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OPINION

Opinion: With species at risk, three wildlife wishes for 2024

By Rachel Plotkin and Maxime Faubert, Special to Montreal Gazette
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The monarch butterfly's status under Canada's Species at Risk Act has been increased from "special concern" to "endangered." John Kenney *The Gazette*

For environmentalists working to protect wildlife and the habitat they depend on, it's not always easy to feel hopeful. But here are three things that we are watching closely in 2024 that just might shake things up for species at risk — in a good way.

Monarch butterfly endangered listing under the federal Species at Risk Act

This tiny orange butterfly that weighs less than a paper clip and is able to intergenerationally navigate its way from Quebec and Ontario to breeding grounds in Mexico has captured many of our hearts.

At the end of last year, the federal government announced [the monarch's status under the Species at Risk Act](#) was being increased from "special concern" to "endangered." This means it's now illegal to harm monarchs or destroy their "critical habitat," which will be defined in a federal recovery strategy by December.

Monarchs depend on milkweed and nectar from wildflowers; we are keen to see how its critical habitat will be defined. We expect that protection measures will include restrictions on use of the controversial pesticide glyphosate, which has virtually eradicated milkweed from hundreds of thousands of square kilometres throughout the monarchs' northern migratory range.

Western chorus frog habitat needs versus development

Listing a species as "endangered" is only meaningful if legislation is enforced, and while the Species at Risk Act enables the federal government to protect habitat within its jurisdiction, there haven't been many instances in which it has used these tools.

In fact, this has only occurred in Saskatchewan and Alberta for the sage grouse, and in Quebec for the western chorus frog. Although the area protected in Quebec was only 20 hectares, it set a precedent: [Western chorus frog habitat needs](#) are now front and centre in several impending development decisions in Quebec and elsewhere.

The western chorus frog is certainly the underdog in David and Goliath standoffs, which pit the needs of a tiny frog against multimillion-dollar development interests. But the frog has already brought habitat needs to the forefront of land-use decision-making processes and will continue to do so as the year unfolds.

Boreal caribou decision pending

Canada's minister of environment and climate change, Steven Guilbeault, determined last year that Quebec and Ontario are not effectively protecting [boreal woodland caribou habitat](#). Logging and forestry roads have fragmented the forests where caribou live and have driven their decline.

If the federal government were to intervene this time, it would be for an area significantly greater than 20 hectares.

The federal government has so far stalled, granting Quebec more time to get its habitat-protection measures in line again and again. But this year Quebec's time will be up, and the public has already loudly declared that it has no appetite for scientifically indefensible bandage solutions like placing caribou into captivity to keep them alive.

The science about what caribou need to survive — large patches of mature forest — has been around since 2008. Most provinces have (slowly) moved toward adopting limits of disturbance within caribou ranges, but Quebec and Ontario remain outliers.

We hope Guilbeault and his colleagues will see through the spin and that he might use the Species at Risk Act as it was intended, to protect caribou in provinces that have turned their backs on them.

For monarchs, caribou and the western chorus frog, habitat loss and degradation are primary drivers of decline, aggravated by excessive pesticide use. The federal government has already committed to land protection and restoration by halting and reversing nature loss, including reducing pesticide risks by 50 per cent. This year will also deliver a [National Biodiversity Strategy for Canada](#). We look forward to it, and to seeing how habitat protection plays out for these three species already on the brink of extinction.

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