

The Self-Guided Hunter...

CARIBOU ADVENTURE ON YOUR OWN

Third in a series...

Morris Owen, Jr.
Official Measurer
Boone and Crockett Club

A self-guided hunt for barren ground caribou in Alaska is a great adventure for the experienced hunter. If you choose to undertake such an experience you will need the skills and the "how-to" abilities for making a camp, caring for trophies, handling meat and general self-reliance in the wilderness. If you have these skills and the zest for a wilderness experience you have the basics necessary to set forth on your Alaskan adventure.

In this article I will attempt to give you some tips and insights that will help insure that your hunt will be both enjoyable and successful.

Influencing Factors

The factors that you as a hunter can control are: your mental attitude; your physical abilities; proper planning and proper equipment. The main factor controlling your hunt and over which you have no control is the weather. In Alaska you need to be prepared for severe weather and if you get good weather you will not be disappointed! Let's look at each of these factors as they apply to an Alaska self-guided caribou hunt.

Mental Attitude

As a hunter, you either have a positive "can-do, stick-to-it" attitude or you don't. After 25 years as a game warden in the Blue Mountains of southeast Washington, I have observed the primary reason that hunters return home without game is due to a lack of mental endurance more than any other single factor.

Let me suggest that when you plan your Alaska caribou hunt that you keep the hunting party between two hunters and a maximum of four hunters. Be sure to pick your hunting partners with care. Choose hunting buddies who have the same level of wilderness skills and abilities and dedication as you have.

Be sure your fellow hunters have the desire and mental endurance to be in the wilderness for 10 days and can relax and enjoy the hunt; for if they cannot, believe me you won't either.

Don't forget to bring along extra over-the-counter painkillers for the aches and pains everyone experiences.

Nat Coffeen, Walla Walla, Washington, packing out his trophy caribou rack.

I have always believed the three hardest things to find in life as a dedicated hunter are: 1. A good wife, 2. A good bird dog, 3. A good, reliable hunting partner. How much you will enjoy your hunt will depend upon your choice of hunting partners.

Physical Abilities

Caribou hunting in Alaska does not require the same physical endurance as does sheep hunting. In some respects, that is what makes it so enjoyable. Although some hunts can involve considerable climbing and stalking in the mountains, most hunts will involve flying into an area, setting up camp and being close to the migratory path of caribou herds. Generally, you will have to hike a short distance to an observation point, then sit tight and get out the binoculars and spotting scope. You let the caribou come to you. After spotting a trophy bull, you must be in good enough condition to intersect its migratory path. In some instances this is an impossible task, especially if the animal is spotted at a distance and is moving. If your hunt area is carefully selected you will be able to intersect the migratory paths of the majority of the caribou passing your camp.

Another enjoyable hunting method includes floating a river in a rubber raft from a drop-off point to a pick-up point. These hunts are popular and have the advantage of enabling the hunter to hunt a considerably larger area depending upon the length of the float trip. Cataracts and inflatable boats are available for rent in a number of areas in Alaska where caribou are found. After harvesting your trophy, you must quarter and backpack the animal back to camp where it can be picked up by the plane. It is best to keep the meat away from camp to cut down on bear problems. I would suggest training to strengthen leg muscles,



CHOOSE YOUR HUNTING PARTNERS CAREFULLY!
Be sure that your fellow hunters have the desire and mental endurance to be in the wilderness for 10 days and can relax and and enjoy the hunt...



The author, Morris Owen, Jr., (right) with his son, Morris Owen III, on a self-guided Mulchatna caribou hunt. The fine double-shovel bull was taken by the younger Morris with a 7mm Remington Magnum.

The Self-Guided Hunter...

The fishing can be fantastic while you are waiting for the caribou migration to start.

The author's hunting partner, Tim French, with a nice catch.



especially a regime of long walks started months prior to leaving on the hunt. Don't forget to bring along extra medication you may be taking and some regular over-the-counter painkillers for the aches and pains everyone experiences.

Planning

The secret for a successful self-guided Alaska caribou hunt includes three important factors: 1. Planning, 2. Planning, and the last, but most important, is **PLANNING!** So, let's plan your hunt.

You will start early, as this will be your first Alaska caribou hunt. November of 1999 is a good time to begin planning for your September 2000 hunt. The first thing you should do is get a large folder and mark it Alaska Caribou. In

web site. You may want to obtain a copy of the 1999-2000 regulations to get a sense of the season structure, license and tag requirements, regulations regarding meat care, etc. Then, as soon as the 2000-2001 regulations are available you may confirm the regulations and apply for your non-resident hunting license, caribou tag(s) and harvest reports. You should also consider purchasing a fishing license for the dates of your hunt. Do not wait to purchase your license and tags when you arrive in Alaska. You will likely not have time between flights and the license dealer may be sold out, this happened to me in 1996 and friends of mine who did not heed my advice this past September 1999. Learn from my mistake. Purchase by mail EARLY! VISA and Mastercard are accepted! When your license/tags/harvest reports arrive in the mail, they will go into the Alaska Caribou folder along with the Big Game Hunting Regulations, air-taxi information, commercial airline tickets and the note pad you are using for your list and all other information.

Generally, the best time to hunt caribou with a rifle on a self-guided hunt is five days on either side of September 20th. The weather controls when the general caribou migration starts. Historically, the weather has been such that the general migration has occurred during these dates. Storms and cold fronts will force caribou out of the mountains earlier than this but when the storm passes the caribou are faced with warm temperatures and the swarms of bugs including "nose-ums" and "white socks." Consequently they will return to the

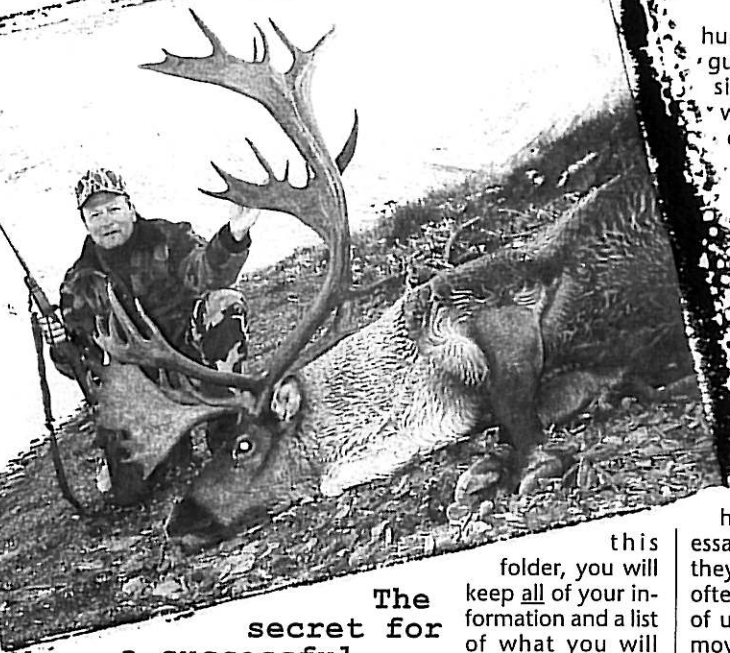
higher elevations, but not necessarily the same drainages where they first came down. These are often young bulls or small groups of up to six animals. This type of movement goes on all summer and intensifies around the first of September. The weather patterns associated with El Nino the past two years have delayed the migration significantly. There are a number of sources on the internet for weather data, including daily weather summaries for as many as 30 years. As you are planning your hunt you may wish to review these summaries and compare them to the recent years or the current year in order to get a better feel for the weather... Even if you cannot control it! One source of this information is the Alaska Regional Weather web site of the U.S. Weather Ser-

vice. On most years, you should plan your hunt so you can be in the field from around September 15th to September 25th

The Mulchatna caribou herd, has flourished in recent years and its numbers are at all-time highs. The population is so high that residents can kill five a year and non-residents two. Non-residents can take from two to five caribou from the Porcupine herd depending upon the portion of the unit you hunt. Currently the better trophies are coming from the Mulchatna and Porcupine herds. In an attempt to "figure out" the caribou migration patterns in the area you plan to hunt, you should contact the Alaska Department of Fish and Game offices in the area you plan to hunt and try to find an area that is located along a major migration route. A complete listing of ADFG conservation officers and district offices is located on the ADFG web site. The 11th edition of the Boone and Crockett Club's *Records of North American Big Game* contains score charts and measuring information and lists over 800 barren ground caribou. Check where the big bulls are being harvested and add this information to your set of planning data.

If you are in an area where you may harvest two caribou I suggest you buy two tags. Most hunters are not skilled at field-judging caribou. I suggest you spend some time learning how this is done so you will be prepared to evaluate a bull caribou in the field. Score charts are available in Adobe Acrobat on the Club's web site. *Measuring and Scoring Big Game Trophies* is available from the Club and gives detailed instructions for scoring caribou and other North American big game species. Make several copies of the score charts and the measuring instructions and take them with you so after you take your first bull you may score it so you will have an idea of how it compares to the Boone and Crockett Club's Awards Program minimums. On your second tag you may choose to wait for a bull that is larger than the first. Even if your first bull is the caribou of your dreams you will have a second tag in case an even better bull happens your way. I have also found caribou meat to be excellent table fare and the second tag is handy if you would like to take home additional meat.

Next you need to select an air-taxi service and confirm the dates when you will fly into and out of your camp. Be careful of air-taxi operators who attempt to maximize their income by flying as many hunters into their areas as



The secret for a successful self-guided Alaska caribou hunt includes three important factors: 1. Planning, 2. Planning, and the last, but most important, is **PLANNING!**

The author with a nice Mulchatna region barren ground caribou. Morris used a custom Monty Kennedy 7mm/.300 Win. Mag. rifle using 160 grain Bitterroot bullets.

regulations are also available in Adobe Acrobat format from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game

possible. Always ask for references and check them out. With this accomplished, you can contact your airline ticket agent and purchase your commercial flight tickets. Be sure to ask about the number of bags, size, weight, and regulations on firearms, etc.

An airline challenge faced by hunters involves shipping antlers and meat home. Antlers and meat have additional restrictions. For example, this fall on Peninsula Airlines, antlers were shipped on a "space available" basis from Dillingham to Anchorage. What this meant was that if you happened to be on one of the flights with a prop-driven aircraft where the flight was full and space was critical, the antlers would not be shipped on your flight. They would follow you on a later flight or be shipped as cargo. The fall 1999 cost for antlers shipped as luggage was a flat \$50 whether they were on your flight or not. Antlers may be nested with smaller antlers set inside larger ones and taped together to reduce cost. The skull plates of antlers that are not large enough for entry into the Club's records program may be split lengthwise and taped together in one bundle not to exceed 70 pounds. If you do this and you intend to have the head mounted be sure to measure the width at several locations so the skull plate may be pieced back together to retain its original characteristics. Fresh or frozen meat may be shipped in a cooler as luggage. The air-taxi services often have cardboard "fish" boxes for sale in which you may pack your meat and have it frozen for shipment via air freight.

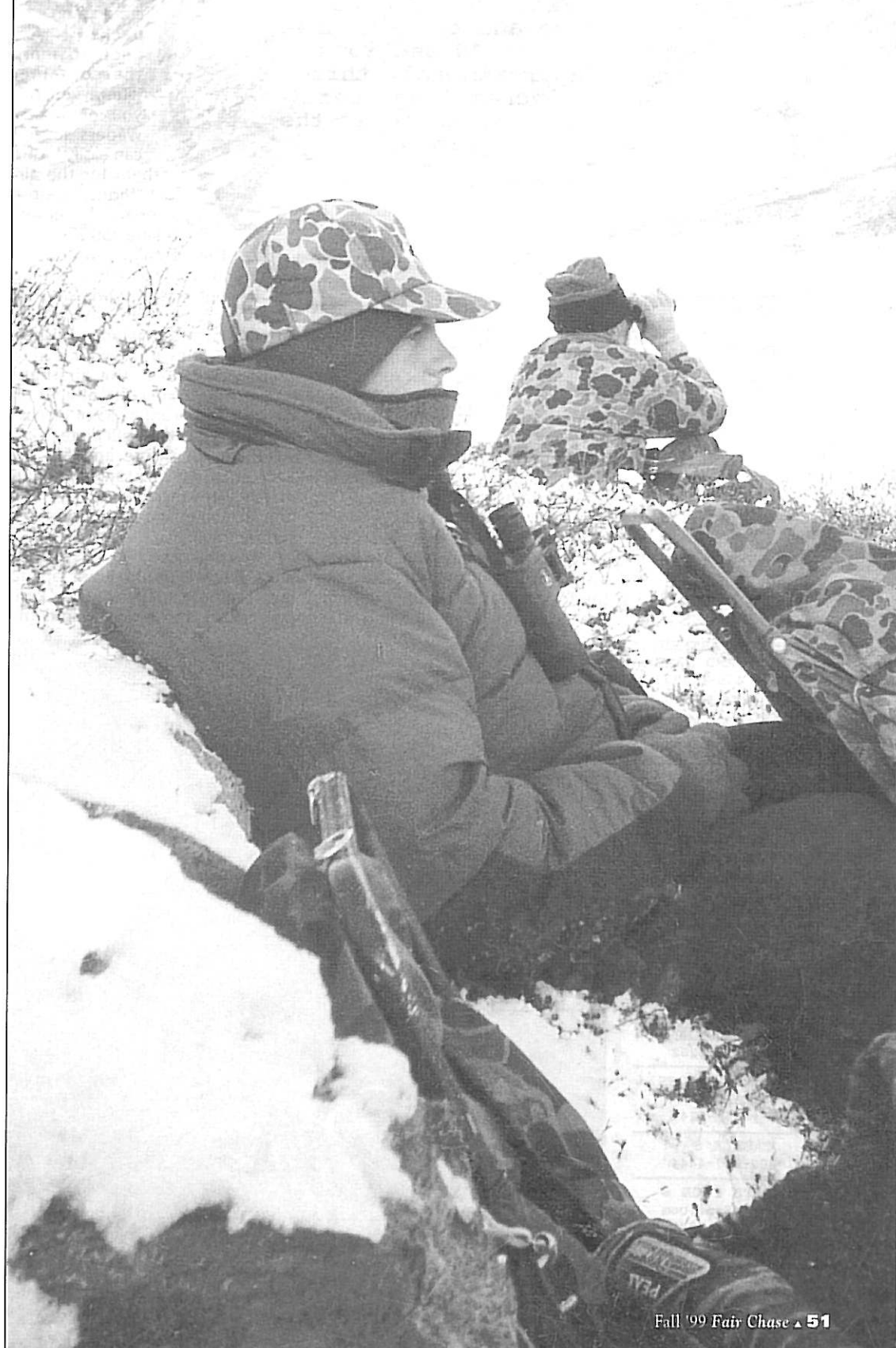
My last two Alaska caribou hunts, 1996 and 1998 cost me about \$2,300 to \$2,500 per hunt; including air travel from Seattle, Washington, to Dillingham, Alaska, my share of the air-taxi fee non-resident license and tags, food, etc. Air-taxi rates for fall 1999 at Dillingham for a Grumman Goose were \$650/hour with a payload of approximately 1,800 pounds. A Widgeon costs \$360/hour with an approximate payload of 1,100 pounds.

Equipment

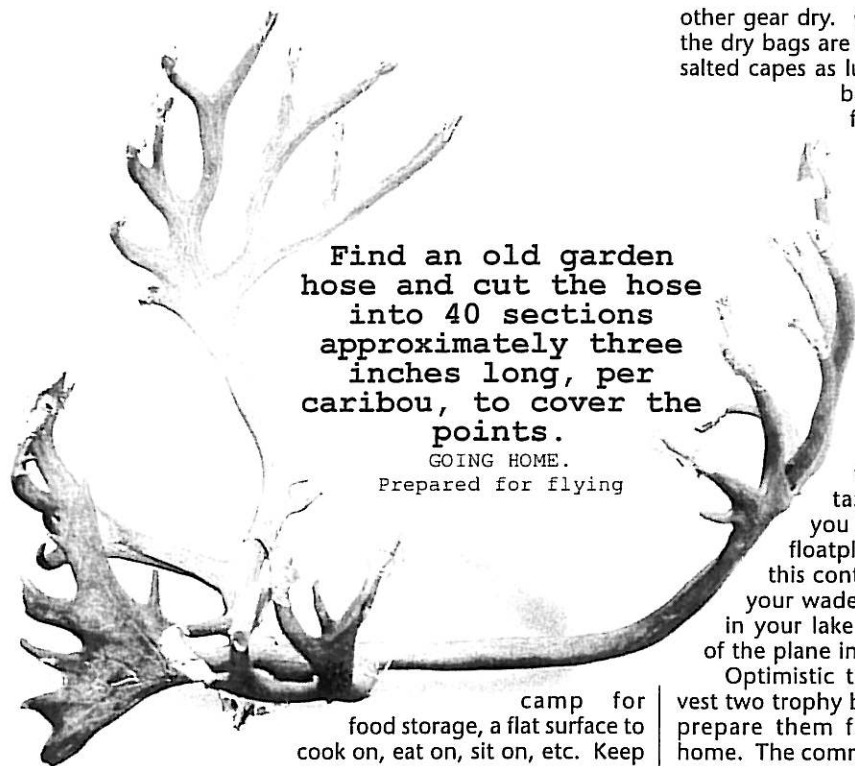
Never take any piece of equipment on a hunt without first trying it out prior to the trip. The first equipment items that you will need are two (per hunter) 30-35 gallon plastic containers/chests that snap shut. These can be purchased at most discount stores for around \$25 to \$30 each. They will act as your suitcases for packing all your food and equipment. I like the plastic containers better than duffel bags since they are more water resistant, and they can be used in

Gear up for cold weather. Snow is always a possibility.

On one of my caribou hunts, I shot my first bull in short-sleeve weather on a beautiful sunny day. Four days later my son shot his double-shovel bull in the rain and two days prior to the floatplane picking us up we had 14 inches of snow.



The Self-Guided Hunter...



Find an old garden hose and cut the hose into 40 sections approximately three inches long, per caribou, to cover the points.

GOING HOME.
Prepared for flying

camp for food storage, a flat surface to cook on, eat on, sit on, etc. Keep in mind that your containers must not exceed 70 pounds per container in weight nor measure a total of 62 linear inches. My friend prefers to use dry bags commonly used for river rafting such as the Bill's Bag™ available from Northwest River Supplies, Inc. He packs the dry bags inside cordura nylon duffel bags on the trip to Alaska. While hunting, the dry bags keep clothing and

other gear dry. On the trip home the dry bags are ideal for shipping salted capes as luggage. One dry bag will hold up to four caribou capes, depending upon how long you cut the capes.

After you have your containers packed you need to mark the container where you put your hip boots/waders so you can easily locate them for the air-taxi flight. Before you board the air taxi floatplane you will open this container and put on your waders. After landing in your lake you will get out of the plane in the water.

Optimistic that you will harvest two trophy bulls, you need to prepare them for the air flight home. The commercial airlines require that each antler point be covered as well as the skull plate. Find an old garden hose and cut the hose into 40 sections approximately three inches long, per caribou, to cover the points on each caribou rack.

You will need two rolls of duct tape. You will use the duct tape to tape the hose sections to the caribou points and wrap around the

plastic bag that covers the skull plate of your trophy. The tape is also used to tape shut the plastic containers for the return trip.

Purchase a box of heavy duty 30-gallon plastic bags to wrap the skull plates, collect garbage and to use as liners for your backpack when packing out meat. Be sure not to leave any warm meat in plastic for any length of time. Before packing your salt for the trophy capes, put the salt in ziplock plastic bags and tape them shut with duct tape.

I divide up everything between my two plastic containers. Just in case one does not arrive, I can still get by. I always take a large "carry-on" with me that contains my cameras, film, binoculars, spotting scope, GPS, etc..

You are not allowed to carry on any ammunition. It must be packed in your checked luggage, separate from your rifle. Knives with blades longer than 4" must also be in your checked baggage. Your rifle case must have a lock on it. I use an aluminum case after the airlines destroyed a plastic rifle case on a sheep hunt to Alaska. Be sure to leave room in your rifle case for fishing rods and reels. The fishing can be fantastic while you are waiting for the caribou migration to start.

I feel it is best not to put your hunting partner's rifle in the same case with yours. If the airline loses one rifle case, you can get by with one rifle between the two of you. Remember: "Never put all your eggs in one basket."

CARIBOU HUNT RESOURCES

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
(907) 465-4100

www.state.ak.us/adfg/wildlife/geninfo/regsg/regshome.htm

ALASKA REGIONAL WEATHER

www.alaska.net/~nwsar/

ADFG CONSERVATION OFFICERS AND DISTRICT OFFICES

www.state.ak.us/adfg/wildlife/geninfo/contacts/contact.htm

ROCKY MOUNTAIN PACK SYSTEMS

208-234-4584

rockymountainpacks.com/

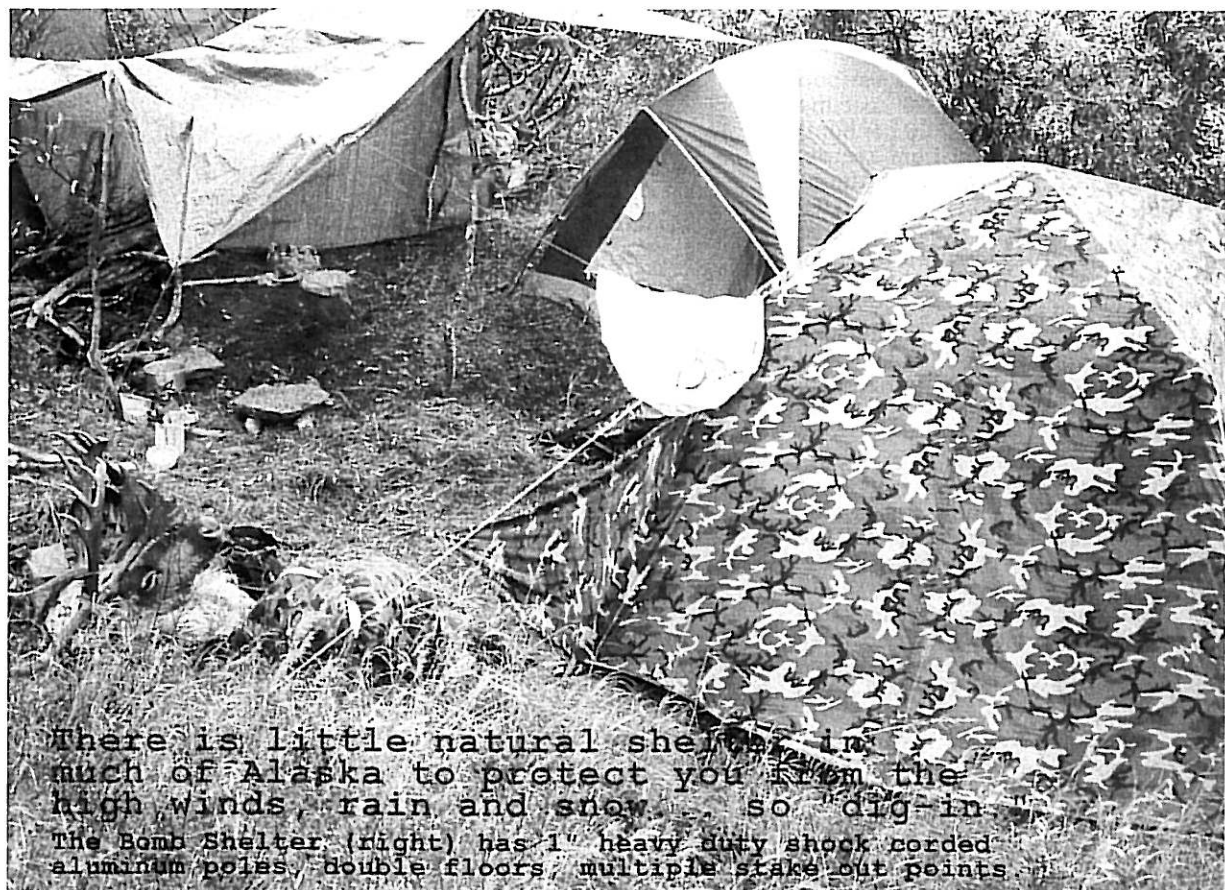
NORTHWEST RIVER SUPPLIES, INC.
1-800-635-5202

BARNEY'S SPORTS CHALET
(907) 561-5242

CABELA'S
1-800-237-4444

NORTH FACE
MountainZone.com
1-800-644-5232

www.northfacestore.com/



There is little natural shelter in much of Alaska to protect you from the high winds, rain and snow... so "dig-in". The Bomb Shelter (right) has 1" heavy duty shock corded aluminum poles, double floors, multiple stake out points

Several months prior to leaving check with your homeowner's insurance policy and make sure your rifle is covered.

What is the "best" caliber or cartridge to use for your caribou hunt? I suggest you use whatever rifle you shoot best. However, you should load it with premium bullets, like Nosler partition, Swift, Bitterroot, or Bearclaw. Why? As extra insurance just in case you meet up with a grizzly bear under the wrong circumstances. I have harvested caribou with my .25-06, but I usually take my 7mm S.T.W. stuffed with 150 grain Noslers and backed up with 175 Nosler or Swift partitions for any bear problems. The .270 Winchester that my hunting buddy uses works just fine, as well as the 7mm Remington Magnum, that my son uses. The old standby .30-06 and .30 magnums work well too.

I like to cover the rifle muzzle with toy balloons or finger cots for protection in the rain. Don't forget to take along a cleaning rod, patches and oil for normal maintenance. A friend of mine was shooting factory ammunition in a custom .338 Winchester and bought a couple extra boxes of ammunition for a recent trip. Although he bought the same brand/bullet type/weight the extra ammunition was from a different lot and the bullets were a less tapered. At the end of the first day of his hunt, when he removed the live cartridge from his rifle chamber the bullet, which was from one of the new boxes of ammunition, the bullet remained stuck in the lands of his rifle barrel. Without a cleaning rod he could have been finished with his hunt.

A fellow hunter who lives in my hometown was planning on going on a self-guided caribou hunt this year. "When it comes to the subject of clothes," he asked, "What should I expect in the way of weather in September? Warm days? Cold? Wind? Rain? Snow?" My reply was, "Yes."

On one of my caribou hunts I shot my first bull in short-sleeve weather on a beautiful sunny day. Four days later my son shot his double-shovel bull in the rain and two days prior to the floatplane picking us up we had 14 inches of snow on the ground. Go prepared with first-class rain gear and warm clothes. Although the new "breathable" rain gear will work in Alaska, if you really want to stay dry buy a set of rubber Helly Hanson bibs and a jacket (the kind fishermen wear in Alaska). If you have to climb a mountain after a bull wear the breathable stuff. When it wicks water up the lining in the sleeves and legs and the pressure points on your elbows, shoulders, butt and knees

get wet, hang it up at camp and let it dry while you wear the Helly Hanson gear. Even a cold wind will dry most of the breathable rain gear if you can keep it out of the rain. Wear your bibs over your hipwaders. If you have to cross a river the rain pants will keep water from splashing over the tops of your boots. If you must cross a river that is over the tops of your hip boots, tape the bottoms of your Helly Hanson bibs tight around your ankles with duct tape and go for it.

Plan on "layering" your clothing. I like polypropylene underwear, fleece shirts, and wind barrier fleece jackets and pants. Down vests and jackets work well if you keep them dry. Jackets filled with synthetic down-like materials are excellent choices as well. Clothing that has been designed for hunting in Alaska's varied climatic conditions can be found at Barney's Sports Chalet in Anchorage. Their Arctic Wind jacket and pants are made of wind barrier fleece and have waterproof patches sewn on the elbows, shoulders, knees, seat for durability. These patches match the pressure points where the breathable rain jackets and pants often get wet so you will stay warm and dry. Take both insulated ankle-fit hipboots and good Gore-Tex lined hunting boots. Ankle-fit boots with "air bob" or similar traction soles are a must as you often have to cross streams and rivers while pursuing caribou, then you may have to climb a mountain. Sloppy fitting rubber boots are the best way to get blisters that I know.

The tent you choose can make the difference between an enjoyable hunt and a cold, wet miserable hunt. I can recommend five different tents that have proven their worth in the Alaska bush. The Bomb Shelter and the Hurricane Hut made by Barney's Sport Chalet have 1" heavy duty shock corded aluminum poles, double floors, multiple stake out points (28 on the Hurricane Hut), and full coverage rain flies that come all the way to the ground. These tents have been proven by hunters and outfitters in the toughest weather in Alaska.

The North Face Pole-Sleeve Oval and VE-25 are commonly used by commercial guides and hunters and are fantastically stable in winds and under heavy snow loads. The Denali XWT tent made by Cabela's is similar to the Bomb Shelter. It is less expensive than the other three and will withstand high winds and tough weather.

There is little natural shelter in much of Alaska to protect you from the high winds, rain, and snow so "dig-in" for the worst weather possible when you set up camp. I recommend taking a smaller sleeping

tent and a larger tent to store equipment, cook in, and have an area to cape out trophy heads if it is snowing or raining outside.

Due to your limited space I suggest you stick with freeze-dried meals and backpack food.

Military MRE's are also a convenient food source. I always take two backpack stoves with me on this type of a hunt, both for convenience and in case one fails I always have a backup. Stove and lantern fuel cannot be shipped in your luggage. Coleman fuel is usually readily available even in remote Alaska stores. Because of the space restrictions, I would recommend taking a break-down

backpack to pack your meat with. They are small, lightweight, and are the answer to the problem of trying to transport a large over-sized frame pack. The best backpack of this type that I have found is the Rhino take-down pack frame made by Rocky Mountain Pack Systems. This frame will fit in any of the RMPS fanny packs or day packs, allowing you to use a frame at all times.

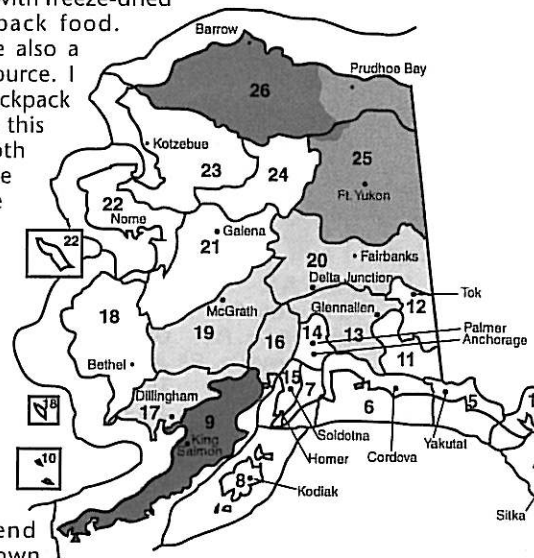
I would caution you to focus on hunting only caribou on this hunt. Most first-time Alaska self-guided hunters want to do a "combo-hunt" of moose and caribou. Don't! When hunting moose you will have the best results hunting in areas that have virtually no caribou. Areas with the most caribou are not the best areas for moose.

If you pay attention to detail the hunt will be a success and be enjoyable. Years later when you look up and admire your trophy bull on the wall, it will have a special meaning to you. You will have the satisfaction of knowing the accomplishment of planning and executing a self-guided Alaska hunt. You were the hunter, not just the shooter.

So, take one of the greatest adventures that North America has to offer; the self-guided Alaska caribou hunt.

Good luck. ▲ ▲ ▲

FOUR MAIN CARIBOU HERDS IN ALASKA



There are four main caribou herds in Alaska. They include: (1) The Mulchatna herd located throughout units 13, 16, 17, 19, and 20 with an estimated population of 220,000 caribou. (2) The Porcupine herd estimated at 130,000 located in unit 25 and the eastern portion of unit 26. (3) The Western Arctic herd estimated at 463,000 located in the western portion of unit 26 and the northern portion of unit 25. (4) The Nelchina herd estimated at 38,000 located in unit 9 on the Alaska Peninsula.