

Snow, Snow Go Away! Little Caribou Want to Live!

By Arnold Kawuba

Before leaving the house every morning, I want to know what the temperature is. I want to know if it is too cold, too hot, or just right. Lots of people do this so that we can plan ahead about what to wear to go outside. But what do animals do? How do they survive harsh weather?

Biologists have studied how weather affects a species of animal known as **caribou**, or reindeer. The caribou are grass eating animals in the most northern parts of North America. These animals live in very cold temperatures. Since they have adapted to live in these very cold conditions, would you think that a warmer winter would be a nice break or big trouble?



In fact, the warmer winters with snow that is wet and heavy are very hard on the caribou. Have you ever tried shoveling and walking through wet, heavy snow as opposed to light and fluffy snow? I bet walking through the wet, heavy snow was more tiring than walking through the dry and fluffy snow. Just like it is difficult for people to walk or shovel, it is also hard for caribou to dig through when looking for food.

Warmer winters mean that snow is heavier and thicker. It often has an icy layer on top too. For **Peary Caribou**, a type of caribou found only in a few very cold, very northern areas of Canada, warm winters mean they can't reach their food. Peary Caribou are smaller than other caribou and when the snow is wet and heavy they use so much **energy** trying to reach their food (grass under the snow) that they actually die because they run out of energy. Even if the female caribou survive till spring, they may have used up so much energy on themselves during the winter that they don't give birth to healthy young.

The problem of lost energy for the caribou does not only end with the heavy and wet snow. They also have a problem with insects in summer. You are probably wondering how little tiny insects can affect a 200 or 250 pound caribou. Oh yes, these little tiny things make the life of caribou miserable. Have you ever been outside when there are a bunch of mosquitoes or flies? I bet you get tired of slapping them away. The caribou don't have an enclosed home to go back to though. They are outside all the time – twenty-four hours a day! The caribou use up so much energy fighting off insects that they don't build up enough fat for winter. The Peary Caribou have to be nice and fat during the warmer months so that they can survive during the winter.

A population count was taken in 1972 and there were 12,098 Peary Caribou in Canada. In 1990, a research team in Canada found out that the number of Peary Caribou had dropped to less than 3,000. And then a population count taken in 1998 found fewer than 500 Peary Caribou! As global temperatures rise, the Peary caribou are being killed off by the heavy snow and ice that are brought to the north in warm winters.

Many scientists are worried about the future of these endangered animals. At the rate at which they are dying, it is likely that in a few years they will face extinction. Some argue that the Peary Caribou population rises and falls naturally over periods of years as winters vary in temperature. But the recent trend of warming could affect them more than ever before.