

THE ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Life on the Coastal Plain of the Refuge

At 1.5 million acres, the coastal plain comprises just 8 percent of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, yet boasts concentrations of nearly 200 species of wildlife. Nestled between the highest peaks and glaciers of the Brooks Range and the lagoons, barrier islands, and ice floes of the Beaufort Sea, it is often likened to Africa's Serengeti because of its abundant and diverse wildlife. In fact, scientists consider the coastal plain the biological heart of the entire refuge. Unfortunately, it is also where several multinational oil corporations have set their sights. If Congress allows oil exploration and development in the coastal plain, these are just a few of the wildlife treasures that will be put at risk:



Caribou

For centuries, a vast herd of caribou has traveled hundreds of miles from Canada's Porcupine River region to the coastal plain, where females give birth in the spring. The timing of and types of plant growth on the plain are particularly favorable for pregnant and nursing caribou. In addition, in the early summer there are fewer predators

(such as wolves, bears, and eagles), so newborn caribou have a better chance of surviving their vulnerable first few weeks of life. After calving, the caribou gather in large concentrations along the coast, where cooling breezes help disperse insects that can drain more than a quart of blood a week from the calves and their parents.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has concluded that oil development

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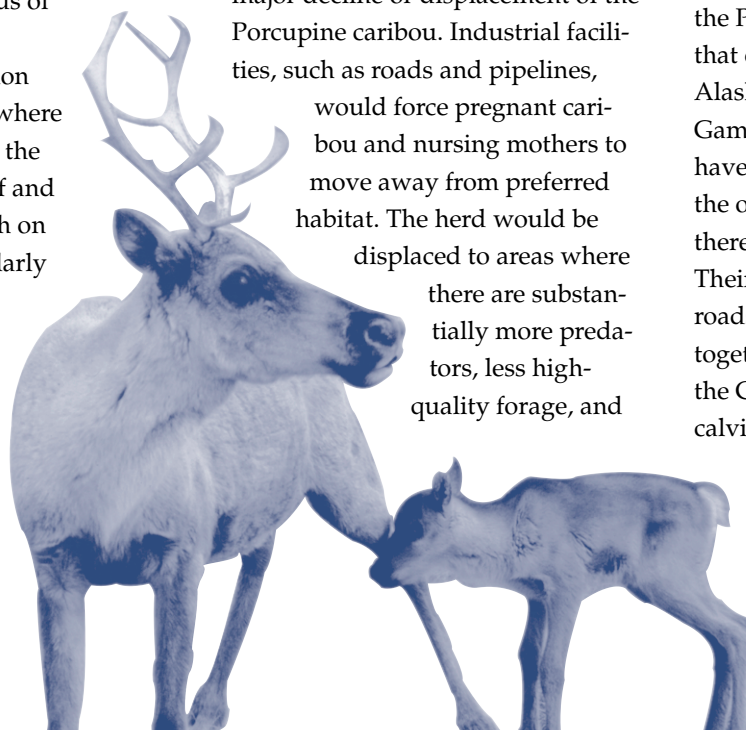
in the coastal plain would cause a major decline or displacement of the Porcupine caribou. Industrial facilities, such as roads and pipelines, would force pregnant caribou and nursing mothers to move away from preferred habitat. The herd would be displaced to areas where there are substantially more predators, less high-quality forage, and



significantly less relief from mosquitoes. Even a small reduction in the number of surviving calves—less than 5 percent in a single year—could have long-term effects, decreasing the size of the herd.

Drilling proponents discount the importance of the coastal plain because caribou remain there only briefly. This is analogous to claiming maternity wards are expendable because new mothers use them for only a short time. Advocates of oil development also point to the Central Arctic herd, which inhabits the Prudhoe Bay area, as evidence that oil and wildlife can coexist. Yet Alaska's Department of Fish and Game reports that pregnant caribou have dramatically shifted away from the oil fields, calving instead where there are no industrial disturbances. Their studies show that as oilfield roads and pipelines grew closer together in the Kuparuk oilfields in the Central Arctic, concentrated calving disappeared from this area and shifted to the south.

Scientists say that the ►



Porcupine herd, which is nearly seven times larger than the Central Arctic herd but relies on a calving area that is one-fifth the size, would be at a far greater risk from oil development.



Polar Bears

The coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge is the most important onshore denning area for the entire Beaufort Sea population of polar bears, which range along 800 miles of the arctic coast. Most of the year, these bears roam along the sea ice in search of seals and other prey. In the fall, pregnant females seek den sites in which to give birth and nurse their young. Denning polar bears are extremely sensitive to industrial activity. Females may abandon their dens if disturbed, which can be fatal for cubs unable to fend for themselves.



Muskoxen

Completely wiped out in Alaska in the late nineteenth century by hunters, muskoxen have been successfully reintroduced in the northern portion of the state. Approximately 325 animals now live year-round on the refuge's coastal plain. According to the Interior



Pamela A. Miller

Faith Gemmill, a Gwich'in Native Alaskan from Arctic Village. The Porcupine caribou herd has been central to Gwich'in culture for 20,000 years.

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Department, oil development in the region would displace muskoxen from a large percentage of their preferred habitat in all seasons, which would reduce their population in the refuge.



Birds

During the brief summer season, more than 135 bird species gather on the coastal plain of the refuge

for breeding, nesting, and migratory stopovers. Among the many species that use the area are snow geese, tundra swans, red-throated loons, snowy owls, eider ducks, scoters, long-tailed ducks, pintails, and a variety of shorebirds.

Some of these birds are extremely sensitive to human disturbance. Snow geese, for example, depend on the coastal plain as a place to rapidly build up fat reserves for their 1,200-mile nonstop migration to southern California and Mexico. They are disturbed by helicopters and airplanes as far as four miles away. According to the Interior Department, this kind of disturbance, along with destruction of prime feeding areas, could prevent these birds from accumulating the energy reserves essential to their arduous migration—and thus threaten their survival.

An exceptional wilderness at stake

The coastal plain is the last 5 percent of Alaska's vast North Slope where oil exploration and development have not been allowed. It is the key to the ecosystems that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was designed to protect—too fragile, and too valuable, to be sacrificed for a short-term, speculative supply of oil.



Natural Resources Defense Council
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011
212 727-2700 fax: 212 727-1773
www.nrdc.org



122 C Street, NW, Suite 240, Washington, DC 20001
202 544-5205 fax: 202 544-5197
e-mail: info@alaskawild.org



122 C Street, NW, Suite 240, Washington, DC 20001
202 628-1843 fax: 202 544-5197
www.alaskacoalition.org