CARIBOU On Your Own

As the bush plane disappears into the vastness of the Alaskan tundra, you're left with little more than your ability to survive the experience. Do you have what it takes?

By A.E. Walsh
Photographs courtesy of the author

I've been fortunate to have hunted around the world and lived the many experiences that come with such adventures. The big game I've chased includes the dangerous (Cape buffalo and three species of bear) and the beautiful (Dall's sheep and Coues' deer). Along the way I've experienced the hunt in many different ways: I've horse packed, backpacked, slept in first-class lodges and teepees.

I've hunted with guides made famous by outdoor writers of days long gone, and been equally privileged to hunt with guides so new to the business their boots blistered their otherwise inspired feet. I've survived my mistakes long enough to make many more, and learned enough lessons to lecture my kids into submission.

And while the change of scenery and rush of a new challenge are always nice, some things maintain the special foothold that keeps you coming back for more. For me, the adventure begins when the tundra tires of a jittery Super Cub rejoin the Alaskan turf. Soon I'm dispatched with nothing but my gear and my questionable wits, set to test both against caribou on its home range. Then the roar of a single engine drowns out all but the uncertainty, the bush pilot gives a weak wave and disappears for days on end.

Alaska is the land of vastness, and caribou hunting is a game of finding the needle in the haystack. These two qualities spell the definitive need for quality optics and the patience to use them correctly.

The smart ones begin by getting their camp set up; the others—with me firmly ensconced in their ranks—drop their gear at the side of the strip and start glassing. I'm a huge fan of the caribou, and invariably, I spot a bull that looks good from afar, and spend the better part of my first day waiting for the rain to catch me tent-less. It's happened to me too many times to count.

As a native Oregonian I feel I know a little something about rain, but Alaskan rain during caribou season isn't really rain; it's a liquid toughness test where the only correct answer is a hasty retreat. One year, while playing host to a couple of friends who'd never lived the tundra life, I coerced them into my trusty pattern, and we immediately dug out the spotting scope. As we stayed glued to the optics, the azure skies of our arrival silently gave way to a thick storm. In an instant we were soaked, scrambling to get a tarp over the gear and ourselves. We stayed huddled under the tarp, three grown men wet as sewer rats, for several hours before leg cramps encouraged us to tough out the rightful construction of camp. Caribou have that type of allure, where one would rather spend five days hunting in wet clothes than miss an opportunity to watch their parade.

Your caribou drop camp pits you against the forces of nature. A quality tent may save your life when staked in the middle of nowhere — you may want to consider renting.

Planning Your Caribou Drop Camp

A drop-camp caribou hunt starts with planning, possibly more than any other hunt found in North America. **The first place to start is at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G).** (See sidebar for important contact information on the following page.) In addition to hunting season dates, license requirements and fees, the ADF&G is an excellent source for herd data, including migration status and herd strength.

Finding a reputable air taxi service is all about leg work, but should not be given short thrift, because these are the guys who are responsible for getting you out to the bush, putting you in front of the migrating caribou, and most important, picking you up at the appropriate time. **These bush pilots are your lifeline to civilization, and short of a satellite phone, your only link with the outside world.** They take off from and land on over-sized mud puddles, often stiff-arming the reaching tops of grabby spruce trees, battling ever-fickle winds, and at the same time keeping an eagle's eye out for the next trophy head.

The right equipment can mean the difference between success and misery, or worse. **Many of the top fly-in outfitters have Alaska-ready gear—including tents, stoves and other expensive-but-necessary items—available for rent.** Unless you plan to use this equipment again, renting often makes the most sense, as it tends to be specialized and costly. Before signing on the dotted line, however, be sure to check with the outfitter's references to determine how previous customers assessed the equipment. Having old or non-functioning equipment makes you a prime candidate for trouble.

Alaska is big country; Quality optics are required. Enough said.

Caribou are not necessarily tough, but they share space with bears. For this reason, I recommend taking more rifle than you think you need, just in case. Having taken close to a dozen trips to Alaska, I've never (knock on wood) had bear trouble, but when I do I'll have a well-constructed .30 caliber bullet at the ready.

CARIBOU PHOTOGRAPH BY © DONALD M. JONES

D-I-Y Resources

The best resource for information on hunting caribou is the Alaska Department of Fish & Game. If you are willing to spend some time rooting around on that agency's website, www.adfg.state.ak.us, there is a wealth of herd information, easy-to-follow links to other helpful sites, regulations, licensing, and season date information. Be sure to familiarize yourself with Alaskan regulations, as they are vastly different from most other states. To speak to a department representative, call (907)465-4190.

A fairly comprehensive listing of air services and bush pilots is available at: www.outdoorsdirectory.com/directory/airtaxi.htm. **Be sure to check their references!**

Two great full-service outfitters who also cater to the do-it-yourselfer include Burr Henriksen of **Alaskan Safari and Trading Company**, www.alaskansafari.com, email info@alaskansafari.com, telephone (907)224-3552 (office) or (907)227-2252 (cell). Burr, a straight-shooting guide, outfitter, and bush pilot, offers a large selection of hunts across the gambit of Alaskan game. His peninsula brown bear hunts are world-renowned, but equally impressive are the drop camps he arranges in Units 9, 17, and 19 for caribou. Lake Iliamna serves as his base of operations.

Other sources include Gary, Louise and Steve Pogany at **Osprey Lodge**, www.ospreylodge.com, info@ospreylodge.com (email), telephone (907)696-2390 for Gary or (907)688-1511 for Steve. Osprey Lodge, homesteaded by Gary and Louise Pogany in the 1970s, is a first-class operation. This family-run business, with son Steve taking the lead in the bush, is situated in the heart of the Mulchatna herd's migration. Approaching the herd from the northeast, Osprey catches many of the bulls that are too far for the hunters originating at Lake Iliamna. Drop-camp and other hunters are delivered to the Osprey Lodge's private landing strip by scheduled flights out of Anchorage.

At the completion of a successful hunt, the process of getting the meat and trophies back home can be far more frustrating than the actual trip planning. Airlines, while certainly familiar with the spoils of the hunt, are often laden with red tape. **To save yourself a tremendous amount of frustration, consider hiring an expediter to handle your trophy.** They will inventory, prepare, and ship the product of your hunt once you're back home, and life has reluctantly returned to normal. The best I've found in Alaska are D&C Expediters (www.dandcexpediters.com).

Dwight Van Brundt of Kimber shot this bull as much for character as anything. The previous day he watched a B&C qualifier prance 25 yards from the tent as he was making camp. Unfortunately, the plane had only dropped him off an hour earlier, and Alaskan law prohibits flying and hunting on the same day.

A drop-camp caribou hunt offers the purest essence of hunting: a segment of life far away from civilization, with only one's own skills and desire to make it work.

ABOVE: The author and his wife, Jessica, have found the escape to Alaska a breath of fresh air in an otherwise rushed life. Jessica shot this bull on the final day of the hunt after watching several bigger bulls but not wanting the trip to end early. **LEFT:** The author shot this bull early in the season when caribou stay at higher elevations. When the bugs are bad, head uphill where the winds keep the biting flies from harassing you and the caribou.

Two tales from caribou camp—one of success and one of compassion—epitomize the gut-check required to hunt caribou:

In 2002 I hunted Dall's sheep with a friend in the Wood River drainage, between Denali and Fairbanks. I was fortunate to draw a limited-entry caribou tag and assumed it would be nothing more than a gimme at the conclusion of the grand sheep hunt. Each morning began streamside, and we spent our day climbing after white specks strewn about the peaks, each step taking years off our lives. After four days of pushing our bodies to the limits imposed by our tormentors, we decided to take a break for caribou.

We followed our well-established routine, riding horseback to an unnamed draw where we would find the quarry, dismount and pursue on foot. The "break" our caribou offered proved far more arduous than any sheep stalk.

It was early in the season, and the caribou were scattered about the higher elevations where the wind kept the bugs from feasting. We spotted a beautiful bull feeding along the side hill and decided to go after him.

The first 50 yards of the hill were guarded by an incredibly thick stronghold of willows, intertwined to prevent the passage of anything larger than a biting black fly. Almost successful in its attempt to keep us from climbing, we eventually made it through to find the pitch of the lush green slope far more severe than it appeared from below. So much steeper was the slope in fact, that we had to climb up the rocky creek bed that hosted a torrent of glacial run off. Within 20 minutes our toes and fingers were frozen, despite the mild air and dangerously high body temperature. Six hours later I flopped across my pack frame and found the bull at 300 yards. Unable to go any farther, I sucked enough of the thin air to feed my brain data for the distance, dancing crosswind, and extreme angle. Lucky for me, the bull died with the determination of a farm-raised trout, collapsing at the shot and ending the stalk before running out of mountain to climb.

Three days later, with my legs aching from the caribou's ascent and arms stinging with the fresh cuts of angry willows, I shot a nice ram. Within days of returning to my Virginia home I had my pictures developed and I sat with my family retelling the tale. Like an ice cube dropped down the back of my pants I sat bolt upright. There in the background of my caribou pictures was the same mountain I'd shot my sheep on; The photo was being taken from the uphill side of the caribou, so looking down a good bit, one could see the apex of my sheep hunt. Certainly not the way I had planned it.

Another tale from my long list of fly-in caribou adventures involves my wife, Jessica, and I, sharing camp with Dwight Van Brunt, a mutual friend and adventure freak who is vice president of sales and marketing for Kimber. We were hunting the tail of the famed Mulchatna herd. We set up camp almost immediately (that's my wife's influence) and spent the evening talking and glassing, but mostly carrying on. Band after band of caribou streamed within 100 yards of our tent city, and the excitement of the next day's hunt was palpable. Daylight hung around until after 10 p.m., when seven caribou emerged from the green tapestry of the tundra and marched directly at us. From a mile away we could see the mass of antler that graced the bull, but his cows seemed unimpressed as they grazed toward their winter grounds. Shortly before the last light faded, the bull strolled nonchalantly in perfect profile within 50 yards of our camp. Without a doubt the bull was a Boone and Crockett qualifier, and now the bar had been set for the start of the hunt the next morning.

We didn't sleep well that night or for the next three nights, until the memory of the huge bull was forced out of our minds by countless miles of brutal tundra. The last full day of hunting appeared before another great bull, and we vowed to continue to hunt hard. Shortly before noon, with Jessica perched on a short knoll overlooking a frequently traveled saddle, she pulled the trigger on a nice double-shovel bull. While she field-dressed the bull, I packed and Dwight continued to glass from the backside of the same hill.

Somewhere between meat load number three and four, Dwight had spotted a bull of grotesque character. Recognizing that the bull would never win a beauty contest, but fascinated nonetheless, he set off. He left behind a note, and unbeknownst to me, his pack frame.

As Jessica and I loaded the head and cape on to my back and began the half-mile trek back to camp, the network of draws and saddles delivered the "pop" of a distant shot. Excited but keenly aware of the distance in the report, I trudged back to camp suddenly ill.

Getting in front of ever-moving caribou is the key to success.

True enough, the shot report had traveled a great distance in the open country. From the vantage of camp I could see a white T-shirt marker, hung by Dwight on a bearberry bush. The spotting scope was set at 20-power, yet it was too far to make out the detail of his fallen bull.

I untied Jessica's trophy, threw a granola bar down my gullet and grabbed some water for Dwight and me. With a pack board on my back, Jessica and I set out to help Dwight. There was no use in stepping off the distance; it wasn't meant to be measured in yards, rather miles, with an "s".

By the time we reached him the day was getting long into the evening. Maybe under different circumstances he would have been a beautiful bull (in his own unique way), but when I realized I was the only one with more than a daypack, he got very ugly, very quickly. With only a few hours of daylight and certainly not time for more than one trip, we knew the bears would have their way with the bull if we didn't take him now.

We took a few group photos so we could laugh about it all many, many years later, then took to dismantling him as best we could within the stringent laws of Alaska. The resulting loads were distributed as such: Dwight carried the head and neck over his shoulders, as well as a front shoulder tied precariously to his daypack; Jessica toughed out the ribs, split and arranged into a decent bundle, as well as the tenderloins and some miscellaneous meat; I strapped the hindquarters on the frame and carried the front shoulder in my arms like an ugly baby.

The pace was slow and plodding, and darkness passed us well before we reached camp. Exhausted, we tied the meat into a stand of nearby spruce trees, shuffled back to the tents and fell into a sleep that was broken only by the din of the morning's flight home.

If you've never been on a drop camp for caribou, these stories may appear Herculean in nature; however, if you have then you certainly recognize them as nothing out of the ordinary. I retell them because the drop-camp caribou hunt does not offer you the choice of toughness to make. At the end of the day, you're as tough as it takes to hunt caribou on your own. ■