 3 of the animals were females and one was a male.

Warden Fred Roberts of Greenville has sent me several records for the Moosehead Lake region, but none of them is later than 1901.

Warden Levi Dow of Fort Kent, on the Saint John River, Maine-Canadian border in Aroostook County, stated that there seems to be no foundation in any report of the presence of caribou in his section since 1903. In the spring of that year a female caribou was found in a weakened condition and was taken to a lumbering camp, where she was kept for several weeks before she died. Three years earlier, in 1900, another caribou was taken on Knowles Brook, a tributary of the Saint John River.

According to Arthur Stupka, Alex Rossignol of Togue Pond Camps saw a herd of 84 caribou on the Katahdin tableland a few years before the Spanish-American war; the same observer saw two caribou on Katahdin on October 2, 1904.

John Cushman of Lincoln, Maine, is said to have seen 68 of these animals at the same place in October of the same year.

Dr. G. M. Allen (1904, p. 8) gave the range of caribou in Maine as south to Grafton, while the second edition of Stone and Cram's "American Animals" (1904, p. 48) included Maine in the range of this animal.

In the October, 1905, issue of *The Maine Sportsman* there is mention of a herd of caribou seen on Mt. Katahdin in September, 1905.

B. H. Dutcher, writing on the mammals of Mt. Katahdin in 1903, stated (p. 65) that the caribou was then an animal of the past in the Katahdin region. In this report, based on field work done at the mountain between July 10 and September 5, 1902, Dutcher mentioned two migrations of caribou from northern Maine, the second of which is said by him to have occurred about 6 years earlier. He saw none during his visit to the region and concluded that their absence was at least partly due to wanton destruction.

In spite of Dutcher's unfavorable report, however, the caribou did appear again on Mt. Katahdin, for 7 were seen there on February 8, 1905. Two of these animals were photographed by Professor Roland B. Dixon of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Mr. Sinclair Kennedy of Patterson, New York. These pictures were published with an article by E. S. C. Smith in *Appalachia*, 1926. Smith also referred to items by Ellicott, Orr, and Wolfe, that are included in the present list of literature cited.

John Cushman, of Lincoln, Maine, told Arthur Stupka that he saw 20 or 25 caribou on Katahdin in 1906.

The year 1908 appears to be the last during which caribou were reported for Katahdin. Lorenz (1917, p. 44) stated briefly that they were seen there during that year, while Ellicott mentioned them in a note in *Forest and Stream* (1908, p. 58). The latter author made a trip to the Maine woods in October, 1908, and recorded that 14 caribou were said to have been seen near the top of the mountain, and that guides and sportsmen were glad to have them back after years of absence.

Of the many reports on the occurrence of caribou in Maine since 1908, at least the majority of them are of a very questionable nature. Except for



a report (which is to be viewed with scepticism) of a single animal said to have been seen on the eastern shore of Eagle Lake in early November, 1913, I feel that records in my possession of caribou in Maine after 1910 are not worth serious consideration. Furthermore, I have not succeeded in locating corroborative evidence to support the statement by Austin (1915), or the anonymous report (1914), both of which are quoted by Seton (1929, vol. 3, part 1, p. 59), or any evidence to support the statements made by George G. Goodwin (1936, p. 48). Goodwin's paper seems to be based almost entirely on earlier published reports, such as that of McNulty (1928).

Again it might be well to mention that none of the wardens nor any of my correspondents (with one exception) has considered as reliable any of the reports dating later than about 1908.

*The future outlook.*—With continued settling of the state and the resultant increasing accessibility of what were formerly rarely-visited areas, there is apparently no hope that caribou would long survive in Maine if they were introduced from elsewhere. The animals, if present, would be constantly forced to be on the move. Apparently they are much less adaptable to changing conditions than are deer, which have greatly increased in numbers.

At one time there was some consideration given to the possibility of stocking the Katahdin region with caribou or reindeer from elsewhere (see Orr, 1923). Avery (1937, p. 241) is the most recent one to mention in print that caribou might be brought back and maintained on the mountain. The idea of restocking Maine with caribou has never been tried and was apparently given up at the time Orr wrote his article, either because there was too much opposition or because the same plan had been tried in Michigan and elsewhere. These ventures had resulted in failure.

The writer is indebted to Mr. C. M. Aldous of the Wildlife Conservation Department of the University of Maine for permission to use the data contained in the big-game questionnaire, and for critically reading the manuscript; to Mr. Arthur H. Norton of the Portland Society of Natural History for bibliographical assistance and for a number of suggestions; to Mr. Arthur Stupka of the National Park Service, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, for several reports and suggestions; to Mr. Archer L. Grover of the Department of Inland Fisheries and Game for information from the reports of the Commissioners; and to many correspondents who have supplied useful data.

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