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Photos Courtesy of Rebecca Spring



ALASKA CARIBOU



The author with his first caribou bull taken with his .338 Win. Mag.

Alaska. A single word that when uttered amongst hunters stirs images of a majestic bull moose standing deep in a remote lake with his freshly rubbed antlers demanding the attention of all who see him; a grizzly bear crossing the tundra, willing to sacrifice whatever necessary to gain the nutrition it needs to survive the long, dark, cold winter months to come; or the migration of caribou—waves of animals moving thousands of miles in unison across the tundra in the paths created over millennia. Perhaps a pack of arctic wolves trailing them finds success, and your mind drifts to a camp where the few hours of darkness in late August allows you to view the northern lights as a chorus of wolf howls eerily pierces the air. The varying tones remind you that while you may be allowed to participate as a hunter in the natural cycle of life here, you are merely a player in the game.

To nearly all the folks in the United States and even the hunters who pride themselves on their woodsmanship, you may enter this land to participate, but you are the underdog without a solid knowledge of what you are getting into. To many folks, and rightfully so, this challenge is too much to overcome. The option of paying an outfitter to worry about all the unknowns is well worth the prices they fetch to take the unprepared into this great land. To hunt some species such as the brown bear, grizzly,



ANY HUNT IN THE NORTH IS ABOUT PATIENCE. YOU CAN KILL YOURSELF GOING OUT AS FAR AS YOU CAN HIKE TO SEEK GAME—THIS COUNTRY IS BIG AND UNFORGIVING.

Dall's sheep, and mountain goats requires their services unless you are an Alaska resident (or a very close relative of one) to hunt. Though for those willing to invest the time, money, preparation, and trepidation of the planning process that generally stretches over multiple years, the opportunity exists to experience the 49th state in some of the greatest unguided wilderness hunts left on the planet.

This particular piece will highlight barren ground caribou. To start, there are numerous opportunities to hunt caribou in Alaska, ranging from the North Slope to the Alaskan Peninsula, where the classification of reindeer or caribou is a concern. Kodiak Island even has a herd, though these are not considered barren ground caribou for records-keeping purposes. For me, seeing herds on the tundra of the North Slope, though generally not as large, was an experience I had dreamed of for years.

A float hunt in Alaska is an amazing experience but adds a whole separate level of planning and required skills to successfully complete.

While I have done one that I will eventually write about, that should only be considered if you have ample experience—not only on rivers but with extreme, remote hunting.

First and foremost on a drop-hunt is gear selection. If you think you may need it, you probably don't. If you are pretty sure it will come in handy, leave it home. If there is no possible way to survive without it, put it on the list that will have to be cut down later. All these hunt costs are dictated by weight—and remember, paying to upgrade to a bigger plane could well prevent you from accessing certain areas. The flying service will give you a price and weight per person. In nearly all cases, this involves body weight. In our case, we had 1,800 pounds for four people or basically a single DeHaviland Beaver load. This may seem like quite a bit, but when you start breaking it down, it adds up very quickly with decent gear. You are going to want to use the lightest and best gear you can possibly afford (which also adds to the trip costs).

PERSONAL GEAR LIST

- **A .338 Win Mag with 4-14x scope**

Only take stainless synthetic. You can take a fancy rifle, but it's wet where you're hunting, and carrying full cleaning supplies for your baby is extra weight.

- **Gun sock for flight from Fairbanks to Bettles and Bettles to hunting location**

Neoprene scope cover and lens pen with optics cleaning cloth; a small sealed gun rag with a small amount of gun oil on it.

- **One 20-round box 210 grain Barnes bullets**

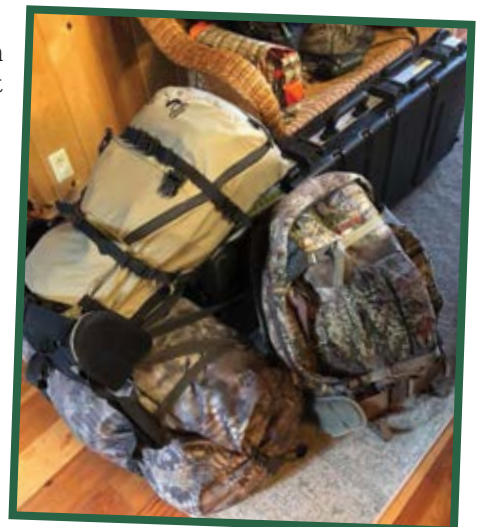
The .338 is way more than enough for caribou but just right if a grizzly decides he needs your quarters more than you do while packing them.

Less is more on a drop-hunt. If you think you may need it, you probably don't. If you are pretty sure it will come in handy, leave it home. If there is no possible way to survive without it, put it on the list that will have to be cut down later.

A sidearm, in my opinion, is wasted weight for a tundra hunt, where a surprise bear attack is highly unlikely. In a predatory situation, I am also not going to season myself with bear spray. Additionally, you aren't allowed to fly commercially with any compressed sprays so you are going to have to buy it in Alaska at Alaska prices or have it shipped up ahead of time. Even then, certain flight services may not let you take it.

- **Two sets of hunting clothing**

I wore one in and had a full set in reserve if I got sweaty or



wet. I prefer Sitka gear as the fit for me is nice, but numerous high-end hunting brands offer wicking materials that can literally save your life. My layering system includes a synthetic short-sleeved undershirt, an insulating shirt (the Sitka hoodie is my go-to), a heavier outer layer shirt and a heavier pair of pants. I am a big fan of the Sitka Timberline pants, but pull out the knee pads. Be aware, some folks that may not be as insulated as I am may want long underwear or puffy pants. On this hunt, we had temps from 18-60 degrees.

■ **One set of insulated rubber gloves**

A last-minute addition and best piece of gear for the trip. Doing dishes, moving meat, filtering water—they were being passed around like... well, never mind. Take some rubber insulated gloves in addition to your favorite pair of hunting gloves. I like the neoprene palmed fingerless Glacier Gloves while hunting.

■ **One pair of high-performance wool socks for every day and a pair of high performance underwear for every other day**

Alaska is wet and cold. You will find yourself at some point dejected, wet, cold, and just downright crabby. Change your socks—it will change your world.

This setup combined with a puffy coat and an outer layer rain shell has worked for me down to single digits but is right at home in the 25-45 degree range.

■ **One pair hip boots**

I wore mine in on the plane as we were dropped on a lake, and we needed some type of wader to even get off the plane. I used Yoder chaps on a pair of Muckmaster muck boots.

They were a little warm, and my feet did sweat some while packing meat, but in camp with the temps in the mid-30s, they were perfect.

■ **One pair other hunting boots**

I took a pair of Xtratuf rubber boots (Alaska sneakers). I have used these boots extensively in southeast Alaska while hunting bear, but my ankles are very strong (meaning the lack of ankle support for me is not an issue). I like how they can almost fold around things as I walk, but that is personal preference. The other three on the trip took high-quality leather hunting boots and gaiters which seemed to work very well until the hole in the tundra went from 6 inches—like the previous 200 they stepped in—to 30 inches. This isn't really a downside to this choice as my boots would have had the same problem in water that deep. My Xtratufs are well broken in and serve as a very comfortable pair of camp shoes as well.

■ **Buck Paklite knives**

I took the two bigger skinning sizes and a caper with a small, portable sharpening steel. I used one skinner to take off

legs, hide, pop hip joints, etc., and cut ribs and head off. I saved the other for breaking down meat. The caper I used to skin out the head in camp.

■ **Wyoming saw**

Fairly light and quite a bit easier to cut off ribs in the units that require meat to stay on the bone (including rib meat since all meat in Alaska is required to come out). I took a wood blade and two finer bone blades but only used one bone blade on this trip.

■ **Trekking poles**

From crossing rivers to setting up a tarp to keeping meat and cooking area dry, they have far more uses than just hiking. We had two sets on the trip and they were both used continuously.

■ **Winter hat and ball cap**

Sometimes you need sun shade, sometimes your ears are cold, sometimes both.

■ **Stone Glacier EVO 3300 pack**

They are not cheap, but it weighs less than four pounds, feels absolutely amazing empty to completely loaded, had

enough room for me to carry two caribou quarters and a scrap bag plus my day's hunting gear—and carry a head and cape over my shoulders. It's small enough to use as a carry-on for commercial airline flights. Two others on the trip had far bigger packs they used for their checked bag, which works but is more weight. Again, a personal preference thing.

■ **15x binoculars and carbon fiber tripod**

In hindsight, I would have taken a spotting scope as well. My general feeling is that 15s on a tripod let me glass and would give me enough magnification to make a call if I want to get closer, but we didn't realize we would be able to see as many miles as we could. A 40x spotter could have saved some hiking time for a couple of the guys on the trip. Plus, it would have greatly magnified our fortunate observation of the nine grizzlies, two Wolverines, and musk ox!

■ **10x power binoculars and chest harness**

I always have those on while hunting even if I am just packing meat. You are in Alaska; at

THE RIVER CROSSING WAS DEFINITELY NO JOKE, AND THE HIP BOOTS JUST WEREN'T QUITE ENOUGH.



Official Measurer Brett Ross and hunting partner Levi Costopoulos cross a river with Brett's 350 class bull.

any moment you could observe something that you may never again see in your life, and you never want to miss it. In addition, on a stalk, I don't want heavy 15s but want to be able to check what the critter is doing; 8x powers would probably suffice, but I have some awesome 10s that I just love.

■ **Headlamps**

I took two, though never used either, but it does get dark a few hours a night that time of year. One would suffice the next time around.

■ **Head net**

Bugs for us were very minimal, we had a very cold night the first night out and never really had much of an issue after that. That being said, I would never be on the tundra without one. It is just not worth the chance, and they weigh nothing. We also took one small bottle of 100 percent Deet bug spray. I sprayed a bit on my hat when we first landed. Then I spent the next three days with rain and sweat running it off my hat into my eyes and wishing I had toughed out the bugs for the first afternoon.

■ **Zero-degree synthetic sleeping bag**

Down is less bulky but will not dry if it gets soaked, although with the newer (treated) down bags, this is not as much of an issue. There is very little wood on the tundra beyond some willows that are generally fairly wet so my wife and I elected to not take a stove for the tent. The other two on the trip were able to get enough wood for a small fire to dry gear after a river crossing where the hip boots just weren't quite enough. My wife and I met them on the near side of the river to help them finish out the pack of their bull, and the river crossing was definitely no joke.

■ **Lightweight cot and a Therm-a-rest type sleeping pad**

The cot was a luxury for sure, but when one of the others in camp had his pad fail, I was able to give him my pad and still make it through just fine on the cot. He got no sleep the night his sleeping pad went completely flat, and he "froze" as the ground sucked the heat right out of him. The inflatable ones are nice, but just go with a foam pad even though they are not nearly as comfortable.

GROUP GEAR LIST

■ **Tents**

We ended up taking two Seek Outside tipis. We had a six-man and also a Redcliff; the six-man on its own probably would have sufficed for four, but seeing as they were each minimal weight we took both so we had our own space. Three in the Redcliff with the stove would have been tight, but it was great for two.

■ **MSR Dragonfly and Jetboil-type stoves**

I've taken the MSR on both trips as there is no question that transporting empty fuel bottles or shipping ahead is allowed as long as all fuel is cleaned out of them. The MSR runs on numerous fuels; the first trip I ran it on Jet A, which is basically kerosene. This time I was able to get white gas in Bettles before we flew out. Check with your float service on what is available and what they will allow. Fuel for us was not a problem for either stove, but it takes some preplanning. Four of us used less than two 20-ounce bottles of white gas, and we were making fairly in-depth dishes that required lots of stove time in the six days/five nights we were out. To be safe, we took three bottles for our main stove.

■ **Bear fence**

UDAP makes a lightweight fence, whether it packs enough punch to stop a charging grizzly I highly doubt, but it should

deter non-human acclimated curious bears. I have used both the mesh fencing and the hotwire on four posts. I greatly prefer the second type for ease of setup and lack of brush removal required. We actually took two and set one around our tents and the other around our cooking and meat-storage area. We had a bear hit one fence on a previous trip, and it turned him around from a full quartered moose in camp.

■ **Ultralight tarp**

We chose the Luxe Batwing with the poles. This type of shelter was big enough to keep us dry during rain and also was adjustable enough to keep the meat quarters dry and out of the weather. We used this as a communal area for cooking, glassing, and storing meat. It was quite a compliment when the floatplane pilots both commented on how nice and dry our meat looked.

■ **Game Bags**

Synthetic bags are great; if they get wet, a few minutes in the wind will have them and your meat dry again. Most of the bag packages don't count on it being required to salvage rib meat on the bone. Generally a single package of these newer bags commonly sold won't be enough.

■ **Chairs**

For both my Alaska hunts, the ground was pretty soft and chairs with small legs would sink in. The ground is wet, and



B&C Official Measurer and the author's wife, Rebecca, with her first-morning bull. It ended up being the largest of the trip and stretched the tape to 390 inches in camp.



having a nice chair is definitely a luxury worth considering.

■ Walter filtration system

We took both a gravity style filter (fill a bag and then gravity pulls it through the filter) and also a small hand pump. The hand pump is slow and tedious, but the larger bag filter eventually clogs and ends up taking more time to filter but you can do other camp chores while it works unlike the hand pump. Also remember neither of them work if they freeze, so keeping them in the tent—and if it's really cold, in a sleeping bag—ensures a water source.

Beyond these items, the rest is personal preference for cooking and eating utensils, coffee, packable spinning or fly rod. The general consensus from all the other groups who caught fish was Panther Martin spinners. Pretty sure our lake was void of grayling as we hooked one fish in four hours of trying (and it got off). We used the same setups as they were using.

While this article is fairly limited to our

experience and how we actually hunted, the gear is what will make or break your hunt.

There are thousands of caribou migrating, and you will see plenty if you get to where they are migrating. Any hunt in the North is about patience. You can kill yourself going out as far as you can hike to seek game—this country is big and unforgiving. Finding a good glassing point that you can spend some time watching will result in seeing game. You can note the general path they are following, the speed at which seem to cover distance, and then when you find a bull you want to make a play on, your legs are fresh and you can go.

Patience is also key in selecting a drop location and in just plain getting there. Transporter services make a living by putting folks in good areas so they come back. Having a plan and asking about a particular lake or area you may fancy is fine, but if they say they would rather put you somewhere else, it's wise to listen. Your buddy may have seen 10,000 caribou at Lake X three years ago, but maybe the

migration is early or late. The transporter is up every day the weather is clear, and they know what's going on.

Weather is a huge factor on these hunts as well. If the transporter says it's not safe, don't push the issue. They want you there pestering them about when you fly out about as much as you want to be waiting there to start your hunt. Again, they make money by getting people in and out successfully.

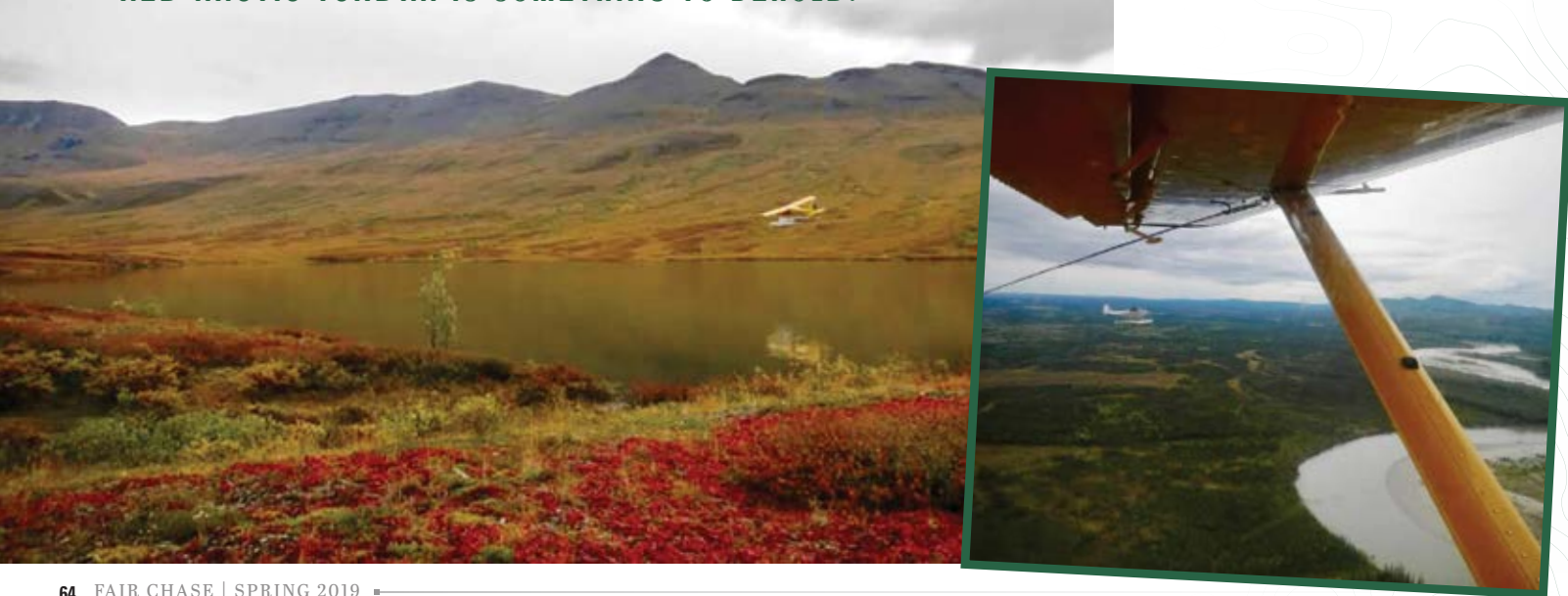
We also had a day or two layover in each of our connections. We left on a Sunday and arrived in Fairbanks around 3 pm local time. This gave us time for last-minute shopping for forgotten items and perishables as well as getting tags, which I would recommend ordering early. From Fairbanks, we flew with Wright Aviation, a commuter service operating mainly Cessna caravans that can fly IFR (Instrument Flight Rules) but still have landing requirements that can be impeded by weather. This flight went well, and we overnighted in Bettles with plans to fly out the next day. On my previous trip, we

actually flew out a day early as weather was coming in. On our scheduled departure date, we loaded the plane and were taxing out when we got a weather report that the fog was all the way on the ground where we were headed. Within a few hours it cleared, but staying patient is all part of the experience.

The day the last of the group punched his tag, we saw planes flying. The group wanted to stay and hang out, but I made the call to get out when we could. In hindsight, they agreed it was the smart move but still were all a bit disappointed. We had meat that needed attention, and in my opinion, pushing for an exact date and time leaves many chances for plans to fail. "Fly when you can" is my motto. This gave us a full two days in Bettles to completely process all the meat, which reduced the amount of weight we had to freight back out on the commuter flight to Fairbanks, and ultimately, freighting it back on Alaska Airlines.

Since we had extra days, we were able to freight most of our processed meat from Bettles back to Wright Aviation, which had a freezer. Freighting saves you almost a dollar a pound vs. flying with it on your scheduled flight. We purchased fish boxes, and after what we ate plus

EVEN IF YOUR HUNT WINDS UP WITHOUT YOU EVER SEEING A CARIBOU, WHICH IS HIGHLY UNLIKELY, THE OPPORTUNITY TO FLY THROUGH THE BROOKS RANGE AND BREAK OUT ONTO THE RED ARCTIC TUNDRA IS SOMETHING TO BEHOLD.



trimming all the meat, we had a box per caribou between 65-85 pounds each. We had scheduled two full days in Fairbanks at an Airbnb to allow us to process and freeze meat, but since we had two days in Bettles, we were able to take it easy and see the town.

I could write numerous articles on this trip and our experience, but each hunt in this country is unique. All our bulls were taken within a couple miles of camp, with the largest and also closest being taken the first morning by my wife about a half mile out. Our shots were anywhere from 40 yards to 400. There are bears and wolves in this country and plenty of them, so you need to be smart about keeping your camp and meat safe as well as keeping your head about you, but all we encountered were very well-behaved. Even if your hunt winds up without

you ever seeing a caribou, which is highly unlikely, the opportunity to fly through the Brooks Range and break out onto the red arctic tundra is something to behold. Flying over the Gates of Arctic National Park and seeing the unspoiled wilderness for as far as the eye can see turns a small world much larger during the hour-and-a-half flight. The trails through the tundra are visible and caribou and moose antlers dot the expansive valleys below.

The great North has always called to me from my first trip as a young boy. Nearly 30 years later, not a day goes by that the pull of the wilderness and all that embodies America's conservation legacy is far from the front of my mind. You only live once, and no story ever started with, "Well it seemed so difficult, so I decided not to even try." ■



NEXT UP: PRONGHORN



TOTAL COST

PLANE TICKET TO FAIRBANKS: \$350 EACH
(ALASKA AIRLINES CREDIT CARD ENTITLES YOU TO A COMPANION FARE.)

LODGING IN FAIRBANKS: \$225 EACH
(ONE NIGHT IN, TWO NIGHTS ON THE WAY OUT)

TRUCK RENTAL IN FAIRBANKS: \$100 EACH
(ONE DAY IN, THREE DAYS ON THE WAY OUT)

CABS: \$12 EACH

WRIGHT AIR FLIGHT TO BETTLES: \$340 EACH

FREIGHT: CHARGED AT \$1.80 OVER 40 LBS ON WRIGHT'S (VARIES GREATLY BUT WE PAID ABOUT \$100 EACH, WITH MOST OF THAT ON THE WAY OUT FOR THE CARIBOU MEAT)

STAY IN BUNKHOUSE IN BETTLES: \$0
(DINNER AT BETTLES LODGE WAS \$50 EACH)

FLIGHTS FROM BETTLES TO THE FIELD: \$2,750 EACH

CABIN IN BETTLES: \$50 EACH NIGHT
(BUNKHOUSE IS AVAILABLE, BUT THE CABINS ARE NICE AS WELL WITH ACCESS TO A BIGGER SHOWER)

LICENSES: \$1,005
(CARIBOU, WOLF, AND HUNTING/FISHING YEARLY LICENSE)

TOTAL: \$4932 EACH

COSTS IF SUCCESSFUL

CAPE PREPARATION AT FAIRBANKS FUR TANNERY: \$100

OVERAGE CHARGE FOR BAGGAGE: \$100
(ONE BAG FREE WITH CREDIT CARD, 2ND BAG \$25, THIRD BAG WHICH WAS SPLIT AND WRAPPED ANTLERS \$75)

FREIGHT (GETTING MEAT ON ALASKA AIRLINES): \$92
YOU MUST BE A KNOWN SHIPPER TO SHIP OUTSIDE OF THE STATE. YOU MUST FILL OUT A FORM AND THE WAIT TIME FOR APPROVAL BY TSA IS A COUPLE OF WEEKS.

ADD IN FOOD AND ALASKA PRICES IN GENERAL AND YOU ARE LOOKING AROUND \$6,000 DOOR-STEP-TO-DOOR-STEP PER HUNTER BEFORE PURCHASING ANY GEAR.