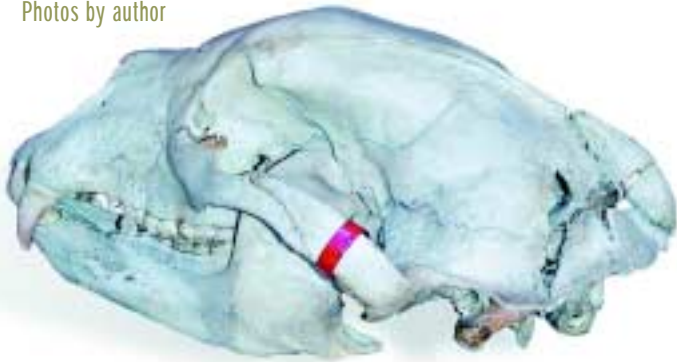


CLOSURE

The Second Time Around

By James Baichtal
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Photos by author



WHEN THE TAXIDERMIST WAS FLESHING THE BOAR'S HIDE, HE FOUND A .58 CALIBER ROUND BALL BEHIND THE LEFT EAR - PRESUMABLY, ONE THE BEAR HAD BEEN CARRYING SINCE LAST SEASON. THE SKULL HAD HEALED AND IS ACCEPTABLE IN THE CLUB'S RECORDS PROGRAM.

Closure (kl_ 'zh_r), n.,... a bringing to an end, conclusion, a sense of certainty or completeness. This is such a story. A story of one hunter's expectations, frustrations, humiliation, fear, and ultimately, closure. This is also a story of personal ethics, love for and respect of the animals we pursue and appreciation for the help and support of those with whom we hunt.

As Chairman of the East Prince of Wales Island Fish and Game Advisory Committee, I had to learn quickly about baiting bears. Alaska's Board of Game (BOG) would consider the Committee's comment in making regulatory changes. I had no experience with baiting and in fact preferred to "spot and stalk" bears when hunting. To better understand the issue, I applied to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game for two bear baiting permits. A friend, Larry, loaned me his well-established baiting station and treestands.

The bears came, sometimes several circling the bait at the same time. One mid-May evening while I had one bear on the bait and another circling, a big boar entered the muskeg. The other two bears quickly left the area. This bear was huge, well furred, and walked with a swagger.

The massive boar seemed to know that something was not quite right. He paced. He crossed the muskeg to his marking tree, let out a roar and began to claw and rub on the tree. While he was occupied, I slipped from my stand and crept to within 25 yards. The big boar caught a movement and dropped to the ground, piercing through me with his small, black eyes. His nose worked and his jaws smacked, spraying saliva. He swayed back and forth and woofed as he slammed both front feet down, sending a shower of water from the muskeg. I raised the .58-caliber rifled French Fusil-fin, took aim down its length and touched the trigger.

The flintlock belched, its ball striking the boar just behind the head. He immediately rose, spun half around and fell backwards into the muskeg with a splash. He let out one last mighty

roar and lay still. I slowly reloaded and decided not to approach him from the front, but to check him from behind. This would mean that I would have to pass behind several small shore pines and cedar trees. I primed the pan and slipped through the trees. When I approached to where the bear had fallen, he was gone! Nothing, no noise, no tracks, nothing. I checked the timber and brush behind me. Nothing. How could he disappear like that? A terrible feeling began to sink in. How could I have missed? I had practiced with the flintlock for just such a shot. I had wanted to put the bear down quickly, so I had opted for breaking his neck just behind the head like I had done on so many other bears, foregoing the easier lung shot. I knelt and found a spot of blood but no impressions in the muskeg. I circled once, twice, playing out the events in my mind's eye. Heck, I had my Ruger .44 Magnum. I could have gone forward and finished the job quickly... but by all indications this bear had dropped dead!

After a half-hour of searching, I found more blood on a skunk cabbage leaf along one of the many trails leaving the muskeg. It was getting late, and the overcast skies were stealing valuable light. I followed the trail to where it branched, taking off my coat and shirt to bare my arm. I ran it on the underside of the blueberry brush on the right side of the trail. A pink tint appeared on my arm. I crept forward. I figured the bear was bleeding on the right side of its neck and the hair was likely matted over the wound. I'd progressed only 100 yards from the first opening and into a second.

By now it was getting late. I could barely see without a flashlight, and the prospects of tracking a wounded bear by flashlight were less than appealing. As I walked back to my truck, I wondered if I'd let my ego get the best of me, had allowed the size of the bear's head to blur my judgment.

Before work the next morning, I was back at the last blood sign. I managed another 40 yards before running out of red again. I circled, retraced, circled, and

then ranged out into the forest, hoping to stumble upon him. Nothing.

I kept bait at the station, and bears came to it. For the rest of the week I searched every day, morning and afternoon, then sat in the treestand during the evening. Larry took his dog into the woods but found no hot scent. No ravens or eagles circled. Maybe the bear survived.

One evening, a large boar swaggered into view, then stopped 70 yards out. The wind swirled and he was gone. It all happened so fast I could not be sure if it was the big boar or not. One thing for certain, it showed no ill effects.

As spring 2001 came around, I was still haunted by my wounding of the big boar the year before. I decided to bait again, hoping to see the animal once more. I began baiting in mid-April, but the weather remained cool. Finally after many days, my bait was hit. I kept it supplied, sprinting to the stand on evenings, many times spooking bears from the station. On May 18, I found time to sit more than a few moments on the bait. Shortly, a huge boar emerged from behind me, approaching on a trail that came within 20 feet of me. The wind was perfect as the bear sauntered over to the bait. He showed no hesitation and I watched him for over 15 minutes. He had all the right proportions. His head looked small for his body, as did his ears, and they were wide apart. His belly nearly touched the ground. His dark brown nose, convex on the top, ended with a hint of white along his lips. At this close range I could even see old scars on his face from past battles with other boars. Finally he looked straight toward me and I could see a deep cleft between his ears.

This time I'd wait for a lung shot. After what seemed a long time, the animal turned just right and stepped ahead, exposing his vitals. I carefully aimed my custom

Hawken and fired. The bear bolted through the muskeg, spraying water. He stopped about 50 yards away, looked back over his shoulder and fell dead. Really dead. A short trip to town brought help from Dennis Landwehr, my longtime hunting partner. With another friend, we returned, skinned the bear, and packed out the meat.

The bear's skull green-scored 20-14/16 points; its hide squared over 7 feet and, save for some rubbing on the paws, was in prime condition. Amy Russell, an ADF&G field biologist, was interested in the tanned hide. Karen, my wife, dropped the hide with Skip and Diane Warren at Prince of Wales Taxidermy in Craig. That evening Skip phoned. He had been fleshing the boar's hide and had worked his way up to the head. In a healed pocket in the hide, behind the left ear, he found a .58 caliber round ball, one the bear had obviously been carrying for some time. After a long pause, I stuttered something about a healed wound or scar on the right side of the neck – was it there? Skip confirmed just such a scar.

The bear had died just 20 yards from where it had been shot the year before. Closure at long last. A rare opportunity in a hunter's experience to know the final fate of an animal he or she has wounded. I am still shocked when

I think about the circumstances and the events that led to the final knowing.

A couple of days later, after the birds had cleaned the carcass, I inspected the spine of the boar. The second vertebra of the neck, the axis vertebra, was missing its vertical fin. The break had healed.

As for my internal debate on the appropriateness of bear baiting as an ethical, viable hunting method, I have come full circle. I still personally prefer the spot and stalk method for bear hunting. However, for those who do not have the good fortune to observe and scrutinize a large number of bears and whose hunting time is limited, I believe that hunting over bait allows them to observe unstressed bears, really looking them over and sizing them up before shooting.

I reflect on these events with disbelief, as well as relief, and I owe a lot to all those who played a role in this hunting drama. These are some of the incredible outdoor experiences in a hunter's life that provide a lifetime of reflection. The lessons from this hunt have already been incorporated into my hunting style and decisions. I will never forget this hunt, the events, those involved, and ultimately, its final closure. ▲▲▲



THE AUTHOR WITH HIS BLACK BEAR TAKEN DURING HIS SECOND SEASON HUNTING OVER BAIT. THE BEAR GREEN SCORES 20-14/16 POINTS, BUT HAS NOT BEEN ENTERED IN THE RECORDS PROGRAM YET.

FIVE TIMES LUCKY

Mackay Lake Adventure

By Wayne Norstrom
B&C Associate and Official Measurer
Photos by author

CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP: BOB WILLIAMS WITH HIS CARIBOU - NOTE THE GOOD BROW AND TOP POINTS. DON NORHEIM WITH HIS CARIBOU, WHICH ALSO HAS A GOOD BROW AND TOP POINTS. THE AUTHOR (IN RED) WITH HIS GUIDE ARCHIE SANGRAS AND HIS BOOK CARIBOU.



Mackay Lake was starting to lump up and the Arctic sun was low in the west when I spotted Bob William's boat coming in. Bob was the last of our party of five to kill his second caribou and he and his son, Kevin, were hard at it. Through my binoculars I could see caribou antlers riding up front. I walked down to the dock for the show and tell that comes with a successful hunt.

The head was on the shore when I got there and what a head it was. Long beams, long points, and a double shovel, it was definitely a candidate for the book. "Geez Bob, that's a big caribou, it's in the book." I blurt out. Harly Leader, a well-known Calgary taxidermist, was walking past, and we got a second opinion. Harly has handled hundreds of caribou and knows a good head when he sees it. He concurred with my thoughts. It was going to be well up in the "book". Tomorrow I would throw a tape on it, just to see.

It was that evening, after supper was done, the second coffee was poured, and the stories were being retold, that it hit me. We had done something that I would have thought impossible.

Five hunters had killed five caribou that would place well up in the all-time records. Most people, me included, have hunted their entire lives without scratching into the all-time records book. We had

done it in less than a week.

I knew the four others were in the book because Ron Kerr and I had spent all morning scoring them. Luck played a part, however, I believed there had to be more reasons for our success.

Gary Jaeb, owner of True North Safaris, operates out of Mackay Lake in Northwest Territories. He has operated there for 18 years and has a solid knowledge of the caribou herd. Gary had an interesting observation.

July had been a wet month for the Arctic. Most people don't realize the Arctic is actually a desert. All

the lakes say it's not, but precipitation records prove differently. The wet July resulted in exceptional plant growth, and Gary believes that the improved nutrients resulted in better antler growth. Harly Leader has worked on a lot of central Canada barren ground caribou heads and his comment was, "This is the best year I've seen. They average a lot bigger than other years." Harly believed about 20 percent of the season's harvest at True North Safaris would make the all-time records book.

I concur with Gary. I'm sure there is a correlation between antler growth and plant growth. It stands to reason that animals with a good, high nutrient diet will have the opportunity to grow better antlers than something that is living on a scurvy diet of poor vegetation. But it doesn't end there.

The past two winters in northern Canada have been exceptionally mild. Winters are the major limiting factor on most northern animals and caribou are no exception. Mild winters result in the animals migrating north in better shape, which should result in better antler growth. Certainly mild winters result in bigger, stronger calves.

There has to be something said for genetics. Look in the book (for any animal) and start plotting where the records are killed. Whenever I've tried this certain areas stand out. Look in the records for central Canada barren ground caribou and notice how many come from the area around Mackay and Courageous Lakes, which are only a few kilometers apart. Perhaps it is only coincidence, certainly it won't stand scientific scrutiny, but it is interesting. The fact that caribou outfitters have been operating there for some time helps. Certainly non-resident sportsmen are more likely to record their trophies than residents who generally hunt for meat. Regardless of those factors, the fact remains, a lot of big caribou came from that area.

It is my opinion a couple of other factors (besides dumb luck) played in our favor. We had booked the last week of September, which is the last hunt of the year. A time when old man winter can have his hand on the throat of the Arctic. Jaeb had advised me of this when we

booked the hunt. Missing a couple of days hunting due to weather was to be expected. Some of the bays would probably be frozen. But the migration would be smack on. We were all Northerners — cold weather wasn't a worry.

The weather really smiled on us. The first three days of the hunt the daytime highs were in the low 20° Celsius (about 70° F). This was unheard of. In the 18 years Jaeb has spent on the lake, this was the first time the Arctic was snow-free for the last hunt. The good weather let us get around.

The other advantage of a late hunt is the belief that the larger bulls came through last. I'm not a caribou expert, however, the biologists and hunters I talked to all agreed that there is a flush of large bulls at the tail end of the migration.

On any hunt the human factor plays an important part. Good guides, good equipment, and a hunter who can shoot plays a large part in the success of a hunt. A sportsman who is willing to wait and watch and be selective will generally do the best. This is especially true with caribou.

Caribou are an incredible animal to see. The late Jack O'Connor once wrote that caribou were the second most spectacular animal in the world, behind the Bengal tiger. The size of the antlers really fool hunters used to looking at deer or even elk. I've taken several mule deer and a couple of whitetails that were as large in the body size as any central Canada barren ground caribou I've ever taken. But, I've never taken a deer with over 300 inches of antler. Imagine a caribou, crossing the open tundra. An large mule deer-sized animal, chocolate brown, with a flowing white mane, and on his head is more antler than you can believe. You take him, and although he's an excellent trophy, you were fooled. A 300-class caribou looks great on the hoof, but it won't do anything for the record book. You have to wait, glass, and study or you will get fooled. We waited and studied. And we had Archie.

Archie Sangras guided me and my buddy, Don Norheim. Archie was hard working, had excellent vision, and most importantly, he wanted us to get real trophies. It all came together the second day of the hunt.

Early that morning, only a few kilometers from camp, Archie spotted a small bunch of caribou on the skyline. Through our glasses we could see good weight on the tops of a couple. The caribou were angling away from the lake and it was a foot-race to get ahead of them. We made it with barely a minute to spare. Hidden in a dip in the tundra we watched, judged, studied, and then, there he was, high-beamed, with long top points and double shovels. Both Archie and I said the same thing "That's a big caribou." Don took it. The green score was 386 and change.

Of course, I believe in luck, and it was our day. I had walked back to the boat to get our lunches, Thermoses, and my pack board, while Archie started working on the caribou. As we sat in the sun eating our lunch more caribou showed up. A mixed herd of about 200 fed past us, however, way across the valley, a herd of bulls bedded down. We judged two to be worth a second look, but there was no way we could get closer. We waited, watched, and studied. A couple of hours later the mixed herd gave us a break and Archie said we had to move a long ways, quickly.

Half an hour later we were hidden in the tundra, catching our breath, when they showed up. There was probably close to 40 bulls feeding. Every once in a while a fight would break out. Love was on their minds. There were two truly fine bulls in the bunch. One was tall and wide with double shovels, while the other lacked the beam and width but had spectacular weight. Archie and I both agreed that the tall wide one would score more, but the heavy one was the pretty one. The herd fed past us at about 100 meters. When the

pretty one came free I took him. The green score said he was on the good side of 388. Not bad for the little one.

Back at camp Don and I laid our trophies on the beach. Later in the evening Kevin Williams put one down on the good side of 370 and Ron Kerr dropped one near 380. Unbelievable, four heads, all well up in the book. Only Bob was left.

He connected the next day. Bob's bull didn't come easy. He and his guide turned down a good bull early, then boated a couple of hours north where they positioned themselves above a long valley. Caribou were constantly coming through, and Kevin spotted one bedded futher up the valley that looked promising. Paul, the guide, concurred. Two hours and four kilometers later, Bob was in position to shoot. At 154 laser measured yards, the bull came clear of the cows. Bob took him. The next day I measured him just under 382. The unbelievable had happened, five hunters had booked five caribou.

Lady luck didn't smile on us, she actually beamed. She beamed last winter with warm weather and again in July with lots of rain. She beamed on the weather and she beamed on us.

I just wonder what that high, wide one would have scored? ▲▲▲

RON KERR (TOP) AND KEVIN WILLIAMS WITH THEIR MACKAY LAKE BULLS.



PHOTO BY RON KERR



THE FIVE HUNTERS WITH THE FIVE RECORD BOOK CARIBOU - (LEFT TO RIGHT) RON KERR, BOB WILLIAMS, DON NORHEIM, KEVIN WILLIAMS, AND THE AUTHOR WAYNE NORSTROM.

