Did You Know?

CARIBOU
of the Western Arctic Herd

1. **What's in a name?** Caribou have long been a vital resource to Alaska Natives. Their Iñupiaq name is *tuttu* [too-too], and their scientific name is *Rangifer tarandus*.

2. **A long walk:** Western Arctic Herd caribou walk an average of 2,000 miles per year. The longest recorded distance was 2,700 miles.[1]

3. **A summer of pests:** Which weighs more: the 17 trillion mosquitoes or 950 thousand caribou in Alaska? Scientists estimate there are 96 million pounds of mosquitoes compared to 230 million pounds of caribou.[2] A caribou can lose about 4.4 pounds of blood to mosquitoes each year![3]

4. **Quick learners:** Calves are typically born during a three week period from late May to mid-June. Just two days after birth, they can travel over 10 miles per day. Within six weeks, antlers begin to grow![4]

5. **Unique antlers:** Unlike most members of the deer family, both males and females grow antlers. Adult male caribou shed their antlers after the rut in late fall, but females can keep their antlers all winter. Antlers of captive female reindeer (domestic caribou) average 3 pounds and can weigh up to 7 pounds. Antlers of males weigh an average of 17 pounds and can reach 29 pounds![5]

6. **A dynamic population:** The Western Arctic Herd is one of the largest caribou herds in Alaska and the world. In 2003, the herd was estimated to have 490,000 individuals,[6] and in 2016, the herd count decreased to 201,000.[7] Caribou populations naturally fluctuate on 40-70 year cycles.[8]

7. **Do caribou cross the ocean?** Caribou of the Western Arctic Herd have been documented crossing 35 miles of sea ice in Kotzebue Sound from the Seward Peninsula to Cape Krusenstern National Monument during spring migration.[9]

8. **Adapted to life in water:** Caribou are amazing swimmers thanks to their buoyant, hollow hair and wide hooves. Adults are known to swim as fast as six miles per hour.[10] In northern Canada, adults and two-month-old calves have been documented swimming between islands that are 1.5 miles apart.[11]

Superscript denotes a citation to the original source of reference. Full citations can be found at: http://bit.ly/CaribouMonitoring

Above: Caribou hair seen at high magnification (x300). Scanning electron microscope (SEM) image of a longitudinal cross-section through a caribou hair shows the distinctive open cellular structure of the cortex and medulla with thin cell walls (reminiscent of 'bubble-wrap'). The trapped air within the structure gives the hair excellent thermal insulating properties combined with light weight. Densely packed fur protects the caribou in arctic conditions. It is also weatherproof and hard wearing when used for traditional Iñupiaq arctic clothing. The hair is 0.16 mm wide. Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, The British Museum. Image courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, Department of Scientific Research.

Meeks, N.D. and Cartwright, C.R. 2005. Caribou and seal hair: examination by scanning electron microscopy In J.C.H. King, B. Pauksztat and R. Storrie (eds.) Arctic Clothing, The British Museum Press, London; 42-44

Left: *Caribou of the Western Arctic Herd swim across the Kobuk River near Onion Portage during fall migration, Kobuk Valley National Park. NPS photo, Matthew Cameron.*

Lower left: *Migrating Western Arctic Herd caribou stop on the hills above Kobuk River, Kobuk Valley National Park. NPS photo, Matthew Cameron.*

Want to learn more about Western Arctic Herd caribou? Visit the NPS Arctic Network website at:
http://bit.ly/CaribouMonitoring
Visit the Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve website at:
www.nps.gov/GAAR

Questions? Contact NPS Wildlife Biologist, Kyle Joly, at: kyle_joly@nps.gov

Map: *The longest recorded movement of a Western Arctic Herd female caribou that NPS biologists have monitored. Line coloration corresponds to time of year for the caribou — orange/red is fall migration, blue is winter, purple is spring migration, gray is calving, yellow is insect harassment, and light orange is late summer. Lines are drawn between sequential GPS locations collected every 8 hours.*

Background photo, top, NPS, by Kumi Rattenbury, 2008
Background photo, bottom, by Carl H. Johnson, 2007
Publication: Matthew Cameron, Kyle Joly and Laura Weaver