

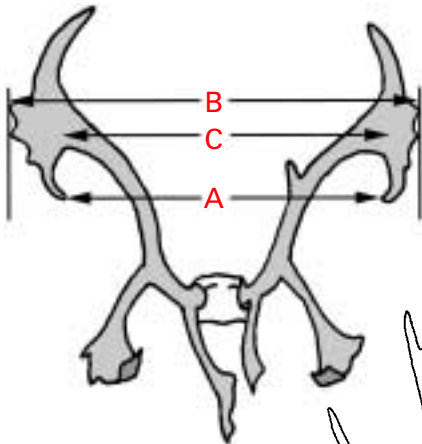
FIELD

No other antlered game shows a greater variety in the development of antler points than the caribou... find out which features matter most.

CARIBOU
THE
SECOND IN
A SERIES

JUDGING

By Jay A. Lesser



I knew what to expect. I have watched the endless swarms of caribou with their mind-boggling array of antlers stream by on my TV set many times. I figured my two biggest concerns would be to try to hold out for a really big bull and then to try to maneuver for a clear shot that wouldn't pass through and wound another animal.

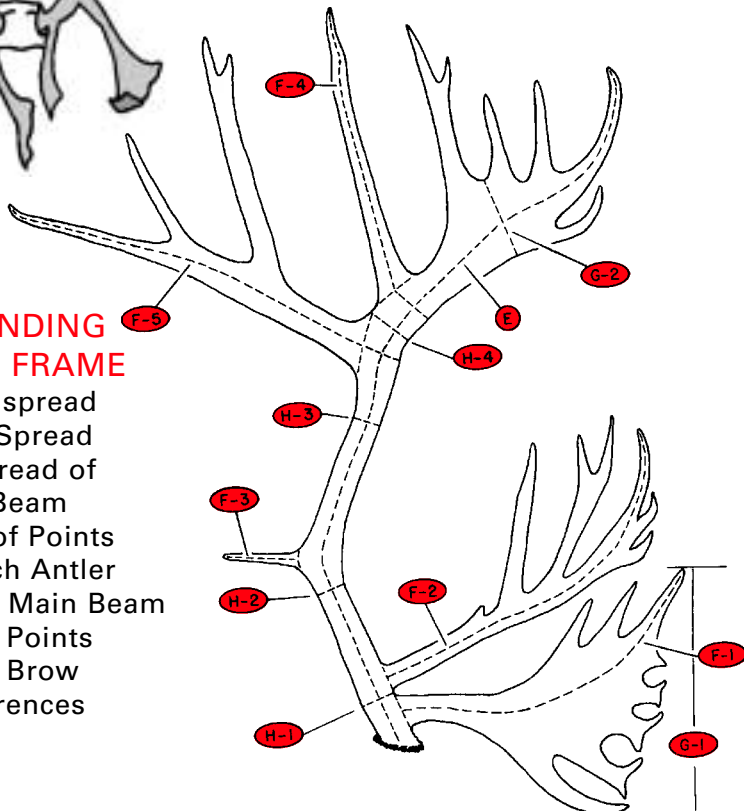
In preparation for my first caribou hunt I studied the Boone and Crockett records book, memorizing measurement locations and trying to get a handle on what features mattered most for a high score. I chose my rifle and load carefully and practiced frequently to perfect the pinpoint accuracy that I knew would be necessary to surgically remove my coveted trophy from his brethren.

I then found myself in Alaska with my rifle in hand and a caribou tag in my pocket. However, by day three, my guide and I had walked an average of 10 miles a day and with the exception of a few shed antlers, we hadn't seen any sign that a caribou had ever been there, let alone spot a caribou. My guide assured me that there really were caribou in this huge chunk of wilderness but because of the unusually warm weather conditions, they were widely scattered. He explained that the caribou were seeking the cool shade of the timbered areas and refuge from the bugs wherever they could find it.

It had never really occurred to me that with the wide distribution of the

UNDERSTANDING A CARIBOU FRAME

- A – Tip to tip spread
- B – Greatest Spread
- C – Inside Spread of Main Beam
- D – Number of Points on Each Antler
- E – Length of Main Beam
- F – Length of Points
- G – Width of Brow
- H – Circumferences



Top points are a series of distinct, separate points that develop at the top of the antler main beam, with the beam often showing distinct palmation at this location. Ideally, you are looking for long points and well-developed palmation on the tops.



Brown Bear
27 12/16 B&C

Dall's Sheep
172 3/8 B&C

Moose
174 3/8 P&Y

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Barren Ground Caribou
394 7/8 B&C

EIK
377 6/8 P&Y

Black Bear
21 4/16 B&C

Mule Deer
189 7/8 B&C

Pronghorn
77 2/8 P&Y

Whitetail
168 5/8 P&Y

Coues' Deer
111 1/8 B&C

Desert Bighorn
181 6/8 B&C

Whitetail
152 3/8 B&C

Whitetail
131 3/8 P&Y

Whitetail
140 3/8 P&Y

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various caribou types and the effects of weather, insects, food availability, etc., that maybe caribou everywhere didn't spend all their time cruising around in big herds migrating back and forth.

On day four we left camp early in the morning and traveled about 30 miles upstream by jet boat to try a new area. We had hiked inland about four miles from the river where our boat was secured until we found a good vantage point to do some glassing. It overlooked a meandering creek and a series of hills, valleys, and scattered timber patches. The country seemed to go on endlessly. We had only been glassing for a few minutes when my guide spotted a caribou bull bedded directly across from us about a half mile away. We quickly set up our spotting scopes to take a closer look at the bull, which already appeared quite large through the binoculars.

I was excited because it was the first live caribou I had ever seen. My guide was excited because it was the biggest caribou he had ever seen. That was a sobering thought considering the fact that this man had been guiding for more than 20 years and had looked at thousands of bulls (he has even seen the "nature channel" type migrations). We only looked at the bull for a few moments before we crammed everything back into our packs and began to ease down toward the creek and out of the bull's line of sight. I can still remember thinking that this bull looked bigger than any of the mounted heads or any of the pictures I had studied in preparation for my hunt. He was just plain huge.

The bull was lying in the middle of a plateau that was timbered along the top on the right side. Just across the creek below us, a small valley angled up the hill to the timbered edge of the plateau where the caribou was resting. If we could make it to the spot where the valley met the timber, it looked like it would put us within a few hundred yards of the bull, assuming he stayed bedded that long.

Once we were below the bull's line of sight, we hurried the 500 yards to the creek below. The wind was in our favor and everything went smoothly as we crossed the creek and made our way up the small valley, all the while wondering if he would still be bedded there when we arrived. When we reached the point where the valley met the trees, we paused to catch our breath. We then crawled to the top and peeked over. My heart skipped a beat when I saw that the bull was still lying there, apparently unaware of any danger approxi-

mately 250 yards away. At that range the antlers looked absolutely immense. As I crawled forward a few feet, sliding my pack ahead of me to use as a rifle rest, I tried to fight back the buck fever that was beginning to flood my system.

I eased my rifle into position and snuggled in behind it in preparation for the shot. My guide belly-crawled up next to me and whispered that since the caribou seemed to be completely at ease, maybe we should try to get closer. I assured him that I would have no problem making the shot from where we were. I turned my Leupold scope up to 10x and eased the safety off. Placing the wavering cross hairs in the middle of the

bull's shoulder, I took a deep breath and let half of it out as I calmed down and the cross hairs stopped moving and became rock steady. However, I noticed that because of the angle the bull was laying, it appeared that I needed to hold much lower to center his vitals, almost at ground level. I raised my eye from the scope and asked my guide if he thought I should wait until the bull stood up.

Then fate intervened. Out of the trees to our right a large brown bear was loping directly toward the caribou. The caribou saw the bear coming and instantly jumped to his feet and ran for his life. When the caribou jumped up, the bear poured on the speed and was within 10

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FIELD JUDGING

yards of the bull as they disappeared over the crest. My guide and I stared at each other in disbelief, then scrambled to our feet and sprinted to the crest of the hill where the bear and my caribou had gone over. When we reached the place where they had disappeared and looked out over the country, they were nowhere in sight. We had a great view of the surrounding area from that point but they had simply vanished. We spent the rest of the day hiking and glassing into every nook and cranny in the area, but we never saw either one of them again. I guess I should

be saying something noble like, "Oh well, that's hunting," but frankly, I still find myself wondering, "What if?"

Categories

The Boone and Crockett Club recognizes five categories of caribou. These are the barren ground, Central Canada barren ground, mountain, Quebec-Labrador, and woodland caribou. The general conformation of the antlers is similar for all five categories, while the size of the antlers and the size of the animal that carries them varies. No other antlered game shows a greater variety in the development of antler points than the caribou and for this reason there is no such thing as an abnormal point on a caribou.

The definition of what constitutes a point on a caribou differs from the gen-

eral definition used for all other antlered game. The Boone and Crockett Club defines a point on a caribou antler as any projection at least one-half inch long, and longer than it is wide at one-half inch or more measuring from the tip. The number of points that a caribou has is an important consideration when field judging them because the total number of points contributes directly to the score.

Five Features to Look for in the Field

A mature caribou rack generally has five main features:

Length of the main beam

You can use the height of the animal to estimate the length of the main beam considering the average bull stands four to four-and-a-half feet high at the shoulder. However, it can be hard to accurately estimate the length because of the differences in the curve of the main beams of each individual bull's antlers. Those with straight beams appear to be very long, while those with deeply curved beams will appear shorter, but usually the latter will have a much longer actual beam length. When viewed from the side, bulls with a narrow spread will appear to have a longer main beam than those with a wide spread, but they seldom do. This is a good time to mention that the inside spread between the main beams contributes directly to the score and it too can be estimated by the shoulder height of the animal, but there is a catch here. If the inside spread exceeds the length of the longer main beam, spread credit is only equal to the length of the longer main beam. This isn't a normal occurrence with the western trophy categories, but it is fairly common to the Quebec-Labrador variety.

Brow palm

The brow palm, generally referred to as the "shovel," is the antler growth that projects horizontally out over the caribou's face. Most caribou bulls only have a well-developed shovel on one antler, with a spike or small shovel on the other. However, occasionally a bull will have "double shovels" (a well-developed shovel on each antler) and this will enhance the final score. Ideally the shovel(s) will project well out over the bridge of the caribou's nose and form a multi-pointed broad palm. The length of the shovel, the width of the palm, and the number of points on the shovel contribute directly to the final

When hunting for a potential records-book caribou, try to find a bull that has as many of the features that we have examined as possible.

Pictured here is the highest scoring caribou entered in the books – the current World's Record barren ground caribou scoring 477 points.



score. There are no deductions for asymmetry between the shovels.

Bez point

The next antler projection growing forward from the main beam just above the shovel is the bez (pronounced "bay"). There should be one on each antler with some hint of symmetry. The bez should have good length, and the more points growing off of them the better. Both of these features contribute to the score.

Rear point

The rear point usually develops as an unbranched spike projecting backward from about the middle of the main beam. Although not all bulls have these points, their length, when present, adds to the score.

Top palm and top palm points

Top palm points, with occasional branch points, arise from the top of the antler main beam, with the beam often showing palmation at this location. Ideally, you are looking for lots of points on the top palm and well-developed palmation. The lengths of the two longest top palm points on each antler are a significant portion of the final score. Unlike any of the other antlered categories, top palm point lengths are taken from the tip of each point to the bottom edge of the palmation of the main beam. There is also a circumference measurement taken at the narrowest place between the two longest top palm points, as well as a width measurement at the widest place between top palm points. Thus, the top palm is measured four times (two points, width, and circumference). A well-developed top palm is a highly desirable attribute.

I would also mention there are three other circumference measurements taken on each main beam, making long, massive main beams another highly desirable attribute.

When hunting for a potential records-book caribou, try to find a bull that has as many of the features we have examined as possible and you just might get yourself a records-book animal. Very few bulls have all of these attributes, but the possibility of finding one is a part of the attraction of hunting the majestic caribou. ■



Vic van Ballenberghe

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