

OPERATION CARIBOU



By Larry Jennings
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"SHOT UP HIGHWAY SIGNS, snow machines harassing caribou, poor sportsmanship and crippled animals hobbling around leaving bloody trails in the snow. That's what caribou hunting is all about," said my nonhunting friend. "Why don't you guys do something about that slaughter?"

I had heard many similar remarks in the weeks preceding the opening of the caribou season, both from the hunting and nonhunting public. Obviously many Alaskans were disgusted with the way a few caribou hunters went about obtaining their winter meat supply.

While some of the offensive acts described were clearly illegal—shooting from the road and chasing game with snow machines—for example, others were not. They were distasteful, no doubt, and probably reflected poor sportsmanship on the part of the individuals participating. But illegal? Nope!

As area game biologist for East Central Alaska, which includes the

Taylor Highway caribou hunting area, the scenes described by my friend were still clearly etched in my mind. What could the Department of Fish and Game do to help clean up caribou hunting?

After several discussions with caribou hunters and with my colleagues in Fairbanks, "Operation Caribou" was conceived.

Hunters' Support Sought

"Operation Caribou" was designed to enlist public cooperation in upgrading the caribou hunting situation along the Taylor Highway. The Department of Public Safety, through its fish and wildlife protection officers, would play a vital role. The Bureau of Land Management, landlord of much of the Fortymile country, had a stake and asked to be included.

Men from all agencies were assigned to patrol the highway during the caribou migration to encourage compliance with the game and littering regulations. They also gathered valuable biological data and aided hunters when necessary.

A game checking station was maintained at 35 Mile Taylor Highway 24 hours a day to provide hunters with information and to outline "Operation Caribou." The Bureau of Land Management parked trucks at strategic locations along the highway to collect camping litter and caribou remains.

The results were gratifying. Realizing that they were under pressure to improve a tarnished image, most hunters turned in creditable performances. In contrast to past years, few hunters complained about hunting conditions. Indeed, most hunters commented that this year's hunt was one of the best that they had experienced. Only a few game and littering violations were noted.

About 1,200 caribou were tallied through the check station during the three weeks it operated. Many valuable biological samples were obtained through the cooperation of numerous sportsmen. Information derived from the specimens will lead to better management of the caribou herd. *Cont'd on page 14*



BLM HELP — Bureau of Land Management trucks collected trash and caribou litter, helped keep Taylor Highway clean.



↑ *BAG CHECK — Department of Fish and Game biologists operated game check station at 35 mile Taylor Highway during "Operation Caribou."*

WINTER MEAT — Trill Rulison of Ketchikan was among many who bagged caribou on Taylor Highway. →



Larry B. Jennings was graduated from Oregon State University with a B.S. degree in wildlife management. He joined the department in 1962 as assistant area management biologist in commercial fisheries at Kodiak, then transferred to game in 1968.



SUCCESSFUL HUNTERS — Two outbound hunters provide biologist Spencer Linderman with information for check station data form.

DAILY PICKUP — BLM employees emptied litter barrels daily.

Thanks to the Caribou

Some of the credit for improved conditions this year must go to the caribou. Instead of crossing the highway this year, the animals paralleled it for 30 or 40 miles and most hunters had to hunt away from the road. This minimized the firing lines and unsightly roadside piles of caribou litter so prevalent in the past.

Credit must also go to the hundreds of hunters who successfully sought to present a responsible image to their antihunting critics.

Was "Operation Caribou" a success?

Those who participated definitely believe that it was. In fact, a similar project is planned for next year when the caribou cross the Taylor Highway. I only wish that my nonhunting friend had been there this year to see the Taylor Highway caribou hunt. He might have been surprised, and pleased! ■



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