

If you find your spirit getting a little adventurous this fall, take a serious look at heading north for

CARIBOU

By T.J. Schwanky

Photos courtesy of Author

"Big one!" were the only words uttered by Noel, our native hunting guide.

"That's a real big one," I said stuffing another charge down the spout of the still smoking muzzleloader. "He'll go close to 400."

My wife and I were hunting on Mackay Lake in the Northwest Territories and I had just shot what was by all accounts a great Central Canada barren ground caribou. He would easily score enough to qualify for the Boone and Crockett Awards Program, but the one I was looking at now made him look like a porcelain miniature. I had debated about buying the second caribou tag before we left Yellowknife, but was I ever glad that I did.

At a little over 100 yards, the bull and his companion split and then paused for a brief moment. Long enough, however, for me to drop the striker on the percussion cap and send a 240-grain sabot on its way. The big bull dropped instantly, the bullet striking him

in the spine. In a little over a minute I had shot two trophy caribou, and I was later to find out that the second bull scored 379-5/8 points, making him the largest muzzleloader-killed bull at the time.

Caribou are quite simply the perfect quarry for the hunter interested in traveling to some wild and exotic locations. While certainly not deserving of their reputation for being stupid, caribou are much more approachable than most ungulates, making them ideal for limited range hunting such as with muzzleloaders and archery gear. But, if you think you can walk right up on a caribou, stick the barrel in his ear and shoot him, you better think again. Caribou can be very wary. I have had them take off after just catching the slightest glimpse of me. I have also had them spot me and then come running for a closer look. Unpredictable is the best way to describe them.

Boone and Crockett recognizes five categories of caribou for the records books, as do taxonomists. For the hunter, the most noticeable differences are body and antler size, and the terrain they inhabit. If you are looking for a caribou to enter in Boone and Crockett, timing is everything. The big bulls will often hold onto their velvet until late August, so it is advisable to look at a September hunt. Boone and Crockett has no category for antlers in velvet, so they must be stripped if you



Kim Schwanky and Gary Jaeb with a Central Canada barren ground caribou taken in Northwest Territories. Hunting Central Canada barren ground caribou is the ultimate in relaxation.

wish to score and enter them. Also, the bulls have much nicer coats later in the season and make a far more impressive mount for the wall.

BARREN GROUND CARIBOU

Barren ground caribou are found in Alaska and the northern Yukon, with the majority of big bulls coming from Alaska. Overall, barren ground caribou sport the largest antlers of all the categories. Boone and Crockett sets the minimum score for an All-time record at 400 points and the minimum for the Award's book is 375 points.

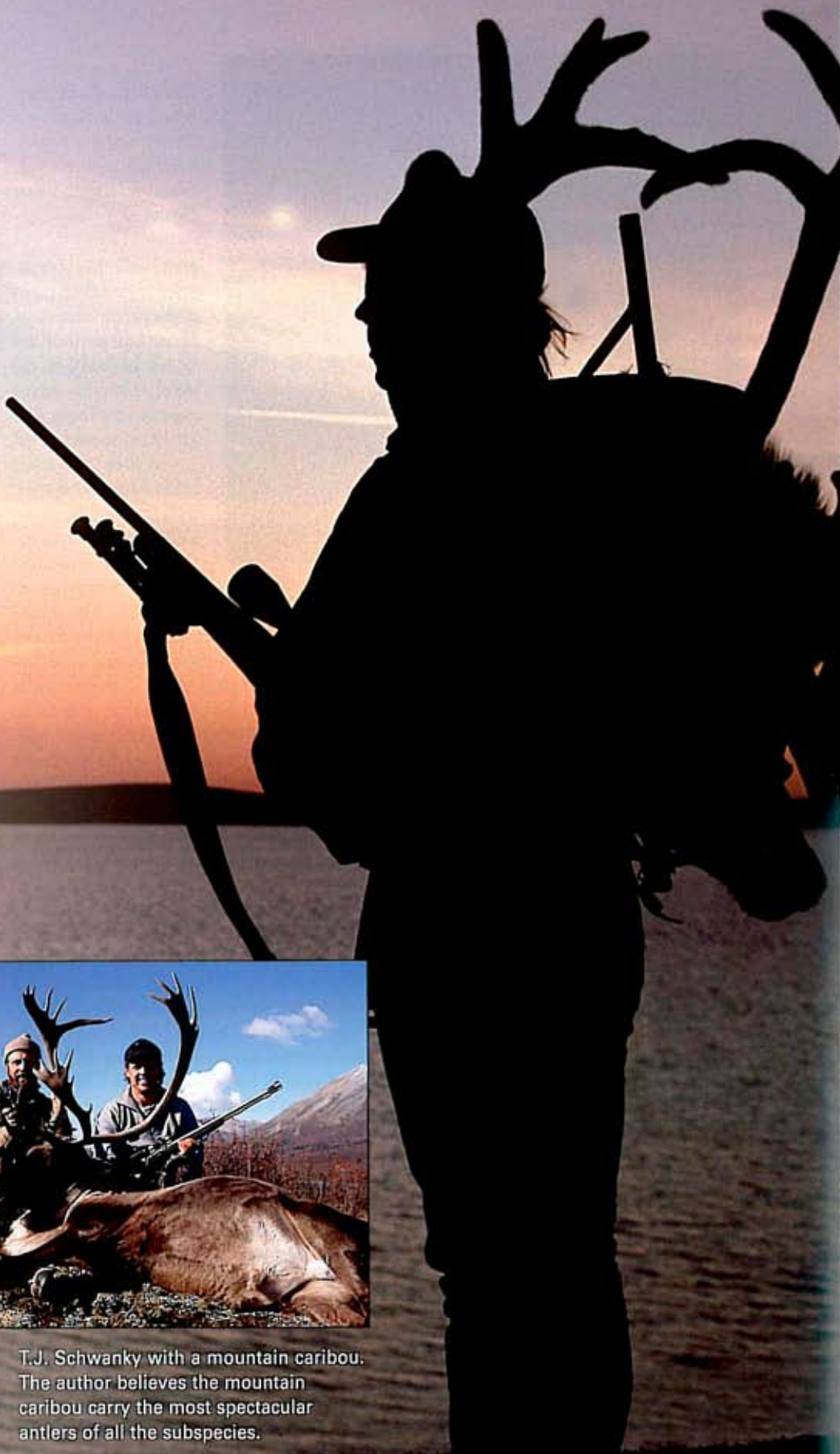
Hunting for barren ground caribou in Alaska may be conducted without a guide or outfitter, and drop camps are extremely popular. These caribou are highly migratory and being in the right place at the right time could never be truer. Many hunters have been surrounded by caribou one day, then the migration moves through and they never see another animal for the remainder of the hunt. At other times, you may have your choice of thousands of bulls for an entire week.

River hunts are extremely popular in Alaska as they allow you the ability to move several miles each day in search of caribou. Typical floats run 7 to 14 days and usually require the use of an air charter service to get you in and out. This type of hunt can often be combined with moose and black bear and is quite economical in the realm of fly-in hunts. Charter services can often supply rafts, motors and any additional gear you may require. They are usually well in tune with where the migration is most heavily concentrated and where your best opportunity for success is.

Barren ground caribou grow big, often exceeding 600 pounds. It is their size that intimidates many hunters, but with modern rifles and bullets, your favorite elk rifle is more than adequate. I have shot a number of caribou with a .264 Winchester magnum, and several more with a .50 caliber muzzleloader shooting 240-grain sabots and only once has a second shot been required. The hide and bone structure of a caribou is not overly heavy and getting a bullet into the lungs does not require much force. I'd venture a bet that more caribou have been killed with the .30-30 and .303 British than all other calibers combined. Getting within 100 yards or less is rarely a problem, long-range rifles are seldom necessary.



T.J. Schwanky with a mountain caribou. The author believes the mountain caribou carry the most spectacular antlers of all the subspecies.





The author with a Quebec-Labrador caribou. Even though there are more than one million caribou in Quebec, hunting them can be hit or miss.

grand bulls that puts the price higher than many of the other subspecies. Mountain caribou are usually hunted with the use of pack trains, remote mountain camps, and lots of manpower. That is why they are usually hunted in combination with species like goats, Dall's sheep or moose.

There is no question that the Northwest Territories produces the lion's share of trophy bulls. The southern Mackenzies are a Mecca for the devout mountain caribou aficionado, and for someone looking to place a bull in the annals of Boone and Crockett, they are the place to go. The Yukon also produces its share of fine bulls, but not nearly the quantity that the Northwest Territories does (this can be partially attributed to sheer numbers of hunters).

It is not the make, style or caliber of rifle that you take for mountain caribou that will determine your success; it's how durable it is under extreme conditions. My last two trips to caribou country were plagued with more than a week of bone-chilling rain and snow. These are conditions for rifles with stainless barrels and synthetic stocks. While the weather can be gloriously warm and sunny, don't count on it, especially if you want to hunt hard-horned bulls. These bulls often don't shed their velvet until early September and this is when mountain weather is the most unpredictable.

CENTRAL CANADA BARREN GROUND CARIBOU

It wasn't until 1984 that a new category was established for Central Canada barren ground caribou. They were classified with barren ground caribou, but as it was believed, caribou in Northwest Territories had smaller antlers, Boone and Crockett established the new category with a minimum of 345 points. That has since been raised to 360 for entry in the All-time records and 345 points for the Awards book.

Central Canada barren ground caribou occur on Baffin Island and the mainland of the Northwest Territories, with geograph-

ic boundaries of the Mackenzie River to the west; the north edge of the continent to north (excluding an island except Baffin Island); of Hudson's Bay to the east; and the southern boundary of Northwest Territories to the south. In 1994, the boundary was expanded to include the northwest corner of Manitoba north of the south limit of township 87 and west of the Little Churchill River, Churchill River, and Hudson Bay. They are comprised mainly of the highly migratory Bathurst, Beverly and Qamanirjuaq herds, which number in excess of one million animals. All non-resident hunting requires the services of a licensed outfitter and guide. Most hunts originate out of Yellowknife and run in the \$3,500 to \$5,000 range, with outfitters allowing hunters to harvest two bulls. There is often an additional charge for the second caribou.

Central Canada barren ground caribou typically have tremendous top points, but are often weak on the fronts. If you find one with both, it truly is an awe-inspiring sight. It was thought at one time that this subspecies could never attain scores in excess of 400 points, but there have been several bulls taken in the past few years to top that mark. A big bull may only weigh 350 pounds, which makes for a pretty impressive animal when you plunk 400 inches of antler on its head.

Most of the camps on larger lakes have a good population of resident caribou and it is not uncommon to see 50 to 100 animals per day during early season hunts, but when the migration starts, I have seen in excess of 5,000 in a morning. This can be both a blessing and a curse. With the smaller numbers of animals it is a much simpler task to pick out a good bull and execute a stalk. With thousands moving through, with that ground-eating cadence that only caribou can attain, there is often little time to properly look at all the bulls, let alone pick out a trophy and shoot it.

Hunting Central Canada barren ground caribou is the ultimate in relaxation. The day usually starts around 9:00 a.m. with spotting caribou around the lake. As there are no trees and the caribou are active all day, there is no need to be up at first light and hunt until dark. I think that's what I really enjoy about these caribou – you are hunting and seeing animals all day long. When they are spotted, it is just a matter of trying to get in front of them and cutting them off. If they get by you, it is impossible to catch up with them again on foot. When migrating, they walk about 5 miles per hour and cover up to 40 miles a day.

MOUNTAIN CARIBOU

Mountain caribou includes trophies from British Columbia, southern Yukon Territory, the Mackenzie Mountains of Northwest Territories, and Alberta, although there is currently no hunting season for them in Alberta. Taxonomists lump the mountain caribou together with the woodland caribou of eastern Canada, but for the hunter there are some considerable differences in antler size.

To me, mountain caribou carry the most spectacular antlers of all the subspecies. They are very heavy, and while they typically do not sport the tremendous main beam lengths of the barren ground and Quebec-Labrador bulls, trophy mountain caribou bulls have mass that is unequalled. First circumference measurements often exceed seven inches, bez and shovels are ponderous, sporting countless points, and tops are palmated with long deviating tines. The Boone and Crockett All-time minimum is 390 points and the Award's book minimum is 360 points.

The mountain caribou are also the prettiest of the subspecies. Their sharply contrasting coats and long flowing manes are fine tribute to the mountainous regions they inhabit. Mountain caribou are substantial in stature, often weighing in at 600-plus pounds. To see one standing on the crest of a windswept ridge at 8,000 feet is a sight not soon forgotten.

All mountain caribou hunts require the services of a guide or outfitter, unless you are lucky enough to be a resident of a province where they reside. Mountain caribou hunts can also be pricey, ranging from \$4,000 to \$6,000, depending on where and who you hunt with. It is the logistics of hunting these

QUEBEC-LABRADOR CARIBOU

The Quebec-Labrador caribou may be considered the most hunted of all the subspecies, due in large part to their proximity to the major urban centers in the United States and the relatively low price of the hunts. Quebec-Labrador caribou, like their name implies, are found only in Quebec and Labrador. Non-resident hunters require the services of an outfitter, but do not need to be guided. This, plus the heavy competition, keep prices affordable. Hunts are available for as low as \$2,000, but don't expect any luxuries. Two caribou may be taken in most camps.

Quebec-Labrador caribou are known for incredible main beam length and massive shovels and bez. They are often very weak on the top, with some bulls never even growing top points. If you can find one with long top points, it is usually a trophy-class bull. The minimum All-time Boone and Crockett score is 375 points, and 365 points to be accepted in the Awards book.

Even though there are over one million caribou in Quebec, hunting them can be very hit and miss. I know many hunters who have never seen a bull during their trip, and I know others who have seen tens of thousands. These caribou are constantly on the move and constantly changing their migration routes. Make certain your outfitter is willing to relocate you if there are no caribou in the area you are hunting.

Much of the region that caribou frequent in Quebec is a mixture of dense stands of spruce and open, rock ridges, providing plenty of cover to utilize when executing stalks and setting up ambushes. This is why the Quebec-Labrador variety of caribou is so popular with muzzleloader hunters and archers. Some of the traditional crossings on the larger rivers are also prime locations when the migration is moving through. Seeing thousands of caribou swimming a raging river is incredible.

It is the hunter who is willing to put the miles on by foot that is usually most successful. Getting up on the high ridges and doing lots of glassing is the key. If the caribou start moving through one area, they will usually follow that same path for several days in a row, so keep track of where they are moving and plan your ambushes accordingly.

WOODLAND CARIBOU

Woodland caribou have the most diminutive antlers of all the categories, with a score of only 295 points required for Boone and Crockett All-time records and 265 points for the Awards book. Antlers are quite spindly and often do not sport a large number of points. Main

beams are fairly short and spreads are narrow. But with that said, they are fun to hunt and there have been some incredible trophies taken over the years, including three bulls that scored in excess of 400 points. Only trophies taken in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland/Labrador, and New Brunswick are eligible for entry in the books, and Newfoundland can lay claim to all the entries except for a handful from New Brunswick.

The great thing about hunting woodland caribou is that they are not migratory and you can almost always be assured of seeing bulls. For hunters that like the challenge of spot-and-stalk hunting, woodland caribou are the ultimate. You won't be seeing the great numbers you will in Quebec, Alaska, or the Territories, but there is more than enough to keep any hunter interested.

Hunters must employ the services of an outfitter and guide, and prices range greatly depending on the lodge. Some of Newfoundland's lodges specialize in five-star service, but you will also pay five-star prices. Expect prices to start around \$3,000 and go up from there. Hunters can usually combine a woodland caribou hunt with moose and black bear, and some first-class fishing.

BEFORE YOU GO

No matter which category of caribou you decide to hunt, do your homework. Talk with numerous outfitters, talk with their previous clients, and even check with local outfitter associations. While relatively inexpensive in the world of outfitted hunts, a caribou hunt still represents a sizable investment and it is up to you to get your money's worth.

It is also up to you to know what your expectations are. While guides can help you to some degree in assessing trophy quality, it still comes down to your decision to pull the trigger. All caribou look big, especially if you have never seen one before. Gary Jaeb, owner of True North Safaris on Mackay Lake in the Northwest Territories, used to tell all his hunters not to shoot the first caribou they saw; to wait a day or so until they got familiar with what big bulls looked like. That was until one day a hunter turned down the first bull he saw and his companion shot it. It turned out to be the new World's Record at the time. Not shooting the first caribou you see is still good advice, but the more you know about them, the better off you will be when it comes to making the final decision.

The scoring of caribou antlers is very complex and it pays not only to try and get a look at a number of heads but also to examine the score sheets very carefully. A word of

advice: if you are looking to qualify for Boone and Crockett, the bull should have two shovels. It is quite easy to gain 30 or more inches with a second shovel. Very few caribou with single shovels have qualified for the books. Many guides that I have hunted with are hung up on the bull having rear points, or back-scratchers as they are often referred to as, but in my opinion they are the least important element. They look nice and are a bonus if your bull has them, but don't discount a caribou without them. My muzzleloader World's Record Central Canada barren ground caribou had only one, one-inch rear point. Look for two shovels, descent bez and main beam length, and a well-developed top palm with at least two, long top points and you likely have a good bull in front of you. Palmation, extra points, and rear points are all bonus.

Caribou hunting is much more than a trophy quest, however. It is an experience. Nowhere else will you get so close to so many animals and have so many opportunities to harvest an animal. If you find your spirit getting a little adventurous this fall, take a serious look at heading north for caribou. No matter which category you select, you are assured of a great time. They really are the perfect quarry for the hunter with adventure in his heart. ■

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