



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Arctic

National Wildlife Refuge

Porcupine Caribou Herd

Like antlered gypsies, barren ground caribou are always on the move. Exactly when and where they go is impossible to predict. Most herds, however, are drawn to a specific calving area. The 123,000 member Porcupine caribou herd has such a connection with the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Named for the major river within its range, the Porcupine herd uses an area the size of Wyoming in the Refuge, Yukon, and Northwest Territories. The herd winters in the southern portion of its range, including the Refuge, where they are an important resource for the Gwich'in people.

Twice a year the herd migrates more than 700 miles to and from its traditional calving grounds on the arctic coastal plain. Sometime in April, the caribou head north. The route they take depends on snow and weather conditions.

By early June, the pregnant females reach the calving areas and give birth. Shortly thereafter most, and often all, of the herd joins the cows and calves on the coastal plain of the Refuge. In late June and early July, when hordes

of mosquitos hatch, the caribou gather in huge groups numbering in the tens of thousands. Seeking relief from the insects, they move along the coast, onto ice fields, and to uplands in the Brooks Range.

The herd leaves the coastal plain by mid-July, heading back east and south toward its fall and wintering areas. Just as no one knows in advance precisely where most of the caribou will drop their calves in the spring, no one knows until it happens whether the majority of the herd will winter on the south side of the Refuge or in Canada.

Hunted by local residents, chased by predators, harassed by insects, challenged by river crossings, and faced with difficult terrain and weather, the Porcupine herd confronts many hardships. Yet it thrives, every summer staging a magnificent wildlife spectacle on the arctic coastal plain. The caribou are a vital part of the natural system that operates there. Unalterably linked to the area, the herd both depends on and enhances the dynamic wilderness that is the Arctic Refuge.

