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THE BULLS OF NUSHAGAK HILLS



Story and Photos by Jim Roche



The wind through the finger-smudged window was refreshingly cool and welcome as it fought to choke back the heat from the Super Cub's roaring engine. The unrelenting sunshine bore its way through the Plexiglas at the top of the plane's fuselage, baking the back of our necks, Gerald's and mine. The view below was peaceful, though, as we followed the winding Nushagak River. Its ripples, shimmering and alive, made their long journey downstream to die in Bristol Bay. Spawning Sockeye Salmon lined the river, adding rich red colors to a canvas of green and blue. Occasionally we would catch a glimpse of a fleeting bear, salmon in mouth, diving deep behind the picket-like fence of white-barked birch trees. Moose, seeking shelter from the heat, buried themselves deep in the cool, clear pools of water. They lazily raised their heads and shook away the bugs with their long ears as if to wave "hello" as we slowly sailed away overhead. August is a great month to be hunting in Alaska!

Gerald Farris, my first hunter of the fall season, first began his Alaskan adventure when he decided to drive 4,000 miles to Anchorage from his home in Central Texas. Gerald, an easy-going Christian man, armed with an infectious smile and personality to match, loves to travel and take life slowly. This wasn't always the case though. You see, only a few years before, Gerald, along with his wife, Ann, and a couple

of their close friends were eating lunch at Luby's Cafeteria in their hometown of Killeen, TX when an armed gunman slammed his car through the wall of the restaurant, crashing to a stop just short of Gerald's table. The gunman bailed out and began firing randomly into the terrified luncheon crowd, killing one of Gerald's close friends. When it was all over, 24 people were dead and many seriously wounded. The horrific event understandably changed Gerald forever as it revealed the true fragility of life. For many months Gerald questioned why he had been spared and found comfort in the Bible and closest friends. Before, he was not unlike most of us who rush through life as if our tails were on fire, trying to somehow validate ourselves with material possessions or assumed power. Suddenly every day was special. It had new purpose, new meaning! Now, here we were, the two of us, flying alone across the Alaskan wilderness. For me, a registered guide and commercial pilot, it was another day at the office; for Gerald, "the trip of a lifetime." We have all heard the question "Is the glass half empty or half full?" For Gerald, the glass is always full. Not unlike some small child venturing down the highway of life with his nose pressed against the glass, Gerald eagerly asked questions and frequently commented on the raw and untamed beauty of Alaska's wilderness. His energy was amazing. A once smoldering fire inside me



seemed to re-kindle itself and, after a short while, I, too, was looking through the plane's windshield as if it were my virgin trip. Gerald's enthusiasm was infectious, and I was really looking forward to our upcoming caribou hunt together.

We flew along, 500 feet above the deck, for about an hour. The Nushagak Hills, once blue in the distance, were now green and inviting. As we closed the distance, the hills began to crawl and come alive. Hundreds and hundreds of caribou skylined themselves as they paraded single file along the ridge tops. Their tireless march of escape from heat, cold, bugs, and predators is endless. Because Alaska law prohibits same-day airborne hunting, we had to guess where the traveling herd would be the following morning when we could hunt. Fifteen miles ahead of the migrating herd, we found a long open ridge that offered a safe and unassuming place to land with an alder patch to camp by for wind protection. A black bear scurried for cover as I eased back the throttle and pulled a couple notches of flap. The huge 31-inch tundra tires gently touched down on the ridge's backbone, and we came to a stop next to some old caribou sheds. We pitched our "Alaska Bombshelter" tent



and secured the plane for the night. It was hard to sleep with the anticipation of the oncoming herd, but we finally dozed off sometime around 10:30 pm when the sky went dark.

Gerald and I awoke early the next morning to the sound of clicking hooves. I quickly unzipped the tent fly and peered out as five curious cow caribou walked by not 50 yards away. We both slammed down a quick breakfast of blueberry pop

tarts and hot coffee while packing our daypacks. Afterwards we shouldered our packs, grabbed our rifles, and headed down the ridge to a lone vantage point overlooking a narrow valley. Once we arrived to our glassing point, we noticed several sets of caribou antlers protruding above the curvature of the hill. The antlers shook back and forth as the bulls tried to swat away the many bugs. Gerald and I quietly slipped off our daypacks and eased around the ridge for a better look. There appeared to be twenty-five or so caribou bedded 100 yards below. An interesting mix of antlers commanded our undivided attention. We sat there in the warming morning sun for the better part of an hour with our patience running short. Gerald was eagerly awaiting my call on which one to harvest and I could feel the



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pressure building. Finally, when I could take it no longer, I began whistling to get the small herd to stand up, offering a better inspection. One by one the caribou began to rise to their feet. With almost all of the caribou now standing, a huge bull, unseen before, suddenly rose to his feet. Apparently he had been bedded behind one lone alder bush. Almost in unison Gerald and I exclaimed, "Where did he come from?" The caribou started to move up the valley; so Gerald and I quickly moved to flank them. Once in position we waited for the huge bull to un-shadow himself from his companions. He finally stepped clear and Gerald took the shot. His new .300 Ultra Magnum spun the big bull completely around and, after some tricky foot work, he went down. The brown velvet-covered antlers were way beyond our wildest imaginations. Wow, what a bull and, best of all, only 500 yards from camp! Gerald proudly posed for many photographs. Then, with the fun over, it was time to get to work packing the bull to the airstrip. That night neither Gerald nor I had any problem sleeping!

The next morning we awoke once again to the sound of clinking hooves. Gerald unzipped the tent fly and suddenly scrambled for his rifle. Not knowing exactly what Gerald had



seen, I, too, scrambled for my rifle. Visions of charging bears quickly came to mind. I unwound myself from my sleeping bag and scrambled for the tent's doorway. Standing, not seventy-five yards away, were six big caribou bulls all lined up shoulder to shoulder, staring back. The showdown continued for a moment longer as Gerald fought to steady his rifle. I quickly plugged my fingers into my ears just as Gerald fired from inside our tent! The largest bull reared up on his hind legs, then fell over backwards. His partners quickly abandoned him, running 50 yards where they stopped and spun around, waiting for their fall-

en comrade to come join them. Satisfied that he wasn't, they turned and high-stepped it away with both their noses and little white tails held high. For several minutes Gerald and I just sat on our cots staring outside in total disbelief at the fallen bull.

Once outside we admired the truly outstanding bull. Gerald held the massive antlers as I carefully adjusted the focus on my Nikon camera and centered on Gerald with his infectious smile. As I snapped the shutter time after time, I could not keep from thinking of the old saying, "It's always better to be lucky than good." Oh, what a special hunt this turned out to be! It was heaven-sent just for Gerald; he deserved it! 



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