


# TANDEM

A man in camouflage gear is walking through a rocky stream in a mountainous landscape. He is carrying a large caribou head on his back. The background shows rugged mountains and a cloudy sky. The word "TANDEM" is written in large, bold, black letters at the top of the page.

Casey (left) shared his Alaska adventure with one of his closest friends and his regular hunting partner, John Whipple (right).

SEE JOHN AND CASEY'S CARIBOU LISTED ON PAGE 98.

CASEY L. DINKEL  
60TH PARALLEL ADVENTURES  
CO-OWNER  
Photos Courtesy of Micah Ness  
and John Whipple



As the oversized balloon tires of the Piper Super Cub touched down my mind started to race with excitement. The pilot quickly handed me my gear and readied himself for takeoff. “I’ll be back in a few with your buddy,” he yelled, and with a quick burst of the throttle the wheels of the plane were off the ground heading back toward civilization. Within seconds the drone of the engine shrank to nothing, and I was alone surrounded only by the sounds of Mother Nature. I impatiently pulled my binoculars out to scan the surrounding mountains. As I explored the steep slopes it wasn’t long before I was able to pick out some antler from amongst the rocks and tundra. A closer look revealed several young bulls. “On the ground less than five minutes and already seeing caribou,” I murmured under my breath as I peered intently through the binoculars. Collecting my pack and rifle, I moved away from the tiny rock airstrip and up to a little meadow where I had camped the last time I had been here. This was my third hunting trip in this valley, and although to most people it was just another rugged Alaskan landscape, to me it was much more.

Somehow in three of the last four years I have been fortunate enough to pull a particular draw tag for barren ground caribou. After drawing the tag the first time, I did some research and settled on a little hanging valley nestled high in the mountains and accessible only by Super Cub. The bull I took on that trip was my first big game animal in Alaska, and a great way to cut my teeth on hunting in the 49th state. The second time I went back to that valley I took another nice bull, this one falling just shy of the book. I went this time with a guy named John Whipple who has since become one of my closest friends and my regular hunting partner. In the three years we have known each other we have already been on many hunts and spent countless days in the field together. After our first hunt together we started applying for the same hunt unit as a party tag, in the hopes that we would draw and both have an opportunity to harvest a trophy caribou. With the draw odds being so low neither John nor I dreamed that we would draw the tag just two years later, putting me back in the valley that was quickly starting to feel like home, for the third time.

Even though John and I felt blessed to have drawn a trophy area for barren ground caribou, we knew drawing the tag was going to be the easiest part. Our first obstacle would be pursuing these monarchs in steep mountain country; we had often observed mature caribou bulls sharing the same cliffs with Dall's sheep. We knew we would have to be in good physical and mental condition in order to pursue and pack out a caribou in terrain this rugged. The weather would be our second hurdle; the weather in Alaska can change on a dime, particularly high mountain valleys such as

the one we were to be hunting in. We planned our hunt for the first part of September, which meant the weather would be turning and we were risking spending a lot of time getting snowed on, and the caribou had time to shed most or all of their velvet and transition into their winter colors. In the early season, barren ground caribou are mostly gray with dark gray velvet on their growing antlers. Once the end of August rolls around and September nears, the larger bulls shed their velvet and become hard horned, while exchanging their grey brisket for solid white. To my way of thinking, there are very few animals in North America that are as beautiful and majestic as a mature caribou bull with his winter coat.

Now as I sat for a third time in this little valley, watching yet another small group of caribou graze across a hillside, I heard the faint buzz of an airplane in the distance. The plane flew up the



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valley hovering just below the clouds that consumed the mountaintops and touched down at the airstrip, bouncing to a stop. "It's good to be back," John said with a big smile as I

helped him move his gear away from the plane. Still completely overwhelmed with excitement I just smiled and nodded my head. We spoke to the pilot briefly and confirmed our tentative pick up date; weather providing of course. "Well we'll see you guys in a couple weeks, good luck!" the pilot yelled, and in seconds he was airborne and out of sight. Since it was early evening we decided to set up camp as quickly as possible and hike up a nearby ridge to glass. In Alaska you cannot hunt the same day you are airborne, however we wanted to survey as much of the valley and adjacent drainages for any potential trophies before nightfall. Once we made it most of the way up the ridgeline we spotted several small groups of caribou across the valley—mostly comprised of cows and calves. However, looking closer we were able to confirm one small group of respectable bulls that we decided might need a closer look in the morn-

ing. With the days still fairly long in early September, we glassed every nook and cranny we could until roughly 10 P.M. With no more daylight left and stomachs growling we headed

down the mountain toward base camp. Once back at camp John and I discussed our morning game plan over a meal of Mountain House, concluding that we should head back up the ridge for more glassing at daybreak. Even though I was fairly tired from all the packing, travel, and excitement, I found it difficult to sleep. All I could think about was giant caribou and how the morning could not come fast enough!

Shortly after daybreak we loaded up our packs for a day hike and set out. The ridgeline we had glassed from the previous evening ran several miles to the south and allowed us to scope out a series of drainages that flowed into the main stem of the valley where we camped. An added bonus was that this particular ridgeline presented a somewhat easier trek when compared to the rest of the surrounding area. Moving across the ridgeline John reminded me to stop often and glass each drainage as our perspectives changed. It can be easy in the mountains to just put your head down and focus on trying to get from point A to point B, but then only to stumble across animals that would have been seen earlier if one had taken the time to glass a little more. It was nearly 3 P.M. as John and I sat on the mountainside eating a protein bar as we scoured the countryside for any sign of caribou. Since the morning we had seen only one cow with a calf. The other small groups we saw the evening prior had seemingly disappeared from the area. I had been glassing the head of a steep, rocky drainage directly across the valley from us for over an hour and was fairly convinced that it was time to move on. Popping the last chunk of protein bar in my mouth while looking through the spotting scope, I



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# TANDEM HAUL



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was just getting ready to ask John if we should continue down the ridge when I caught movement. I instantly froze in position to be sure I had actually seen movement and not just the vibration of my chewing as I looked through the scope. As I focused, a caribou bull slowly emerged from the shadows into the sunlight and began grazing. In a few seconds another bull came into focus, then another; it seemed like they were appearing out of nowhere. Five bulls in total fed out into a small boulder field interspersed with lichen. "You better take a look at this John," I said as I pointed out the area with my finger. The bulls grazed for only a few minutes and like ghosts dissolved back into the flat light of shadows. John and I decided that two of the five bulls looked to be potential trophies, and that we should definitely take a closer look. "That looks like work," John said with a grin as we started our way down the mountain toward the rocky drainage—a good 3.5 miles from where our camp lay.

It took us all of three hours to cover roughly 2.5 miles. We had traveled down the mountainside losing 2,000 feet in elevation, crossed a small river in the valley floor, and started our ascent up the drainage where we hoped the caribou would still be bedded.

As we neared the head of the drainage, John and I circled high and wide trying to get a visual of our quarry. Of course, the terrain looked considerably different up close than it did through the spotting scope. It was riddled with tiny pockets and gullies, any of which could be hiding caribou. We moved cautiously in single-file, keeping as quiet as possible on the noisy rocks. Suddenly John turned around and signaled me to get down.

The bulls lay about 200 yards in front of us, nestled

in the bottom of a steep, narrow gully. We decided to belly crawl 20 yards or so and take cover behind a small bolder, just big enough to hide both John and me as we kneeled. Peeking over the boulder we noticed the bulls must have sensed something was afoot; they started to move up the opposite side of the gully, looking back in our direction. Slowly all five bulls moved into sight with the two largest of the group being the last to step into view. It didn't take us long to realize that these were exceptional bulls of trophy caliber.

As they continued to move up the gully, John and I took a shooting position and readied ourselves for a shot. John was first to shoot, hitting the bull cleanly through the lungs. The group ran 30 yards or so to the top of the gully, stopping again to look back in our direction. A second shot rang out from John's .300 Remington SAUM, sealing the deal on the massive bull. After John's caribou fell to his final resting place, the four remaining bulls ran down the ridge-line, giving me enough time to reposition and acquire the remaining bull in my sights. "He is 287 yards," John calmly called out. On a side note, I have always admired John's ability to keep calm in stressful situations.

With the bull cleanly in my sights, I waited for one of the smaller bulls to move out from behind my target. Taking a deep breath, I slowly squeezed the trigger of my .270 WSM. The shot stuck the bull slightly high in the shoulder, bringing him to the ground where he stood. Not taking the bull from my sights I racked another round for a follow-up shot. Thankfully, there was no need and I watched as the bull expired in seconds. Still kneeling and weak in the legs from all the excitement, John and I celebrated, exchanging the



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handshakes, back slaps, and congratulations that follow a successful shot. As we approached the bulls, they only seemed to grow in size.

Arriving at John's caribou first we both stood speechless for the moment. The sheer size of his antlers and body was simply impressive! The bull easily weighed 400 pounds and was dressed for the ball with a steel gray coat that transitioned into a beautiful white brisket. His antlers tinted red with blood from the recent shedding of velvet. He was truly a site to behold! John knelt for several minutes completely silent, admiring his magnificent trophy. Next we closed the final yards to claim my bull.

Still wearing most of his velvet and summer coat, he lay like a dark gray statue upon the ground. Taking one knee behind him I grasped his antlers and moved his head to reveal a set of enormous bezes and a single massive shovel. Velvet hung from portions of his rack, soaked with blood; his neck and shoulders were lightly dusted, displaying a hint of his winter coat. He was a stunning, absolute giant. I could not have been more happy. It was a moment I didn't want to leave, but I knew that we had a lot of work still ahead.

It took us several hours to completely dress out our trophies and by the time we had finished a storm had moved in, snow was falling heavily, and darkness had fallen as well. Both John and I were a bit tired from such a long day and decided to make a meat stash near a large boulder that we could use as a landmark, and then start our long trek back to base camp. We traversed slowly over the

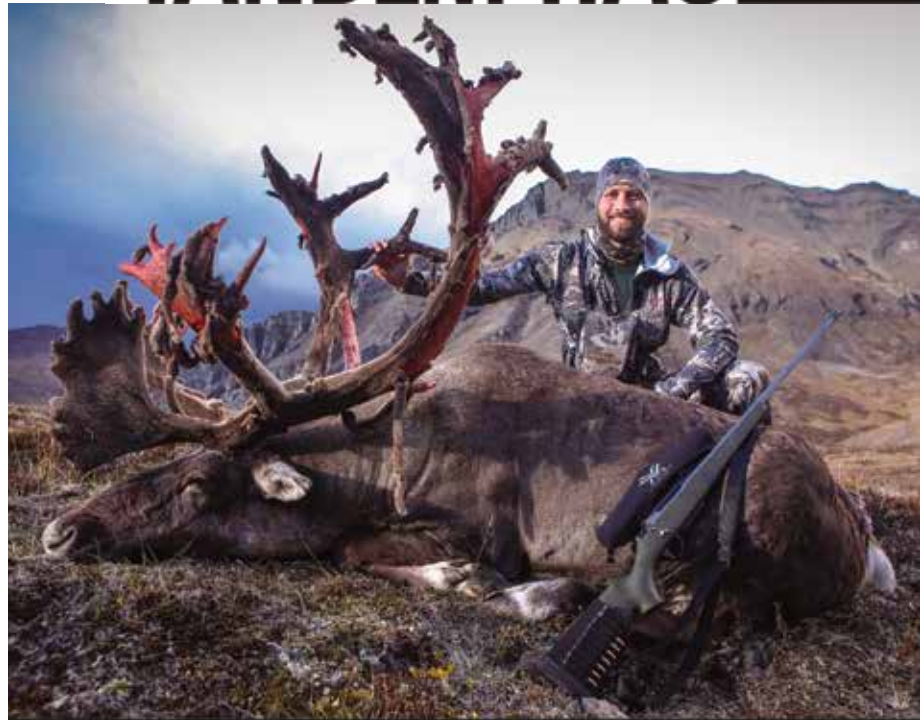
boulder fields and slick tundra slopes taking care not to fall. By the time we made it to the valley bottom and started our ascent toward camp the snow had lessened. We made it back to camp around 1:00 A.M., completely soaked from sweat and snow. As I dropped my pack next to the tent and removed my headlamp, I noticed a shimmer in the horizon. The aurora borealis or "northern lights" had started to dance their way across the sky with a spectacle of green and blue that was almost hypnotic. All I could do was smile as I lie in my tent and let the colors dance me to a much needed slumber.

In the morning John and I awoke to a sunlit valley. About six inches of snow had blanketed the valley and mountains. In one night our hunting ground had transformed from vibrant fall colors to a winter wonderland. We made a quick bite to eat, gathered our packs, and started our way toward the meat stash some three miles away. With more meat than we could carry in one load we knew that it would take us several trips to haul our spoils back to the airstrip. One at a time we shimmied into our fully loaded packs from a sitting position and then

rolled over and climbed to our feet. Bearing the 120-pound packs, we felt like we were getting a small taste of what Atlas must have felt as he strained under the weight of the world. As we started our first meat

haul back to camp, my aching shoulders and burning legs reminded me of the price of success! It was a feeling that brought a smile to my face and one that I would hope every hunter gets to know. ■

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Both the hunters with their record-book barren ground caribou. TOP: Casey L. Dinkel with his caribou, scoring 375-6/8 points, was still in velvet when taken. BOTTOM: John C. Whipple with his 383-1/8-point bull