

# THE ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

## Protecting Life on the Coastal Plain

**W**hy destroy America's foremost wildlife refuge for less oil than we consume in a single year?

Nestled between the Brooks Mountain Range and the Beaufort Sea in Northeast Alaska, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's coastal plain is home for nearly 200 wildlife species, including polar bears, musk oxen and caribou. Every summer, millions of tundra swans, snowy owls, eider ducks and other birds migrate there to nest, molt and feed. Because of its abundant and diverse wildlife, the refuge is often likened to Africa's Serengeti.

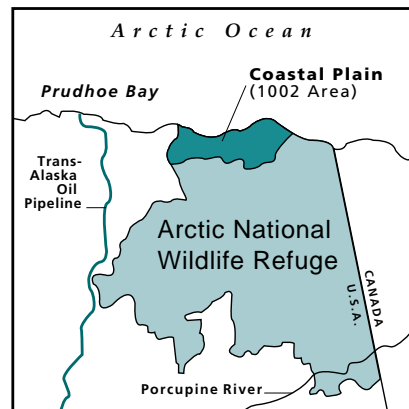
Scientists consider the coastal plain to be the biological heart of the entire refuge. It is this very heart that has been targeted by some members of Congress and oil companies even though there is relatively little oil there, if any. Any amount of oil from the refuge would not significantly reduce U.S. dependence on imported oil and would irreparably harm the wildlife that depend on this unique habitat.

If Congress allows oil drilling in the coastal plain, it would set a dangerous precedent. Not only would oil development permanently scar this pristine, fragile wilderness, but it also would open the door to industrializing America's last remaining untouched wildlands.

### **Oil development would permanently harm polar bear denning habitat**

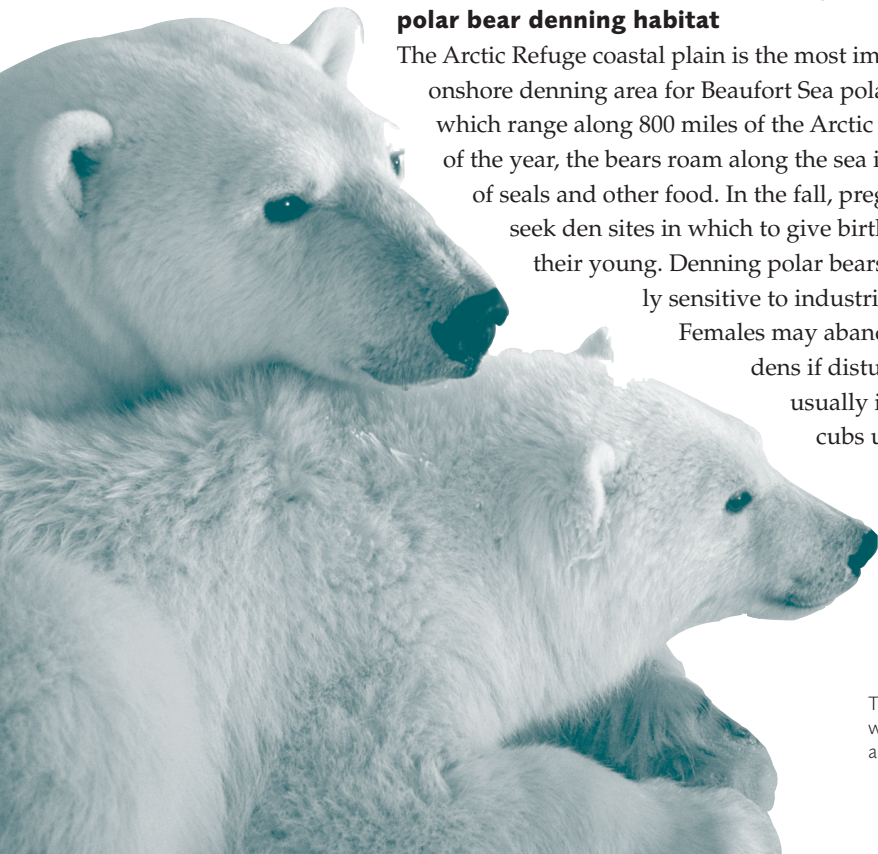
The Arctic Refuge coastal plain is the most important onshore denning area for Beaufort Sea polar bears, which range along 800 miles of the Arctic coast. Most of the year, the bears roam along the sea ice in search of seals and other food. In the fall, pregnant females seek den sites in which to give birth and nurse their young. Denning polar bears are extremely sensitive to industrial activity.

Females may abandon their dens if disturbed, which usually is fatal for cubs unable to fend for themselves.



### **Oil development would permanently harm bird habitat**

During the brief summer season, more than 135 bird species gather on the refuge's coastal plain to breed, nest and make migratory stopovers. Among the many species that rely on the area are snow geese, tundra swans, red-throated loons, snowy owls, eider ducks 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 non-stop migration to Southern California and Mexico. Helicopters and airplanes can disturb snow geese from as far as 4 miles away. According to the Interior Department, these kinds of disturbances, along with destruction of prime feeding areas, could prevent the birds from accumulating the energy reserves essential to their arduous migration, threatening their survival. ►



Nicklin/Minden Pictures

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's coastal plain is home for nearly 200 wildlife species, including polar bears, musk oxen, the Porcupine caribou herd, and millions of birds.



Kenneth R. Whitten/AlaskaStock.com

Every year, the Porcupine caribou herd migrates more than 700 miles to and from its calving grounds on the Arctic Refuge coastal plain.

### **Oil development would threaten caribou survival**

The Porcupine caribou herd has been central to the culture of Gwich'in Indians in Alaska and Canada for 20,000 years. Every year, this vast herd of caribou travels hundreds of miles from Canada's Porcupine River region to the coastal plain, where females give birth in the spring. The plant growth on the plain at that time of year nourishes pregnant and nursing caribou, and cooling breezes along the coast help disperse insects that can drain more than a quart of blood a week from the calves and their parents. These unique conditions—and the fact that there are fewer predators in the coastal plain—offer newborn caribou a better chance of surviving their vulnerable first few weeks of life.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have concluded that oil development in the coastal plain could destroy this delicate balance, prompting a major decline or displacement of the Porcupine caribou. Industrial facilities, such as roads and pipelines, would force pregnant caribou and nursing mothers to abandon their preferred habitat. The only

places left for the herd to go have substantially more predators, less high-quality forage, and significantly less relief from mosquitoes. According to a recent U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) study, even a small reduction in the number of surviving calves—less than 5 percent in a single year—could reduce the size of the herd.

Advocates of oil development point to the Central Arctic herd, which inhabits the Prudhoe Bay area, as evidence that oil and wildlife can coexist. But 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. Studies also show that as roads and pipelines grew closer together in the Central Arctic's Kuparuk oilfields, concentrated calving disappeared from this area and shifted to the south.

At 123,000 strong, the Porcupine caribou herd is significantly bigger than the Central Arctic herd, but relies on a calving area, the refuge coastal plain, one-fifth the size of Prudhoe Bay.

Furthermore, scientists from the National Academy of Sciences and the

USGS have concluded that the Porcupine herd is especially threatened by development not only because of the absence of a safe alternative calving area, but also because of its slow reproduction rate.

### **Oil development would threaten muskoxen**

Completely wiped out in Alaska in the late 19th century by hunters, muskoxen were successfully reintroduced in the northern portion of the state. A small population of these animals now lives year-round on the refuge's coastal plain. According to the Interior Department, oil development in the region would displace muskoxen from a large percentage of their preferred habitat in all seasons, which would reduce their numbers.

### **A unique wilderness at stake**

The Arctic Refuge coastal plain is the most critical part of the delicate ecosystems that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was established to protect. It is too fragile—and too valuable—to be sacrificed for a relatively small amount of oil. We would not put a dam in the Grand Canyon, or cut down Sequoia trees for firewood, so why would we allow oil derricks in one of our last pristine wildernesses? Some places should be off-limits to oil drilling and industrial development, and the Arctic Refuge is one of them. We have a moral responsibility to save wild places such as the Arctic Refuge for future generations.

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