

THE MUSKOX

NORTH AMERICA'S MOST UNDER-RATED GAME



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Excepting the few guides and outfitters who pursue them, I seriously doubt that any modern sport hunters are genuine experts on hunting muskoxen. They are interesting and attractive trophies, and since they're a bona fide North American game animal a fair number of sportsmen pursue them. But I doubt that a great many hunt them more than once, and I doubt that anyone hunts them on a regular basis. I am certainly not an expert on muskoxen—but I have hunted them twice, once in fall and once in spring. I suspect that gives me twice the experience of most people who have hunted this animal. To tell the truth, I'd kinda like to go again—so I guess that makes me a real fan of this strange beast!

The Latin name of Ovibos moschatus means “musky sheep-ox,” which comes pretty close to describing the creature. Biologically he possesses some characteristics of the

sheep clan and some of the wild oxen. Like most folks, I tend to simply call them “muskox” in any number.

THE LITTLE ARCTIC BUFFALO ISN'T
THE MOST DIFFICULT ANIMAL TO
BAG—BUT HE'S UNIQUE AND UNIQUELY
BEAUTIFUL.



AND THE COUNTRY HE LIVES IN
PROVIDES ITS OWN CHALLENGES.

Technically, however, “muskox” is singular and the proper plural is “muskoxen.” In appearance he's ac-

tually very similar to our bison, and must be a cousin on some level.

However, there is no real comparison in size between a mature muskox and even a half-grown bison. The extremely long hair—all over—makes it natural to badly overestimate the size of muskoxen. They look as big as buffalo—but it's all fluff. Bulls from harsher environments such as Alaska's Nunivak

Island and Canada's offshore islands rarely weigh more than 600 pounds, including all that hair and the wonderful horns.

Bulls from the mainland are indeed larger, but 750 pounds live weight would be a very big muskox. In other words, they're actually about the same weight as a bull elk!

That long hair that fools you is one of the neat things about this animal. The outer hair is long and fairly coarse; single strands can be as

long as 24 inches. Underneath this is a layer of fine wool, called qiviut first by Greenland Eskimos and now by most everyone. This wool obviously protects the animal from its extreme environment, and in years gone by was collected for use in sweaters and such. I have a mounted muskox head, and it's actually one of the most striking game mounts I own. At first glance it's huge—but you can stick your arm into that hair almost to the elbow from any angle. My second muskox, by the way, was done like a closed-mouth bear rug, with the head attached. That's a particularly interesting way to preserve a muskox trophy—but you sure don't want to stumble onto the horns in the middle of the night!

Legend has it that the closest you could ever come to getting hurt by a muskox would be to trip over one in that fashion. This is simply not true. I would not go so far as to classify a muskox as dangerous—but they have the equipment and often the temperament to turn tables on the unwary. Their classic circular formation is a primary defense against wolves—but it's not a static circle. Part of this formation is for individuals to make short charges from the circle, then retreat. Bowhunters, who occasionally approach such a circle within, well, within wolf range, have had to do some fast scrambling!

Bulls often group together in twos and threes—and can be quite protective of each other. It was exactly this scenario that the great sheep hunter Otis Chandler ran into a couple of years ago. They had shot one bull, but its buddy wouldn't leave. Chandler took a charge from the second bull and was hammered badly. Getting to help, immobile on a sled with a shattered shoulder, must have been a cold and agonizing ordeal.

That's just to say that, as with any wild animal, you can't take chances. It is not to say that the muskox is akin to the Cape buffalo! He's also very easy to spot. In winter a herd stands out from miles away, like pepper sprinkled onto salt. Even in summer muskoxen are easy to glass in their wide-open terrain. Now, that glassing can take some time. Espe-

cially on the Mainland, where they range widely over huge country, finding a bull can take days. But most generally a herd is found. Muskox hunting is probably the most universally successful hunt in North America.

When Canada first opened many muskox herds hadn't been hunted for decades. Wolves were their only enemy, and it was common

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for a herd to circle instantly when hunters approached. Today, with more permits and more pressure, getting a shot is a bit more difficult; a muskox herd is more likely to flee than stand when they become aware of the hunters. This has made bowhunting much more difficult, but approaching within range of a centerfire rifle is still not a huge problem in most cases.

The real challenge with muskoxen hunting is the country and the weather—and that's part of the charm of this hunt. The first muskox hunt I did was clear back in '81, when Canada's Northwest Territories had just started to issue nonresident permits. That hunt was in November, and the cold was absolutely incredible.

The hunting day was short, too. As I recall we had sort of half-light from nine in the morning 'til noon, then perhaps two or three hours of genuine daylight, then half-light

again from before three until full dark before five. It was just as well; I honestly couldn't have withstood the cold for a longer hunting day!

The second hunt was in the spring, in April before breakup. The days were quite long, and on a couple of clear days the weather was absolutely glorious—perhaps as high as 15 degrees, with a pale sun and little wind. But we caught a storm on that trip, a serious one. We had the equipment for it; our tent camp could have withstood the gales just fine. But we were luckier than that. We saw it coming as we headed along the coastline out of Coppermine, headed to a crossing across the pack ice to Victoria Island. We made for a little cluster of summer fishing shacks our Inuit guides knew of, and weathered the storm quite snugly.

We had quite a crew on that hunt—myself; Canadian photographer Sherman Hines; gunmaker Col. Art Alphin of the A-Square company; and Col. Charles Askins, last of the old-time gunwriters. Askins entertained through two days of storm with tales of the old Border Patrol and such, and I only wish I'd had a tape recorder! When it cleared we proceeded across the Queen Maude Strait, set up a very comfortable tent camp, and proceeded to take our muskoxen!

The history of muskox hunting is very old and very new—with darn little in between. At one time the animals were probably incredibly plentiful both in Greenland and the Canadian Arctic, but during the latter years of the last century and the early years of this one muskoxen were badly depleted by trappers, whalers, natives with their newly-acquired firearms, and market hunters. Perhaps surprisingly, some of the worst slaughter occurred right after the great bison herds were finished! Muskox were probably never close to extinction, but there was very little sport hunting between about World War I and the opening of Nunivak Island's transplanted herd about 35 years ago.

A cruise through Records of North American Big Game's muskoxen listings is fascinating stuff. Even today, in the 1993 edition,

SUNSETS ON THE HIGH ARCTIC ARE FABULOUS -- BUT THE NIGHTS THAT FOLLOW ARE LONG AND COLD!



you'll find quite a few entries of trophies taken between the late 1880's and about 1910. You'll even find two trophies taken by Admiral Peary, one in 1906 and one in 1909. Then you'll find several entries taken in Greenland in the 1930's. And then you won't find anything until you get to Bert Klineburger's 1959 Nunivak Island trophy.

There have been quite a few transplants of muskox, to places as far-flung as Norway and Siberia, but the Nunivak herd is the best-known and most successful. In 1935 and 1936, 31 muskoxen from Greenland were released on Nunivak. They thrived, with the herd once reaching a high of 750 but generally stable at about 600. On a limited permit basis this was muskox hunting for quite some years, but in 1980 Canada's Northwest Territories began issuing permits.

There was good reason for opening the hunting, justification that remains valid today. After decades of protection, and with little fanfare, Canada's muskoxen herds have literally exploded. From scattered remnants throughout the Far North the herds reached 25,000 in the late '70's, then 50,000 in the '80's. Today they are plentiful enough that permits aren't a problem. Lack of hunters to purchase those permits is today's muskox management dilemma!

For the first few years of Canada's muskox hunting virtually all the hunting was done on Victoria,

Banks, and a couple of other offshore islands. The record books began to be rewritten, and that short list of pre-1940 trophies was quickly overpowered by entries from the 1980's. More recently hunts were authorized on the mainland. By 1983 it was obvious that Canada's islands produced bigger muskox, at least in the horns, than Nunivak. By the 1990's it was equally obvious that the Ca-

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nadian mainland produced the biggest muskox of all.

The real shocker is that, with muskoxen, the entire Top Ten were taken or found within the last 15 years. This is unprecedented turnover that is found in no other category. The oldest Top Ten head, the number 5, was picked up on the mainland in 1979. Second oldest is another mainland head picked up in 1983. Of the other eight, one was taken in 1986; two in '88; one in '89; two in 1990; and two in 1991.

The current edition of the book closed in 1991. I won't be a bit surprised if the next records book shows similar turnover!

My geography could be off just a bit, but I believe only two of that current Top Ten came from offshore islands; the rest come from the mainland. The primary reason mainland animals are larger is almost certainly because they eat better. However, a secondary reason might be found in the fact that the mainland muskox are a slightly larger subspecies.

In years gone by hunters often differentiated between Greenland muskox and barren ground muskox. This was probably a ridiculous and futile effort, since the separation occurred when there was literally no muskox hunting anyway! However, biologists do recognize at least two subspecies of muskox: *Ovibos moschatus moschatus*, the barren ground muskox of the mainland and southern Victoria Island; and *O. m. wardi*, the Greenland muskox the High Arctic islands and Greenland. On many individuals the Greenland muskox can be differentiated by a white face, while faces are generally dark on barren ground muskox. A more clear difference, however, is almost certainly body size—which is reflected ultimately in potential horn growth. Earlier biologists also identified a third subspecies, *O. m. niphocetus*, the Hudson Bay muskox supposedly found northwest of Hudson Bay and on the Melville and Boothia peninsulas. This subspecies is generally discounted today.

However, it is generally agreed that there are two subspecies, at least in a pure world. The problem is that

MOST MUSKOX HUNTS ARE DONE BY SNOWMOBILE TODAY, WITH THE CAMP AND EQUIPMENT PULLED ON A SLED. A GREAT DEAL OF GROUND MAY BE COVERED DURING A NORMAL HUNT.





LEFT: THE AUTHOR, LEFT, AND COLONEL CHARLES ASKINS. AT 80, ASKINS WAS A BIT OLDER THAN THE AVERAGE MUSKOX HUNTER, BUT HE SURVIVED THE COLD IN FINE SHAPE!
BELOW: AUTHOR, RIGHT, AND INUIT GUIDE WITH A NICE VICTORIA ISLAND BULL.

numerous transplants, plus a broad intergrade area on Victoria Island, have muddied the waters so badly that today all record-keeping organizations just have one muskox category. Probably as it should be. But they just get bigger and bigger—and as the populations continue to grow, probably will for some time.

The traditional minimum score for many years has been 90. When there was almost no muskox hunting—and almost no muskox—that was a formidable goal. On Nunivak it wasn't all that hard to hit 90. When Victoria Island first opened, and today with the mainland being hunted, reaching 90 isn't much of a trick. In fact, the majority of muskoxen taken in the Northwest Territories probably reached the Boone and Crockett minimum had they been officially measured. For those who wanted their name in the book, a muskox hunt was a sure ticket.

In the future it won't be so easy. From 1992 forward the minimum score for inclusion in the all-time book will be 105, possibly the largest minimum increase in B&C's history. That, friends, won't be all that easy a mark to hit—and that's as it should



be! I suspect there are plenty of muskox out there scoring well over 105, and I stand in my prediction that the Top Ten can turn over once again. Some herds have yet to be hunted at all, and I suspect we don't yet know how big muskoxen can get. But it won't be a sure-thing record book hunt with the new minimum, and there are several good reasons.

First, muskoxen are very hard to judge. It's easy to see the drop of the horn and the length of the turned-up tips, but the boss is very important in total score and the full extent of the boss is hidden by that long hair. Since few hunters hunt muskoxen more than once, trophy judgement rests with the guides. With increasing experience many of

the Inuit hunters are getting better—but few are really adept at judging, and perhaps it's asking too much.

When I took my first muskox in 1981 I darned near passed it. It looked good to me, but nobody could tell me whether it was a great one or just a normal mature bull. Finally, realizing I might not shoot, my guide suggested a storm might come. So I



ABOVE: BODDINGTON AND ALPHIN DRESSED FOR A DAY'S HUNT. THIS WAS A SPRINGTIME HUNT WITH RELATIVELY MILD TEMPERATURES, AND THE VERY BEST MODERN CLOTHING WAS ADEQUATE. IN GENUINE COLD NOTHING WORKS LIKE THE INUIT'S CARIBOU-SKIN CLOTHING!



shot. That bull was the world record for several years by another scoring system. In 1993, after it had dried for a decade, I finally had it scored for B&C, and it was 110 and some-

thing. But I sure didn't know that when I pulled the trigger.

The other problem is that muskox hunts are generally scheduled to be fairly short—rarely more than a week. Given the bad weather that's likely, hunters generally have the opportunity to see, judge, and pass just a few muskoxen in the course of a normal hunt. And, quite honestly, due to the extreme cold and arduous nature of travel by sled (whether pulled by dog or snow machine doesn't matter—the teeth-jarring bouncing is the same!) few hunters are going to pass a whole bunch of bulls looking for a monster!

I'd personally like to see muskox hunting become a lot more popular. It must necessarily be fully guided, but as ultra-exotic expeditions go, the costs are quite reasonable. As a tro-

phy the muskox is much under-rated. The horns are fascinating, but the long hair and mixture of white, tan, and black are just as beautiful as the horns. But the hunt itself is much under-rated as well.

In this case it isn't the shot. The shot will probably be quite easy, and will probably be anticlimactic, provided you don't get confused by all that hair and shoot low. (In this case, forget the old adage "shoot at hair,

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not at air." With muskox, the bottom third of what looks like chest is hair. Aim dead center right behind or on the shoulder, not low on the chest!) The stalk will probably be easy, and the glassing easier still.

Ah, but the hunt. Few of us will ever afford a polar bear hunt—and fewer still would really enjoy being



out on the ice for two weeks. But a week or so of muskox hunting is a fabulous glimpse of the High Arctic, still North America's least known ecosystem. It's a strangely beautiful place, ferocious when the wind blows and eerily silent when it's still. The Northern Lights alone are worth the trip—and seeing how the Inuit guides deal with their environment is equally worth it.

The Inuits I've hunted with are competent and fearless—and for a hunter from down south, there is much to fear in the High Arctic. Especially the High Arctic itself! But those guys know how to deal with their habitat, and they know how to keep their hunters safe and comfortable. A muskox hunt with them is a short slice of an entirely different existence—and the muskox himself is a wonderful memento of a great hunting experience.

EDITOR'S NOTE: CRAIG BODDINGTON IS SENIOR FIELD EDITOR FOR PETERSEN'S HUNTING AND GUNS & AMMO MAGAZINES, AND IS THE AUTHOR OF EIGHT BOOKS ON HUNTING AND SHOOTING.

ABOVE RIGHT: THE INUKHUK IS A TRADITIONAL INUIT WAY OF FUNNELING GAME INTO AN AMBUSH. STONE INUKSHUKS ARE FOUND ALL OVER THE NORTH, BUT ICE-BLOCK DECOYS WERE USED AS WELL.

TOP: DURING A BREAK IN A STORM OUR PARTY TRIED THEIR HAND AT MAKING AN IGLOO. IT PROVED TO BE AMAZINGLY WARM!

BELOW: THE HIGH ARCTIC IS BIG, LONELY COUNTRY!

