

# EXTREME

## 3° NORTH O

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### EXTREME HUNTING

IN NORTH AMERICA, THERE ARE A MULTITUDE OF SPECIES OF GAME TO HUNT, AND EACH PRESENTS ITS OWN PARTICULAR CHALLENGE. IN SOME PLACES, THE WEATHER AND TERRAIN ARE SO EXTREME THAT THEY PROVIDE ANOTHER, OFTEN MORE CHALLENGING, ASPECT OF THE HUNT. THE FOLLOWING TWO STORIES GIVE US A GLIMPSE OF HUNTING IN THE FAR NORTH AND FAR SOUTH OF THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTINENT, WHERE EXTREME COLD AND INTENSE HEAT DEMAND FORTITUDE FROM A HUNTER. - ED.

**The arctic** is a wonderful place in winter. Animals, including muskox, Central Canada barren ground caribou, arctic island caribou, and wolverine, are fully furred in their splendid coats and much easier to see as they are more grouped together. And since everything is frozen, one can travel anywhere without being confined by rivers, lakes, or bogs. Quite a contrast to summer, when animals are scattered and hard to find, and black flies and warble flies are as thick as soup.

Four years ago, I was on Victoria Island, one of the arctic islands of Canada's Northwest Territories. Our camping spot was called *Noyuktuk*, meaning "place of the horns." Lots of caribou antlers were found there, some buried, some piled up, some over a thousand years old. I was after a small but unusually beautiful, white-colored type of caribou closely related to the Peary's subspecies.

The Peary's caribou herd on Victoria Island has suffered sufficient degrees of hybridization with Central

Canada barren ground caribou that it is no longer considered *R.t. pearyi*. Technically, this herd is referred to as the Arctic Island caribou hybrid (*R.t. pearyi x groenlandicus*). Genetically pure Peary's caribou are endangered and cannot be legally hunted anywhere. Although Boone and Crockett does not recognize the Arctic Island caribou hybrid for records-keeping purposes, I wanted to harvest one anyway. I have been fascinated by the white caribou and all the other arctic animals since I was a young boy.

From my home in Montana, I flew to Calgary, then Yellowknife and on to Kugluktuk (the new name for Coppermine). From Kugluktuk, we flew in a Twin Otter over Coronation Gulf of the Arctic Ocean to Victoria Island. It was a very cold and noisy ride inside the airplane. Two other hunters whom I had never met before were going to hunt caribou and muskox out of the same camp using separate guides.

The ocean was mostly frozen with abundant leads, but lots of open water still remained out in the middle. From the plane, I could see caribou on the Richardson Islands and also near the gravel airstrip where we landed on Victoria Island. The whole country was white and frozen, but the snow was only a few inches deep. When we landed, the temperature was -40° F, and a north wind added a considerable wind-chill factor.

Three Inuit guides met us. These wonderful and friendly people live and hunt on the land year-round, and are amazingly proficient at surviving in such a harsh environment and finding animals on the vast landscape. One guide, Charlie, was accompanied by his wife and

daughter. The first thing I noticed about the women were their beautiful parkas, one made out of caribou skin, and the other of fabric with a wolf-trimmed hood.

We rode snowmobiles to camp, about 10 miles away. My introduction to the cold came quickly. Although I took my mitts off for only a brief moment, my hands became chilled to the point that I could not recover any warmth in them. My thumb and fingers were almost frostbitten all the way to camp, and I had to push against the throttle and handle bars with my wrists while closing my fists, hoping that my fingers would unthaw.

Except for my hands, the trip was relatively comfortable, at least when I compare it to a previous arctic caribou hunt with my son David. On that trip, David and the two guides drove snowmobiles for 41 miles to reach camp, pulling me and the camping gear in a *qamotik* (sled). The Inuit guides called it an "arctic limousine." I called it something else. It was a rough-riding, bone-jarring trip, even though the sled was well-padded with caribou skins.

Our camp on Victoria Island was at the edge of a broad frozen river, and consisted of a small cook shack and a canvas sleeping tent large enough for me and the two other hunters. The sleeping tent was heated with an oil stove, but water froze in the tent anyway. It seemed fairly luxurious to me—on my previous arctic hunt, we slept on caribou skins in a "tent" consisting of old blankets sewn together.

By the time we reached camp, it was 4 PM and it was starting to get dark. Charlie had gone to the river by snowmobile to check his set-

BACKGROUND PHOTO BY  
MICHAEL FRANCIS

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lines for arctic char, which were placed in holes chopped through the ice. Later, he returned on foot. The snowmobile's fuel pump had frozen. They went back out with another machine, towed the frozen machine home, and disassembled and de-iced the fuel system. These Inuits are remarkable skidoo mechanics; their lives depend on it. They also carry side-band radios for safety. Each evening, conversations and news from all over the arctic can be heard on these radios.

When the guides returned, I saw that the set-lines had caught beautiful, red-meated arctic char, 2 to 3 feet in length, which had conveniently frozen moments after leaving the water. Charlie piled the frozen fish like cordwood in a boat that was supported by oil drums to keep it off the ground and out of the reach of foxes.

That first night, two things struck me as strange: I was looking south at the northern lights, and nearly straight up at the North Star. According to our GPS, our latitude was 69° 37' north, about 3° north of the Arctic Circle. Our proximity to the North Pole didn't seem to bother the arctic hares I saw lingering in camp, seeking safety from wolves and foxes. They were plump and chunky in appearance, and very pretty with white fur, black ear-tips, and jet-black eyes. Ravens were also lurking around, waiting for scraps of food.

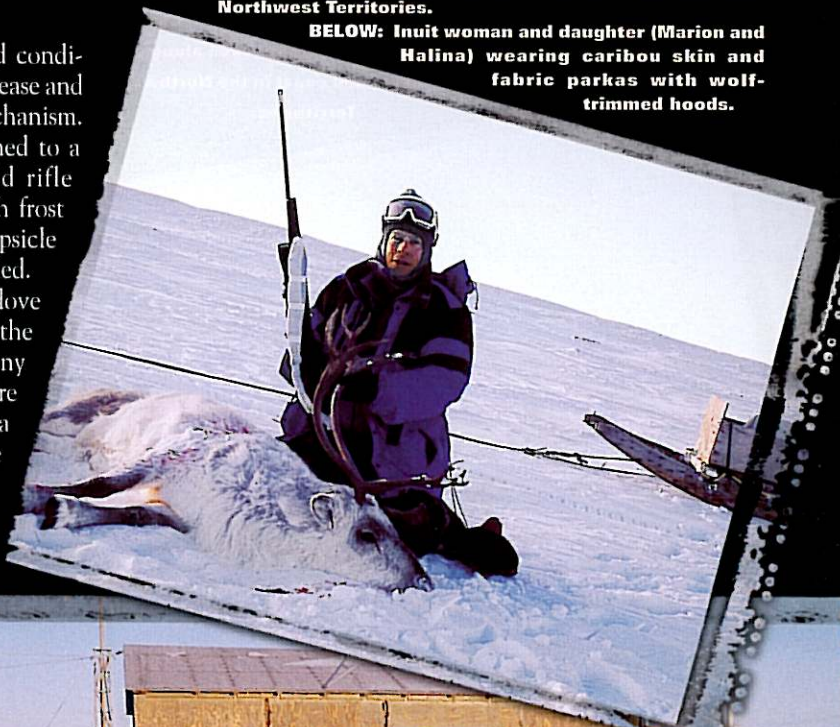
It was clear and sunny the next morning, -50° F with a slight breeze, and a perfect day for hunting. I dry-fired my frozen rifle in camp to make sure the firing pin worked, and it sounded eerie—the spring rang like a piano string in the intense cold. Before I left home, I

had prepared for the frigid conditions by removing all the grease and oil from the rifle's firing mechanism. I knew that when I returned to a warmer climate, the cold rifle would accumulate so much frost that it would resemble a popsicle until it was dried and re-oiled.

I never took off my glove liners when I was checking the rifle, nor when I was doing any of the other tasks that require finger dexterity. Touching a sub-zero rifle with your bare hands is a good way to leave a lot of skin behind. In the arctic, you can ruin a good

**INSET:** The author with a Peary's caribou taken on Victoria Island, Northwest Territories.

**BELOW:** Inuit woman and daughter (Marion and Halina) wearing caribou skin and fabric parkas with wolf-trimmed hoods.



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**INSET:** The next day, a group of muskox were spotted from camp. Their tracks were enormous. We had to stalk them three times before they would pose.

**BELOW:** The author's 16-year old son, David Kushnak with a Central Canada barren ground caribou taken along the arctic mainland coast in the Northwest Territories.

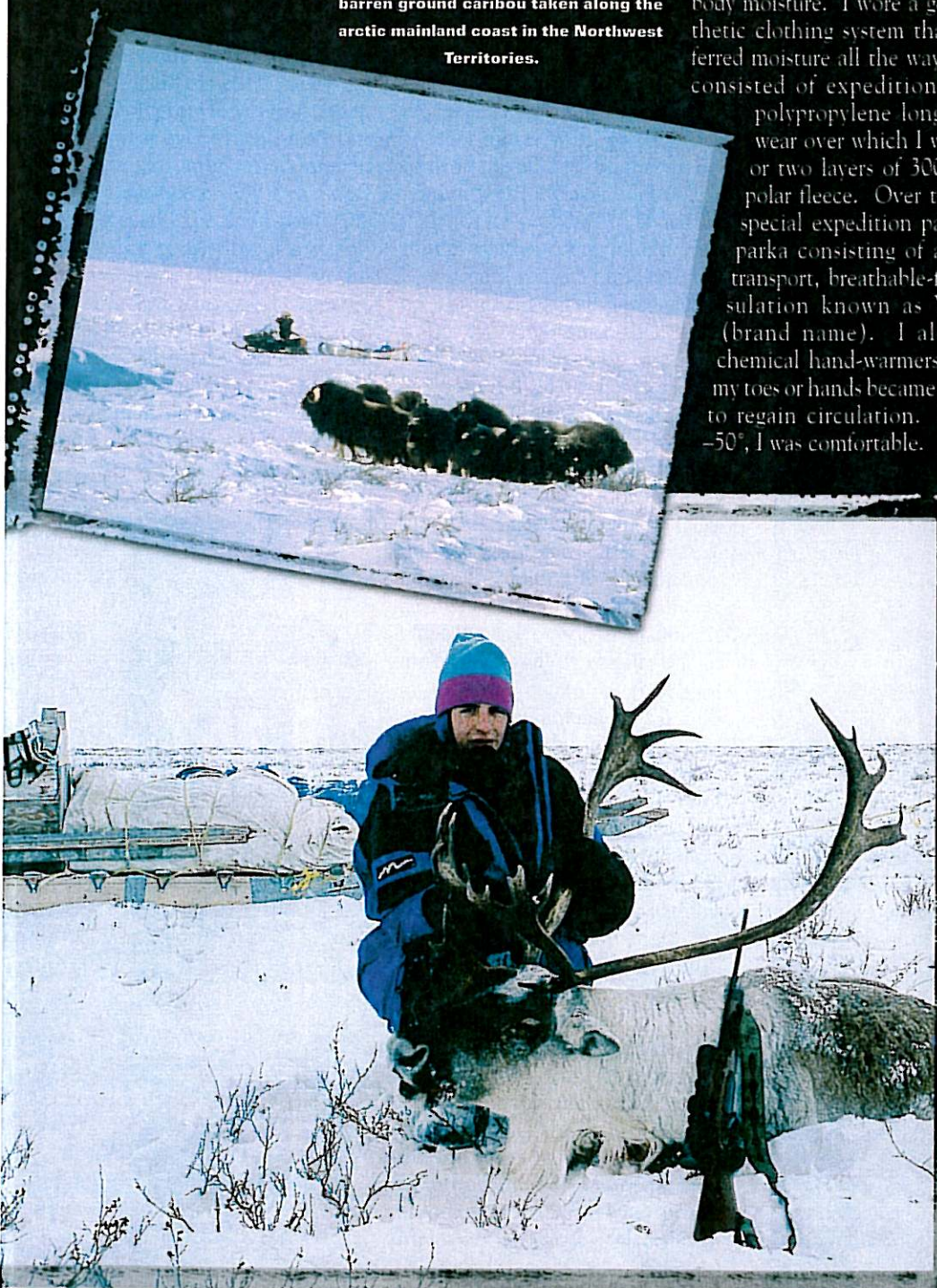
hunt just by bringing the wrong clothing, and not all expedition clothing works. Cotton and down are deadly. Down is comfortable for a day or two, but then becomes frozen mush from accumulations of body moisture. I wore a good synthetic clothing system that transferred moisture all the way out. It consisted of expedition-weight polypropylene long underwear over which I wore one or two layers of 300-weight polar fleece. Over this were special expedition pants and parka consisting of a vapor-transport, breathable-foam insulation known as Vaerrex (brand name). I also used chemical hand-warmers in case my toes or hands became too cold to regain circulation. Despite  $-50^{\circ}$ , I was comfortable.

I went with Collin, my guide, to hunt along the ocean coast. I saw two beautiful white arctic foxes running out on the ocean ice. Animal feeding craters were everywhere on south facing slopes, and that is also where we saw most of the caribou and muskox. On Victoria Island, the caribou herds migrate to the south end in the fall. Then one herd moves eastward along the coast and another moves west, passing each other in the middle. So there is opportunity to look over a lot of animals. The problem is, if windy, stormy weather comes in or a white-out occurs, you can't find the caribou very easily, if at all. I was advised to not waste too much time in selecting an animal.

We stalked one herd for about half-an-hour, using the rolling terrain to give us protection. In order to approach them into the wind, we were forced to face the low-hanging sun. This made it difficult to judge the hair color and antler development. In addition to the difficulty created by the angle of the sun, my binoculars were very stiff and nearly impossible to adjust, and the oculars fogged when put to my eyes. Just looking at the animals was a difficult task in that bitter cold.

I finally selected the smaller of two bulls in the group because it had a much whiter coat. After a 200-yard shot, the bull turned and ran a short distance, following the other animals. Then he fell over with his legs straight out, as if frozen stiff before hitting the ground. Collin hollered in excitement, "you got *tuktu* (Inuit for caribou)!"

While skinning, the hide stiffened like cardboard as it was removed from the carcass. We had to frequently stick the knife blade into the still warm muscles to clean off frozen accumulations of fat and blood. My so-called fog-proof, triple-pane goggles fogged readily in these conditions. At these tempera-



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tures, you cannot have any bare skin exposed, so goggles must be worn whether you can see through them or not. I remedied the problem by cutting narrow slits in the lenses, allowing me to see. For those of us who need corrective lenses, contact lenses are essential. Eyeglasses would be worthless in the frigid arctic air. My camera worked for only five or six pictures of the animal before freezing up.

When I arrived at camp, everyone ran out to greet us, admire the animal, and rejoice in the success. Inuits are very spiritual about hunting, and never presume success. They pray for success, but give thanks whatever the outcome. For dinner, we had frozen arctic char with soy sauce—an Inuit version of sushi—which we cut into cubes with an *ulu*. It was very delicious.

Inuits claim that eating frozen fish and caribou keeps them warmer than cooked food. They do not eat raw seal, at least in the western reaches of the arctic, because of the heavy parasite load. Although Inuits like tea and coffee, they prefer broth made from boiled seal meat when traveling. It warms the body like tea, but without the diuretic effect so they don't have to urinate all the time. There is no comfortable way to go potty in the arctic. Despite this serious disadvantage, I chose the tea.

The next day, I spotted a group of muskox from camp, so Collin and I went out to take some photos of them. They were not very cooperative and we had to stalk them three times before they would pose. Their tracks were enormous. In places, their dew claws were imprinted in the snow from running and landing hard on their feet.

My other experience with muskox was on a spring hunt a year earlier, about 180 miles northeast of Inuvik. We had found a herd of muskox on a sunny calm morning,

with the temperature at a balmy  $-31^{\circ}\text{F}$ . I almost missed the animal with my first shot, as the foot-long hair hanging below the muskox's belly deceived me into shooting lower on the chest than I should have. The shot just barely hit the bottom of the heart, but it was enough to drop him. After skinning the animal, the carcass looked like a hippopotamus. A rounder, more rotund animal I've never seen. The beast was so round, we were easily able to roll the 700-pound carcass from side to side while skinning. It seemed like a good adaptation for cold climates, with no corners to get cold.

You wouldn't think that something that round could move very fast, but later that day, I happened to be in the right place when another hunter spooked a muskox herd he was stalking. I looked up to see a thundering mob of these ice-age beasts running across the white tundra with snow flying under their pounding hooves, and their long hair flowing in rhythm with their bounds. It was a spectacle I will always treasure.

I have taken three hunting trips above the Arctic Circle. Each time it strikes me that even though everything is white and frozen, the landscape is somehow inviting and comforting. And this trip was no exception. It felt good to be here. Everywhere I looked or went, I would see wildlife. It was a secure feeling, knowing that the abundance of wildlife could sustain us if we got stranded here for the winter. I wondered how it looked in summer, with the kaleidoscope of colors on the flowering tundra, the millions of migratory birds, and the big, red fish moving up the streams. Only a few heads of grass were visible here and there, appearing only a couple of inches above the shallow snow. Beneath the snow were very short, ground-hugging forbes and lichens. It is unbelievable that muskox and

caribou could find a living on such sparse vegetation. With a hard crust, these animals could easily starve.

Collin and I went out that evening to collect an arctic hare using a .22 magnum. We skinned and measured it for a full mount to go with my caribou display. These are the largest member of the hare genus, and were larger than any jackrabbit I've ever seen. There was a full moon, and it was very eerie and silent.

At 5 AM, the dog started to whimper in distress and wolves were howling from a distance. There was a light dusting of snow that allowed us to see a set of wolf tracks 50 yards from camp. The tracks indicated a young one—the older, wiser ones kept a much farther distance from camp. Wolves on this island come in all three colors: gray and white are common, but black is rare. I also saw a snowy owl and two beautiful, white, thickly-feathered ptarmigans feeding near camp that morning.

Since the other two hunters were also finished collecting their animals, the three of us took advantage of the clear weather and arranged to fly out immediately. It is possible to get stranded on these islands for weeks due to arctic storms. The Twin Otter landed just as we arrived on our skidoos. We loaded our gear, trophies, and one of the skidoos onto the plane. The Inuits hugged us goodbye. They are such warm, loving people. I think this is because of the harsh arctic environment, which requires the Inuits to rely on each other for their survival and safety.

These winter trips to the arctic were marvelous, unforgettable adventures for me. It is nearly impossible to visit the arctic and not be changed by it. But it is not everybody's hunt. The arctic is cold, tough, and unforgiving even for the truly adventurous. ▲ ▲ ▲