

Mountain Caribou Adventure
By Ron Spomer

We were high enough for sheep when we found the bear tracks in the alpine saddle where the wind pushed at our backs and snapped our sleeves. “These look fresh,” I said, kicking the snow beside the long, five-toed print.

“Yesterday at the latest, wouldn’t you say?” Bryan stated more than asked as he squatted beside the spoor. “Pretty good-sized grizzly.”

We crossed through the dip between the barren, rocky peaks with our hoods up. “He’ll know we’re coming if he’s ahead.” I could see him running in my mind’s eye, high in the shoulders, front legs wolf-long, rear compact and powerful, driving, sending impact shivers through his dark pelt. He would be throwing glances back over his shoulder as if needing visual confirmation of the stench that spooked him. That’s how I wanted to see him. Still, I took the little 7mm rifle off my shoulder and carried it across my chest.

We stopped to glass the new ground that had opened to us. The west mountain broke into a cliff that plunged too far for us to see its base. The east mountain was not so steep. Mats of low, tundra plants stitched its rockslides together. Willow and dwarf birch grew in patches down where the snow ended. Caribou could have hidden in that, but we saw none. Bryan tucked his binocular inside his green fleece jacket and moved farther down the saddle. I followed, stepping beside the grizzly tracks, man and beast both having chosen the easy route. But we stopped when the saddle plunged suddenly into a long slide. The bear tracks kept going.

“There he is,” Bryan announced triumphantly. “Didn’t I tell you we had big grizzlies in this country?” Bryan was excited. Bryan was always excited, like a 14-year-old in a 29-year-old body. “Look at the head on him. What’s he doing? I think he’s trying to smell us.”

The bear was darker than I’d imagined and larger, even from so far away. He was eating grass or berries or something in a little basin as unnaturally green as a golf course in Tucson. He was not running, but did seem to be testing the air, even though we must have been 800 feet above and a quarter mile away. “Too bad you don’t have a tag. We could drop right down there and shoot him,” my guide said, aware that we both knew the wind would give us away. “He’s a big one.” We watched, sitting there in the snow on top of the world, until the keening wind made me lonely. I don’t mind cold but it was only early September and, while summer down by the bear, we sat on the edge of December with the sun going down behind clouds that promised more snow and not even a rosy finch or water pipit for company.

“Why don’t we camp down in the firs out of the wind?” I asked when we crossed back through the saddle and saw Todd and Aliya picketing the horses on the open tundra above two blue tents as exposed as mushrooms in a suburban lawn. “We could have a fire.”

“Fire? Fires are for whimps.” Bryan, a masochist and still young enough to be suffering from testosterone poisoning, was only half joking. “I thought you were up here to hunt caribou? Don’t you wanna be up high where we can start glassing right away in the morning?”

I did, but just then I would have preferred a cozy fire in a quiet fir copse and a steaming pot of coffee. Instead we huddled behind a tarp thrown over the pile of saddles and stared hungrily at the rim of blue flame rising around an aluminum pot atop a hissing MSR backpack stove. A freeze-dried meal and two cups of hot cocoa revived me enough that I could brush my teeth and organize my gear before diving into the tent and zipping my bag. I brought my water bottle in with me to keep it from freezing.

“Whadya suppose Heather made for supper back at main camp?” I asked Todd.

“Probably steaks and corn bread and green beans,” the assistant guide answered.

“And chocolate chip cookies for desert.”

“No, chocolate cake.”

“Oh shut up.”

We rose at dawn. I put on all my clothes, the Gore-Tex pants over fleece pants over polypropylene underwear. A water bottle had leaked in the tent and soaked the inside of my Gore-Tex jacket so I draped that over a saddle to dry and put a green nylon windbreaker over my fleece shirt and jacket instead. Then I tied a red bandana around my neck and pulled on two stocking caps. Nineteen-year-old Todd, nothing but a baseball cap on his shaved head, pumped the stove. Aliya, our wrangler, was out in the gloom staking the horses to fresh graze. Bryan was bent over a trickle of water filtering through the tundra, filling water bottles. “Ready for breakfast?” he asked cheerily. After instant oatmeal and a bowl of hot granola, I treated myself to a small Baby Ruth. The cold would wear it off soon enough. Then I shouldered my pack, grabbed my rifle and hiked east to a saddle overlooking a long, brushy drainage paralleled by a long alpine ridge that looked promising for mountain caribou. Everyone else went south to see the bear.

Three marmots whistled and stood like miniature bears against the gray sky as I climbed toward their rocky ledge to get out of the wind. Then I sat – carefully to avoid their droppings -- with my elbows on my knees, the binocular pressed against my brow. After a half hour I began to wonder if I was overlooking game. There should have been a moose or bear in the brushy bottom, a goat on the rocky peak, some caribou ranging along the ridge. A sharp-shinned hawk flew by, hunting like me. I glassed everything again, slowly, trying to imagine how small a caribou might look at that range. Pretty big, as it turned out. A bull walked over the ridge three miles away as obvious as Rosie O’Donnel in an anorexics’ support group.

Bryan and Todd met me halfway back to camp. “Bear’s still there. You see anything?” they asked.

“Got a bull. Big one.”

After a quick peek through Bryan’s spotting scope, Todd jogged back to help Aliya break camp and bring up the horses. Bryan and I studied the bull at 60X. British Columbia regulations mandated at least six points above a caribou’s bez tine, almost always present on a mature bull, but not obvious on this one. “He’s got the frame and mass to be legal, but I count only five points on one side, maybe six. He’s definitely six if he’s got back points. Can you make out any?”

I took my turn behind the scope. The bull had bedded, occasionally turning his head. One instant I could see back tines, the next I could not. “His velvet is hanging and blowing. Could be a piece of that.”

“We’re just going to have to go over there and look. I think he’s legal, but we gotta get closer.” That meant flanking the head of the drainage on slippery scree or

dropping several hundred feet to cross it. We ate jerky and energy bars and took long drinks of water before leading the horses down, staying above them while their iron shoes scraped and sparked on moss-covered rocks. Dozens of rivulets trickled into brooks that poured into a stream where we drank, pausing between each icy gulp. Then we filled our water bottles and started up the other side, wending around willow thickets and forcing our way through dense stands of tough, twisted firs no higher than a horse. When we were high enough to again see the crest, Aliya held the horses while we crept over a rise and looked. The bull was standing.

We dropped into a drainage basin and followed it to the top, then peeked again down the long ridge. We could not see the caribou. "It might have dropped behind that hump," I suggested. "Or crossed over to the other side." We stayed under the crest, leading the animals single file, slowly, watching ahead, keeping behind little humps and rises. "He's gone," Todd said when we should have been close enough to see him.

"We didn't spook him," Bryan said, trying to convince himself. He looked at me for reassurance.

"Not unless he can smell downwind or see through rock. It's almost noon. He isn't likely to travel now."

"He probably just fed over the top. That crest with the clump of... There he is!" Heavy antlers trailing strands of velvet like party streamers rose from a hidden saddle. Beneath them the caribou emerged, his head dark, his neck white as a patch of early snow. He walked easily, effortlessly up a rockslide, dipping his head now and then to nip a mouthful of pale lichens. Then he was on top of the highest knoll on that barren ridge, weaving aimlessly like a drunk on a deserted side street at midnight before finally disappearing over the far side.

"Wait." Bryan held up his gloved hand. "He might come back over." We gave him five, ten minutes until light snow started blowing into our faces.

"Let's go. Easy, though. Let's take our time," I said even though I didn't feel like taking my time. My stomach was beginning to churn and my arms to shake. I wanted to run over that mountain and throw a spear into the bull. It is always that way near the end, when the stalk narrows and the risk is greatest. This is the adrenaline counterpoint to the hours of hiking and riding through picture postcard country, identifying wildflowers and songbirds and looking for game like a proper Granola-head. That's what hunting is, mostly. You feel the ground, the lashing rain, the warming sun. You relax and slow and gradually remember why you wanted to be here. You begin living in the present, begin smelling the air, hearing the trees, feeling the pulse of wilderness. Then you find a grand old bull and remember that you are the predator in this natural drama, not some tourist from a galaxy far, far away.

I'd already done my hiking during a mountain goat hunt the previous five days. I'd done my sight-seeing ride when we led a string of pack horses 30 miles through the wilderness to reach this caribou range, plunging through rivers, slogging through bogs, clinging blindly to the saddle through cave-black spruce forests at midnight. I'd seen and heard and smelled and tasted enough freeze-dried protein. It was time to kill and eat fresh meat, to truly become one with Nature.

"Tie the horses here," my lanky outfitter said when we reached an island of stunted subalpine firs just below the knob the bull had crossed. I kept watching the skyline with my rifle in my hands, expecting antlers to loom. Then we started up, seeing

hoof prints in the wet gravel. I stayed close to Bryan, Todd on my right, Aliya behind, all of us tiptoeing. One step and scan the horizon. Another step and look again. Left. Right. He could be anywhere. The wind stayed steady in our faces, a few flakes stinging our cheeks. Now we could see the lower ridge rising from a deep saddle immediately below. We glassed it. Took another step, watched the horizon, glassed the distance again. What if he'd walked down to the willows? What if he was already into the fir forest? Maybe he was getting away. Maybe we should run. Maybe he was feeding right beneath the lip of the ridge on which we stood, a bow shot away. Maybe we should crawl. I had my thumb on the safety release, the rifle half-raised, the scope turned down to 4X.

"There he is!" Bryan hissed and crouched. We all went down to the wet gravel and lichens.

"Where?"

"Down there." The young guide pointed, smiling. "Less than 200 yards." The bull was farther away than I expected, standing on green tundra dotted with scattered firs. And while we watched he laid down, facing downhill. "Can you take him from here?"

My answer was to duck-walk forward until the ridge broke over, clearing a prone shot. I lay on my belly and raised the rifle. But before I could shoot, my quarry slowly tipped his head, placed his great antlers on the ground and fell asleep. "Look at that! He's out. We could sneak up and smack him on the butt."

"Wanna try it?" Bryan asked, eyes twinkling.

"Let's go." The four of us began picking our way down the slope, trying to not dislodge broken slabs, but four eager humans were three too many and a small slide brought the bull awake. I sat with my elbows in my knees, hoping the big deer would go back to sleep. He didn't.

"He's getting up," Bryan warned as the caribou tensed at the shoulders and pushed his chest up. "He might run."

The cross hair was steady behind his dark brown shoulder a hundred yards away. It was a chip shot, but I concentrated and squeezed as if it were 300 yards. The little rifle bucked, the explosion of powder torn away in the wind, and the caribou jumped forward, stopped, and stood. I bolted a fresh round into the chamber. Now it was just a matter of watching him fall over. "Perfect shot," Bryan said easily. "Better shoot again so he doesn't make a death run down the mountain."

There was sense to that, so I held where I thought the heart should be and shot again. The bull collapsed, dead.

"This is an old bull," Bryan said. "Look at the size of him. Look at that neck."

"What do you think he weighs? He's gotta be over 400 pounds."

"You think so?"

"Has to be. I mean, I've butchered whitetails that went 250 hog-dressed and this thing would dwarf them. It's as big as some six-point bull elk I've shot and they average 600 pounds." As we admired our prize it began snowing hard. Aliya arrived with two horses and the cameras and we took pictures with velvet flapping from tines, then peeled it off and took some more. The snow quit and we began butchering. Bryan left the skin on to protect the shoulders and hams. I filleted the tallow fat off his haunches and it measured four inches through. Todd found both bullets lodged under the skin of the off-shoulder, seven inches apart, mushroomed like an advertisement. The massive heart had been shot through. We had killed as surely and quickly as we could and there was pride

in that. By four o'clock we had the meat loaded and it was snowing again. Bryan led the paint horse with the antlers standing tall over its back. The two hams were tied across the saddle of Bryan's riding horse.

"Hey, what do you guys wanna do," he called back. "We could camp in the bottom by that tent site we passed coming in or push on to the cabins. Get back around eleven o'clock I'd guess."

"I vote for a cozy camp with a fire," I said. "We can roast fresh meat. How far is it?"

"About seven miles. We should make it before dark." Bryan walked the entire way, bushwhacking down a stream canyon to knock a mile off the route. Aliya walked, too, just to prove she could. Todd never stepped off his horse, just to prove how smart he was. I rode and walked as necessary to favor whatever was most sore. Ah, to be twenty-five again. It stopped snowing and the sun broke through for a few minutes at sunset, warming the distant mountains but not us. Then we plunged off the mountain and reached the campsite just before dark. Though fire, meat and sleeping bag sounded ideal, I had to agree that unpacking the caribou, erecting the camp and reloading everything in the morning was a lot of extra work. The cabins were only six or seven miles away. "Let's go for it."

So again we set off through the black woods, horse hooves slurping through bogs, sparking on rocks, splashing in the lake shallows and crunching on its gravel shore. Pine limbs slapped canvas panniers, saddle leather squeaked and a great horned owl boomed out a greeting. Bryan lighted the way with a tiny LED headlamp that glowed at the head of the pack string like a miniature street light. We rode up to the cabins at 11:30 just as the clouds opened to pour pale moonlight on the lake.

If You Want to Go

Once again Jack Atcheson & Sons, Inc. matched me up with a great outfitter. Young Bryan Martin is a hard-charging, optimistic, never-say-die woodsman who knows his country and his game. He is always upbeat, light-hearted and friendly, and he carries everything in his pack including the kitchen sink (I think I saw it in there.) About all you have to do is remind him from time to time that you're not as tough as he is so he'll slow down. Or offer to carry you. Very competent, pleasant fellow. For more information, contact Atcheson at 406-782-2382 or www.atcheson.com or Canadian Mountain Outfitters Ltd. at 406-585-7837 or www.canadianmtnoutfitters.com.

Gear Tested

Always conscious of weight on mountain hunts, I carried a 4-pound, 4-ounce Kifaru Rambling Rifle on this hunt. It's 18 1/2-inch barrel launched Federal High Energy 140-grain Trophy Bonded Bear Claw bullets at 2,860 fps and grouped them inside 1 1/4 inches at 100 yards. The two slugs recovered from the caribou carcass weighed 138- and 134-grains. Sticking to the light-is-right theme, I sighted the rifle with a 2-7X Leupold Compact scope. Its weight is included in the rifle's total above. My lightweight binocular was the superb, 22-ounce Leica 8x32 BN Trinovid. Bryan conducted long range antler judging with a wonderfully sharp, 38-ounce Nikon 60mm Fieldscope III with 20-60X eyepiece. Cabela's 8-inch Mountain Hunter boots with Gore-Tex and 400 grams

Thinsulate kept my feet dry, warm and sticking to the mountain; their MT050 Gore-Tex jacket and pants kept the rest of me dry.

I carried everything in a Kifaru backpack with an integral fold down seat that converts the pack into a backrest glassing and shooting chair that's quite handy. A quick-release rifle carry system integral with the shoulder strap frees your hands for climbing.

#