

# **Porcupine Caribou Harvest Management Plan Annual Harvest Meeting 2026**

## **Porcupine Caribou Management Board Report and Recommendations to the Parties February 2026**

### **A. PREAMBLE**

In accordance with the Harvest Management Plan (HMP), the Porcupine Caribou Management Board (Board) held the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Harvest Meeting in person in Inuvik, Northwest Territories on February 11 and 12, 2026. The Board convened the meeting to gather input and to deliberate on the harvest management recommendations for the Porcupine Caribou herd (PCH).

This report presents the Board's recommendations and rationale to the Parties regarding the harvest management zone and associated management actions that should apply to the herd over the coming year. Also included are other related concerns raised during the meeting and the recommendations from the Board regarding those concerns.

### **B. RECOMMENDED HARVEST MANAGEMENT ZONE AND HARVEST MANAGEMENT ACTIONS**

The Board recommends that the PCH be considered in the Green Zone (above 115,000 caribou).

Consistent with the Green Zone harvest management actions outlined in the HMP (page 20), the Board recommends that the following actions remain in effect:

- Harvest only the amount needed;
- Licensed hunters receive a maximum of two bull tags;
- Shooting will be accurate and wounded animals will be retrieved; and
- Parties will collect rigorous and verifiable harvest data, to be provided for the Annual Harvest Meeting.

### **C. RATIONALE FOR BOARD RECOMMENDATIONS**

The HMP identifies a suite of indicators that the Board should consider in determining the status of the herd (HMP, page 19). The following provides an overview of the information used in the Board's deliberations regarding the harvest management assessment, the determination of the Colour Zone, and the associated harvest management recommendations.

## 1. Harvest Management Assessment — Review of Indicators

### 1.1 Population Size and Trend

**1.1.1 Population size by photocensus (survey):** The primary consideration is the population estimate. A photocensus (survey) was last successfully conducted in 2025 and estimated a midpoint of 143,135 caribou (95% CI = 122,974 to 173,087) caribou. All collars were located and photographed with high quality images. The minimum count was 122,974 caribou.

**1.1.2 Estimated population based on computer program:** The data from indicators are used to inform a computer program that estimates likely population sizes based on those data. Information on the number of calves surviving to one year (calf recruitment) is not fully known for the herd so we use available PCH calf survival data together with our knowledge of how caribou calves die over the year based on detailed calf survival data from other herds (e.g., Fortymile Caribou) and community observations to determine an annual estimate. During model preparation, harvest data were not available from all user groups, including Alaskan harvesters. Instead, the model used harvest estimates based on the best available information from harvesters in communities combined with past documented harvest levels. Despite there being several years since the last photocensus in 2017 and a lack of calf recruitment data for the herd, the model's baseline scenario closely predicted the decline and was confirmed by the 2025 photocensus estimate. Additionally, using the 2025 photocensus estimate, the model was optimized to further enhance its prediction accuracy. It is helpful in assessing the annual trends in the population, particularly when no photocensus data are available. Using indicator values representing the average from the last five years, the model was used to forecast to 2028 with optimistic, neutral, and pessimistic scenarios if most vital rates (e.g., calf survival) do not change significantly. All model scenarios forecast the herd continuing to decline over the next few years if current vital rates remain unchanged.

**1.1.3 Population trend:** From 2017 to 2025, the population decreased from about 218,000 to 143,000 animals. The average annual decline during this time period was 5%. Survival rates among yearling and adult male caribou have declined over the past two years, with low cow survival noted in 2024-25. The population model scenarios found that the herd has declined from the 2017 population estimate, and this was subsequently confirmed by the photocensus results.

### 1.2 Harvest

**1.2.1 Total harvest:** Harvest data for 2024-25 was received from all Parties; however, there were several challenges noted, including a lack of harvest data available for the communities of Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk. Inuvik began providing harvest data in 2025, which should be included in next year's report. Based on the reported and estimated information provided by the Parties, the total minimum Canadian harvest for 2024-25 was estimated to be 1,474 caribou. Alaskan harvest is estimated to be 363 caribou by their licensed hunters and an additional 400–700 caribou for their communities,

although this is a crude estimate based on the number of harvesters. As in previous years, harvest data remain incomplete for several user group communities (e.g., GTC, IGC). Reported values therefore represent minimum estimates and likely under-represent the total harvest.

The total estimated harvest has fluctuated since 2010 when the HMP was implemented. Annual variation in harvest can be accounted for by changes in caribou availability along with some differences and variability in harvest reporting success each year. Improvements are being made in community harvest reporting programs through the use of digital data collection tools and additional support for under-resourced Hunters and Trappers Committees. Available data, anecdotal information, and caribou availability suggest the Canadian harvest was likely low, and together with Alaskan harvest, remains well within sustainable limits. Based on the information provided, current Canadian and range-wide harvest is not considered a major concern as it is estimated at 1.8% of the total population size. If missing harvest data are included, this rate would increase but not significantly.

**1.2.2 The percentage of cows in the harvest:** Cows made up 29% of the Canadian harvest, based on information available during the Annual Harvest Meeting.

**1.2.3 Hunters' needs met:** Caribou became accessible near Old Crow and in the Rock River area west of the Dempster Highway following the rut through to May 2025. Caribou were also available on the Yukon North Slope in late summer. Due to the limited distribution of caribou in the Canadian portion of the range, some Parties did not have access to the herd. For communities that reported on this metric, Old Crow indicated that most of their community's needs were met, whereas around two-thirds of Gwich'in in the NWT reported their needs were not met.

### **1.3 Population dynamics**

**1.3.1 Survival:** Estimated survival rates declined in 2024-25 for adult females (80%), they remained consistently low for adult males (65%), and were average relative to previous years for yearling females (80%).

When adult female survival is greater than 84–85%, the herd could be stable or increasing if other indicators are good. When the adult female survival rate drops below this value, it is typically indicative of a declining herd as adult female survival is a key driver of population dynamics.

Data in 2025-26, though incomplete, indicate that survival estimates to February 2026 are mid to upper ranges, though calf survival still appears low.

**1.3.2 Birth rate and calf survival:** The parturition rate was 93% for adult cows greater than or equal to four years of age. This is higher than the five-year average of 85%. Three-year-old cow parturition was 70%, which is higher than the five-year average of 54%. Rates lower than 55% may be indicative of a declining herd.

Late-June calf survival in 2025 was low, at 79%, compared to the long-term average of 86%. This indicates that even with high birth rates, young calves are dying at high rates.

**1.3.3 Peak of calving:** Calving data in recent years have been relatively high quality; however, peak of calving was undetermined this year because calving was delayed, and at the time of the survey (June 3, 2025), less than half of the cows had calved. Further surveys were not completed after this date. By June 3, cows had mostly moved onto the coastal plain and were widely distributed from the Babbage River in the Yukon west to the Jago River in Alaska.

**1.3.4 Bull ratio:** No rut count was attempted in fall 2024 due to herd distribution, cost, and feasibility factors.

### **1.4 Body Condition**

**1.4.1 Average backfat:** In 2024-25, 15 caribou samples were assessed for backfat depth. Cows averaged 0.6 cm and bulls averaged 0.1 cm, which is less than the long-term average for both cows (1.0 cm) and bulls (1.5 cm). Most samples were collected post-rut, when animals were most lean. Low sample sizes make interpretation of this metric challenging.

**1.4.2 Hunter assessment:** A total of 15 caribou were reported in the caribou sampling initiative this year. On a four-point scale, cows averaged 2.6 and bulls averaged 2.9, indicating fair or good condition. During the Annual Harvest Meeting, Parties reported that hunter surveys indicated the majority of caribou harvested were in fair to good condition.

**1.4.3 Health:** There was no dedicated effort to collect information on the health of Porcupine Caribou this year. Disease and contaminants screening continues, and no major changes have been noted.

### **1.5 Habitat**

**1.5.1 Snow conditions:** In 2024-25, all stations other than the Vuntut National Park Mountains stations recorded depths below the five-year average, and the Ogilvie and Old Crow stations were slightly above the long-term average. The PCH were split between Alaska and Yukon winter ranges in 2024-25. Caribou were scattered across Alaska, from the Dalton Highway to the Alaska border, with concentrations north and south of Arctic Village. Caribou in the Yukon were mostly distributed south and east of Old Crow to the Whitefish Wetlands, although small groups were found in Fishing Branch, the Old Crow Flats, and in the mountains flanking the Firth River in Ivvavik National Park.

**1.5.2 Major fires:** In 2024, within the range of the PCH, there were five fires in Alaska and 10 in the Yukon, as well as three or four fires along the edge of the range in the NWT. These fires burned a total of ~120 km<sup>2</sup>, which is well below the five-year average of 845 km<sup>2</sup>. None of the fires were considered large (>10,000 ha).

**1.5.3 Weather and Climate:** There was no concerted monitoring of weather and climate in 2024-25. Hot dry summers and erosion in recent years have made travel challenging for harvesters in some areas due to low water levels.

**1.5.4 Human activity:** There were no additional detectable increases in human footprint within the range in 2024-25. Potential projects within the range include oil and gas developments in the 1002 Lands in Alaska and in the Eagle Plains area. The current United States federal administration which took power in January 2025 is reopening the Coastal Plains Oil and Gas Leasing Program in the 1002 area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

## **2. MANAGEMENT ACTIONS**

The Board recommends management actions consistent with the Green Zone, as outlined in the HMP (page 20) as follows:

- Harvest only the amount needed;
- Licensed hunters receive a maximum of two bull tags;
- Shooting will be accurate and wounded animals will be retrieved; and
- Parties will collect rigorous and verifiable harvest data, to be provided for the Annual Harvest Meeting.

**2.1 Harvest only the amount needed:** In the Green Zone, Indigenous harvest is not restricted. Cows and bulls may be harvested (HMP, page 13). Consistent with the HMP, the Board recommends no restrictions be placed on caribou harvesting by Indigenous hunters.

**2.2 Licensed hunters receive a maximum of two bull tags.**

**2.3 Shooting will be accurate and wounded animals will be retrieved:** The Board recommends the continuation of hunter education and awareness programs conducted by the Parties as outlined in Essential Requirements of the Plan on pages 27 and 32 of the HMP. To this end, the Board intends to continue to coordinate with the Parties on communication and hunter education initiatives such as sight-in-your-rifle events.

**2.4 Parties will collect rigorous and verifiable harvest data, to be provided for the Annual Harvest Meeting:** Overall improvements are being made in community harvest reporting programs, although data submissions to the Board continue to be late. The Board reminds the Parties of the Milestones Calendar outlining dates and deliverables for harvest data submissions which were agreed to in the HMP Implementation Plan (Appendix 8). Harvest data is due from Yukon Government (YG) and the Government of the Northwest Territories by June 1, and from First Nation and Inuvialuit Parties by July 15 each year. Harvester participation in these programs varies by community, and in some communities, it is known to be low. The Board continues to express concern regarding its ability to effectively recommend management actions in the absence of complete harvest data.

## **D. ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1. Advance implementation of the HMP**

Although the herd remains within the Green Zone, the Board notes that information presented at the Annual Harvest Meeting indicates that the herd is declining. If the decline continues, the herd may pass Yellow and Orange zone thresholds in the near future. The Board therefore emphasizes the importance of ensuring that the HMP framework can be fully implemented to guide management decisions. The Board also recognizes the important stewardship role that harvesters and communities play as the herd declines.

The Board recommends that the Parties work collaboratively to advance implementation of the HMP and address outstanding elements of the Implementation Plan.

Priority actions include:

- completing outstanding tasks from the HMP Implementation Plan related to harvest reporting and harvest sharing (Tasks 1.1 and 2.2);
- ensuring that Parties to the Native User Agreement appoint Commission members and convene to address outstanding implementation needs;
- continuing efforts to improve harvest reporting and reduce gaps in harvest data collection; and
- exploring options that support coordinated harvest management across jurisdictions, including a range-wide Porcupine Caribou herd tag.

### **2. Continue monitoring and sharing information on herd status**

The Board recognizes the importance of periodic herd counts and appreciates the successful completion of the 2025 photocensus. The Board encourages YG and its partners in Alaska to conduct additional counts when conditions allow.

In addition to photocensus results, the Board relies on a full suite of indicators reported annually at the Annual Harvest Meeting to assess the status and trajectory of the herd. These include demographic monitoring, harvest information, and on-the-land observations from harvesters and community members. The Board also recognizes the value of continued development and application of scientific tools, such as population models and other indicators, to help interpret available data and support informed management decisions.

The Board encourages the Parties to continue to provide monitoring information and on-the-land observations to assist the Board in developing its recommendations.

### **3. Strengthen community communication and engagement**

The Board encourages the Parties to collaborate with the PCMB to communicate herd status and HMP commitments at the community level. With the herd in decline, the Board will increase its efforts to work with community leadership to communicate the status of the herd and recognize the important stewardship role that harvesters and communities play. Support from Parties will make these communication efforts more effective,