



PEARY CARIBOU

Rangifer tarandus pearyi



Appearance

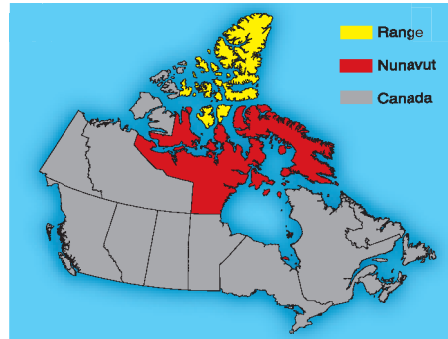
Peary caribou, named after the man whom some believe was the first to reach the North Pole, are the smallest North American caribou. During the winter, they have a thick coat of white fur. Their summer coat is short and dark. Their thick coats are made of hollow hairs that help trap warm air and insulate their bodies. Both male and female caribou have antlers. Peary caribou have short, broad, well furred ears, large crescent shaped hooves and large furry muzzles. Females weigh an average of 60 kg and males weigh an average of 110kg although the weight of Peary caribou varies greatly depending on geographic location, season and availability of food.

Food And Feeding

Purple saxifrage is one of the Peary caribou's favorite plants and in June their muzzles may become stained purple. Because of the limited biomass of plants in their range, Peary caribou will eat almost any food available like grasses, sedges, lichens, willow, saxifrage and mushrooms. Their sharp shovel-like hooves allow them to dig through the snow to find food.

Behaviour

Peary caribou migrate between summer and winter ranges, sometimes moving between islands - up to 150 km each way. Peary caribou use their speed to escape from predators like wolves. The Peary caribou, like other caribou, are great swimmers. They are generally found travelling in small groups, grazing along the way. In winter usually only 1 - 4 Peary caribou are seen together, probably an adaptation to the small patches of forage that are available. In summer, groups commonly range from 1 - 12 caribou.



Range

The Peary caribou can be found on the high arctic islands, including Banks, Prince of Whales, Somerset and the Queen Elizabeth islands.

Habitat

During the summer, Peary caribou are found on the upper slopes of river valleys and uplands where the vegetation is richest. During the winter, they inhabit areas where the snow is not too deep such as rugged uplands, beach ridges and rocky outcrops.

Reproduction

Male Peary caribou can reach sexual maturity in their second year and females in the third. Females will mate sometime in the fall and after a gestation period of 7.5 to 8 months one calf is born. In some severely cold years, most calves in a population may not survive. However, the long term survival of populations depends more on the survival of the females and their ability to breed in following years.

Status Survival and Management

According to the Nunavut Wild Species 2000 report, the status of Peary caribou is sensitive. Peary caribou may live 15 years in the wild, but rarely do. Various studies and recovery projects are underway to ensure the continued survival of the Peary caribou. The Inuit of Resolute Bay have restricted their harvesting of this population since 1975.

Other Species in Nunavut

The existence of the 'arctic islands' caribou is an ongoing debate not only among scientists but among traditional knowledge supporters as well. Some believe that this species is different from both barrenground and Peary caribou while others do not believe the differences are great enough to distinguish them as a subspecies.

Did You Know?

The name caribou comes from the Micmac's name xalibu which means 'the pawer' and refers to the caribou's habit of pawing the ground to uncover lichens.

