



COSEWIC
Committee on the Status of
Endangered Wildlife in Canada

COSEPAC
Comité sur la situation des
espèces en péril au Canada

Over 60 wildlife species at risk in Canada's changing North

WHITEHORSE, YUKON (May 1, 2017). Atlantic Walrus and Eastern Migratory Caribou are at risk of extinction. So concluded the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), which met in Whitehorse, April 23-28. The number of Canadian northern wildlife species considered to be at risk now stands at 62.



Atlantic Walrus © J. Higdon

Canada has already lost one of its three populations of Atlantic Walrus. Once abundant in ocean waters of Atlantic Canada, including the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the animals were hunted to extinction by 1850. The two surviving populations rely on Canadian Arctic marine habitat and have coexisted with Indigenous peoples for millennia. Over the past few decades, the areas inhabited by the few thousand High Arctic walrus and the more numerous Central and Low

Arctic population have shrunk and continue to do so. As the climate warms and sea ice recedes, interaction with industry and tourism is increasing. These threats, layered upon ongoing harvesting, led the committee to recommend a status of Special Concern for both populations. According to marine mammal expert and COSEWIC member Hal Whitehead, "The walrus is a most unusual and distinctive mammal of the northern seas. Walrus have been very important to the Inuit, both as food and in their culture, and they remain so today. Walrus are particularly sensitive to disturbance, and certainly deserve special attention."

Many caribou populations have previously been assessed by COSEWIC, but the committee considered the Eastern Migratory Caribou for the first time. The famous George River herd in Québec and Labrador numbered over 800,000 in 1993, but the numbers have now fallen to an

unprecedented low of a few thousand animals. A second major herd is also in serious decline. The committee therefore recommended Endangered status. Graham Forbes, co-chair of COSEWIC's Terrestrial Mammals Subcommittee, stressed the sensitivity of caribou to human activity, a condition complicated by rapid northern climate change: "Shrubs increasingly cover landscapes that were once dominated by lichen, caribou's major winter food source, and overharvest continues. We are worried that these factors may make it very hard for herds to recover."

Parts of Canada's North are warming faster than anywhere else in the world, and the number of northern species at risk is rising. Over half of these at-risk species are currently assessed as being of Special Concern, meaning measures to address climate change and good management of hunting, disturbance, and development are needed to prevent their status from deteriorating to Threatened. Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board Chair, Frank Thomas, highlighted the need to coordinate efforts toward this goal: "Local communities, through the work of management boards, play an important role in the conservation of Canada's northern biodiversity. We all need to work together."

Eric Taylor, Chair of COSEWIC, echoed Mr. Thomas' call to action: "Canada's biodiversity is at risk from coast to coast to coast, and timely action on many fronts is required, from dealing with habitat disturbance and overharvesting to concerted efforts to combat the effects of climate change."

At the meeting, a number of other wildlife species were found to be at risk. Examples include:



Harris's Sparrow © G. Romanchuk

Endangered

- Ord's Kangaroo Rat (neither a kangaroo nor a rat), a rare Prairie dune specialist
- Some populations of Lake Sturgeon, a large, very long-lived species affected by historical overfishing
- Butternut, a tree in eastern provinces devastated by a fungal disease.

Special Concern

- Harris's Sparrow, a northern songbird breeding only in Canada and showing ongoing declines largely due to pressures on their wintering grounds in the US
- Shortfin Mako, an open-ocean shark found seasonally in Atlantic Canadian waters and showing signs of recovery from overfishing.

Further details on all wildlife species assessed at this meeting can be found on the COSEWIC website at: <http://www.cosewic.gc.ca/default.asp?lang=en&n=EC89538C-1#results>

Next meeting

COSEWIC's next scheduled wildlife species assessment meeting will be held in November 2017.

About COSEWIC

COSEWIC assesses the status of wild species, subspecies, varieties, or other important units of biological diversity, considered to be at risk in Canada. To do so, COSEWIC uses scientific, Aboriginal traditional and community knowledge provided by experts from governments, academia and other organizations. Summaries of assessments are currently available to the public on the COSEWIC website (www.cosewic.gc.ca) and will be submitted to the Federal Minister of the Environment and Climate Change in fall 2017 for listing consideration under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). At this time, the status reports and status appraisal summaries will be publicly available on the Species at Risk Public Registry (www.sararegistry.gc.ca).

At its most recent meeting, COSEWIC assessed 33 wildlife species in various COSEWIC risk categories, including 9 Endangered, 3 Threatened, and 13 Special Concern. In addition to these wildlife species that are in COSEWIC risk categories, COSEWIC assessed 1 wildlife species as Extinct and 5 as Not at Risk. An additional 2 were found to be Data Deficient.

COSEWIC comprises members from each provincial and territorial government wildlife agency, four federal entities (Canadian Wildlife Service, Parks Canada Agency, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and the Canadian Museum of Nature), three Non-government Science Members, and the Co-chairs of the Species Specialist and the Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge Subcommittees.

Definition of COSEWIC terms and status categories:

Wildlife Species: A species, subspecies, variety, or geographically or genetically distinct population of animal, plant or other organism, other than a bacterium or virus, that is wild by nature and is either native to Canada or has extended its range into Canada without human intervention and has been present in Canada for at least 50 years.

Extinct (X): A wildlife species that no longer exists.

Extirpated (XT): A wildlife species that no longer exists in the wild in Canada, but exists elsewhere.

Endangered (E): A wildlife species facing imminent extirpation or extinction.

Threatened (T): A wildlife species that is likely to become Endangered if nothing is done to reverse the factors leading to its extirpation or extinction.

Special Concern (SC): A wildlife species that may become Threatened or Endangered because of a combination of biological characteristics and identified threats.

Not at Risk (NAR): A wildlife species that has been evaluated and found to be not at risk of extinction given the current circumstances.

Data Deficient (DD): A category that applies when the available information is insufficient (a)

to resolve a wildlife species' eligibility for assessment or (b) to permit an assessment of the wildlife species' risk of extinction.

Species at Risk: A wildlife species that has been assessed as Extirpated, Endangered, Threatened or Special Concern.

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