

D Luck of the Draw

Musk Ox Hunting on Alaska's Nunivak Island

By Warren Eastland

Photos by Author

Drawing a hunting permit seemed to be the biggest hurdle to an Alaska musk ox hunt. One guy I work with has tried, and failed, for the past 23 years. When my wife, Wini Kessler, drew a permit on her first try, I realized that setting up a hunt on Nunivak Island, the seventh-largest island in the U.S. and more than twice the size of Maui, wouldn't be easy. Wini solved that by booking with a guide, Ed Shavings, Sr., of Mekoryuk, the only village on this Bering Sea island.

Shavings enlisted his son Lincoln and nephew Raymond Amos as helpers. At sunrise on the first day of the September season, we boarded the *White Cap* and left Mekoryuk's semi-protected shallow spot that Nunivak Islanders call a harbor. About 22 or 23 feet long by about 6-1/2 feet wide, shallow of draft, and built of thick aluminum, the *White Cap* is an example of an "Eskimo Boat" built especially for Bering Sea villagers.

After about an hour's travel along Nunivak's north coast, where we all were keeping a wary and totally unrewarded eye out for musk oxen, we stopped not much shy of Cape Manning to do a bit of scanning from shore. Shavings had often encountered musk oxen in this area, but not on this day.

The weather had been sort of cooperative up to this point. Although 100-percent overcast, the sky hadn't delivered on its threat of rain, and the waves had been in the 1- to 1-1/2-foot range, so boat travel wasn't excessively uncomfortable even in an unheated skiff, and lighting conditions for spotting musk oxen were good. From our observation point, though, it looked like things might not stay so good because a thick mist, or a light fog, call it what you will, was about to

reach the island from the east.

After a thorough glassing of the area, we headed on to the east, then south past Cape Manning. Finally, Shavings pulled the throttles back and spoke to Lincoln and Raymond. I couldn't quite hear what he said, but I got the idea pretty quickly. I could see a musk ox not far inland, and through my binoculars I could see at least one more that was either lying down, or was standing in a low spot. It seemed to take forever for Shavings to turn and maneuver the boat to the shore. The slow process of bringing the boat in did give us more time to look at the animals through the binoculars. We couldn't really see much, though, because of the drizzle, the rocking of the boat on the waves, and the poor viewing angle that only got worse as we inched our way to shore.



ABOVE: Wini and her two Cupik guides look for musk oxen on Alaska's Nunivak Island

FAR RIGHT: Cape Manning at Nunivak Island's northeast corner is a favored hangout for musk oxen, but was empty on this day.

Shavings finally nosed the skiff onto the shore and remained aboard while Raymond leapt out and paused only long enough to assist the rest of us in our awkward disembarkation. It is hard to be graceful when one is wearing multiple layers of clothes topped off with rain gear and shod in rubber boots. Once we were all ashore, Raymond took off to trot in a wide circle to get out beyond the musk oxen while Lincoln, Wini, and I got our gear arranged. Once Wini had the .270 loaded, we, too, ascended the steep 20-foot slope to the tundra plateau above.

The tundra was anything but flat. Seamed with fissures, some of them water filled and deep between the tussocks, walking was difficult, and I could only wonder that Raymond could trot over that ground.

The musk oxen were several hundred yards away, and we stopped several times to try and view their horns, but the drizzle made that difficult, and the spotting scope was not much help. The wind-driven moisture coated the lenses pretty quickly, so getting a glimpse of the musk oxen came only between swipes to clean the glass. Each time we'd stop, Lincoln would gauge the edginess of the musk oxen, and we'd move another 25 or 30 yards closer to try for another view.

There were three musk oxen spread out over some 75 yards or so. The stunted development of the horns on the one to the far right showed that it was a juvenile male, although its body size approached that of the other two. The other two animals both looked like males, but we couldn't make out the amount of horn or the condition of the bosses; the horns just disappeared in the shaggy, wind-whipped, hair, and only when all the angles were perfect could we get a glimpse of the head gear.

We approached in 30-yard increments until we finally got to within sure shooting distance of about 80 yards, but we still weren't sure which of the two adults was the better one. The forelock of the rightmost one kept about half his boss hidden, and the condition of his horn tips wasn't clear, even through the spotting scope. The light was so dim that the scope could only be used at its lowest power. Finally a gap in the mist that coincided with a space between wind gusts allowed us to get a look at the middle animal.

"They're both mature males," Lincoln said.

"Yeah, but I can't see any black tips on the guy on the right and I can on the guy in the center," I replied.

Lincoln was silent for a moment



ALASKA'S MUSK OXEN

The chances of getting a trophy musk ox in Alaska are slim. Since 2000, just 11 musk ox entries have been accepted from Nunivak Island and another 7 from other areas in Alaska. Extirpated from Alaska by the middle of the 1800s, musk oxen were reintroduced to Alaska from Greenland in the early 1930s. These animals were originally island animals so they are generally smaller than their Canadian Arctic kin. Isolated on Nunivak Island so that they would be free from predators and disease, musk oxen have been transplanted throughout various ranges in Alaska. There is a general ecological rule stating that animals from islands tend to be smaller than their closest relatives from the mainland, and this holds true for musk oxen. The top-ranked musk ox from Nunivak Island has a final score of 111-6/8 points – that's more than 17 inches smaller than the current World's Record taken in Northwest Territories.

Over 80% of Alaskan musk ox listed in the Club's records books are from Nunivak Island. The first hunter-taken trophy was taken in 1959 by Bert Klineberger. Unfortunately, there is no photograph of the musk ox in Klineberger's trophy file. The bull scored 106-6/8 points. The decade of the 1970s was the most prolific for records-book entries with 75 entries. The number of entries has decreased by nearly half each following decade.

Musk ox hunting in Alaska for all but a few rural residents is by drawing permit only. There are huntable herds in the northern and northwestern arctic, and on Nunivak Island. Information and applications can be made online at <http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=hunting.muskox>, and the deadline is May 31 of each year. The odds are slim for any of the hunts, but they are best (at under a 7% chance of a drawing success) for the Nunivak Island hunts. There are two hunts for Nunivak Island musk oxen; the first one is in September, and the second one is in February and March.

The fall hunt has the advantage of being comparatively warm, and the days are long. The disadvantage of the fall hunt is that transportation is primarily by boat, so if the musk oxen aren't relatively close to the shore, you're not likely to find them at all. The winter hunt has the same advantage as it does a disadvantage; it is cold and snowy. You can get just about anywhere on the island by snowmachine, but temperatures are likely to be well below zero.

Unless you are a resident of Mekoryuk, Nunivak Island is a long way from wherever you are, and that distance means that you'll need to hire most of your equipment and transport once you arrive via the twice-daily scheduled airplane. Guides registered for Nunivak Island, Unit 18, can be found at Alaska's commercial services web site at <http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/occ/guideusemaps/mapintro.htm>. Alaska has very strict meat recovery laws, and should you not wish to transport all of the meat back to where you live, the guide or transporter will also help you distribute the meat among the island's residents. Additional information can be had from the area biologist for Nunivak, based in Bethel, by phone at (800)425-2979.

then said, "There is a bit of black on the one on the right, but not much and the boss is better on the center one. I think that's the one to take."

I turned to Wini who had been following our discussion the way spectators follow a tennis match. "It's your permit, so it's your call," I said. "Go for one of these, or go see about finding some more animals somewhere else?"

She answered with a question. "If you had the permit, what would you do?"

I turned to Lincoln and asked, "I need your best guess. What's the weather likely to do over the next week?"

Lincoln thought a moment, then said, "I think this wind will turn to the north and maybe it will be impossible to travel by boat for awhile."

I answered Wini, "I think I'd take that center animal."

Lincoln moved off to the left while Wini and I started our last bit of forward stalk. At 50 yards distance, the two mature musk oxen were starting to realize that we might be a threat, so I knelt down. Wini stumbled as she, too, started to kneel, and all three musk oxen started to trot away from us.

After a hundred yards or so, the three musk oxen drew up and spread out. They looked around for a moment, then seemed to forget why they'd run, and went back to grazing.

Wini hadn't damaged anything when she fell, and she'd kept the barrel high and safe. We picked ourselves up and recommenced the stalk. Once we made it to about 50 yards, I pointed with the sticks at a spot some six inches above the surrounding tundra, which was lichen-covered rather than moss-covered and therefore drier. I knelt down next to the spot, laid the sticks aside, and shoved my daypack up at the leading edge of the dry spot. As Wini knelt down I said, "Shoot prone. Use my pack as a rest. Hold it until we can get who's who sorted out."

Using the binoculars, I quickly sorted out the youngster, and had my best guess for the animal Wini wanted. I tilted up the shooting sticks, laid the barrel of the spotting scope into the vee-notch and studied the two adults. The black tips of the one Wini wanted stood out plainly, once I'd again cleaned the spotting scope's lens. Just as I started to speak to Wini, Lincoln, who was off to our left, moved up to where he could better see the action, and that spooked the animals again.

"Stay put," I said to Wini. The three musk oxen stopped after a short 30-

yard canter. The three animals were in a line in front of us and the closest animal was blocking our view of the two beyond. "Right. The closest one is the juvenile, and the farthest one is the one you want."

Wini started to ask something, but Lincoln spoke up from where he'd moved to, just behind us, as Wini and I had been getting settled. "That one nearest the shore is the one you want."

It was his way of describing the same animal, and it stepped forward three full paces. "Take it when you're ready, Wini. I'll call any movements from the other two." Just as the juvenile animal had taken a single step forward and I was ready to caution Wini about shooting, she pulled the trigger.

The lead animal, the one she'd been after, hunched a bit, then all three trotted forward for 30 or 40 yards. The wounded animal was in the lead, but fell behind just before all three animals stopped their run. "Okay, Wini, the left animal, the rearmost animal is yours. Better shoot him again."

Wini fired and the musk ox spun 180 degrees and trotted back to where it had been when Wini first fired. A moment later the other two musk oxen trotted back to join it. Wini's animal was standing with its front legs spread wide and its back legs stepping clumsily from side to side as it tried to maintain its balance.

"Reload, but don't shoot. He's dead and just hasn't quite realized it yet."

Wini said, "I don't want him to suffer," when the musk ox interrupted her by falling over. The other two musk oxen just stood there, near the downed animal. "Why won't they move off?"

"Mostly, they haven't figured out that he's dead yet," I answered, "and they want him to circle up with them as a defense against us." It took awhile, and a bit of whistling from Raymond and Lincoln, but the two surviving musk oxen trotted off to the west and disappeared from sight.

The downed musk ox roused himself one last time and managed to lift his head up. "One more time, Wini, give him his grace." Wini fired, and her permit had been filled.

The last dying stumble of Wini's bull had caused him to tumble from the tundra down to the lower edge of the grass that fringed the beach. It made the ideal spot for taking pictures, and we weren't even going to have to pack meat out. Shavings had been watching everything from the boat and was headed to the waterline not 100 yards away.

Lincoln, led by Raymond, started to get everything ready for butchering the

musk ox, and the first step was to pull grass from the fringe and make a clean surface on which to work.

The two Eskimos did everything in a methodical, professional manner, and only gave me a single heart attack. Lincoln had slit the hide from just forward of the hump, and up the back of the neck to the boss. That allowed them to start removing the cape from around the boss. After the top side was freed, they rolled over the beast and started skinning the hide back from a midline belly slit to allow them to bone off the quarters. What gave me the heart attack was when Raymond continued the midline slit forward, up the neck and forward under the jaw to within a few inches of the chin. A cape slit on both sides! Raymond saw the stricken expression on my face and stopped his work for a moment. "This bottom cut here," Raymond said, pointing with the tip of his knife, "must look strange, but it's how you get under the horns here," and he pointed to the downswept horns of the musk ox, "to get the hide loose." I thanked him for the information, and continued to keep my mouth shut, except to ask where they needed me to help. These guys obviously knew a lot more about butchering musk oxen than I was ever going to learn.

Shavings, as befit his elder status, sat and conversed quietly with Wini as his "boys" worked. Whenever either of them hesitated or appeared to be about to make a mis-stroke, he'd get off his comfortable rock, slide his hood back, and step forward. Occasionally bursts of Cupik, their native language, fired back and forth to explain the details of something, then Shavings was free to sit and chat from his supervisor's perch.

By the time everything was sliced, boned, cut, bagged and sacked, the tide had turned and was working its way back toward where the *White Cap* rested on the mud. Too, the misty drizzle had switched into a regular rain. The bay appeared to be a bit choppy, but it didn't look like the wind had really risen in the hours since we'd begun the stalk.

After an hour's enforced rest while we waited for the tide to creep back up



From left to right: Raymond Amos, Wini Kessler, and Lincoln Shavings with Wini's musk ox. The bull's final score was 106-2/8 points and is listed in this issue's "Recently Accepted Trophies."

and float the boat, we headed back out. We went equally as slow on the way out as we had on the way in, but this time I knew why. The bay was full of rocks, individually and in big groups, that hid underneath anything but dead low tide and Shavings didn't want to smash his prop or rip a hole in the hull of his boat by trying to speed through the rock garden.

Once we were outside the bay, I found out that the low plateau around us had kept the worst of the wind off. It had indeed risen, as had the waves, and it was a long rough ride back to Mekoryuk, made even more miserable by lashing rain that didn't cease. Finally Lincoln smiled in the dimming light and said, "The village is just ahead."

"Just ahead," to a Cupik Eskimo from Mekoryuk isn't so far that you need to pack an overnight bag, but if you expect to arrive in the next few minutes, you need to think again. The pounding seemed to continue forever, but finally the engine slowed.

Shavings showed his boat handling skills as he maneuvered the boat until the *White Cap* was settled just where it needed to be in the crowd of other skiffs. It was still pouring rain as we unloaded our gear and the several hundred pounds of musk ox meat, skull and hide, but we didn't care all that much. Success provides its own comfort. ■