

Solo Alaska caribou hunt defines “trophy”

*** Experience of pursuing caribou on tundra of state's interior more valuable than any prize.**

NUSHAGAK RIVER, Alaska - The measure of a hunting trophy sometimes lies in the size of the animal killed. Other times, it is simply the sum of an entire outdoor experience. On my first Alaska caribou hunt in September 2003, I was fortunate enough to have it all.

As part of a lifelong quest to hunt and explore North America's wildest places, I traveled to Alaska to pursue barren ground caribou in the windswept Alaskan interior. I had hunted Alaska for moose previously, but always on the peninsula, on dense, alder-choked mountains and hillsides.

As soon as the bush plane cleared Kvichak Bay near Naknek, Alaska, I knew the terrain and experience would be quite different than anything I had experienced. Buzzing 500 feet above the ground, the wide-open spaces seemed less ominous than the alder and conifer forests I was used to. Though wolves and brown bears inhabited the tundra in similar numbers as in the woods, I figured it would be a lot harder for them to sneak up on me, as one had two weeks earlier in the Katmai Wilderness Area when an encounter with a brown bear left me nervous but unhurt.

After about an hour of flying, I started to see caribou milling about the tundra below me. First there were a couple scattered animals, until eventually, there were herds of 50 to 100. On a couple of occasions, I could see wolves trailing the larger concentrations of caribou, waiting for a weak or uneducated animal to stray away from the safety of the herd.

After a couple hours of flying over vast herds of caribou, I started wondering why we weren't setting down to make camp and hunt. Finally, and inexplicably, the pilot set down in a wind that was so strong, it was a chore to stand upright once I exited the plane.

What I later understood was that regardless of the caribou, a good pilot won't land a bush plane just anywhere. In my pilot's case, he knew the area well enough to find a safe place to land that was also in the very middle of all the migrating herds.

After the plane floated up and away into the heavy wind, I felt a sense of urgency to get my tent set up before dark. Sixty-mph sustained winds made what should have been a routine task quite difficult, especially since I was alone. As night fell, I was serenaded to sleep by the scattered howls of wolves as they prepared for their own caribou hunt.

Pick a 'bou

It was 15 degrees at dawn, so I went through my well-practiced routine of getting completely dressed without exiting my sleeping bag. Poking my head out of the tent with great expectations for the first day's adventure, I was not disappointed. About a mile away, I could see approximately 50 caribou milling about.

Though I could see no bulls in the group, I didn't care. I saw those animals as an opportunity to do some still hunting. I crept as close as I could in a crouched position, then went down to my belly to close the distance. After a couple of hours, I was within 100 yards of them, and they were headed my way.

As my heart raced, they walked by me at twenty yards in single file. The only bull in the group was small, and I let him go. After the last one passed, I just laid there, grateful for the experience and adrenaline rush. I knew most human beings would never know how life affirming it was to count coup with truly wild animals, and for a brief time I was a bit sad that I was alone. How spectacular that moment would have been had my son or daughter been lying next to me.

Over the next couple days I saw countless caribou, and was having a blast exploring the tundra by myself.

I passed up several shots at average-sized bulls, until finally I figured I had better shoot something before my luck ran out.

Knowing I had to butcher and pack the kill alone, I decided to try and intercept a bull a manageable distance from camp. The first group that fit the bill contained two bulls about the same size. Neither would make the record book, but that was never a concern for me.

After several hours of crawling and spotting, I found myself 100 yards from the herd of 30 animals that had lain down for a siesta. Though I found out after the first day of hunting them that caribou will usually let you walk into rifle range, I found satisfaction in the crawl and higher percentage shot. I waited until the biggest bull stood up, and dropped him with one shot from my .300 WSM.

As I loaded the last bit of meat into the heavy canvas game bag for the final trip back to camp, a group of 10 bulls crested the horizon. Each animal was more spectacular than the next, and more than one of them had a book head. They walked to within 150 yards of me, and would have been an easy shot had I not already tagged out.

It didn't matter. The bull on my back was the sum of a week of hunting and surviving on my own in a place that was more defined by its grandeur, than the antlers on any one animal's head.