

# TESTING LIMITS

A dramatic landscape photograph of a mountain valley. The foreground is a rocky, sparsely vegetated slope. In the middle ground, a river flows through a valley. The background features rugged mountains under a cloudy sky. The title 'TESTING LIMITS' is overlaid in large white letters at the top.

Whether it's the stunning scenery, abundant wildlife, or seemingly endless wilderness, Alaska is arguably one of the best places on earth to hunt. It seems to evoke adventure and the challenges that follow. As an adventure hunter, I am constantly raising the bar and pushing myself to the next level. Whether it's hiking further, getting closer to my quarry, or battling the elements that Mother Nature has to offer, I can never seem to get enough. The very design of an adventure hunter is to test limits; not only our physical and mental limits, but the limits of nature itself. This is the very basis of this story and why reaching your limit, as my hunting partner would say, "can be a very sobering experience."



CASEY L. DINKEL

60TH PARALLEL ADVENTURES  
CO-OWNER

Photos Courtesy of Micah Ness  
and John Whipple



## A GOOD BUSH PILOT IS WORTH MORE THAN GOLD.

TAJ SHOEMAKER OF ISLAND AIR NAILS A DIFFICULT LANDING ON AN ALPINE LAKE.

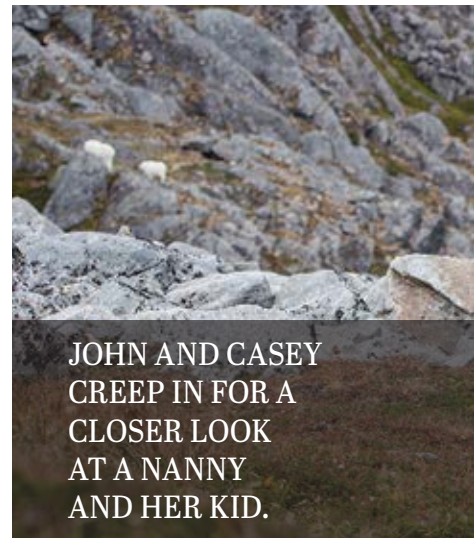
The Emerald Isle—Kodiak as it is more formally known—is a truly amazing place and an outdoorsman’s paradise. At the very mention of its name, most hunters immediately think of the famous Kodiak brown bear. With some bears standing 5 feet at the shoulder and weighing in at over half a ton, it’s easy to understand why these giants draw so much attention. Even though my hunting partner John and I love pursuing brown bears, it’s not what brought us to Kodiak this time around. During this adventure, we would be scrambling high into the alpine to pursue mountain goats. These creatures of the crags were introduced to Kodiak during the 1960s and have been thriving across the high country of the island. In fact, mountain goats have been doing so well that an ambitious hunter can register for two tags on the southern portion of the island each regulatory year. This hunt has been on our hit list ever since it became available several years ago. The possibility of taking two mountain goats each is definitely a tall order, especially when one calculates all the logistics, rugged terrain, and unpredictable weather that Kodiak is famous for. It’s an adventure-hunter’s dream and a challenge that both John and I could not wait to embark upon.

Landing on the crystal-clear lake surrounded by nothing but boulder fields and rock walls made my body tingle from adrenaline. My stomach felt light and uneasy from the hairpin turn and steep landing the pilot had to make on the tiny body of water nestled between two large mountains. “Rugged enough for ya?” the pilot asked as he taxied the Super Cub closer to the shore. “This is perfect,” I replied confidently; masking my intimidation as I gawked at the vertical terrain. Once

ashore, I moved my gear away from the water’s edge and confirmed our pickup date with the pilot. “Well I think you’re all set. Be safe and good luck out there guys!” he said, jumping in the tiny Super Cub as it floated away. Within seconds, the echo of the plane drowned out nature as he taxied his way to the far end of the lake for takeoff. I stood silent as I watched the plane gain speed and peel its floats from the water’s surface. Watching the Super Cub drop from sight and disappear below the cliff’s edge that bordered the west end of the lake was an eerie sight. I couldn’t imagine how tough it would be taking off from this puddle with a full load of meat. The wind would have to be from the west and absolutely perfect for our pickup day. Anything less and we would be stranded at the will of Mother Nature—not to mention that we were hunting in October with the possibility of our liquid runway freezing up. If we drew the cold weather card, it would mean a 10-mile hike out of the high country to the saltwater for pickup. Sure it was mostly downhill, but packing all our gear and a couple hundred pounds of goat meat through thick brush that was home to some of the largest bears in the world was not exactly on my favorite-things-to-do list.

I had just begun to gather my gear from the lake’s edge when I spied John crouched atop a large boulder filming some mountain goats that had apparently come to investigate all the ruckus from the airplane’s departure. Over the past few years, we have begun to document all of our hunts with film and photography in order to share them with the rest of the world. As one can imagine, trying to hunt and film can present some unique challenges. And since John and I

were hoping to harvest four mountain goats within 10 days on this little adventure, we both deemed it necessary to bring along another cameraman. Our good friend Micah had graciously accepted to follow John and I around the cliffs and crags in pursuit of our quarry. Micah is not only an excellent cameraman; he is also an avid hunter and skilled rock climber, aptly known as “The Goat” in certain circles due to his mountain prowess. This was a skill which John and I greatly envied and appreciated, especially during mountain goat hunts. After gathering enough footage for the time being, we decided to survey the immediate area and set up camp before dark. We found a somewhat level spot at the lake’s end that needed minimal rock management and assembled both of our Hilleberg tents in quick fashion. We had become



JOHN AND CASEY CREEP IN FOR A CLOSER LOOK AT A NANNY AND HER KID.

very fond of these tents over the years; one tent had been on 11 fly-in adventures previous to this one and had withstood everything Alaska had to offer. Whether it was driving rain, heavy snow, or gale-force winds, Hillebergs have kept us safe, dry, and warm in the nastiest of conditions. However, little did I know this hunt would be the ultimate test for both tents.

In the morning, we awoke to scattered showers and a light southwest wind. Over breakfast we glassed the immediate area for goats, just in case one or two had snuck in close to camp during the night. Finding only a nanny with her two kids close by, I began to glass a mountainside roughly a mile away. One by one I was able to pick them out from within the rocks; I counted nine goats in all. "I got six over here," John whispered with his back to mine,

five goats nestled among the cliffs not more than a mile away. We collected our gear and set out across the steep cliff faces in pursuit of our quarry. After several hours of intense climbing and bouldering, it became apparent that we were going to run out of daylight if we didn't pick up the pace.

We reached a small rock outcropping less than 800 yards from the group of five goats by early afternoon. With some concentrated

deciphering the sex of a mature mountain goat can be downright impossible from a few hundred yards unless they urinate or have a little one in tow. With daylight burning, we quickly picked the best stalk approach between us and the group of goats and started to close the distance. With no cover between us and the goats, we opted to head straight at them utilizing the boulders that blended near perfectly with our camouflage. Amazingly it

rolling, I squeezed the trigger, striking the billy just behind the shoulder. In a mad dash he acted as if he was never touched and began running uphill to his escape route. Leading the billy, I threw another round downrange in an effort to stop him before it was too late. The billy toppled backward end over end down the mountain about a hundred yards. After several high-fives, we made our way to the billy for examination. He was an absolute brute; a mature



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WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE.**

looking in the opposite direction. "Seven more across the lake," Micah chimed in. As we continued to survey the countryside, goats seemed to appear out of every nook and cranny. With our initial breakfast tally somewhere around 32 goats, this was quickly becoming one of my favorite hunting spots! After a brief discussion, we decided to make a play on a group of

glassing through the spotting scope, we concluded that the group was comprised of one nanny, one kid, two adolescent billys and one mature billy. Though John and I have hunted goats for years, accurately judging sex and trophy quality can still be quite challenging. Many hunters consider them one of the toughest big game animals to judge in North America. Just

worked; we were able to leapfrog down the mountain, across the valley and into shooting position within a couple of hours. The goats had started to make their way into cliffs to bed up for the evening, which was of great concern. If they made it into the crags, a shot would not be possible; the chance of the animal being destroyed upon falling—or worse, hanging up on a cliff—was too great.

The mature billy was at the tail end of the group as they made their way single file up a narrow rock chute. Settling into a prone position, I adjusted my dial turret to the 350 yards that John had just ranged. With camera up and

5-year-old billy with a full winter coat. As I sat and admired him for several minutes, I noticed the sun begin to fade on the horizon. It was a magnificent start to our hunt, but with dark upon us and a long, dangerous hike laden with heavy packs ahead, the adventure had only begun.

Late in the evening of day five, we found ourselves a couple miles from base camp as we neared the top of a steep drainage. John had spied a nice billy bedded up near the ridgeline of a large peak. Crawling to within less than 200 yards, we set up a shooting position behind a small rock outcropping. With nothing between us and the

billy but elevation and a massive boulder field, things were working out. However Alaska had other plans. As we positioned ourselves to harvest another goat, a record storm was brewing on the horizon. Several days prior we had received word via satellite communication that a massive storm was heading our direction. Unable to control the weather, we decided to adhere to our game plan and deal with the storm when and if it came. John zeroed in on the billy and let the first shot fly, striking him just behind the shoulder. Leaping from his bed, the billy sprinted horizontally across the boulder field as if he was in a track meet. With a quick readjustment, John's follow-up shot brought the billy tumbling down the rocks where he fell upside down between two car-sized boulders. In the midst of all our celebration, I noticed the clouds darken as the wind picked up substantially. As we picked our way up through the rocks to John's billy, the clouds began to move in and rain started to fall. It was dark and pouring rain as we steadily cut up John's animal. I got a knot in my throat as I heard the wind load atop the mountain and roar toward us. Grabbing a nearby rock, we braced ourselves from being knocked over. Alaska had us in her grips and there was nothing we could do now but suffer her wrath.

After about an hour we had the billy completely broken down and divided into what seemed to be equal portions between the three of us. Adjusting my pack straps as tightly as possible, I pulled the last bit of slack out of my hip belt as it squeezed me like an 18th-century corset. I was now ready to descend the mountain with the heavy load. As I adjusted my head lamp, the gravity of our situation began

to set in. It's hard enough dissecting boulder fields and navigating vertical terrain with a heavy pack in the dark; adding in the pouring rain and gale-force winds made for a situation I might not live to talk about. Having no other choice, I swallowed the fear and started my way toward lower ground. About an hour into our descent, I braced myself for a wind gust that sounded like a freight train barreling toward me. Hitting me with unbelievable force, the gust grabbed my pack and hurled me to the ground onto my back. Sliding on the wet tundra for 20 feet or so, I was stopped abruptly when the frame of my pack hung up on a small rock. Cold, tired, and soaked to the bone, I rolled to my belly and reluctantly waited for the wind to die down just enough so that I could stand up. A few hundred yards later, the three of us found a small patch of tundra nestled among the rocks near a small cliff face. It was not an ideal

location, but it was protected slightly from the wind, and all of us were more than ready to get out of the monsoon. It was everything we could do to keep the wind from shredding our shelter as we wrestled the tent into position.

Once inside, we aligned our meat-laden packs on the windward side of the tent for extra support; thus, keeping the wind from smashing our

shelter to a pancake. The tent was too small for all three of us to completely stretch out, so we lay shoulder to shoulder in half-sitting positions against our packs. Even though I was very uncomfortable, it wasn't long before my eyes grew heavy and I began to drift asleep over the roar of the storm as it relentlessly bombarded our tent.

Somewhere in the mid-



**FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: MICAH, JOHN, AND CASEY WITH THE FIRST HARVEST OF THE TRIP.**

dle of the night, I awoke to a near-deafening growl coming from directly outside the tent. My eyes hazy and brain in a fog, I unzipped a corner of the shelter and observed a full-blown river running past us. Where once there had been only the barest trickle of water, there was now a full-fledged roaring current. To make things even worse, the water was still rising, and we had positioned ourselves against a cliff wall. If the water rose much higher, we would have to break camp and relocate to a safer area. We repositioned our gear as the water rose high enough to enter one side of the tent. It was 6:17 A.M. as we waited for

daybreak and prayed the storm would give us some reprieve. As daylight broke, we awoke to a light rain and breeze. Stepping out from under the tent, I was astonished to see that the once-raging river had subsided to a small, ankle-deep creek. As I observed the landscape, I noticed hundreds of streams and waterfalls across the mountain range that had not

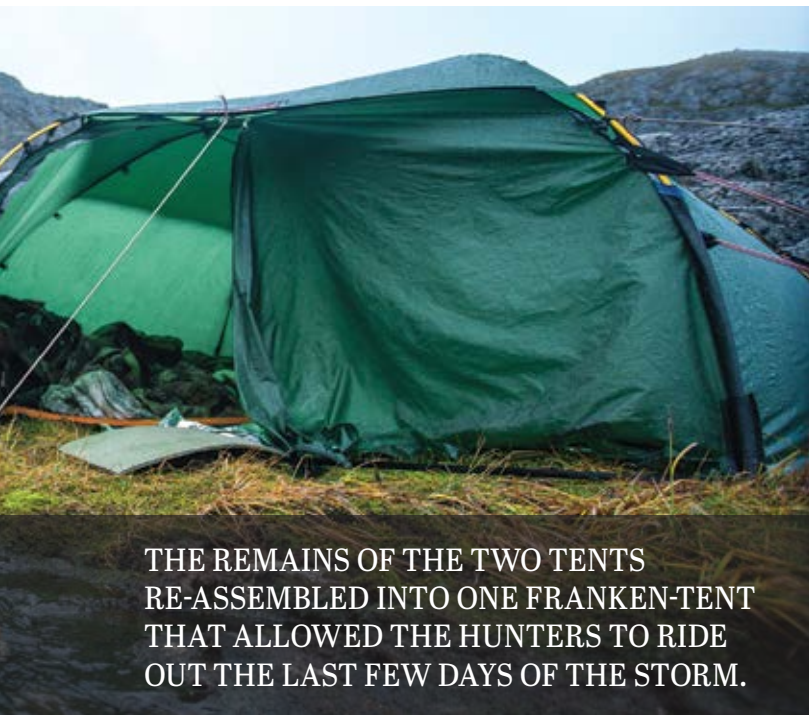
We all agreed that this was without a doubt the worst storm any of us had ever experienced. Mid-morning of day eight, the storm seemed to let up a bit, or it could have been my restless legs sending false signals to my brain. In either case, I had to get out of the tent before I lost my mind. While stretching my legs, I spied a white mass in the rocks above camp not more

quartering-away shot. The first shot sent the billy tumbling down the mountain a ways before he stopped among some boulders. Without much hesitation, he jumped back to his feet and made a beeline for the cliff's edge. With two more well-placed shots, it was over, and the billy was anchored less than a couple feet from a 150-foot cliff that would have surely destroyed him if he had fallen.

As we collected photos of the magnificent animal, some motion from below the cliff near our base camp caught my attention. At first glance, I could not make out the odd-shaped figure in the rocks. Then all at once, my blood ran cold. I could not believe my eyes—it was our tent! The wind had ripped both of our shelters from the rocks and tossed them like rag dolls down the mountain about 75 yards. At this point, we had about two hours of daylight left, an entire mountain goat to process and pack down an almost vertical chute, and as if that wasn't enough, the storm was getting much worse. As John and I processed the goat, Micah went to secure our gear and salvage what was left of the tents. With the goat on our backs we reached base camp a little before dark. We frantically fixed the tent using parts and pieces from both shelters. After a couple of hours we climbed into a tent that resembled Frankenstein's face. It wasn't until we settled inside that we recognized how cramped it was, and all of us began to laugh out loud. It had been a crazy day of defying the odds.

And the trip wasn't quite over yet.

Around noon on the last day of the hunt, I awoke to water dripping on my face from a small hole in the tent ceiling. Half awake, I sat up and noticed that Micah was

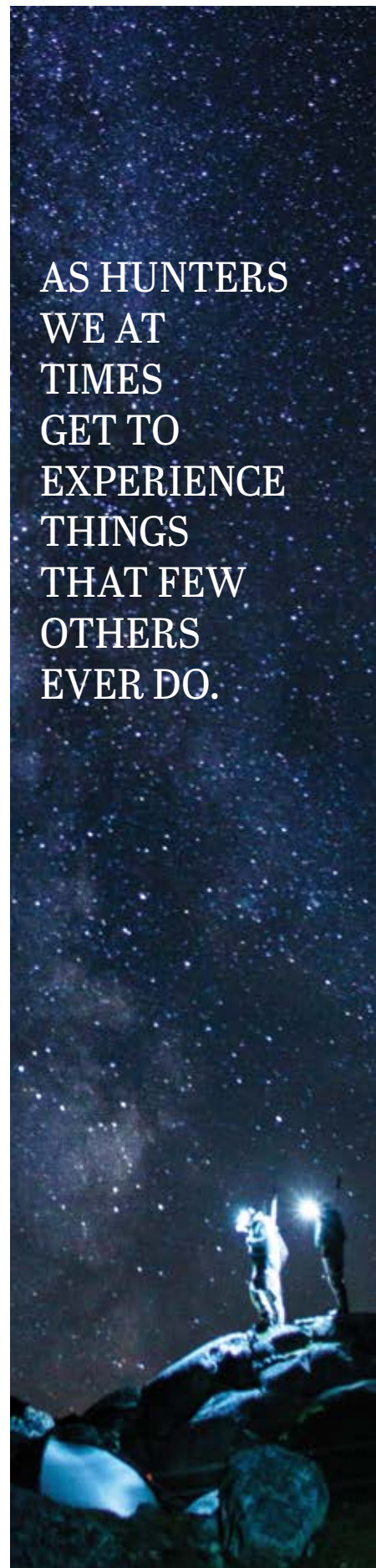


**THE REMAINS OF THE TWO TENTS RE-ASSEMBLED INTO ONE FRANKEN-TENT THAT ALLOWED THE HUNTERS TO RIDE OUT THE LAST FEW DAYS OF THE STORM.**

been there days before. A smile came to my face as I consumed the scenery and felt thankful for the experience. After helping me hoist the heavy frame to my back, John slapped my shoulder and said with a grin, "Only two more goats to go, my friend!"

Over the next couple of days, we were unable to do much of any real hunting. The storm had given us a little reprieve on day six of the hunt, but it returned with a vengeance to punish us with severe wind and rain. We had grown tired of battling the storm, so the three of us reluctantly confined ourselves to our tents and tried to catch up on some much-needed rest.

than 500 yards away. Grabbing my binoculars to take a closer look I was delightfully surprised to see what looked like a mature billy hiding on the leeward side of a cliff. Even though he was in a nasty spot, we decided to roll the dice and head up the mountain to give him a closer look. Once again, in the wind and rain we made our way up a near-vertical chute to where we had last seen him bedded. After about an hour, we had scratched and clawed our way to within 75 yards of the mature billy. Before we could get settled into position, he spotted us. In an instant, he leapt from his bed and ran up and away from me, offering a good



**AS HUNTERS WE AT TIMES GET TO EXPERIENCE THINGS THAT FEW OTHERS EVER DO.**

still fast asleep but it appeared that John had gone for a walk-about. Lying back down, all I could think about was how badly I wanted to get home, rest my aching body, and catch a shower. All at once, my daydream was interrupted when John barged into the tent like a herd of bison and began frantically collecting gear. "There's a couple of nice goats at the head of the lake!" John exclaimed as he stuffed gear in his pack. "I am going to go after them, so if you hear a shot, one of you should come help and the other should stay with the

tent so it doesn't blow away again." Since the goats were not terribly far from camp, we agreed with John and he quickly went after his quarry.

Several hours passed and I began to worry about John's safety; it can be dangerous to head in to goat country alone. Near dark, my conversation with Micah was interrupted by the crisp report of a rifle shot, a brief pause, and two more shots that rang out against rock walls at the far end of the lake. "Well, I better go give him a hand," Micah said, putting on

his rain gear. I watched the glow of Micah's head lamp disappear as he trekked off into the dark to assist John. Hours passed and my nerves began to dance as I wondered if my friends were okay. The rain and wind pounded the tent once again and made it impossible to see when I peered out of the tent to see if I could get a glimpse of my buddies. I was literally gearing up to go out after them when I heard the faint sound of John's voice over the roaring wind. Head lamps and laughter broke the night and calmed

my nerves almost instantly.

A sunny bluebird day greeted us the next morning. With a sigh of relief for the break in weather, we assembled our gear and meat for pickup. It would take most of the day to fly all three of us, our gear, and four mountain goats worth of meat back to Kodiak—a good problem to have! Throughout the afternoon our pilot took load after load out of the high country, until only I was left. As I waited alone by the lake's edge, my mind reflected on the events that had transpired over the last 10 days. Many thoughts came to mind, but mostly I was grateful for the experience and time shared with good friends. ■



JOHN AND CASEY AWAIT THE PLANE WITH FOUR GOATS WORTH OF MEAT AND HIDES.

LONG DAYS  
ARE MADE  
MUCH  
EASIER  
WITH VIEWS  
LIKE THIS



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