Click to view entire image

# First Look At Jasper's Caribou Conservation Breeding Centre

By Jennifer Bain

December 26, 2024

In November, Parks Canada's Scott Taylor checks on construction of the Caribou Conservation Breeding Centre in Jasper National Park/Jennifer Bain

Behind an electrified fence along a seasonal road in Jasper National Park, a trailblazing Caribou Conservation Breeding Centre is nearing completion despite setbacks from a massive summer wildfire.

The plan is to capture mostly female woodland caribou — 25 to 35 over multiple years — and start producing enough annual calves to bring Jasper's dwindling herds to sustainable levels within a decade.

On this November day, though, the construction team is hanging gates, adding gawk screens to the perimeter fence and waiting for deliveries of slat fences and game mesh. I'm about to get a preview of the site once Darrell Lumley, supervisor for the general contractor Landmark Solutions, provides a safety briefing.

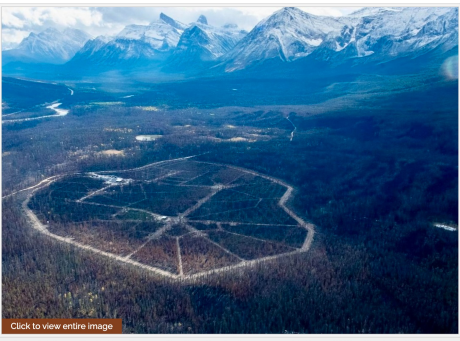
Click to view entire image

From left: Parks Canada's Scott Taylor and Karly Savoy, photographer Luuk Wijk and Landmark Solutions supervisor Darrell Lumley/Jennifer Bain

Scott Taylor — the new site manager — stands ready to show off the project. With 30 years of experience managing wild and wildlife for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, he was about five years from retirement when this unexpected Parks Canada gig brought him to Alberta.

It wasn't the caribou that enticed him — he's worked with them before along with moose, deer, wolves, coyotes, black bears and polar bears — it was the lure of "a brand new, never been done before in Canada" project.

"That was just very, very exciting to me," Taylor admits. "I like all Canadian and North American species of wildlife and I've had pretty interesting experiences in my career. I thought I was going to retire in the MNRF but now I'm here."



An aerial view of the Caribou Conservation Breeding Centre compound in Jasper National Park/Parks Canada

We've driven about half an hour south of the Jasper townsite, first down the busy Icefields Parkway and then along the unpaved Geraldine Road that goes to a backcountry trailhead. Caribou Recovery Program communications officer Karly Savoy and photographer Luuk Wijk have joined us.

"So basically, the whole site has this perimeter fence and then you've got a series of pens that can be used for different combinations of animals," explains Savoy. "Some are for bulls only, some are just for cows, some are for cows and bulls. Some for cows with their babies, and some will be the yearlings by themselves when they're weaned off and ready to go."

It makes sense when you see the hub-and-pen site plan.

"This will be a first in North America," Savoy promises. "All aspects have been done elsewhere — like capturing, maternity pens, domesticated reindeer — but they have not been put all together in this way at this scale in North America."

Click to view entire image

It's rare to see Jasper National Park's two dwindling caribou herds/Lalenia Neufeld, Parks Canada

I've summered alongside Fogo Island's wee caribou herd in Newfoundland and Labrador, met free-ranging reindeer in a Scottish national park, and taken a guided forest walk at a reindeer ranch in Alaska not far from where Taylor recently spent time at the Large Animal Research Station.

Caribou and reindeer are actually the same species and share the same scientific name, *Rangifer tarandus*. As the National Parks Service explains, this deer family member is typically called caribou in North America and reindeer in Eurasia. Caribou are always wild animals, the NPS continues, while reindeer can be wild, semi-domesticated or domesticated. I'm not sure where caribou born in captivity will fit in.

Parks Canada is building this $27-million breeding center because it believes Jasper's threatened caribou herds are too small to recover on their own.

Click to view entire image

A summer wildfire set back construction of Jasper's Caribou Conservation Breeding Centre/Jennifer Bain

These southern mountain caribou are part of a subgroup of woodland caribou herds. Four populations have traditionally called this park home, moving between high-alpine areas in summer and subalpine forests in winter to avoid predators. But the Maligne herd hasn't been seen since 2018 and the 150-strong À La Pêche herd is mainly managed and monitored by the provincial government.

That leaves Parks Canada to monitor the Brazeau herd (which has fallen below 10 animals) and the Tonquin herd (with about 50 animals). Staff do annual counts by helicopter when there's snow and it's easy to see tracks and collect scat. They also use remote cameras to gather data.

With an estimated nine to 11 breeding Tonquin females and less than three breeding Brazeau females, there simply aren't enough calves each year to grow these herds. Besides, small herds are especially vulnerable to predators, disease and accidents like avalanches.

2024-07-14 08:59:51
M 4/5
11°C
RECONYX
Click to view entire image

A caribou from the Brazeau herd is captured on a remote camera in the summer of 2024/Parks Canada

Years of work protecting caribou habitat, limiting the effects of human recreation, and reducing human influences on the wolf and elk populations that impact caribou have helped, but now it's time to try conservation breeding.

The breeding center is outside of an area that has been closed to the public between Nov. 1 and May 15 each year. The closures help caribou stay protected from predators at high elevations where snow is too deep for wolves to walk without sinking. Backcountry ski, snowboard and snowshoe trails can inadvertently help wolves access these caribou.

I read 2023's *Caribou Comeback: Recovering an iconic species at risk in Jasper National Park* to learn more about the master plan.

Park staff will capture what's left of the Brazeau herd, and some of the Tonquin animals, and move them to the center. Caribou born here will be released into the wild Tonquin population when they're about 10 months old for males and 15 months old for females until the herd reaches about 200 animals. If this works, Parks Canada will consider releasing animals back into the Brazeau and Maligne ranges.

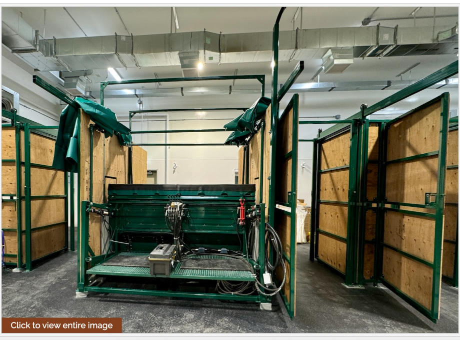
Click to view entire image

Scott Taylor shows off the lab in the administration building of the Caribou Conservation Breeding Centre/Jennifer Bain

My tour starts in the steel-clad administration building, where an office, lab and necropsy room share space with a kitchen and four bedrooms that can be used during calving or by First Nations partners, grad students and researchers.

The barn, with its hydraulic squeeze and scale, is where the breeding stock will be treated to lichen rewards as they get used to being handled. A small patch of rubberized floor will be easy on the hooves of any young orphans. Holding pens made from pressure-treated lumber will help protect antlers, especially when they're in velvet.

Outside, there's a heated workshop and storage for tractors and UTVs.



A look at the equipment in the caribou handling barn/Jennifer Bain

There are a staggering 272 gates on site plus a powerful five-strand electrified fence that will keep predators and diseases out. Gawk screens will prevent people and predators from peeking through the fence. Boulders piled along Geraldine Road will discourage people from parking along the fence line and getting too close.

"We're going to have to figure out how to bring the story out to the people, knowing people can't come here," admits Savoy.

Jasper, Canada's largest Rocky Mountain park, draws about 2.4 million visitors a year. It just survived the Jasper Wildfire Complex that began July 22, burned through 79,000 acres, forced about 5,000 residents and 20,000 tourists to flee, and levelled a third of the town.

Click to view entire image

The Jasper Wildfire Complex destroyed more than 1,000 fence posts at the Caribou Conservation Breeding Centre/Parks Canada

The caribou escaped harm, but Parks Canada is monitoring how habitat changes caused by the wildfire might affect them and the predator-prey dynamics they have with wolves and deer. The fire did destroy a quarter of the park's deer-monitoring cameras, including all the images taken over winter 2023–24.

The breeding center buildings were spared as the parking lot acted as a fuel break. Slat fencing and more than 1,000 posts were destroyed, but a 100-foot fire break barrier outside the perimeter fence helped reduce damage. So did clearing pine trees that had been impacted by mountain pine beetles.

Sadly, almost all forested areas intended as habitat for future caribou were burned. Topsoil and hydroseed will be placed on disturbed areas. Vegetation restoration and planting will continue in the spring and involve native species like Labrador tea, kinnikinnick, willows, trembling aspen, white spruce, Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine. "It's not for browsing," says Taylor. "We lost a lot of horizontal cover, so it's for the caribou to feel comfortable and be able to hide."

TARTER
TARTER
Click to view entire image

Caribou feeding stations will be on skis so they can be moved around the pens/Jennifer Bain

Talk turns to the lichen that caribou love so much.

The Kelly Lake Cree Nation has already delivered 26 bags full and the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation and Mountain Cree have pledged more. While the caribou will be fed pellets, they'll get lichen as a reward for being in the handling system and as they prepare for release.

As my tour wraps up, I get to see how aircraft cable will help protect perimeter fences from falling trees. I hear how there will be portable shade structures in the pens and get to see frost-free water stations and moveable feeding shelters that will keep the ground around them from getting too damaged and muddy.

Click to view entire image

The Kelly Lake Cree Nation has been collecting lichen for Jasper's caribou program/Luuk Wijk, Parks Canada

I remember reading that the breeding center has been designed to be decommissioned at the end of the conservation breeding program's lifecycle.

"It's kind of an open question right now, but it's not intended to be an ongoing forever project," says Savoy. "We're not sure how long things will take or how they'll go."

For now, Taylor is raring to go and so is veterinary technician Louise Dykslag. A maintenance person has been hired and several animal care positions will be filled. All that's needed now is for construction to wrap up so the caribou can move in.

Click to view entire image

At the Caribou Conservation Breeding Centre, trees, plants and shrubs are ready to be planted in the spring/Jennifer Bain

Stories about: Jasper National Park

Story Categories: Canada, News in the Parks, Travel

## Support National Parks Traveler

**Your support for the National Parks Traveler comes at a time when news organizations are finding it hard, if not impossible, to stay in business. Traveler's work is vital. For nearly two decades we've provided essential coverage of national parks and protected areas. With the Trump administration's determination to downsize the federal government, and Interior Secretary Doug Burgum's approach to public lands focused on energy exploration, it's clear the Traveler will have much to cover in the months and years ahead. We know of no other news organization that provides such broad coverage of national parks and protected areas on a daily basis. Your support is greatly appreciated.**

**EIN: 26-2378789**

**♥ Support Essential Coverage of Essential Places**

*A copy of National Parks Traveler's financial statements may be obtained by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: National Parks Traveler, P.O. Box 980452, Park City, Utah 84098. National Parks Traveler was formed in the state of Utah for the purpose of informing and educating about national parks and protected areas.*

Residents of the following states may obtain a copy of our financial and additional information as stated below:

- Florida: A COPY OF THE OFFICIAL REGISTRATION AND FINANCIAL INFORMATION FOR NATIONAL PARKS TRAVELER, (REGISTRATION NO. CH 51659), MAY BE OBTAINED FROM THE DIVISION OF CONSUMER SERVICES BY CALLING 800-435-7352 OR VISITING THEIR WEBSITE. REGISTRATION DOES NOT IMPLY ENDORSEMENT, APPROVAL, OR RECOMMENDATION BY THE STATE.
- Georgia: A full and fair description of the programs and financial statement summary of National Parks Traveler is available upon request at the office and phone number indicated above.
- Maryland: Documents and information submitted under the Maryland Solicitations Act are also available, for the cost of postage and copies, from the Secretary of State, State House, Annapolis, MD 21401 (410-974-5534).
- North Carolina: Financial information about this organization and a copy of its license are available from the State Solicitation Licensing Branch at 888-830-4989 or 919-807-2214. The license is not an endorsement by the State.
- Pennsylvania: The official registration and financial information of National Parks Traveler may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling 800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.
- Virginia: Financial statements are available from the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, 102 Governor Street, Richmond, Virginia 23219.
- Washington: National Parks Traveler is registered with Washington State's Charities Program as required by law and additional information is available by calling 800-332-4483 or visiting www.sos.wa.gov/charities, or on file at Charities Division, Office of the Secretary of State, State of Washington, Olympia, WA 98504.

---

Thanks for your support

WASHINGTON'S NATIONAL PARK FUND

BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY FOUNDATION

National Park Friends Alliance

THE INN NETWORK MEMBER

FRIENDS OF ACADIA

GRAND CANYON CONSERVANCY

National Parks Traveler is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit media organization.

2005-2024 National Parks Traveler