Interisland movements and oceanic swimming of woodland caribou in Newfoundland

Quinn M.R. Webber1\*, Jack G. Hendrix1, Alec L. Robitaille2, Eric Vander Wal1,2

1Cognitive and Behavioural Ecology Interdisciplinary Program, Memorial University of Newfoundland 2Department of Biology, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

**Introduction**

Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) are exceptional swimmers. Ample evidence exists that caribou swim in streams, rivers, and lakes during migration (Leblond, St-Laurent, and Côté 2016), to avoid predators (Bergerud 1985), and access islands during calving (Bergerud, Ferguson, and Butler 1990). Even for adept swimmers like caribou, the energetic expenditure of swimming for quadrupedal mammals is significantly higher than walking or running, and drowning is also possible (Miller and Gunn 1985). Despite a large number of coastal and island caribou herds, only a handful of examples have documented caribou swimming in the ocean (e.g. Miller 1995, 2002; Jeffery, Otto, and Phillips 2007; Ricca et al. 2012).

The Fogo Island archipelago, off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada, is home to approximately 300 woodland caribou. During routine fieldwork on May 30, 2017, we observed an unmarked adult male caribou swim between Western and Eastern Indian Islands (Figure 1), a distance of at least 470 m which took ~9 minutes (~52 m per minute). This observation prompted us to investigate whether swimming behaviour was common among GPS radio-collared caribou in the population (n = 29 adult females; 1240g, GPS 4400M; Lotek Wireless Inc., Newmarket, Ontario, Canada). We identified swimming events as two consecutive GPS (2-hour relocation rates) locations from an individual occurred on different islands. Northeastern Newfoundland typically experiences pack ice during winter and caribou are known locally to travel between islands by walking over the ice. We restricted our GPS data to the ice-free period of the year (April 1 - December 31) and we identified 12 adult female caribou that collectively had 127 swimming events over three years (Figure 2). In addition to our own visual and remotely sensed observations, residents of Fogo Island have also reported observing caribou swimming between islands on numerous occasions.

In total, 127 swimming events occurred throughout the ice-free season, with a peak in November. On average, caribou swam approximately 11 (range = 2-34) per year and remained on those islands for approximately 30 (range = 0-724) days before swimming again. Caribou may swim between islands in the ocean for similar reasons they swim in freshwater (Leblond, St-Laurent, and Côté 2016). We propose that one such explanation, the forage limitation hypothesis, is a likely explanation for oceanic swimming for caribou that live on islands in the Fogo Island archipelago.

Forage limitation and over-grazing is a major concern for caribou populations (Schaefer et al. 2016) and could explain movement between islands. Conspecific competition for resources driven by reduced foraging opportunities can decrease reproductive success of adult females (Schaefer et al. 2016). Forage scarcity has been proposed as a potential reason for caribou moving between arctic islands on the sea-ice in winter (Miller, Russell, and Gunn 1977). Caribou were introduced to Fogo Island (n = 26 animals between 1964–67) and Change Island (n = 5 animals in 1964) from Newfoundland as part of a series of translocations and introductions throughout the province (Bergerud & Mercer 1989). It is unknown when caribou began colonizing nearby islands, but given that some are small, over-grazing by newly arrived caribou may rapidly deplete forage on an annual cycle (Bergerud, Ferguson, and Butler 1990). Although unconfirmed, it is also possible that Fogo Island has experienced forage depletion since the introduction of caribou in the 1960s. More likely, however, is fine-scale competition for foraging resources that drives caribou to swim to new islands.

Movement between islands requires caribou to assess the trade-off associated with swimming. This trade-off can be understood as density-dependent habitat selection governed by the Ideal Free Distribution (Morris 1987; Bradbury, Vehrencamp, and Clifton 2015). Ideal Free Distribution theory predicts a fitness equilibrium: when the density in a given habitat patch has exceeded the optimum for fitness within that patch, animals should relocate and settle new habitat patches, so that fitness is equal across all patches (Bradbury, Vehrencamp, and Clifton 2015). Islands act as discrete habitat patches in this case, but the costs associated with swimming create a trade-off when moving between patches. For caribou in the Fogo Island archipelago, the role of forage limitation in animal habitat selection patterns remains unknown, but swimming between islands may be at least partially governed by density-dependent habitat selection.

In total, 12 of 29 collared female caribou swam between islands in the Fogo archipelago. Only 3 of these 12 individuals had more than 10 swimming events, suggesting that for ~10% of narjed individuals swimming is relatively common, on average occurring approximately every 15 days during ice-free seasons. We did not detect any swimming events for the remaining 17 individuals. It remains unclear whether these individuals do not swim, or whether swimming is rare for most caribou. Overall, there appears to be three groups of individuals: those that swim often (n = 3, every ~15 days), those that swim occasionally (n = 9, every ~42 days), and those that never swam (n = 17). We are also unable to draw conclusions about the prevalence of swimming in the ocean by male caribou: our initial visual observation was of an adult male, but our GPS data only included females.

Regardless, oceanic swimming is relatively common among a minority of marked caribou. Of the three collared individuals that swam the most, two were collared on Western Indian Island and the third was collared on Fogo Island. Inter-island distances between Western and Eastern Indian Islands, and the smaller islands around them, are shorter than those between Fogo Island and others (Figure 2). Individuals that were born on or spend more time on these smaller islands may swim between them more frequently than animals that spend most of their time on Fogo Island. The forage limitation hypothesis is generally thought to apply uniformly across populations, but individual caribou could evaluate the costs and benefits of swimming to another island differently. It is possible that some individuals, in our case ~10%, considered swimming to be less costly or perceived competition or predation more acutely than their conspecifics.

For several decades after their introduction to Fogo Island, the caribou population did not exceed ~100 individuals (Bergerud and Mercer 1989, Newfoundland and Labrador Wildlife Division, unpublished data). During the 1990s, population density reached 300 animals and it is unknown when caribou began to occupy other islands, anecdotal evidence suggests it was during the 1990s. We surmise that as competition among conspecifics increased along with population size, density-dependent habitat selection resulted in expansion of the population to nearby islands. Following Ideal Free Distribution theory, caribou should swim to new islands when the average fitness of individuals on the starting island exceeds the density-fitness equilibrium (Morris 1987). While this is an ultimate explanation, our data suggest caribou only remain on smaller islands for a few days at a time, so the fitness equilibrium remains a theoretical construct. More likely, however, is that fine-scale competition, density-dependent habitat selection, and forage depletion drives individuals to peridiodically swim between islands. Given the presumed low density of coyotes on Fogo Island and the minimal risk they pose, predation risk does not appear to be a major driver of swimming.

Our observations add to the evidence that caribou can, and occasionally do, swim in the ocean (e.g. Miller 1995, 2002; Jeffery, Otto, and Phillips 2007; Ricca et al. 2012). We suggest that swimming is likely more common than previously thought for caribou living on oceanic islands, and that forage limitation and the associated density-dependent habitat selection is an ultimate explanation for this phenomenon. Although our inference is limited to observations, islands appear to represent discrete foraging patches for terrestrial animals that can influence fitness via increased foraging opportunities. We also posit that individuals can vary in their evaluation of costs and benefits of movement between these habitat patches.

**Acknowledgements**

We thank M. Laforge, M. Bonar, C. Hart, and R. Huang for help in the field. Logistical support was provided by L. Bixby. We also thank members of the Newfoundland Wildlife Division including S. Moores, B. Adams, C. Doucet, W. Barney, and J. Neville for logistical support in the field as well as help with data data collection and management. We thank T. Bergerud and S. Mahoney for their vision in initiating much of the work on caribou in Newfoundland. Funding for this study was provided by the National Sciences and Engineering Research Council (QMRW, JGH, EVW). We respectfully acknowledge the territory in which data were collected and analyzed as the ancestral homelands of the Beothuk, and the island of Newfoundland as the ancestral homelands of the Mi’kmaq and Beothuk.



**Figure 1**: Image of swimming unmarked adult male caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) from Western to Eastern Indian Island taken on 30 May 2017.

**Literature Cited**

Bergerud, A. T. 1985. “Antipredator strategies of caribou: dispersion along shorelines.” *Canadian Journal of Zoology* 63 (6): 1324–9. <https://doi.org/10.1139/z85-199>.

Bergerud, A.T., R. Ferguson, and H.E. Butler. 1990. “Spring migration and dispersion of woodland caribou at calving.” *Animal Behaviour* 39: 360–68.

Bergerud, A.T., and W.E. Mercer. 1989. “Caribou Introductions in Eastern North America.” *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 17 (2): 111–20.

Bradbury, J.W., S.L. Vehrencamp, and K.E. Clifton. 2015. “The ideal free antelope: foraging dispersions.” *Behavioral Ecology* arv078: 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1093/beheco/arv078>.

Jeffery, Rebecca A, Robert D Otto, and Frank R Phillips. 2007. “George’s Island, Labrador - A high-density predator-free refuge for a woodland caribou subpopulation?” *Rangifer*, no. 17: 51–56.

Leblond, Mathieu, Martin-Hugues St-Laurent, and Steeve D. Côté. 2016. “Caribou, water, and ice – fine-scale movements of a migratory arctic ungulate in the context of climate change.” *Movement Ecology*. Movement Ecology, 4:14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40462-016-0079-4>.

Miller, F.L. 1995. “Inter-island water crossings by peary caribou, south-central Queen Elizabeth Islands.” *Arctic* 48 (1): 8–12. <https://doi.org/10.14430/arctic1219>.

———. 2002. “Multi-Island Seasonal Home Range Use by Two Peary Caribou, Canadian High Arctic Islands, Nunavut, 1993-94.” *Arctic* 55 (2): 133–42.

Miller, F.L., and A. Gunn. 1985. “Observations of Barren-Ground Caribou Travelling on Thin Ice during Autumn Migration.” *Arctic* 39 (1): 85–88. <https://doi.org/10.14430/arctic2052>.

Miller, F.L., R.H. Russell, and A. Gunn. 1977. “Interisland movements of Peary caribou (<i>Rangifer tarandus pearyi</i>) on western Queen Elizabeth Islands, Arctic Canada.” *Canadian Journal of Zoology* 55 (6): 1029–37. <https://doi.org/10.1139/z77-131>.

Morris, D.W. 1987. “Tests of density-dependent habitat selection in a patchy environment.” *Ecological Monographs* 57 (4): 269–81.

Ricca, Mark A., Floyd W. Weckerly, Adam Duarte, and Jeffrey C. Williams. 2012. “Range expansion of nonindigenous caribou in the Aleutian archipelago of Alaska.” *Biological Invasions* 14 (9): 1779–84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10530-012-0195-z>.

Schaefer, J.A., S.P. Mahoney, J.N. Weir, J.G. Luther, and C.E. Soulliere. 2016. “Decades of habitat use reveal food limitation of Newfoundland caribou.” *Journal of Mammalogy* 97 (2): 386–93. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jmammal/gyv184>.