

## Species at Risk 101 – A Primer

The Yukon government recently initiated a process to develop its own legislation under the Yukon Wildlife Act to address species at risk issues. Renewable Resources is currently consulting with Yukoners about the legislation, so here's an opportunity to brush up on some species at risk basics before providing some thoughtful input.

Canada's prolonged efforts at adopting species at risk legislation began in 1992 when we were the first industrialized country to ratify the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. In 1996 the federal government, provinces and territories signed an Accord for the Protection of Species at Risk, each making a commitment to establish compatible legislation that protects species at risk in Canada.

Federal efforts stalled when Canada's endangered species bill *twice* fell victim to federal elections—in 1996 and again in 2000—and the bills died on the Order Paper. Meanwhile, Mexico and the United States have adopted tough, progressive legislation with strong measures to protect species at risk. Though the Canadian government got back on track by introducing Bill C-5 in February 2001, the bill falls short in several ways and the federal Species at Risk Act is still not in place.

Before venturing into the discussion, a basic understanding of the lexicon of scientists who study and evaluate wildlife issues is a good place to start.

Extinction and extirpation are two terms that are used to describe the degree to which species are displaced. **Extinct** species of animals and plants no longer exist on Earth. Most of us have heard about dinosaurs and the Dodo bird, but 12 much less heralded Canadian wildlife species have also gone extinct, such as the Great Auk and the Dawson's subspecies of the Woodland caribou.

**Extirpated** species no longer survive in the wild where they have naturally occurred, but they may exist in another country or in captivity. For example, if the grizzly bear population in the southern Rocky Mountains continues to decline, the grizzly could eventually become extirpated from the continental U.S. In Canada, 15 species are listed as extirpated or lost from the wild.

A federal body called the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) assesses and designates which wild species are in some danger of disappearing in Canada. With the new legislation, provinces and territories will become more involved in the process. This could mean being able to provide more relevant data or responding more quickly to a species at risk issue than the lengthy COSEWIC process. It could also mean that political, economic or social influences of jurisdictions could weigh in on an independent process that has been largely based on science.

According to COSEWIC, **endangered** species face imminent extirpation or extinction. This classification is like a 'Code Red' in nature, when certain wildlife or plants are at high risk to disappear. A recovery plan is adopted to protect and rebuild an endangered species population. Nationally, 107 species of wildlife are listed as endangered, one of which lives in the Yukon. Across northern Canada and in the Yukon, the bowhead whale is classified as endangered. Canada and the U.S. have monitoring programs in place, commercial harvesting of bowheads is prohibited and a very limited aboriginal subsistence harvest continues.

**Threatened** species are at risk of becoming endangered if nothing is done to reverse the conditions that are leading them toward extirpation or extinction. Two species of wildlife are currently

threatened in the Yukon: the wood bison and the peregrine falcon. The wood bison was brought back from the brink of extinction by a major reintroduction and breeding program in western Canada. Started in the mid-80s with 34 bison, the Yukon herd now numbers close to 500 animals. Similarly, the peregrine falcon faced near extinction in the 1960s and 70s due to the catastrophic impact of pesticides on the bird's ability to reproduce. Though the prospects of Yukon peregrines appeared to change with the banning of DDT and successful captive recovery programs, peregrines in the Yukon and across North America still face significant pressures.

A **species of special concern** could become threatened or endangered because of a combination of factors or natural characteristics that make it vulnerable. Examples include pollutants, low reproduction rates or impacts of habitat loss due to human activities. This classification flags the species, but it does not enact any special measures. Species of special concern in the Yukon are the grizzly bear, wolverine, short-eared owl and squanga whitefish.

Species at risk elsewhere—but not in the Yukon—are still of concern to us because our territory offers something that much of the continent cannot: intact habitat for species that are under pressure or displaced elsewhere. It's also worth noting species that are considered at risk in the Yukon but not elsewhere; these include our local populations of mule deer, muskox, elk and cougar.

**Habitat** is to wildlife what farms and grocery stores are to humans—without it we cannot survive. It's not enough to protect dens and nesting sites, provide buffers or implement hunting closures. Wildlife requires large intact spaces to flourish, where feeding, migration, reproduction and other activities are not compromised. When the integrity of wildlife habitat is diminished, science has repeatedly shown that the species that depend on the area pay the price. **Critical habitat** is a habitat area that is considered essential to a species' survival and recovery. The proposed legislation could fall seriously short in protecting species at risk because habitat protection might be optional.

People sometimes look at the Yukon's comparatively low number of species at risk and relatively high proportion of wild space and question the need for strong legislation that protects wild animals and their habitat. But they miss the point—this is the very reason why tough guidelines are so important. Our territory is home to some of North America's more healthy and intact populations of wildlife. The Yukon can still provide critical habitat for large mammal and migratory bird species that are under intense pressures elsewhere, and increasing pressures here. With the support of strong legislation behind us, Yukoners have the opportunity and responsibility to act as stewards for vulnerable populations and to be proactive in protecting what we have.

A discussion paper on Yukon species at risk is available from the Department of Renewable Resources. The deadline for comments is February 18, 2002. Lots of information on species at risk is available on the web, including:

[www.cosewic.gc.ca](http://www.cosewic.gc.ca)

[www.sp2000.org](http://www.sp2000.org)

[www.cites.org](http://www.cites.org)

[www.especiesenperil.gc.ca](http://www.especiesenperil.gc.ca)

[www.especiesauvages.ca](http://www.especiesauvages.ca)

[www.renres.gov.yk.ca/wildlife/wildrisk.html](http://www.renres.gov.yk.ca/wildlife/wildrisk.html)

[www.wwfcanada.org](http://www.wwfcanada.org)

[www.cnf.ca](http://www.cnf.ca)

[www.wildcanada.net](http://www.wildcanada.net)

[www.extinctionsucks.org](http://www.extinctionsucks.org)

*This is the first in a two-part series on Yukon's proposed Species at Risk legislation.*