

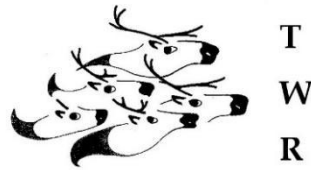
2025 - 2026

GROWTH OF THE KENNEDY SIDING CARIBOU HERD

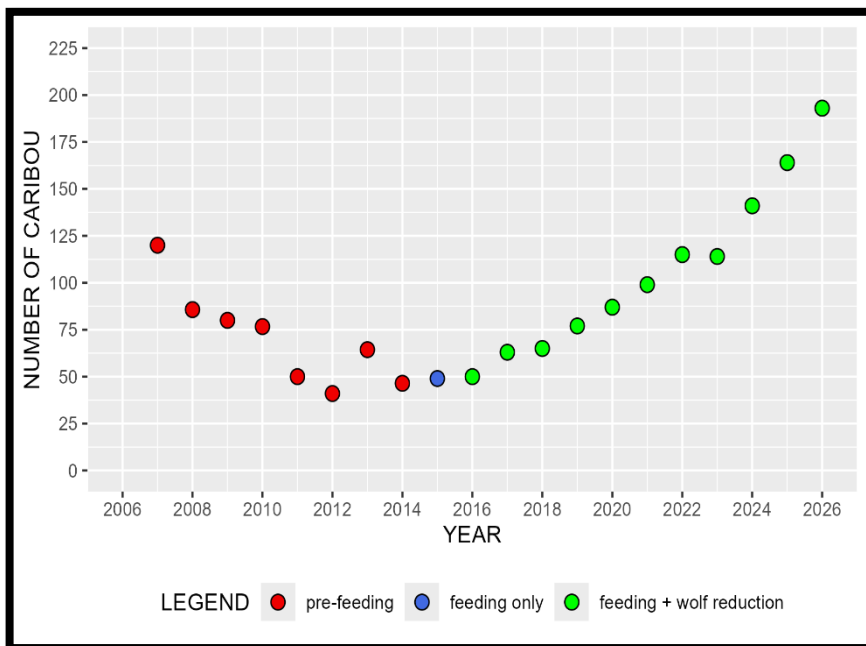
BY

Doug Heard

Tithonus Wildlife Research



March 2026



The number of caribou counted at the Kennedy Siding feeders increased from 50 to 193 over the 11 years when caribou were provided with supplemental food and wolves were reduced.

FEEDING

Supplemental food pellets were provided to Kennedy Siding caribou in the fall of 2025 as had been done each year since 2014 (Heard and Zimmerman 2021, Heard 2025). We began feeding on 1 November, when most grizzly bears have entered hibernation, and continued until 15 January 2026. Destiny Rae Kelto and Tony Inyallie put out 664 20kg bags of food pellets (13,280 kg); about 69Kg/caribou and 1.2 Kg/caribou/day).

FALL ARRIVAL and DEPARTURE

The first caribou arrived at Kennedy Siding on 26 September 2025, later than in any previous year, but the overall pattern was typical (Figure 1). Half of the caribou were present by 21 October (Day of Year 294) and 80% arrived between 7 October (Day of Year 280) and 6 November (Day of Year 310). Timing of arrival was similar for both males and females. The 8 females with functioning radio-collars were representative of the average caribou, as all arrived between 10 October and 2 November. I recorded all 8 radio-collared females on trail camera photographs within 5 days of their GPS arrival date.

Even though food was still being provided, most caribou left Kennedy Siding in mid-December. Number of caribou-triggered photographs dropped from over a thousand per day prior to 17 December to zero by 21 December, with only a few caribou recorded between 25 December and 3 January 2026. The 6 females with functioning radio-collars (2 having failed since their arrival) followed that pattern, all leaving between 16 and 20 December (1 on the 16th, 1 on the 17th, 3 on the 19th and 1 on the 20th) and 5 of 6 moved rapidly and directly about 50km NE to alpine ridges high in the Rocky Mountains.

This mid-December departure was about a month earlier than in most years but similar to departure time in 2024. There was nothing unusual in the weather or snow conditions that seemed likely to trigger this early movement. If supplemental feeding was part of the reason, perhaps feeding improved body condition to the point where a fatness set-point-for-migration was reached.

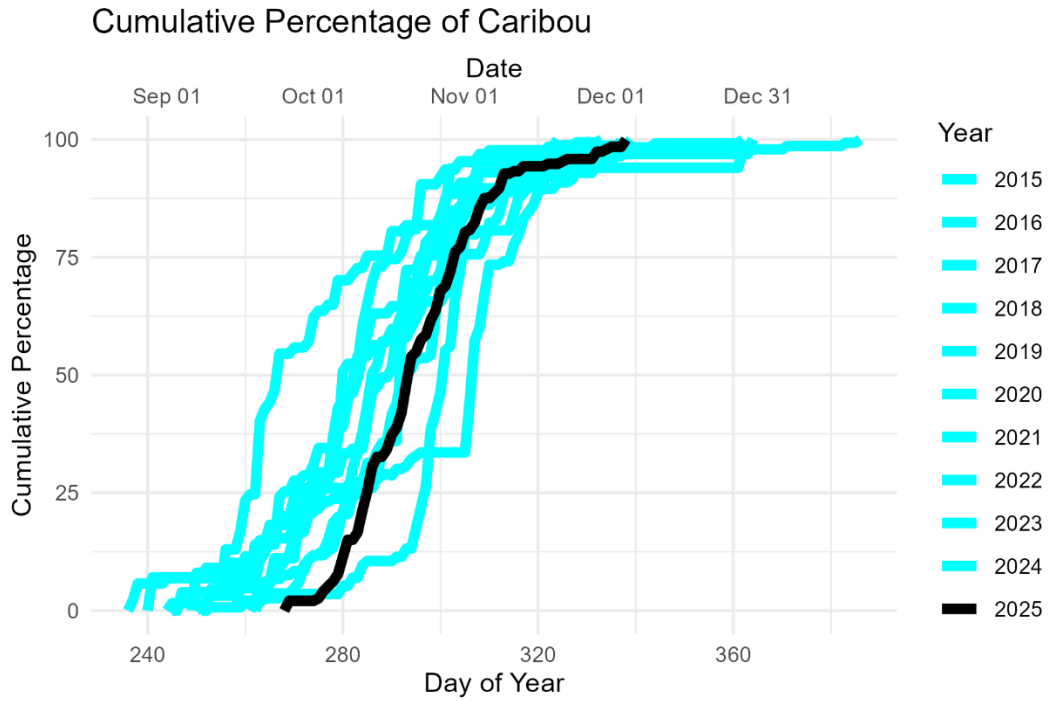
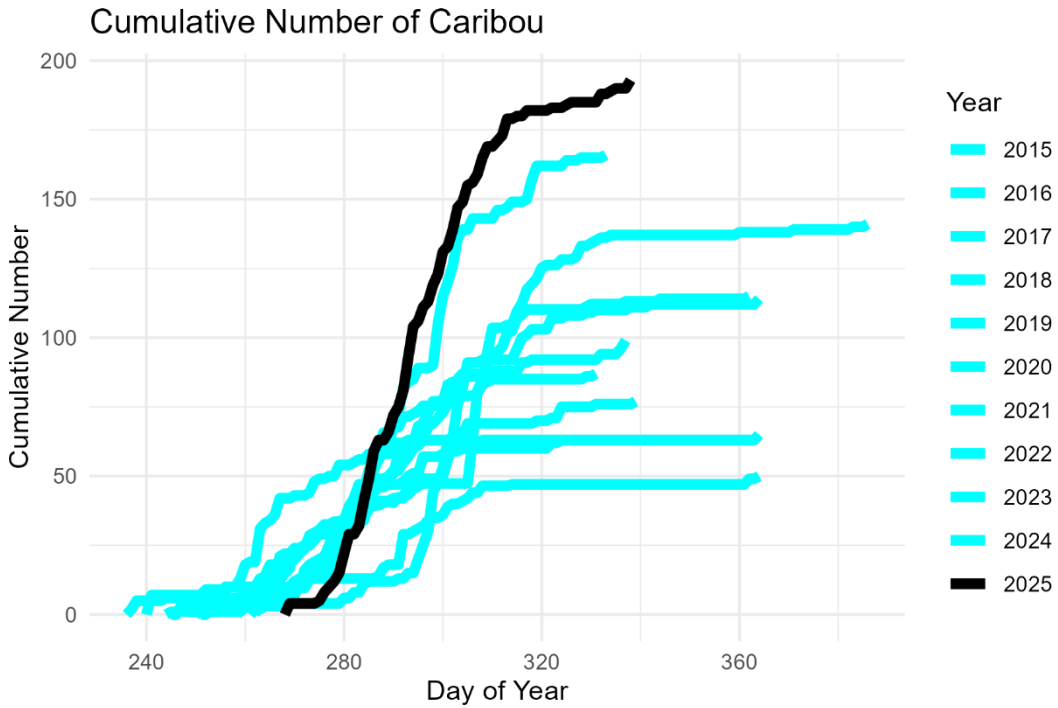


Figure 1. Timing of caribou arrival at Kennedy Siding in fall 2025 compared to previous years.

NUMBERS, COMPOSITION and POPULATION GROWTH

Based on our examination of about 600,000 trail camera photographs, our team (Caslin Rea, Mackenzie Askin, Mackenzie Crerar and myself) identified 193 caribou at the Kennedy Siding feeders in 2025-26 (Figure 2); 84 adult females; 67 adult males and 42 calves (27 female calves and 15 male calves) for a calf:cow ratio of 50:100 and an adult sex ratio of 80:100. Survival of the 166 caribou (adults + calves) from fall 2024-25 to fall 2025-26 was 91% ($100 * (84 + 67) / 166$). Apparently, 4 caribou were killed when hit by a train in December (A Pelletier pers com), but I had too few details to warrant including this incident in the population count.

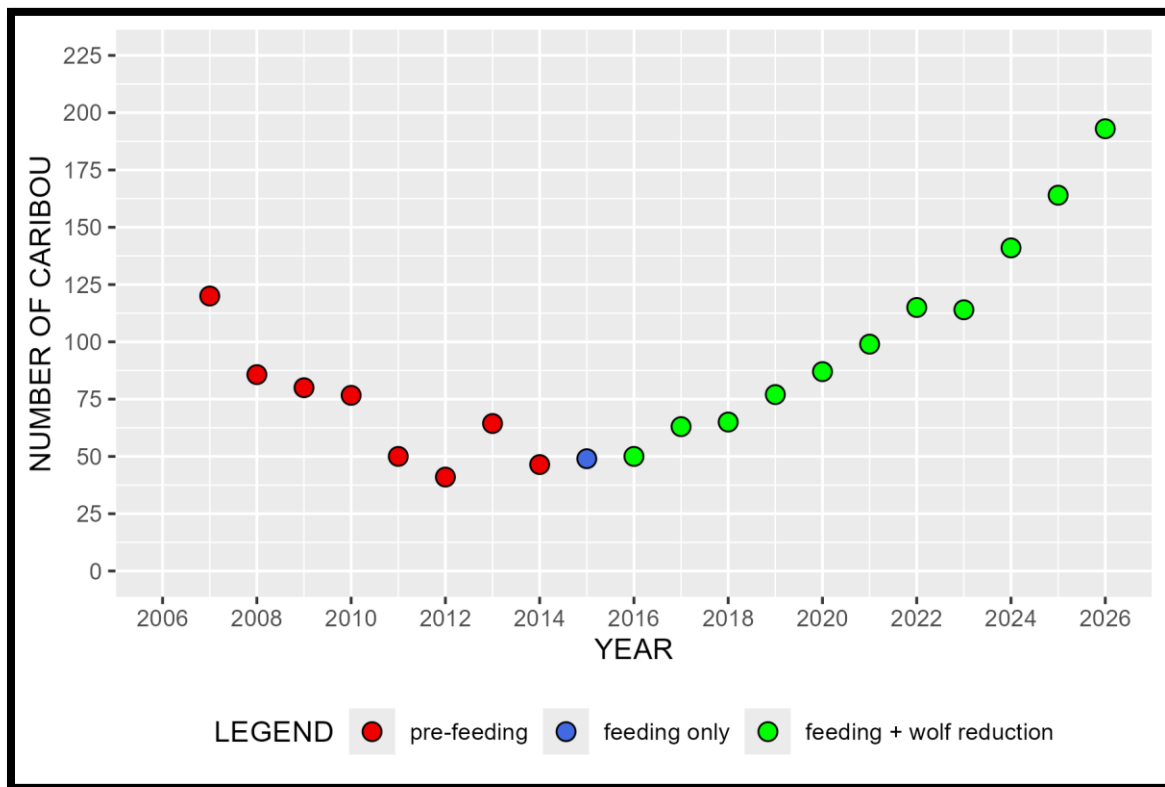


Figure 2. Trend in the number of caribou in the Kennedy Siding caribou herd from 2007 to 2026.

The number of caribou in the Kennedy Siding herd increased at about the same rate as the Klinse-Za herd where there was both wolf reduction and a maternity pen that provided neonatal protection from predation and supplemental feeding while the caribou were penned. Both the Kennedy Siding and Klinse-Za herds appeared to have increased slightly faster than the Quintette herd where the only management treatment was wolf reduction (Figure 3). The Quintette herd estimates presented here are for the herd range as defined prior to 2025. In 2025, the survey area expanded to include adjacent areas, and caribou in those areas may be part of the Quintette herd (Agnes Pelletier pers com). The apparent increase in population growth rate from fall supplemental feeding (Heard and Zimmerman 2021 and Fig 3) is consistent with observations showing the incremental effect of fall nutrition on survival and pregnancy rates in mule deer and elk (Hurley et al. 2014, Bidder et al. 2023).

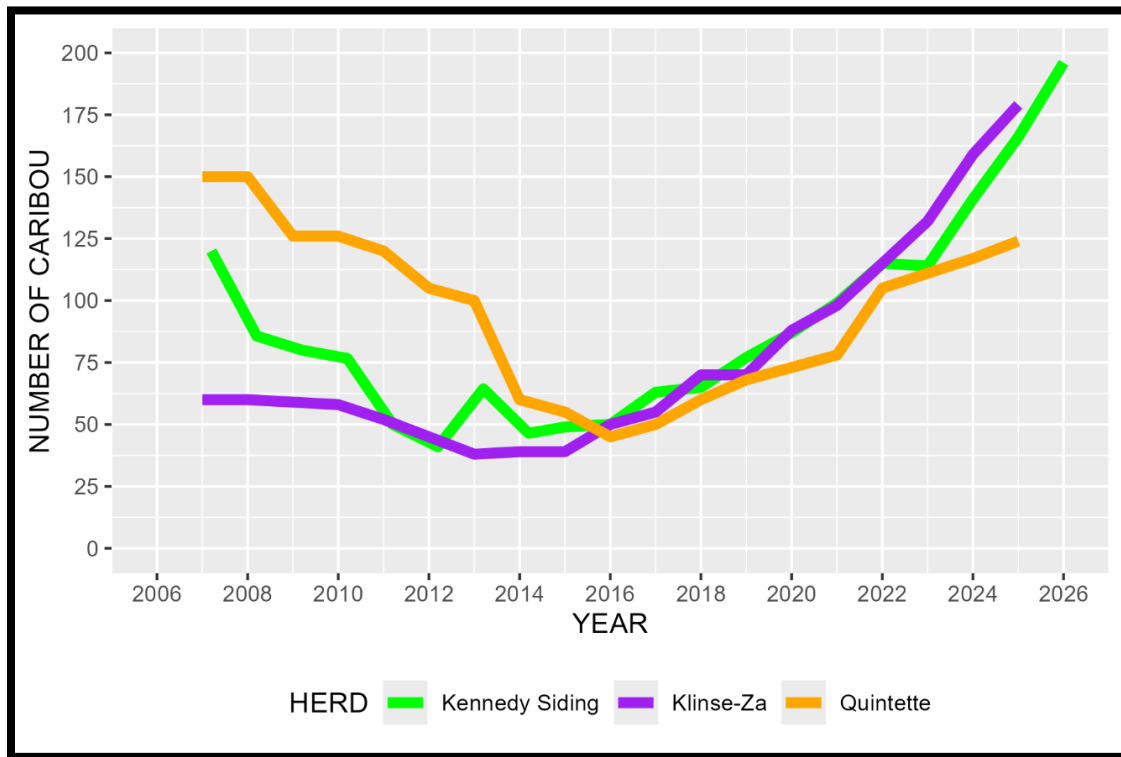


Figure 3. Trend in the number of caribou in the Kennedy Siding caribou herd (this study) and estimated in the Klinse-Za (Michael Klaczek pers com) and Quintette (Agnes Pelletier pers com) caribou herds.

OTHER SPECIES

Even though the BC Caribou Recovery Program attempted to kill all wolves in the Kennedy Siding caribou herd and adjacent ranges each winter since 2015 (British Columbia Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship 2025), trail cameras photographed 15 wolves near the Kennedy Siding feeders in October and November (2 singles, 2 groups of 2, and a pack of 9) but I knew of no caribou deaths from predation, or any other cause, until December when 4 caribou killed when hit by a train.

There was a grizzly bear in trail camera photos on 5 different days in October, but none after October 27.

On 7 nights between 16 November and 7 December, a cow moose stayed for a few hours eating the caribou food pellets. This was the first time that a moose had eaten more than a few mouthfuls.

FALL ANTLER CASTING

In fall 2025, I observed 20 instances of antler casting in adult females and calves. Pregnant females typically cast their antlers within a few days of parturition in May or early June while non-pregnant females casting their antlers earlier (March through April), with both male and female calves casting their antlers in May like parturient females. However, I observed 10 adult females (12% of adult females) and 10 calves (6 females (22% of female calves) and 4 males (27% of male calves)) that had cast one or both antlers between 11 November 2025 and 2 January 2026 (Figures 4 and 5). In the previous 11 years of observations of Kennedy Siding caribou, I had noted only 4 times when an adult female had cast an antler.

Fall antler casting appeared to be related to age. In addition to the 10 calves, the 10 adult females that cast antlers appeared to be young based on their relatively short antlers (22 ± 4.8 (SD) cm vs 28 ± 8.7 (SD) cm), lighter weight (123 ± 15.6 (SD) kg vs 127 ± 16.5 (SD) kg) and that none were mothers with a calf at heel.

On Fogo Island Newfoundland, Love (2025) observed females with velvet covered antlers and in early spring 2024 suggesting that the onset of growth had to have been at least 3-5 weeks earlier than in previous years of her study. Therefore, antler casting must also have been earlier than normal, but she did not know how much earlier.

Timing of antler casting in adult males in 2025 appeared to be normal. Large antlered male caribou (e.g., those with antlers >80cm long) typically begin casting their antlers after the rut ends in mid-October (Figure 6). Small antlered males carry their antlers longer, casting their antlers between February and April, with male calves carrying their antlers until May. The first antler cast by a male this year was on 1 November.

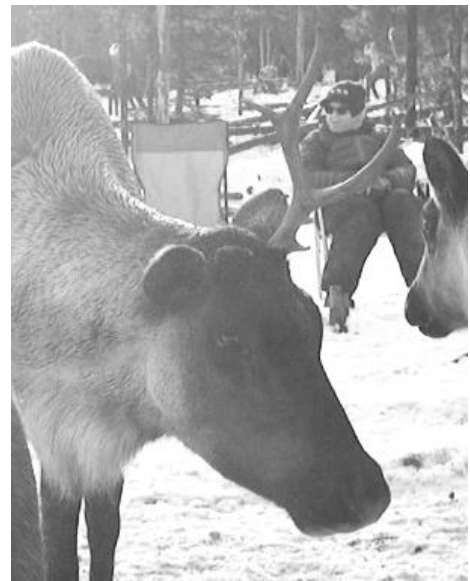


Figure 4. Example photos of 4 females that cast 1 or both antlers in fall 2025.



Figure 5. Example photos of 4 calves that cast an antler in fall 2025.



Figure 6. Caribou 25.196 in the background had recently cast his right antler by 8 November, while caribou 25.051 in the foreground, still carried both of his.

ANTLER ABNORMALITIES

I observed 3 cases of abnormal antler development in 2025 (Figures 7, 8 and 9), one of which appeared to be chronic, i.e., persisting year after year (Figure 8). Abnormal antler development has usually been attributed to physical trauma especially to the antler pedicle (Kaufman and Kaufman 2019). Sukosd et al. (2025) challenged that long held belief, identifying a pathological condition that explained most abnormalities. That condition arises from inflammation and/or infection of the open wound at the detachment site (see Figure 6 caribou 25.196), that leads to scar formation and disruption of normal antler development.



Figure 7. This male (25.164) had 2 left main beams



Figure 8. This is likely the same female 3 years in a row.



Figure 9. Another female (25.095) from 2025 with the right antler extending down over the right eye somewhat like the female in Figure 8.

EXTENSION

There were at least 3 organized field trips to view caribou at Kennedy Siding in 2025. Two groups came from the University of Northern British Columbia, Student Chapter of the Wildlife Society and one from the Prince George Naturalists Club.

A livestream video of caribou at the feeders was available to everyone on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/live/MSkFbZ3Ed-U> or via the MLIB web site mlibwildlife.ca/live-cam/.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Tania Solonas, Destiny Rae Kelto and Tony Inyallie of the McLeod Lake Indian Band for their work and enthusiastic support for this project. Tania provided great administrative oversight while Destiny and Tony kept the feeders full of pellets. Further thanks go to Caslin Rea, Mackenzie Askin and Mackenzie Crerar for their work interpreting photographs. Jo-Anne Allison and Brett Heard helped with the field work.

The 2025 supplemental feeding program was funded by the Province of British Columbia's Caribou Recovery Program, Environment and Climate Change Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service and by the McLeod Lake Indian Band.

LITERATURE CITED

British Columbia Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship. 2025. Predator Reduction to Support Caribou Recovery: 2024-2025 Summary. B.C. Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship, Caribou Recovery Program.
<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/plants-animals-ecosystems/wildlife/wildlife-conservation/caribou/management-activities>

- Bidder, O. R., Connor, T., Morales, J. M., Rickbeil, G. J. M., Merkle, J. A., Fuda, R. K., Rogerson, J. D., Scurlock, B. M., Edwards, W. H., Cole, E. K., McWhirter, D. E., Courtemanch, A. B., Dewey, S., Kauffman, M. J., MacNulty, D. R., du Toit, J. T., Stahler, D. R., & Middleton, A. D. 2023. Forage senescence and disease influence elk pregnancy across the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. *Ecosphere*, 14(12), e4694. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ecs2.4694>
- Heard, D.C. and K.L. Zimmerman. 2021. Fall supplemental feeding increases population growth rate of an endangered caribou herd. *PeerJ* <https://peerj.com/articles/10708/>
- Heard, D.C. 2025. 2024-2025 Kennedy Siding Supplemental Feeding. Report for the BC Conservation Foundation. 14p. <https://mlibwildlife.ca/resources/>
- Hurley, M. A., M. Hebblewhite, J.-M. Gaillard, S. Dray, K. A. Taylor, W. K. Smith, P. Zager, and C. Bonenfant. 2014. Functional Analysis of Normalized Difference Vegetation Index Curves Reveals Overwinter Mule Deer Survival Is Driven by Both Spring and Autumn Phenology. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 369:20130196.
- Kaufman, D.W.; Kaufman, G.A. 20019. Extreme Antler Malformation in a Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) in Northcentral Kansas. *Trans. Kans. Acad. Sci.* 122, 275–278.
- Love, A.E., J.A. Fox, J.G. Hendrix, S. Jackson, K. Ferraro, E. Vander Wal and Q.M.R. Webber. 2025. Addled by antlers: Synchronous disruption to female caribou antler phenology *Ecosphere* <https://doi.org/10.1002/ecs2.70484>
- Sükösd, F. et al. 2025. When Antlers Grow Abnormally: A Hidden Disease Behind Common Cervid Trophy Deformities, Introducing Pedunculitis Chronica Deformans. *Animals* 15, 1530. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani15111530>