



Arctic *National Wildlife Refuge* Caribou and the Coastal Plain

The coastal plain comprises only 10 percent of the Arctic Refuge. Yet from May to July, it is the center of biological activity on the Refuge. For centuries, animals from the Porcupine caribou herd have used the coastal tundra to obtain nourishment, calve, avoid insects, and escape predators.

The calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd include the northern foothills of the Brooks Range and the arctic coastal plain from the Tamayariak River in Alaska to the Babbage River in Canada. The most often used calving area, however, is the Refuge coastal plain between the Katakaturuk and Kongakut Rivers. Commonly, one-half to three quarters or more of the calves are born within this area.

The Refuge coastal plain is very important to calving success and calf survival in the Porcupine caribou herd. There are two main reasons for this. First, fewer wolves, brown bears, and golden eagles live on the coastal plain than in the adjacent foothills and mountains. As a result, the newborn calves have a better chance to survive their first week, until they become strong enough to outrun their pursuers.

The Refuge coastal plain also provides an abundance of plant species preferred by caribou. Nutrition is very important to the pregnant cows, particularly after the long winter. The timing of snow melt and plant “green up” on the coastal plain coincides with their calving period. This gives the new mothers access to the most nutritious food when it is most important for their health and the proper development of nursing calves.

The entire Porcupine caribou herd and up to one third of the Central Arctic herd use the Refuge coastal plain when calving is completed. This

essential area contains forage and a variety of habitats that provide insect relief, including the coast, uplands, ice fields, rocky slopes, and gravel bars.

Their annual visit to the Refuge coastal plain brings new life and vitality to the caribou. The area is important to their life cycle. The coastal plain provides the caribou vital nourishment and the best chance of avoiding predators and insects. This relationship is part of the unaltered system that makes the Arctic Refuge such a wondrous place.

