

PREHISTORIC

A person wearing a white parka and pants stands on a vast, flat, snow-covered landscape. The person is positioned in the middle ground, facing away from the camera. A long, dark shadow is cast on the snow in front of them, extending towards the bottom left. The ground is marked with numerous tracks and depressions, suggesting a path or a herd's movement. The horizon is flat and extends to the top of the frame, where a small, dark mound is visible on the right. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

JOHN GLASSING FOR MUSK OX.

JOHN WHIPPLE
60TH PARALLEL ADVENTURES
PHOTOS COURTESY
OF MICAH NESS
AND JOHN WHIPPLE

PURSUITS

MUSK OX HUNTING IN ALASKA: A CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORY

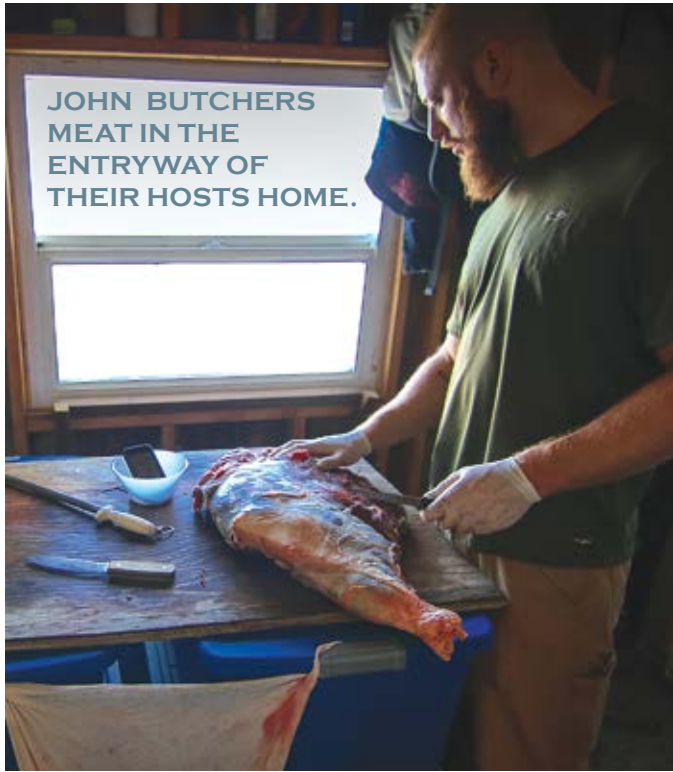
Even among hunters, bringing up the topic of musk ox in conversation is often met with a funny look followed by a lot of questions like “Are those the furry buffalo?” “I thought they were only in Canada?” “What do they taste like?” “How big are they?” “Wait, the cows have horns too?”

Now in the spirit of full disclosure, prior to 2013 I knew little about these prehistoric looking creatures myself other than that they existed in remote regions of Alaska and that even as a resident the chances of drawing a tag to hunt them was well below 1 percent. To my great surprise in February of 2013 my hunting partner Casey Dinkel and I found ourselves among that 1 percent, having drawn a party tag to hunt bull musk ox on Nunivak Island! With the hunt exactly one year away and our excitement already mounting, we began to study up on this intriguing animal and its habitat.

Measuring 1,632 square miles, Nunivak Island is the eighth-biggest island in the US. Located in the Bering Sea some 30 miles from the western coast of Alaska, one could say it meets the definition of remote. The landscape is treeless, windswept, and locked in an icy grip for most of the year. Not many living things choose to call this island home, but it is here that musk ox have thrived for the better part of a century, playing out one of Alaska’s great wildlife reintroduction and conservation success stories.



THE MEKORYUK "AIRPORT".



JOHN BUTCHERS MEAT IN THE ENTRYWAY OF THEIR HOSTS HOME.



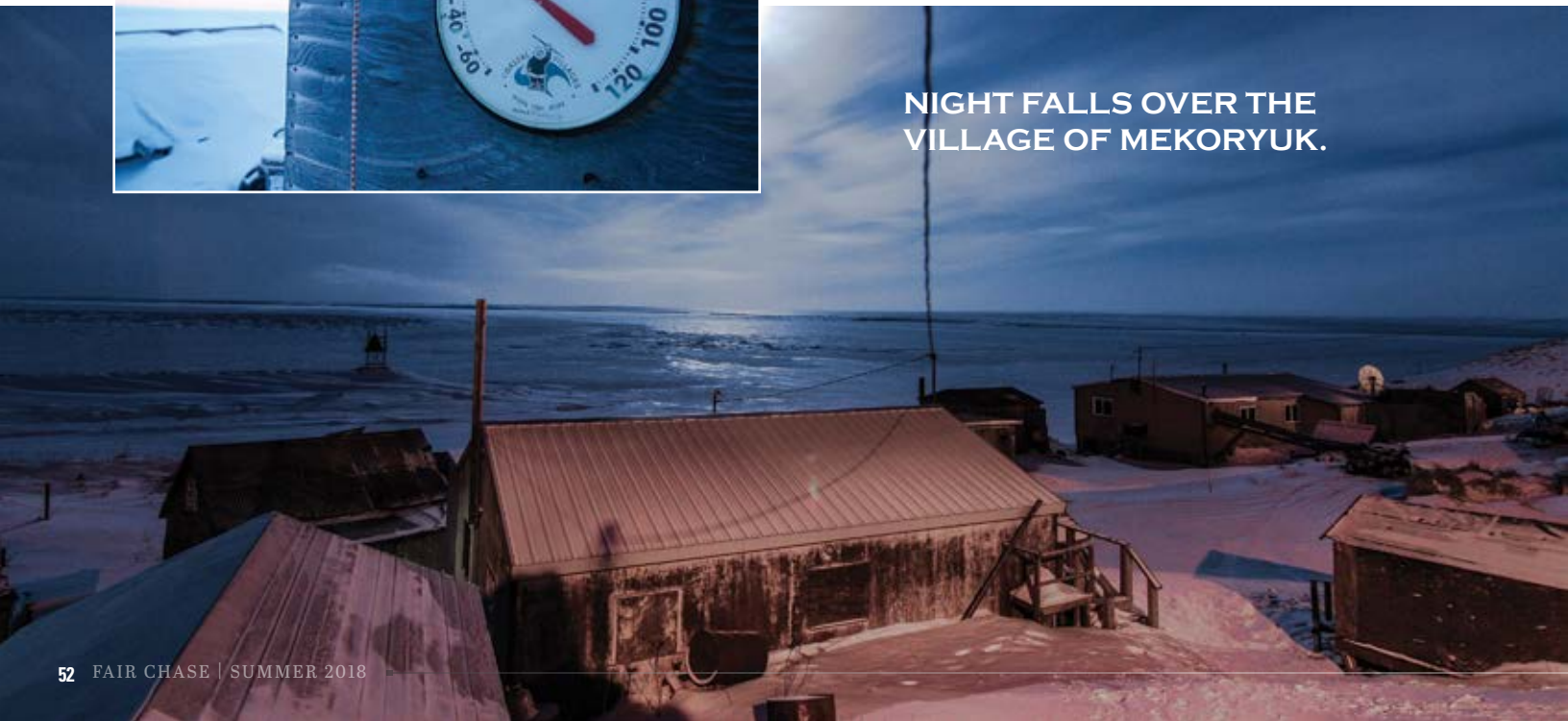
While musk ox have always been native to Alaska, evidence having been found going back as far as the Pleistocene era, in the 1800s unchecked hunting pressure wiped them out. In 1930, 34 musk ox were transferred with great difficulty from Greenland to Nunivak. The effort paid off and the small herd took root, and under effective management was able to flourish. In 1968 the herd had grown to 750 animals, so the excess stock were transplanted throughout different portions of Alaska and Russia (ADF&G). Today the state population numbers in the thousands, and the population on Nunivak is maintained between about 500 to 550 animals, which is considered the optimal sustainable population size for the island.

Since 1975, the Department of Fish and Game has used a highly regulated hunting program to help keep the population on Nunivak stable. About 40 tags are raffled off each year and are available to anyone who wishes to enter. With only 40 tags and about 3,000-4,000 folks applying for them, the draw odds are mighty low, making this a rare

and very coveted tag, and an incredibly unique experience for those lucky enough to draw it. An industry of guiding and transport has risen around this hunt, providing a significant amount of income to the 200 or so people of Mekoryuk, the one small village on the island. Members of the Cup'ig eskimos, many of Mekoryuk's inhabitants have lived on the island their whole lives, as their ancestors have done for generations before them.

One of my favorite aspects of hunting in remote parts of Alaska is the separation from modern life and the perspective it always instills. Looking back on what I learned about life on the island while on this trip, I marvel at the resilience and resourcefulness that the Cup'ig ancestors must have had to live a subsistence lifestyle on an island with no wood, and at the time, no big game (currently there are musk ox and reindeer, but both were introduced by the government in the 20th century). They lived in underground homes dug in to the tundra and survived by fishing, seal hunting, and gathering what they could from the land. Perspective indeed.

NIGHT FALLS OVER THE VILLAGE OF MEKORYUK.



The next step was to ask around and find the best local transporters, and we finally settled on James Whitman. Having grown up on the island, James knows it like the proverbial back of his hand and has hunted musk ox his whole life. James is registered as both a guide and a transporter, the distinction being that in the role of transporter he provides the client room and board and transport via snowmachine to and from the field, but does not assist in the actual hunting or processing of game as he does when hired as a guide.

In our case, he would be filling the transporter role, and assisting him would be another life-long resident, Raymond, who also had a lifetime of musk ox hunting experience. It was actually with him that we would be staying, and Raymond proved to be the most gracious of hosts. After booking with James, we began to spend quite a bit of time studying the qualities of a mature bull as he explained that for the uninitiated, musk ox can be somewhat difficult to judge. Both cows and bulls have horns, and young bulls can look very much like mature cows. Trophy class bulls

are characterized by heavy bosses much like a Cape buffalo, and have long, low, forward curving ivory colored horns with black tips.

THE HUNT

Our boots landed with a crunch on the packed snow of the Nunivak Island airstrip. Our group numbered three, as in addition to my hunting buddy Casey and myself, our friend and photographer Micah Ness was accompanying us in the role of cameraman. As I looked around at the featureless white landscape that stretched out in every direction, my excitement for what was to come began to mount.

The needle on the thermometer hovered around zero as we loaded our gear from the plane to the snowmachines and made our way in to town. As with so many runways in rural Alaska, it is located outside of town (in this case about two miles), and is just a strip of snow-covered asphalt that serves to reinforce the feeling that one is really, truly, in the middle of nowhere. Or, just the sort of somewhere we would like to be.

Upon arriving at James's house, we were greeted by another hunter in the

arctic entryway of the house as he caped a musk ox he had harvested the day before. A good sign of things to come, we hoped. That night, over a meal of musk ox ribs we swapped hunting stories with our new-found friends and began to prepare with anticipation for the hunt that would begin in the morning.

We woke unnecessarily early, brimming with first-day excitement that was quickly tempered by our hosts. With the mentality of islanders the world over they were in no particular hurry, secure in the knowledge that the musk ox weren't going anywhere. We ate a leisurely breakfast, and were on the snow machines and moving out by about 11 o'clock.

We travelled a good 40 miles, periodically stopping to glass for the black spots that would stand out starkly against the sea of white. Sure enough, at mid-afternoon we spotted a herd of about a dozen musk ox. As Casey was hunting with a bow, we had decided he would be the first one "up to bat". We disembarked from the snowmachines and began to make a plan of attack.

Consistent with most

of the island this area was flat and featureless and approach without detection would be difficult. We selected a route that followed a small contour in the land with an occasional piece of brush that offered a modicum of cover. The last 200 yards were done on hands and knees, careful to only move when the many watchful eyes of the herd were not cast in our direction. An arctic fox scampered past us, chasing some ptarmigan that had taken refuge in the thin line of brush. The herd was a cross-section of bulls, cows, and calves but there was one bull in particular with a nice set of headgear and a great big mane of loose wool that set him apart from the rest. At 80 yards, our cover ran out and we were forced to try a painstaking belly crawl, trusting only to our white camouflage over-suits. At 60 yards our target bull had enough of our efforts, got up with a snort and galloped off! The rest of the herd followed in his wake. Thankfully, they only ran about a quarter mile away, presenting us with a chance at redemption.

Stealth having failed, this time we took a bolder approach, splitting up and

WITH SUCH OPEN TERRAIN, IT IS DIFFICULT TO STALK THESE ANIMALS UNSEEN. HERE A MUSK OX HERD FLEES ACROSS THE TUNDRA





A LOCAL ELDER DEMONSTRATES HIS TECHNIQUE FOR HARPOONING SEALS.



JOHN ADMIRES HIS MUSK OX

walking straight towards the herd, each from different angles in pincer fashion. Their prehistoric defense instincts engaged, they grouped in to a circle, with the bulls tossing their heads and stomping the ground in a show of defiance. As we approached, the lead bull made as if to charge several times, but Casey kept inching closer. At 35 yards, he held his bow at full draw, waiting for an opportunity. As with any herd animal, the difficulty is often in finding a clean shot that does not risk injuring a non-target animal, in this case made all the more difficult by the 30 mph gusts that had been our constant companion throughout the day. The lead bull became impatient and turned to take off running again, leaving the protection of the circle, and providing the opportunity that Casey needed. Casey put the arrow right through its heart, and the bull made it less than 50 yards before toppling over. Ecstatic, we admired the mature bull's thick pre-historic coat of fur and its great sweeping horns. Congratulations are necessarily short-lived in the arctic, and we soon set to work breaking down the animal before it

began to stiffen with cold. The smell of our work began to bring in hungry fox looking for an easy meal, and Casey was able to shoot a nice red that came a little too close for its own good. The trip back to the village was made in the dark with a wind that increased in ferocity throughout the night and by morning had turned in to a full-fledged storm. We spent the next two days in town butchering meat and walking around, meeting some of the other locals while we waited for the storm to break. One of the highlights of the trip was when we got to speak to an elder of the town who showed us his workshop, where he carved beautiful jewelry from musk ox horn and mastodon bone that he had found. He also took the time to tell us about his traditional method of hunting seals, demonstrating his technique in his kitchen with his well-worn harpoon.

On the fourth day the storm broke and now it was my turn to try and fill a tag. The sky was a piercing blue and the temperature hovered around minus 10 as we left the village, but the wind had mercifully relented to a relatively mild 10 mph. By

CASEY, ABOUT TO TAKE THE SHOT.



mid-afternoon we had covered 30 miles and all we had seen were one reindeer and two fox, but then we crested a low hill below which opened a large plain. Lo and behold, a band of musk ox was feeding about a mile and a half distance from us. We got a little closer on the snow machines and then prepared for the stalk. I unlimbered my rifle from the cargo sled, my trusty Remington .375 H&H, perhaps a little overkill for this hunt, but a great all-around Alaskan big game gun. We figured we could approach within a couple hundred yards and be far enough away to not alarm the animals.

We got off the machines and made our approach. Several times I stopped to glass the herd, and was able to pick out at least three bulls that were bigger than anything we had seen. At 150 yards we stopped and I settled into my shooting sticks. The bull I had selected was standing out in the open with several other bulls, and they seemed to be on the alert. When he turned and presented a clean broad-side opportunity, I lined up for a shot, but made the error of not accounting for how long a musk ox's fur is and judged the

vitals to be higher than they actually were. The first shot struck too high, missing the vitals. The bull took off as did the rest of the herd, but it was unable to keep up. In a flurry of follow up shots, I was finally able to put the old bull to rest. He turned out to be a beautiful example of the species, with heavy bosses and mass that carried through to the characteristic beautiful black tips. He would later officially score 105-1/8. Caping and butchering these animals is a unique experience, as the hide and meat begins to freeze as soon as it is pulled away from the body, so one must be sure to move quickly and efficiently, and when done to pack

the hide and meat in the sled the way you want it to be shipped, because by the time you get back to the village it might be frozen solid. As we made the ride back to the village, the last golden rays of sunlight stretched across the ice and snow, while I was re-playing in my head all the new experiences we had enjoyed over the last week.

Musk ox hunting in Alaska is a unique experience, defined by the terrain and the people that inhabit it as much as it is by the animal itself. Providing that proper management continues, it looks like people will be able to enjoy this experience for many years to come. ■

For more information on musk ox, visit the Alaska Department of Fish and Game website at adfg.alaska.gov.

John Whipple is a hunter, photographer, and author based in Palmer, Alaska. He operates 60th Parallel Adventures with co-owner Casey Dinkel and specializes in filming and photographing outdoor adventures.

THE WHOLE TEAM FROM LEFT TO RIGHT; MICAH NESS, JOHN WHIPPLE, AND CASEY DINKEL WITH HIS BULL.



DRESSING OUT ANIMALS IN SUB-ZERO TEMPERATURES IS A GAME OF SPEED.

