

Multchatna Monarch

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Most hunters I have known during my lifetime, especially Alaska resident hunters like me, don't go into the field with the intent of bagging a Boone & Crockett record book trophy. Most are content to bag their game, have a good time enjoying the hunt, and if they are lucky enough to claim a nice trophy, so much the better.

That was our intent when I went caribou and moose hunting in Alaska, with my two brothers, Jack and Bob Rogowski, in September of 1992. Jack and Bob live in Wisconsin and spent over two years planning this hunt.

A long-time hunting buddy of mine and I first hunted Unit 17B in Southwest Alaska for caribou and moose in September 1989, and were very successful. We arranged for a drop-off hunt with John Davis, a guide from Soldotna, Alaska, who operated out of Port Alsworth on Lake Clark in Southwest Alaska. He put us into one of his special spots by floatplane. I got a nice caribou and my buddy got a large 59-inch moose. After I shot my caribou, we saw about five other huge bulls within shooting distance of our tent and all we could do was look at them and admire their huge racks with rubbed velvet hanging from some of them like the moss hanging on black spruce trees. I was determined to return to the area again and claim one of these trophies. In my opinion, I don't think there is a more spectacular big game animal than the caribou.

Due to the previous quality experience with John Davis, we hired him again for our 1992 hunt. On September 13, 1992, John flew the three of us individually to my favorite hunting camp since his plane was a two seater with enough room for one pas-

senger and some gear. Our hunting site was about an hours' flight southwest of Port Alsworth.

Bob was the last to arrive. He was quite excited since they had seen several caribou bulls and a large brown bear with two cubs near the opposite end of the lake from our camp. Our pilot warned us that we should be on the lookout since the bear might try to pay us a visit, especially if we had any meat hanging.

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Monday, September 14, our first day of hunting, we decided to try the high hills west of camp to look for moose or caribou. We had gone about a half mile, when Bob spotted a brown bear and two cubs, likely the same two he had seen the day before. They worked their way to within about 150 yards of us before we decided they were getting too close for comfort. We showed ourselves and they high-tailed it into the trees.

Once we got to the top of the hill, we spotted a nice herd of 30 or more caribou traveling across the far side of a valley about a mile away. Even at that distance we easily determined

that there were some very large bulls in the herd. We spotted one particular bull that had a distinctively large, palmated rack that easily stood out among the rest of the herd. If we could see the rack from that distance, we knew it had to be a huge bull, the kind we were after. Since the caribou were traveling steadily away from us, it was useless to try to intercept them. We named this area, Caribou Valley, and planned to be back to hunt it again even though it was about three miles from camp.

We hunted hard over the next few days, but saw no bulls which interested us.

Wednesday, September 16, the weather was cold and windy as usual with the temperature at about 35 degrees. Bob and Jack decided to try Caribou Valley again and took their backpacks just in case they took a caribou. I decided to stay around camp since we expected our guide to check in on us that day.

I hunted the area around camp most of the day without seeing anything. Late in the afternoon I decided to sit on the edge of a small knoll about 100 feet from our tent. We used this site often since one could see over a rather large treeless area and also see the side of the high hills across the valley.

The day was mostly sunny with a strong east wind cutting across a large opening dotted with a few clusters of black spruce. I had my rifle, a Ruger 300 Winchester Magnum, binoculars and a spotting scope set up. To get comfortable, I leaned against a small bush with my back to the wind. I guess I got too comfortable and dozed off for a while. When I woke up, a white

movement far to my left caught my attention. I saw a huge bull caribou with a magnificent white mane and very large antlers. He was slowly traveling toward a clump of spruce where he soon disappeared. He had large palmated beams that seemed extraordinarily wide with a large shovel. He wasn't alone as I counted about eight other nice bulls along with several cows who were with him. I began closely observing the other bulls with large antlers in order to determine which one was the largest. I was still looking for the first bull I had seen and was not convinced that any of the others I had been looking at were the same bull. It was difficult to analyze which bull was the largest and whether any of those were the big bull, since by this time, most of the bulls were laying down in the scrub brush, with only parts of their body and antlers visible. I also noticed that some were sleeping with one side of their rack resting on the ground which made it even more difficult to determine which had the largest or best rack.

It took me about five minutes of intense looking before I spotted what I thought was the largest bull, which I named the "Monarch." He was lying down and appeared to be sleeping. I decided to try to get closer for a better view and a better shot. I took my jacket off and picked up the spotting scope, binoculars and rifle and backed down behind the small ridge which extended straight toward the herd. I crawled to within 200 yards of them and nestled under a spruce tree and behind some brush so I wouldn't be seen. This position still gave a good unobstructed view of the Monarch.

By this time I was very excited about seeing such a large caribou with not only one, but about a half dozen other outstanding bulls. I would have been happy to have any one of them. I continued to observe the animals through my 20x45 variable power spotting scope trying to get a better look at the antlers to see if any had double shovels and to determine if the Mon-

arch had the heaviest antlers.

I tried to get even closer, but decided to remain where I was since the brush, trees, and terrain prevented me from improving my position. I was also afraid that I might spook the herd since the wind can be very unpredictable.

I continued to observe the caribou for another 15 minutes or so until I was as sure as I could be that the large bull laying down in the brush was the Monarch. I was concentrating so hard that my eyes were watering and changing focus, thus I had to look away quite often to clear my eyes. Once I was satisfied that this bull was the Monarch, I decided to wait until he stood up before I would attempt a shot. This would give me a better perspective and improve my ability to compare the size of the rack to his body.

Once he stood up I was certain this was my trophy. I placed the cross hairs just behind his shoulder for a heart/lung shot. I had a good steady prone position with the bull standing broadside. One couldn't ask for a more perfect shooting situation. From the sound of a loud "thud" I knew I had made a solid hit.

When I reached my trophy, I noticed Jack and Bob returning to camp. Jack had taken a beautiful caribou with long sweeping tines. He was a very pleased hunter! After offering each other congratulations and exchanging stories, the three of us returned to my caribou to take some pictures, field dress him and pack the meat and antlers back to camp before dark.

Based on the size of my caribou, I have no doubt that several of the bulls in this band would have also scored very near or exceeded the magic "400" Boone and Crockett trophy criteria. After the required 60-day drying period, my trophy scored an impressive 424-6/8 points. The weather turned cold and the wind continued for the remainder of the hunt. I guess the cold alerted all caribou to clear the area since we saw only a few very young

bulls and cows from then on. John reported that most all of the lakes in the area were frozen over. Because of the frozen lakes, John could not get to about 15 of his hunters that were stranded on lakes that he could not land on due to the thick ice cover that prevented him from landing with floats.



By this time, our lake had developed some thin shore ice but nothing to worry about, yet. He said that this lake was not frozen over because it was one of the deeper lakes in the area, and thus took longer for the lake to "turn over" and freeze.

It was Tuesday, September 22, a week later, before Bob got his trophy. Although it was not as large as mine, or didn't have as many tines as Jack's he was very proud of it, since it required a lot of time and effort to take it.

We finally left our camp on Wednesday, September 23, 1992. We had a very successful hunt, and were three very satisfied and proud hunters. By this time, the lake was mostly frozen over and John had to break the ice before he was able to get to the shore and load us, our gear, meat and antlers for the trip back to Port Alsworth and Anchorage.

KEN ROGOWSKI WITH HIS BARREN GROUND CARIBOU WHICH SCORES 424-6/8 POINTS.