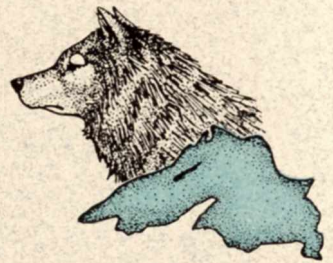


WOLF'S EYE



Isle Royale Natural History Association Newsletter

Summer 1991

Isle Royale's Native Deer: The Woodland Caribou

By Jean Fitts Cochran

In August of 1918 or 1919, newspaper editor William P.F. Ferguson of Ohio hiked from Washington Harbor to Lake Desor via the old Wendigo Mine road-bed. After a stop for water at the Island Mine spring, "where I first met the Isle Royale caribou", his party descended to an old cabin at the southwest corner of Lake Desor for the night.

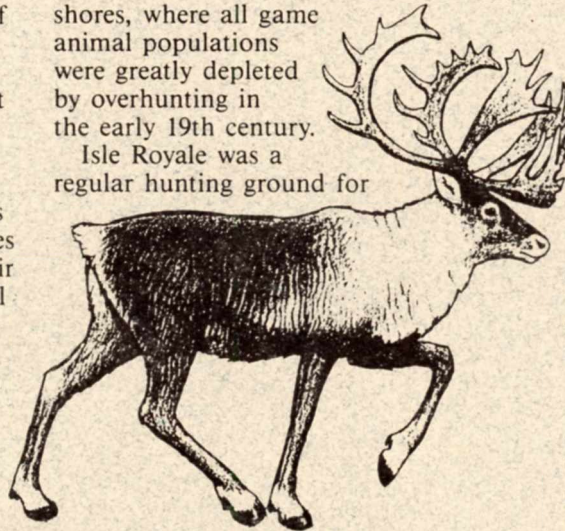
Rising for a dawn swim, he saw "a half mile away, headed from the largest island, where they have been spending the night, perhaps to keep the calves secure from attack by wolves [brush wolves, or coyotes], a line of caribou is swimming toward the main shore. Noses up, antlers lying back almost upon their shoulders (the cows have antlers as well as the bulls) with the calves swimming bravely alongside their mothers, they make a swift passage; and we see them climb the bank, their dripping forms sharply outlined against the green background. We count a full baker's dozen of the adults and are a little in doubt whether there are seven or nine calves. It may be that someone has seen a better section of the Isle Royale caribou herd, but I have never heard them tell of it." ("Wildlife and Adventures Along the Great Desor Trail on Isle Royale," *Detroit News* May 28, 1922).

This account from the last days of caribou on the Island was one of many I uncovered while researching the history of caribou on Isle Royale for a woodland caribou restoration feasibility study. Albert Stoll's *Detroit News* collection, at the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library, together with the Park archives, provide evidence that perhaps 200 woodland caribou wandered Isle Royale after the turn of the century. That's equivalent to the density caribou presently reach in habitats where Canada lynx are their only predator—as

they were on Isle Royale before coyotes arrived around 1910.

Fewer accounts of caribou sightings come from the previous century, likely because caribou were not so numerous on the Island then. This parallels events on the Canadian and Minnesota shores, where all game animal populations were greatly depleted by overhunting in the early 19th century.

Isle Royale was a regular hunting ground for



the North Shore Ojibwa throughout prehistory, as shown by the abundance of caribou bones in ancient campfire remains. Moose, in contrast, do not show up in the prehistoric archeological record—not surprising since they were not living on the adjacent mainland until the late 1800s.

In his narrative of "captivity and adventures with the Indians," John Tanner recalled a 1794 canoe trip to Isle Royale where two of the "abundant" caribou were killed.

Forty years later, a trader at Fort William (now Thunder Bay) reported that the skilled Ojibwa hunter, The Bete, returned from Isle Royale with "only three Rein Deers [caribou];" so the regional overharvest had taken its toll on the Island by the 1830s.

Nineteenth century miners and fishermen were also opportunistic hunters. Island fisherman Mike Johnson remembered a spring day in the 1890s when he saw another fisherman shoot and cripple a cow caribou from out of "two bunches" that were crossing the ice in Rock Harbor. Mike said they usually kept a shotgun in the boat so they could have fresh meat—mostly "rabbits"—occasionally.

The last record of caribou on Isle Royale comes from 1928, when a group from the Milwaukee Public Museum hiked alongside the Little Siskiwit River, above Hay Bay. Guides John Linklater and Bill Lively, two of Isle Royale's most experienced outdoorsmen, said caribou were still living in the "swamps" at the head of the river.

Since the Island's caribou population apparently recovered from 19th century over-harvesting as well as any effects of the extensive forest fires lit by mineral explorers, why did they disappear by 1930? We don't know precisely, but numerous changes must have tipped the balance against this native species. First, estimates of caribou numbers on the Island after 1900 vary wildly—from 26 to 400. While I suspect as many as 200 caribou could have been present (they are essentially loners in the summer and casual observers tend to greatly underestimate population size), it is possible that only a few dozen caribou were ever on Isle Royale in this century. If so, the population would have been susceptible to extinction from random events, such as the herd wandering off toward Canada on bad ice.

Once coyotes immigrated to the Island and prospered (which they did until wolves showed up in the 1940s), the caribou faced a major new source of mortality.

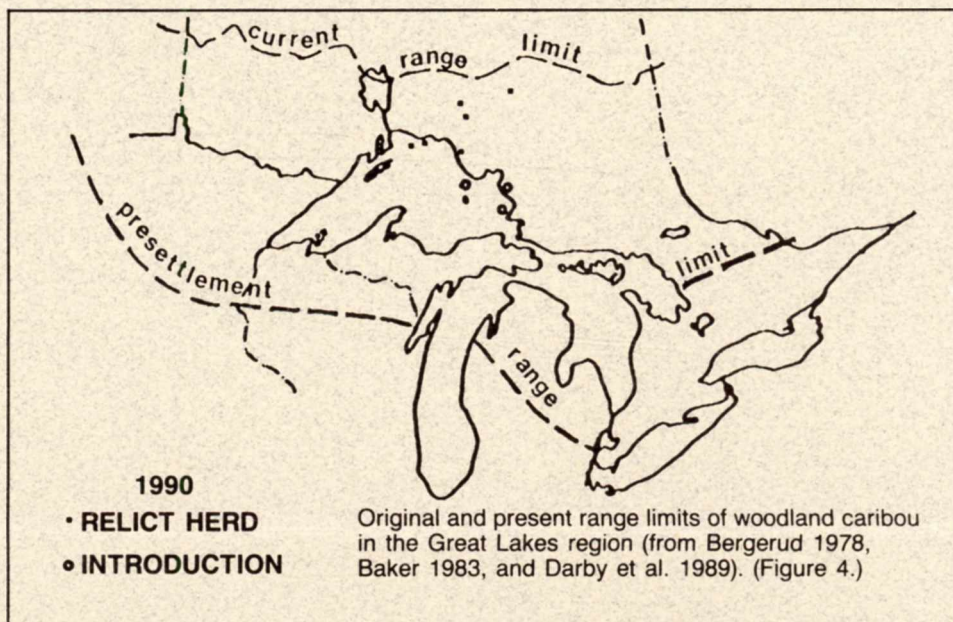
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Woodland Caribou

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Caribou have a very low reproductive rate—not breeding until they are 2 or 3 years old and never having twins—and they are more vulnerable to predators than are moose. Hence, it takes only a little “additive” mortality, from humans or another predator, to initiate caribou population declines. So, the remnant herd on Isle Royale was subject to unprecedented predation when coyotes joined lynx in the Island fauna (despite considerable trapping of both furbearers, records indicate both species remained common into the 1940s).

But perhaps most important to Isle Royale’s caribou was the demise of their species on the adjacent mainland. After 1900, the range of woodland caribou began retreating northward away from Lake Superior due to the influx of moose and whitetailed deer from the south, following Euro-American settlement and forest clearing. These ungulates brought new parasites lethal to caribou (the brainworm carried by deer) and, once established and thriving on the North Shore, contributed to much higher densities of predators than



had survived historically with only caribou for a prey base.

Caribou had been occasional wanderers back and forth across the ice to Canada; a number of potential crossings were observed before 1905. Without a mainland source of reimmigration, the isolated caribou herd on Isle Royale was eventually doomed due to the peculiar dynamics of small populations. For example, small populations are vulnerable to inbreeding, catastrophic events, or demographic hazards like poor reproduction or recruitment.

Due to the coincident timing of the immigration of moose to Isle Royale, and their subsequent population explosion in the late 1920s and early 1930s, moose have been blamed for the demise of caribou on the Island. But after studying the records and life histories of both species, I ruled out moose as the major culprit. Moose may have made life a bit harder for the last caribou—but the two animals’ diets are largely distinct and caribou were on their way out well before moose were that numerous.

Humans contributed to the extirpation of Isle Royale’s caribou both directly and indirectly. Hunting by Native Americans and Euro-Americans reduced caribou numbers—perhaps greatly—in the 19th century. Overhunting and forest clearing or burning on the mainland hastened the removal of caribou from the adjacent shore and isolated the Isle Royale herd. By creating early successional habitats on the mainland,

settlers also facilitated the immigration of moose and coyotes to Isle Royale. Once on the Island, moose and coyotes prospered on the expanse of early successional habitat created by miner’s fires, at the expense of caribou. Thus, numerous seemingly “natural” events—range expansions, spread of disease, predator responses—were played out on a landscape greatly altered by human activities.

“I saw caribou when I was young. One spring, we came down on the steamer *America*... about the 20th of April, and there was still a lot of ice in Rock Harbor channel... usually there’d be seven, eight or more... And then, this one time across from Caribou Island, there were 10 or 12 of ’em walking on the ice. Since then, I seen occasional... not very many. But finally they disappeared altogether. The moose came in, they seemed to leave.” (Milford Johnson, Isle Royale oral history archives).

Jean Fitts Cochrane first came to Isle Royale as an S.C.A. in 1977. She was quickly hooked on Island life — coming back to posts at Daisy Farm, Ojibway and Ishpeming Towers, and Mott Island — and most recently as a wildlife biologist conducting the caribou study. Most of the feasibility study was completed as a V.I.P. project, for which Jean received funding from the non-profit North Central Caribou Corporation, and the Michigan D.N.R.’s Natural Heritage Program. Jean left Isle Royale in June to work as an endangered species biologist in Alaska.

Isle Royale

Natural History Association

87 N. Ripley St., Houghton, MI 49931

A nonprofit membership organization that assists Isle Royale National Park by publishing and selling educational materials to park visitors. Gifts, bequests, memorials and memberships are U.S. tax deductible.

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Artist-in-Residence for 1991

*Three artists have been chosen for the 1991 Artist-in-Residence program on Isle Royale.
Artists selected for the wilderness residency are:*

Julia Barello, a sculptor from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who works in metal and explores the relationship of humans to the environment. She is finishing her Masters of Fine Arts in Metal-Smithing at the University of Wisconsin and has several awards and exhibits. She will be in residence July 9 to 24.

Keith Taylor, a poet writer from Ann Arbor, Michigan. Keith has had a life-long fascination with the North Country and has recently focused on Lake

Superior. He is the recipient of a 1991 fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, has published two books of poetry and has written pieces for magazines and journals. His wilderness residency will be July 30 to August 14.

Jeff Korte, pinhole photographer from Minneapolis, Minnesota. Jeff, who will be at Isle Royale August 20 to September 7, uses a pinhole lens-less camera and black and white film to

photograph the rugged face of Lake Superior. He has had several exhibitions and won awards for his work.

In addition to the above, Barbara Jo Clark of Hancock and Whitmore Lake, Michigan and Gary Hodel of Menominee Falls, Wisconsin, won honorable mentions. In total, 33 artists from 9 states applied for the Artist-in-Residence Program.

The artist will be living at the Kemmer cabin in Tobin Harbor. Donations have arrived from the Gale family in memory of Glen Merritt to help fund this program. We have also received donations from Langdon Silberberg and Miles Del Vecchio in memory of E.K. (Elizabeth Kemmer). Sue Bertolino, McGann Building Supply, Swift's Hardware, Rowe Moving, Northern Stationers, Dollar Bay Linoleum and Tile, the Keweenaw Co-op, Bill Fink, Ace Hardware of Calumet, and The Print Shop have contributed to help in the renovations. We are appreciative of the support we have received in order to make this program happen.

In Memoriam

Glen J. Merritt, died March 6, 1991 at the age of 97

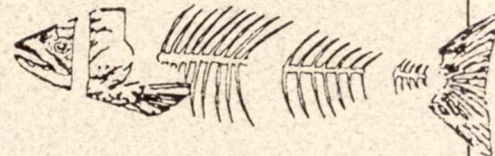
There is a strange silence at the Tobin Harbor service dock these days. "Mr. Tobin", as Florence Stack Wolbrink and others called him, passed away nearly 90 years after his first stay at the "old home" island in Merritt Lane.

The "seagull-feathered ambassador for Tobin Harbor", as Peter Oikarinen described him in "Island Folk", was a charter and life member of IRNHA and a past "El Presidente" as he and Coach Orsborn like to call the job of IRNHA Chairman. He was a true lover of Isle Royale. His children remember the excitement in their Duluth home as the days neared to make the only big trip of the year. Boxes were carefully marked for Tobins "the best harbor on Isle Royale". They were loaded into the 1940 Buick and Glen and Alice, who survives her husband in Duluth, would leave with Mary Alice and Grant for the big adventure of an Isle Royale summer. And on board the Winyah, Detroit, Coastal Queen or the two Voyageurs, the victims, as they were called by the Merritt kids, would hear stories of Isle Royale that captivated them from morning to evening, which was often how long it took to get to Tobins. Glen would even lapse into one of his favorite songs along the way:

Tobins — "There's no place like Tobins, the place where the tourists go. Where the meals are the squarest, the girls are the fairest of any resort we know"

Once unpacked and settled for a long summer vacation at "Camp Dig-Inn" up the harbor from the old home island, Glen and Alice would welcome newcomers as well as old friends to sit around their Indian campfire on the smooth, flat basalt of their camp where Glen would sit in a rocker made by his father out of California redwood in 1905, and tell stories well into the night until the stars, northern lights and satellites would appear bright in the cool clear skies. He loved to share the life and history of Isle Royale to all who showed an interest. His story telling was legendary and his humor and love of life will long be remembered and is recorded on tapes at the Minnesota Historical Society and at park headquarters. "There's little worry of Glen Merritt's image fading". (Peter Oikarinen, p. 111). His unique "Wah-hooo!" to passengers arriving on the Ranger, which he always managed to meet, will linger, and his stories will be retold at the Snug Harbor coffee shop and the campfire he loved so much. He belongs to a group of special people known as "Island Folk". As Don Boxmeyer, columnist for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, wrote the family after reading Peter Oikarinen's book and visiting the Island in the summer of 1990: "Where did they get such people?"

—the Grant Merritt Family



Special Fishing Notice

The NPS is asking park visitors to dispose of fish remains properly:

- At Rock Harbor you can use the fish cleaning station.
- At Windigo, bag your remains in plastic and put them in trash cans.
- In all other areas, cut the fish remains into small pieces (less than 4") and puncture the air bladder. Either dump the remains in the deep waters of Lake Superior (50 ft. plus), or place the remains on shore (above wave action and below vegetation line), and at least 100 ft. from campgrounds, docks, trails or other development.

While on public waters, you may not possess mutilated fish that cannot be measured or identified.

Your help in this matter will be greatly appreciated.

A Special Welcome to New Life Members:

Rev Richard Thomas, Green Bay, WI
Mr. & Mrs. Toxie E. Beavers, Dallas, TX
Roger W. Antony, Prsscott, AZ
Peter A Wimberg, Cincinnati, OH
Annette & David Duchamp, Kalamazoo, MI
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Sherilyn Fowler, Midland, MI
Janet Kokko, South Range, MI

Our Special Thanks:

to the following people who made donations towards the work of the Association:

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