

COURAGEOUS LAKE

By CHARLES J. CLEIS
B&C Associate

"He's gorgeous, Noel! He's got everything I'm looking for. Think he'll score well?"

"Should go around 370 or so!" Noel said in a reply to the question I had finally managed to get out. At the time I didn't know how good, or lucky Noel was. All I knew then was the culmination of one of my longest-held childhood dreams was at hand.

The sun was out, the wind in our faces, a moment frozen in time, etched in my mind never to leave. My hunt for caribou began years ago in the pages of numerous outdoor magazines. As a young boy growing up in western Pennsylvania, I was overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the magnificent bull as well as the colorful carpet-like tundra they called home. Unfortunately, school, then family obligations kept things on the back burner.



CHARLES J. CLEIS WITH HIS CENTRAL CANADA BARREN GROUND CARIBOU THAT SCORES 372-5/8 POINTS.

Finally, I was able to set up a timetable for the trip. Choosing subspecies and outfitters was a deliciously difficult task, and though no one hunt promised everything, I finally settled on Fred Webb and his camp at Courageous Lake, in Canada's Northwest Territories. The most compelling reasons were a combination of his outstanding record of finding excellent caribou for his clients as well as the world

class fishing at Courageous.

The days until my departure for camp passed with agonizing slowness. Finally, August 25, 1990, arrived and with tremendous excitement and anticipation, we landed at Fred's camp on Courageous Lake!

After a hot lunch, we were all assigned our quarters in the framed and floored wall tents equipped with oil heaters. Later we gathered at the makeshift range to verify the sight-in status of our rifles, get our guide assignments and get

ourselves acquainted with one another. A close-up encounter and photo session with a medium sized bull served to get anticipation to a high pitch and made sleeping that first night extremely difficult!

My assigned guide was a Dene Dogrib Indian named Noel Doctor. This chance drawing was an extremely fortuitous one for me. Noel proved to be a tremendous guide, an outstanding cook (our shore lunches, both while hunting and fishing were great fare) and a great companion. He shared much of his knowledge of his people and the barren lands, showed me which of the abundant berries on the barrens were the best to eat and generally saw to it that my trip was great.

The first day dawned cloudy and windy. After a hearty breakfast, we loaded up in the 14 foot aluminum boat and headed out. We spent that first day getting acquainted with the uniqueness that is caribou hunting.

In short order, Noel's calm demeanor and excellence at judging racks had me out of the jitters and getting better at recognizing the finer points of caribou antlers. That day and most of the next were spent cruising the lake shore, stopping every mile or so to put ashore and hike inland. Seeking high ground, we would then glass the surrounding area for that bull of a lifetime. Many times, we stalked animals, only to suffer the caribou hunter's lament. If the tops were good, the bez and shovel weren't, or vice versa.

Late the second day, I had to admit I was getting a little discouraged. Although we had seen many bulls, I just hadn't seen the one of my dreams. I began to wonder if I was expecting too much. Pulling into an area Noel called "L-Shaded Bay," we slowly cruised along, looking for bulls. Spotting only a few cows and calves, we elected to put in anyway.

After a short, steep climb, we topped out on a long ridge that paralleled a small stream. We walked the ridge top for a half mile or more, glassing a

couple scattered groups of caribou, seeing nothing of note. Then we came to a shallow bend in the ridge, and there, down in the crook of the bend, there he was. The late, great Jack O'Connor said it best. The big ones do just look big. Facing away from us at about 400 yards, the rack was magnificent. He had it all! Long tines on the top that curved inward, ending about 8 inches apart, each with a shorter point forking upward a few inches back from the tips; long bez looking like forearms with hands and fingers outstretched; double palmated shovels extending to the end of the nose. My Dream Bull!

Ducking back and down to the lee side of the ridge, we were able to close to about 125 yards of my goal. Easing up over the top, I fully expected it to be an apparition, but no, he was there. He was every bit the trophy I was certain he was when we first spotted him. Standing broadside with the sun shining off the silvery velvet on his rack and the white mane, the picture is forever etched in my memory.

Two days of eating spray, bouncing over the windswept surface of Courageous Lake, hiking numerous miles over granite boulder-strewn tundra had led us to this moment. The beauty and wildness experienced to this point almost made the shot anti-climactic. After asking Noel for his aforementioned appraisal, I was even more convinced that not only was this a beautiful bull, but if Noel's estimate of its score was close, it was also a good representative of the species. Placing the cross hairs behind the front shoulder, the 120 grain Speer spitzer from the .25-06 dispatched him quickly, right in his tracks. If this sounds like a fairy tale, it felt even more so. The entire hunt was marvelous! After the 60-day drying period the bull scored 372-5/8 points. With that score my bull placed 24th in the 21st Awards Period and currently ranks 44th all time.

Another of my childhood dreams involves Dall's sheep in the Yukon. Hmmm...