



# Caribou: Management & Hunting

by Pat Valkenburg

Alaska's caribou population is at an historic high level, with about 800,000 caribou in the state's 33 caribou herds. Despite this abundance, relatively few caribou are harvested, and in many accessible areas of the Interior, nonresidents are generally excluded from hunting. This apparent contradiction occurs for two principal reasons. First, there is uneven distribution. About 80 percent of all the state's caribou occur in the two large arctic herds and the Mulchatna herd where access is both difficult and expensive. These relatively inaccessible herds could easily support greater harvests, while the other, more accessible herds near the road system are harvested at close to maximum levels.

Secondly, Alaska still has its natural complement of large predators, and hunters must "share" with wolves, grizzly bears, wolverines, eagles and others. While deer in many areas of the

lower 48 states can be harvested at high levels (in some areas, 30-40 percent of the population can be taken each year) most of the smaller caribou herds in the interior of Alaska can support harvests of only about 5 percent, and most of this number must be males. In the smaller Interior herds, predators typically eat over 60 percent of the newborn calves. In the one Alaskan herd where predators are absent (Adak), about a third of the population is harvested each year, and the population has remained stable for about 30 years.

Caribou management is further complicated by state and federal subsistence laws which attempt to give a preference for "customary and traditional use" by residents of the state (state law) and for "rural residents" (federal law). The emphasis here is on meat production for local use, which means that many of the

**Caribou, Alaska's most populous species, are found in 33 herds in most areas of the state except Southeast.**

Interior herds that were previously open to nonresident hunting are now closed, and those that are open are generally not managed to maintain or improve trophy quality.

Hunters who are primarily interested in finding large bulls need not despair, however. Alaska's caribou herds are producing as many trophy bulls as they ever have, and although it may cost more now to reach herds with the best trophy potential, there is still plenty of opportunity to bag a large antlered bull, and to hunt in an uncrowded wilderness setting.

How can a hunter determine which herds are most likely to produce trophy caribou? One of the best ways is to review the *Boone and Crockett Club's Records of North American Big Game* to determine which areas of Alaska have produced the most trophies in the past. (See *Alaska Fish & Game*, now *Alaska's Wildlife*, for September/October 1989). Although helpful, these records don't tell the whole story. A herd's trophy potential changes over time due to both natural factors and the effects of heavy hunting pressure. If a herd has been heavily and selectively hunted for males, few will live long enough for their antlers to reach maximum size. Also, if a herd has experienced poor survival, the bull:cow ratio declines because adult bulls have a naturally higher mortality rate than cows. The condition of a herd's range and summer weather also affect antler size. One or more of these factors have recently affected several of the previously good trophy producing caribou herds including the Delta, Chisana, Mentasta and Southern Alaska Peninsula herds. Conversely, the Mulchatna, Fortymile, and Western Arctic herds are producing more trophies than ever before.

It is also good to keep in mind that any caribou herd has the potential to produce a really nice bull, and if other considerations are important, don't worry too much about trophy potential. Some herds with low-moderate trophy potential, such as the Western Arctic, provide unparalleled opportunities for uncrowded



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wilderness hunts with a chance of seeing thousands of migrating caribou. On the other hand, the smaller mountain herds like Chisana, Mentasta, Tonzona, Rainy Pass, and Delta live amid spectacular mountain scenery with opportunities for multi-species hunts. Nonresidents should bear in mind that they are required to have a guide for Dall sheep, mountain goat, and grizzly. The coastal Alaska Peninsula herds also provide great opportunities for salmon, grayling, or steelhead fishing and duck hunting during a caribou hunt. Make sure that everyone in the party has the same expectations before deciding on a hunting area.

Access to almost all of Alaska's caribou herds is by air only, especially where nonresident hunting is allowed. However, virtually every herd in the state has an air taxi service located nearby that specializes in drop-off hunts in the area, and all villages now have telephone service. The best way to find the names of local air taxis is to locate an Anchorage or Fairbanks telephone book, which will include most village listings. Talk over your expectations with the local air taxi pilot and let him suggest specific hunting areas. It is almost always cheaper to begin your charter as close to the hunting destination as possible because all of Alaska's small towns and villages have relatively inexpensive scheduled carriers serving them. Be prepared to pay about \$1,000 a piece for most drop-off hunts. It is possible to pay less, but the cheaper rates usually mean getting dropped off at a larger strip with more than one hunting party.

Transportation of trophies, meat, and gear can be a nightmare if not carefully planned. The three biggest complaints about hunters that I hear from air taxi operators are: 1) hunters have too much unnecessary gear; 2) they expect me to overload my



**Bow hunter Jeff Rentzel with a record caribou.**

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airplane in order to save money; and 3) meat is improperly handled and too little is brought out. Before late September, large bulky tents with stoves are unnecessary. A gasoline lantern and stove will provide all the heat a small tent needs, although a small propane radiant heater will do a better job of drying clothes. Cots, chairs, and heavy cookware should be left behind. Plan one-pot meals with some freeze-dried foods in case the pickup is late or you plan to spend days away from camp. Don't forget to bring a good book to read in case you are tentbound in bad weather. When I hunt a new area I often bring a book about the area's history. It's fun to read about it and experience it at the same time.

Since most transportation for caribou hunting is by charter aircraft, think carefully about what you really need and what you really don't need to bring. The days of cramming airplanes full and then tying the rest on the outside are over. Reputable air taxi pilots do not overload airplanes. Besides, who wants to fly in a plane that has spent half its life flying overloaded in the kind of lumpy air that Alaska weather produces? Here are some weight guidelines for hunters and gear for some commonly used airplanes on normal length charters: single engine Otter on floats-1,600 to 1,800 lbs, Beaver on floats-1,000 to 1,100 lbs, Cessna 185, 206, or 207 on floats- 700 to 800 lbs, Cessna 185 on wheels-800 to 900 lbs, Super Cub-1 hunter and about 100 lbs of gear and meat depending on the length of the strip. It is best to decide beforehand the maximum number of animals that your party will shoot (nonresidents will need to buy a tag for each big game animal anyway). It is unfair to expect your air taxi pilot to fit in extra trips unless arrangements are made ahead of time.

Alaska law requires hunters to retrieve all of the edible meat from big game animals such as moose, caribou, sheep, deer, goats and elk. Exactly what needs to come out is specified in the regulation book. Game bags, either homemade of cotton sheets, or commercially made, are a must in the field. Depending upon the temperature, meat will keep for a week or more if stored out of the rain in game bags, and it will dry out a bit and lose some weight, too. Another good idea is to pack some of your gear in wet-locked boxes and then use them to transport the meat when you are ready to leave. For planning purposes, about 40 percent of an animal's live weight will be "edible meat." Here are some weights of meat and trophies for big game animals: adult bull

## Estimated Herd Size and Harvest of Alaska Caribou in 1989-90

Herd Name	1990 Population	1989-90 Harvest
Adak	400	212
North Peninsula	15-20,000	2,400
South Peninsula	3,500	125
Andreafsky	<100	unknown
Beaver Mountains	900	12
Big River	750	49
Central Arctic	15-20,000	141
Chisana	1,500	49
Delta	9,000	684
Denali	3,000	0
Fortymile	23,000	498
Fox River	50	0
Galena Mountain	500	1
Kenai Lowlands	130	2
Kenai Mountains	300	14
Kilbuck Mountains <sup>4</sup>	1,400	43
Macomb <sup>4</sup>	800	44
Mentasta	2,300	45
Mulchatna	80,000	1,850
Nelchina	37,000	1,980
Nushagak Peninsula	350	0
Porcupine	175,000	750
Rainy Pass	500-1,000	84
Ray Mountains	700	7
Sunshine Mountains	800	2
Teshekpuk	17,000	unknown
Tonzona	1,000	12
Tustemena Bench	100	0
Western Arctic	400,000	10,000
Wolf Mountain	800	0
White Mountains	800	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>791,680—801,380</b>	<b>19,018</b>

moose-600 to 700 lbs, adult bull caribou-250 to 300 lbs (caribou in the arctic herds are about one-third smaller), Dall sheep and large buck deer-70 lbs.

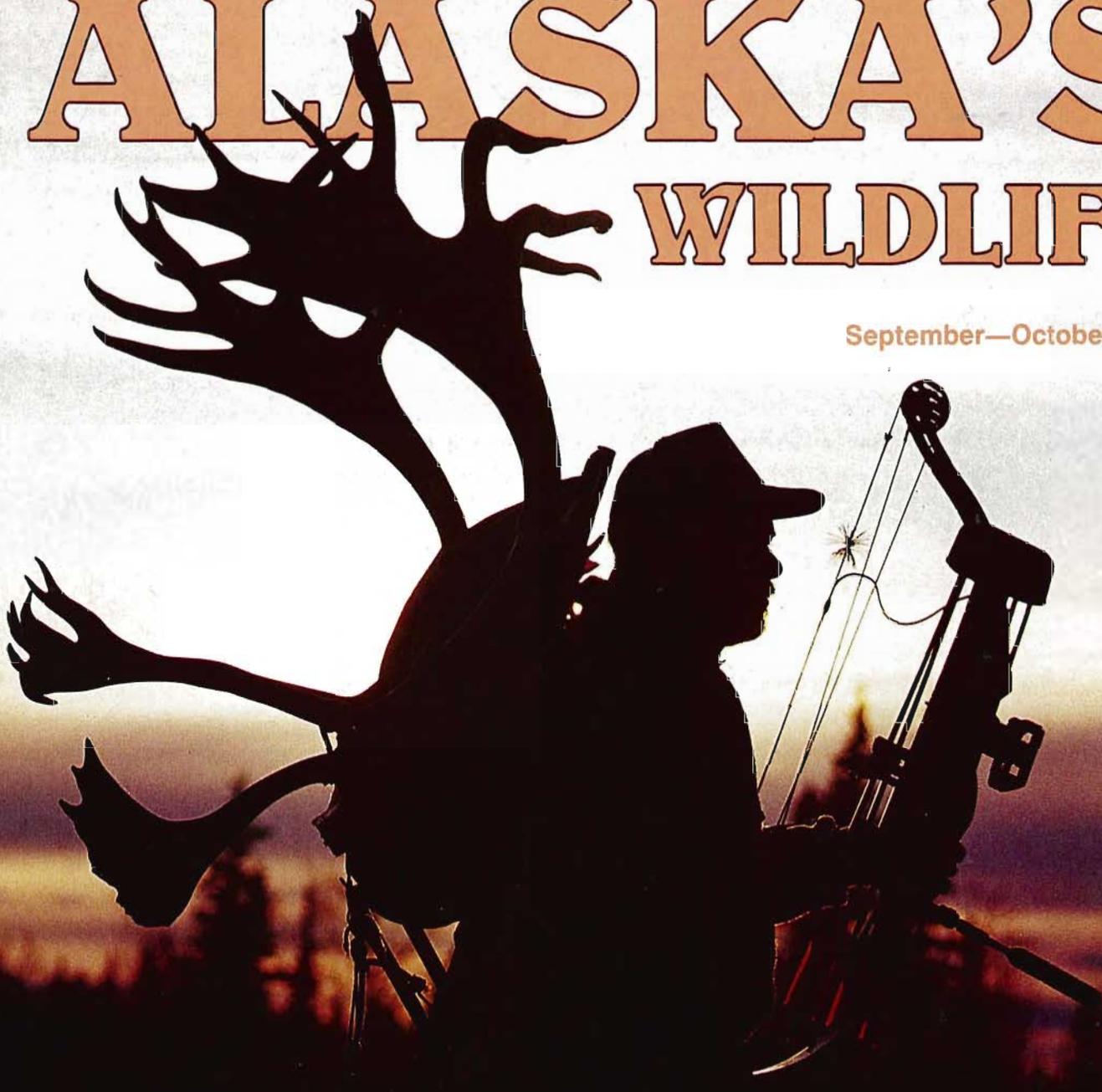
Antlers are especially awkward to transport, and unless you plan to enter them in the record books, it is much less trouble to cut one off just above the skull plate than to try to take them out intact. You or your taxidermist can put them back together later. If you tape empty 12 gauge shotgun shells over the tines, you should have no problem shipping antlers on commercial airlines. Whether you are after a trophy, some fine-eating naturally produced lean meat, or simply an adventure in the wilderness, homework and adequate planning will contribute a lot to the enjoyment of your hunt.

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