

Planning Your Caribou Hunt

by Patrick Valkenburg

Caribou, primarily tundra dwellers, do not occur in southeast Alaska. In interior Alaska caribou are found mainly in mountainous tundra. North of the Brooks Range, and in the coastal areas of western Alaska and south-western Alaska, tundra predominates and the entire area is suitable caribou range.

Each year about 20,000 caribou are taken by hunters in Alaska. Well over 90 percent of these are shot primarily for meat by state residents. Near the road system the demand for caribou hunting is extremely heavy, but in northern and western Alaska it is relatively light. Nonresidents are especially interested in caribou hunting because Alaska is the only state in the nation with huntable populations of these animals.

Where a person decides to hunt depends on what sort of experience is most important to him or her. Opportunities for nonresidents to hunt from a highway vehicle along the road system are limited. In the few areas where caribou herds occur close to the roads, most hunting is by drawing permit only, and these hunts are generally not open to nonresidents. (A permit hunt supplement summarizing these drawing permit hunts is available from ADF&G.)

One of the most economical hunting trips for caribou may be arranged with air taxi services from Fairbanks. For about \$250 to \$500 per person, several charter companies will fly hunters into the central Alaska Range from Fairbanks to hunt the Delta Caribou Herd in Game Management Unit 20A. Don't expect an uncrowded hunt, however. Because of the area's proximity to Fairbanks and several military bases, it is a very popular local hunting area, and the short, two-week season makes for intense hunting pressure near the larger airstrips. Those willing to walk a few miles away from the larger landing areas can still expect to have an uncrowded hunt.

From Anchorage, for a little more money (about \$1,000 per person for two people), it is possible to fly to the western Alaska Range and hunt the Mulchatna Herd. It is more economical to fly first to Lake Iliamna or Port Alsworth and charter from there. The Mulchatna Herd is much larger than the Delta Herd and ranges a larger area, so hunting conditions can be less crowded. Look for air taxi companies that specialize in hunting trips. A good place to start is in the Anchorage and Fairbanks telephone directory yellow pages and in ads in major outdoor magazines such as *Outdoor Life*, *Sports Afield*, and *Alaska Magazine*. In the small communities, check the phone

directory. It pays to shop around because prices vary considerably, and with a little planning it is possible to save several hundred dollars.

There are other opportunities for uncrowded hunting including chartering from King Salmon and Cold Bay (Alaska Peninsula Herd), Bettles and Coldfoot (Western and Central Arctic Herds), Fort Yukon (Porcupine Herd), and Tok (Fortymile and Chisana Herds). These uncrowded wilderness trips often cost over \$1,000 per person. Costs mount quickly if extra in-state travel is required. Jet travel within Alaska is expensive. For example, a round trip ticket from Anchorage to Kotzebue is about \$350 (if purchased a week in advance). Once in Kotzebue several good caribou hunting areas are within one and one-half hour's flight. Charter rates in Kotzebue (and elsewhere) range from \$125 per hour for a Super Cub (one passenger) to about \$200 per hour for a Cessna 206 (three passengers). Because fall is a very busy time, it is a good idea to make arrangements with air taxi services well ahead of time and then confirm a few days before your hunt.

SEARCHING FOR A TROPHY

For hunters who are primarily after large trophy bulls, there are other considerations. Any mature bull caribou is a fine trophy. To many, a set of antlers—regardless of its standing in the record books—brings back memories of a rare adventure in a remote corner of the continent. For some, the quest for a particularly exceptional trophy becomes an obsession, and a few people pass up hundreds of fine bulls over many hunting seasons before finding the animal they want. This kind of hunting has challenges and rewards of its own, and the quest for the right bull provides the hunter with an "excuse" for spending many enjoyable days in the field observing game. To be successful requires knowledge, logistics, perseverance, and luck. A registered guide-outfitter can provide the logistics and knowledge, and for those who will have only one or two opportunities to hunt a trophy caribou in their lives, the added expense may be worth it.

It takes three things to make a record book bull caribou: good nutrition, old age, and the right genetics. Bulls from most of the 29 herds in the state are represented in the Boone and

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Crockett Club's *Records of North American Big Game*. The Nelchina and Alaska Peninsula Herds have provided most of the animals going into the book, and it is generally true that caribou from the southern herds grow the largest antlers. The Arctic herds are not well represented.

The trophy potential of a herd may change over time. For example, the Delta Herd, which produced many fine trophies in the early 1980s, no longer contains many large bulls. It has been heavily and selectively hunted in recent years and is also at a historical population high which may be lowering nutrition. On the other hand, the Fortymile Herd which previously yielded few "book bulls," now produces several each year. Presently, many people consider the Mulchatna Herd in southwest Alaska to have the greatest trophy potential. This is because it is lightly hunted, growing rapidly and expanding into new range, and offers opportunities for hunters to see many bulls. One way to increase the odds of being able to find a large bull is to hunt a herd with a high bull-to-cow ratio. The bull-to-cow ratio is usually expressed as the number of bulls per 100 cows. In unhunted herds the bull to cow ratio will generally range from 70 to 100 bulls per 100 cows. Where bulls are heavily hunted the bull-to-cow ratio may be as low as 30. In Alaska, wildlife managers do not generally allow the bull-to-cow ratio to fall below 30.

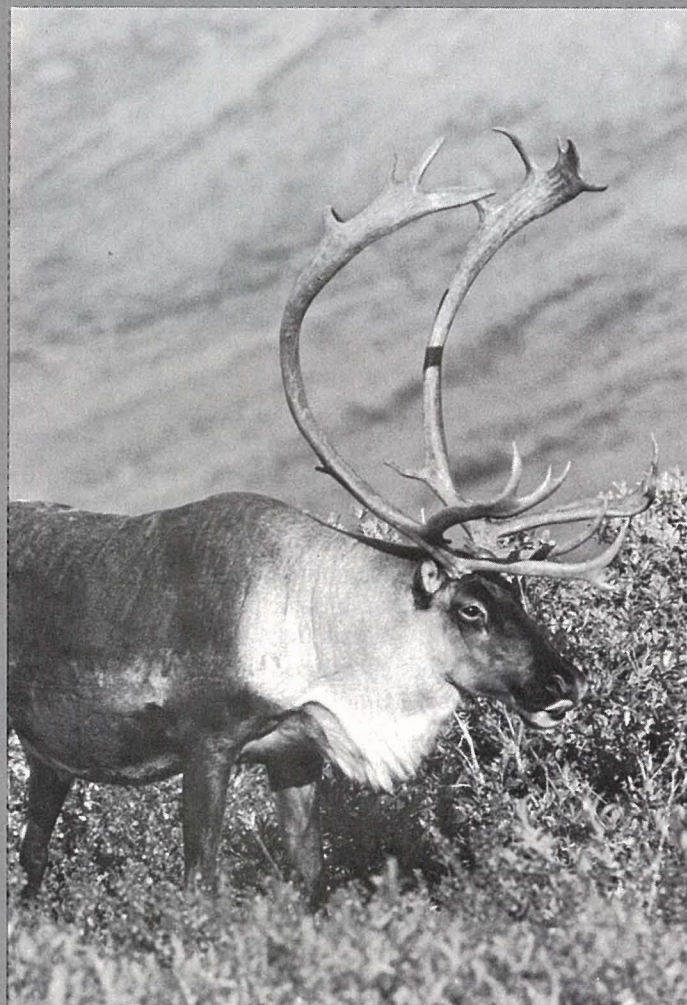
JUDGING A TROPHY

Judging a trophy caribou in the field can be difficult for the uninitiated. To first-time hunters any bull looks big. A good rule for inexperienced hunters in pursuit of a trophy is, don't shoot the first caribou you see. This is especially important in September—October 1989

areas where only bulls are legal game, because cows have antlers too. Study the drawings in the regulations booklet, and then take some time to study the first animals you see. If you are in an area with caribou, you will generally see more than one, and most of the animals you see will be cows. Caribou are usually not wary if the hunter remains several hundred yards away. Bring binoculars and a spotting scope. I'd lay odds that more caribou hunts are compromised by hunters in a hurry to shoot something than for any other reason. Take your time. You spent hundreds of dollars to get here, so don't blow it by being in a hurry. If you're after a trophy bull and have a week to hunt, the last thing you want is to shoot a small animal on the first day. Also, make sure that the animal you choose is standing in the clear, completely away from other caribou. It can be acutely embarrassing to shoot the wrong animal (or more than one) by mistake. Unintentionally shooting the wrong animal is much more common in caribou hunting than in most other big game hunting.

Once a bull is about three years old, its antlers become noticeably larger than those of the cows. Cows generally have antlers with fewer than 15 points, and bulls older than three years of age usually have at least 20. There are four components to good trophy antlers: long length and wide spread, a palmate brow or shovel, long rake-shaped bez tines, and either long tines or palms on the top.

Large bulls will have antlers nearly as tall as they are. These bulls deserve a second look. Look first at the tops of the antlers. If they are palmate or have at least two points on each side that are at least 12-26 inches long, you are looking at a potential record book caribou. Next look at the shovel. The shovel or



Tim Lewis Rue, Leonard Rue Enterprises



John Hyde



Nancy Faville

brow (immediately above the nose) is the palmate first point of one of the antlers and guards the face during sparring. If it is at least ten inches tall, that's good—and if the animal has a double shovel, all the better. The last component to look at is the length of the bez or second tine. To be trophy material it should be at least 18 inches long on each side and rake shaped. Remember also that trophy points are subtracted for asymmetry. Most bulls you see will be deficient in at least one of the major trophy components. When you see one that has them all you will be looking at an exceptional animal.

WHEN TO HUNT

Most hunters prefer to hunt caribou in the fall, from about August 10 to September 30, although it is possible to hunt year-round in northwestern Alaska. Freezing weather is possible any time after August 1, so warm clothes should always be on hand. Rubber boots, rain gear, a wool hat, and gloves are a must for caribou hunting. North of the Brooks Range the higher lakes can freeze and persistent snow is common after September 15. Snow makes off-airport aircraft landings more difficult and hazardous. South of the Brooks Range snow and freezing are generally not a problem until after September 20. On the Alaska Peninsula and in southwestern Alaska snow is not common before October 10.

Many bulls start shedding their velvet by August 20, and most caribou antlers are fully polished by September 5. After August 20, a hunter can usually strip the velvet from unshed antlers, but before then the antler tips can still be soft. Velvet-covered antlers can be preserved by injecting the veins under the velvet with formaldehyde solution. This should be done immediately (or the velvet will begin to rot), and that means carrying formaldehyde and syringes in the field. If you plan on preserving velvet antlers, it would be a good idea to contact a taxidermist

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experienced in mounting velvet antlers before you hunt. Serious trophy hunters should plan their hunts after about September 5. As with other members of the deer family, caribou bulls become more active as the rut approaches and group sizes increase, permitting hunters to see more bulls and be more selective. The hunter must often trade more comfortable weather for the opportunity to see groups of larger bulls.

DISTANCE AND BALLISTICS

Because caribou are found primarily in open country, most shots are made at relatively long ranges and flat shooting cartridges are preferable. Inexperienced hunters should not attempt shots over 200 yards, and experienced hunters should avoid shooting at animals more than 300 yards away. In my experience very few people can judge distances greater than 200 yards with sufficient accuracy to guarantee good shot placement. Beyond 200 yards bullet trajectory falls off rapidly. Even experienced long-range silhouette shooters have problems in hunting situations because of difficulty in estimating distances.

Rifles should be sighted in at about 200-225 yards, even if you plan to make your shot at closer ranges. This way if the shot is reasonably level you will always be able to hold dead on. Relatively low-powered cartridges such as the 30/30 and calibers smaller than the .243 are not suitable for hunting caribou.

CARE FOR THE MEAT

Whatever your main objective is in caribou hunting, remember that all edible meat must be salvaged for human consumption. In many parts of Canada and the lower 48 states hunters are not required to bring out the meat. This is not true in Alaska, and penalties for failing to salvage meat are severe. Consideration in caring for the meat will often dictate where, how long,

and what time of year to plan your trip. Unseasonably warm weather that will spoil meat can occur until August 20, and unless the temperature is near or below freezing, meat does not keep well for more than a week.

Also, bear in mind that a very large caribou bull can weigh upwards of 600 pounds on the hoof (smaller bodied bulls from the Arctic herds average about 300 pounds). About half of that weight is suitable for human consumption. For most people the downing of a very large bull means at least four heavy loads with a good-quality backpack, which means four round trips from your camp. That's eight times the distance between the downed animal and your camp! While caribou hunting, it is best to find a good vantage point close to your camp and let the caribou do the walking. Caribou travel extensively, especially late in the season when the weather is cool and the bulls are starting to rut.

One disadvantage to hunting late in the season is that meat quality can be poor. After September 20 in the southern herds and October 1 in the Arctic herds, many bulls become "stinky," and no amount of care can keep the meat from tasting foul. Most other male members of the deer family are at least edible during the rut provided the skin is carefully removed and the animal is gutted cleanly. This is not true with caribou. Although individual tastes vary and some people are more sensitive to off-flavored meat than others, hunters interested primarily in the finest quality meat should either hunt early or plan to hunt where cows are also legal game.

Once an animal has been taken, the meat or meat and trophy must be transported back home. Meat is heavy, so allow for extra plane trips if necessary. Be sure your pilot knows about how much you're expecting to come out with so he doesn't have to work in extra trips on short notice. Meat may be bloody, especially if it has not had time to hang, so bring plastic bags for transportation from the hunting camp. The antlers of large

bull caribou are especially awkward to transport and they won't fit inside most of the light aircrafts used to transport hunters. Don't be surprised if the pilot picking you up asks you to cut through the skull plate separating the antlers or asks you to cut one antler off so they will fit in the plane. Your taxidermist can put them back together, but be sure to measure the spread before you cut. Although some pilots may carry the antlers tied to the struts of planes like Super Cubs, the FAA frowns on this and has begun to enforce regulations against this practice.

Many hunters are interested in combination hunts, and while it is an attractive idea to combine hunts for caribou and moose, sheep, or grizzlies, this is often not practical. Bear seasons commonly don't overlap with caribou, and guide-outfitters are required for nonresidents hunting sheep, grizzlies, and moun-

tain goats. In addition, hunting conditions are generally more crowded when moose and caribou seasons overlap. Finding areas where there is a good chance for a combination hunt also requires greater knowledge of local areas than first-time hunters can easily obtain without a guide. It is generally best to concentrate on one species at a time.

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POPULATION SIZE, TREND, HARVEST, AND TROPHY POTENTIAL OF ALASKAN CARIBOU HERDS.

Herd No.	Herd name	Population trend	Harvest in 1987-88	Bull:cow ratio	Number of trophies in "Boone & Crockett"
1	Adak	Stable	121	Unknown	0
2	Alaska Peninsula (N)	Stable	2,300	50	139
3	Alaska Peninsula (S)	Declining	300	35	23
4	Andreafsky	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	0
5	Beaver Mountains	Unknown	17	Unknown	5
6	Big River	Unknown	43	Unknown	10
7	Central Arctic	Increasing	575	65	1
8	Chisana	Stable	82	36	13
9	Delta	Stable	667	32	30
10	Denali	Increasing	0	56	1
11	Fortymile	Increasing	260	38	4
12	Kenai Lowlands	Stable	4	60	0
13	Kenai Mountains	Increasing	50	44	4
14	Kilbuck Mountains	Increasing	75	Unknown	0
15	Kokrines Hills	Unknown	5	Unknown	0
16	Kuskokwim Mountains	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	0
17	Macomb Plateau	Stable	57	46	0
18	Mentasta	Declining	112	43	28
19	Mulchatna	Increasing	2,100	56	45
20	Nelchina	Increasing	1,747	56	147
21	Porcupine	Increasing	3,500	50	2
22	Rainy Pass	Unknown	85	Unknown	20
23	Ray Mountains	Unknown	5	Unknown	1
24	Sunshine Mountains	Unknown	2	Unknown	0
25	Teshekpuk	Unknown	750	Unknown	0
26	Tonzona	Unknown	45	Unknown	2
27	Western Arctic	Increasing	10,000	55	1
28	White Mountains	Unknown	10	42	0
29	Yanert	Stable	113	40	5

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