

## QUEST 17

# MOUNTAIN CARIBOU

**GREGG RITZ AND I HAD PLANNED TO PURSUE MOUNTAIN CARIBOU IF WE EACH TOOK A DALL RAM.** After Ritz's one-day sheep hunt, we returned to South Nahanni's lodge and geared up to hunt caribou. As a bowhunter, the idea of arrowing two Slam animals during one trip was pretty exciting.

South Nahanni owner and bush pilot Wer-

ner Aschbacher showed us on the map where caribou congregated in August — high in the mountains toward the border of the Yukon and Northwest Territories, in the heart of the Mackenzies. Those mountains are some of the most rugged in North America.

Chad Lenz and cameraman Martin Teeter would accompany us. Soon, we headed west,



*Here are the Mackenzie Mountains. It's rough and rugged country. Camp is out there somewhere.*



MURRAY O'NEILL/WINDIGO IMAGES

*Mountain caribou are the largest subspecies. Bowhunters prefer the early velvet hunt when bulls are often together. This bull scores more than 400 inches.*



flying down numerous canyons and over mountain peaks. Because there was so much TV gear, four guys and camp gear, Aschbacher flew the gear in his Cessna 170.

### BASE CAMP

Mountain caribou bulls are true prizes if you're willing to climb into remote country to hunt them. They're one of five caribou — along with the woodland, Quebec Labrador, barren ground and central Canadian barren ground — needed for the Super Slam.

Set up on a crystal-clear glacial river, our campsite had fresh, cold drinking water and quick access to a small plateau where we could glass surrounding mountains for caribou. Most of the bulls were still in bachelor herds during the antler-growing season (June through August), so finding a bull likely wouldn't be too difficult. The terrain, and stalking in front of caribou would prove difficult, however. Caribou can cover lots of ground, which is an advantage and a disadvantage.

Setting up base camp is always kind of fun. Tent camping is what you make of it. If you dread it and want it to be finished before it starts, the trip will be no fun. Consider it an adventure, and make the most of it. That's the only way to go into a remote hunt.

It's best to select a campsite that's level and on high ground. Sleeping on the ground requires spe-

cial attention to the tent floor, and although a nice therma-rest pad is comfortable, you still have to get all the rocks and sticks out from under your bag.

We had only four days to hunt, so we opted to build camp by the river channel. It was close to where the chopper could land, and we didn't have to cut alders or work hard to place the tents. The sound of the babbling stream was like sweet music at bedtime.

We set three tents: one for Ritz and I, one for Teeter and one for Lenz. This marked our fourth camp setup since arriving in the Mackenzies, and it was becoming routine. We found quite a bit of driftwood on the stream, and it made great fire wood. The mosquitoes were rough, and you needed a headnet when the sun dipped behind the mountains. Otherwise, you could build a fire, and the smoke kept most of the bugs at bay.

### DRAWING STRAWS

Mountain caribou are the toughest subspecies to hunt. Living high in the mountains in late summer, they seek windy slopes and snow patches to avoid hordes of black flies. Because bulls are in bachelor groups, you must deal with many eyes and ears.

Typically, having a rifle hunter and bowhunter on a hunt together is disaster, especially if the rifle guy is looking for a big bull. The bowhunter is often pressured to get his hunt out of the way so the real trophy hunt can start. Drawing straws to see



## MOUNTAIN CARIBOU

### RANGE MAP AND INFORMATION

Mountain caribou (*Rangifer tarandus montanus*) differ greatly from their barren-ground cousins. Most of the mountain caribou population is centered in south-central British Columbia, an area called the Interior Wet Belt because it receives much more precipitation than much of the surrounding areas.

Like the barren ground subspecies, mountain caribou migrate. But instead of covering hundreds of miles between their winter and summer grounds, they change elevations. Throughout late fall and early winter, mountain caribou inhabit low elevations where old-growth forests offer them forage and protection from snow. As winter progresses, caribou move up the mountains to feed on lichens, which are essential to their survival. They have developed large hoofs and dew claws to deal with the snowpack. That lets them feed in areas where other ungulates would not survive.

In spring, caribou migrate to lower elevations to take advantage of fresh growth. By summer, they start climbing again, with cows leading the way as they seek out calving areas. Calves are born after roughly seven and a half months of gestation. They almost always have one calf.

Mountain caribou are some of the largest caribou, with bulls sometimes weighing more than 500 pounds. It's not just their bodies that are heavier, though. Mountain caribou racks have the most mass of any caribou, even though their antlers tend to be the most compact.

To hunt mountain caribou, pack quality optics, and be ready to climb. They can be surprisingly difficult to locate and are very good at detecting predators via their noses, ears and eyes.

It's important to note that mountain caribou are closely tied to the Interior Wet Belt and the old-growth forests that dominate the region. They are highly susceptible to changes in their environment. Human development and even forest fires can wreak havoc on their ability to survive. That sensitivity to environmental changes has the mountain caribou firmly fixed on the radar of conservation-minded groups. At this point, there are still numerous opportunities for outfitted hunts.

who hunts first doesn't work, as it takes a perfect scenario to get into bow range. A rifle hunt — or muzzleloader, in Ritz's case — is much easier. Ritz and I decided to hunt together and take each opportunity as a bowhunt. If I couldn't get within range and the bull was a trophy, Ritz would shoot first. That meant our arrangement was a bowhunt, with Ritz willing to step in at the last minute to end his hunt. He had taken two mountain bulls previously, with Jim Shockey in the Yukon. I had none.

Our strategy was to glass the mountains in early morning, locate caribou and move in. With limited time in our trip, we planned to go at light speed, getting up early and hunting all day. There was a fatigue factor, as Lenz, Teeter and I had been busting it in the mountains for almost two weeks. Ritz was frisky and full of energy.

The first morning, we made a quick breakfast and moved up on the plateau to glass. At first, we saw nothing. After 30 minutes, Lenz looked at me and raised his eyebrows.

"Wow, were going to have to hike into a better vantage point," he said.



We pulled on our packs and began to walk up and away from camp. After a half-mile, we began to see caribou moving on the skyline of the mountain ridge. They looked like ants through our binos, but the spotting scope told a different story. There were bulls and cows moving. The mountaintop was alive. We estimated the climb to the caribou at two hours, and then set out to move into their world. The mountain was only a gradual climb, not steep but long. The caribou were maybe four miles away and 2,000 feet above us. The sky was blue and temperature warm. I was peeling off clothes in no time.

### THE SNOW PATCH

Ninety minutes into our climb, we were crossing a huge bowl rimmed on three sides by a towering ridge. In the distance, we saw a large shimmering patch. At first, it looked like water shimmering in the sun. As we got closer, we saw it was a 40-yard-long, 25-yard-wide snow patch full of caribou. Actually, there were two snow patches, and both looked like a crowded parking lot for a Saturday football game. No doubt, they were trying to thwart the hordes of black flies. Caribou were everywhere.

We started using terrain to cover and eventually slipped within 350 yards of the caribou. It sounded

like a feedlot, with all the “bah” and “burp” noises 100-plus caribou can make. There were several bulls in the group, but one was mammoth. We watched him and the herd for almost an hour. The hike might have started as a bowhunt, but it wasn’t a bow scenario. We glassed the surrounding area and located a small drainage where the caribou might walk if they left the snow patch. We decided to move, trying to get Ritz within range along the drainage and inside 200 yards of where the group might walk.

It was an amazing sight. When the caribou left the snow, they went together, and for a split second, it seemed like they would walk right by us. However, they wavered and began moving toward the drainage, just as we’d thought. Lenz eyed his range-finder and called out yardage: 300, 250, 225. Boom. Ritz cut loose, and the air filled with smoke. His T/C Encore barked, and the huge bull went down. He was two for two in two days. His bull was a monster, and after shooting our TV bits, we settled in to cape and quarter the bull and begin the hike down to camp.

Going downhill is often harder than uphill. It seems that your legs and back tire much more quickly moving down. The constant pace and fight-



Bugs can be a bummer for hunter and prey. This snow patch would be the local caribou hangout until it melted away or the bugs died off. Winter started in six weeks. You can see the top points of Ritz’s bull just at the top of Lenz’s blurry backpack in the foreground.



Gregg Ritz and Chad Lenz pose with the whopper snow-patch bull.

ing gravity to keep from falling is difficult on your knees. Add 50 pounds of caribou steaks in your pack, and it’s a workout. But caribou loin for dinner was great, and we turned in early. There was an ominous dark sky to the west and three more days to hunt.

My turn was next.

### THE STORM

I slid in my bag and was ready to relax for the evening when I heard thunder rumble in the distance. Soon, thunder and lightning were all around us, and a gully-washing rain fell from the low clouds. Weather can be a big factor on a wilderness hunt. Tent camping affords little room indoors if storms move in. Strong wind can blow camp away, and drying out gear after a soaker rain is almost impossible. Fog can limit visibility in mountain country to the point that glassing for animals is pointless. Fog and low clouds can last for days or even a week. In the far North, you never know when a “northerly” will slide in and dump a foot of snow

— even in midsummer.

I shot some video of the storm and noticed that the creek we were camped on was rising. Also, we had stashed Ritz’s caribou antlers in the stream to keep them cool and away from rodents that might chew on the velvet, but we were afraid the antlers would wash down stream, so we moved them to a more protected area and weighted them with rocks.

Rain on a tent fly has a soothing feeling. In my younger days, I hated rain because I knew everything would be wet and miserable on a hunt. But now, I like rainy nights and take advantage of their restful qualities. The older you get, the more patience you have, and that’s a good thing when you’re a bowhunter.

It rained all night, and by morning the stream had risen to just feet from the tents. However, the skies were breaking up, and the water was already receding, so we decided not to move camp.

Lenz and I knew the best chances for bowhunting would be atop the ridge, so we made a beeline to the previous day’s lookout. Again, we saw tiny





Lenz poses with Ritz's cape and horns. Camp is downhill and to the right about six miles.

caribou on the skyline. We immediately began hiking, this time bypassing the bowl and staying on an old game trail that worked through a saddle and up a spine to the high ridge and the caribou. After about three miles of hiking, Lenz and I had velvet antlers in our binoculars. The caribou still looked like mice in the distance, but their huge velvety racks were visible to the naked eye. Through magnified glass, the shovel, bez and tops were recognizable. There were 70 bulls walking the mountain peak. Of course, it would take us another hour to climb into bow range, and there was no telling if bulls would be there when we arrived. Further, every step away from camp would require another step back to camp. That doesn't sound like much, but six miles from camp in mountain country can feel like 20 if a stalk turns into a dead end. I had lost almost 20 pounds on the trip, which is typical of a sheep hunting expedition. However, with Ritz tagged out, I was walking with a bounce in my step and the thought of killing out quickly when we spotted a good bull on top.

### ROCK-STREWN HIDEOUT

The good thing about caribou is you often see numerous bulls and have multiple opportunities. During a sheep hunt, there might be one shooter ram in an entire valley, and a foiled stalk could cost two or three days of regrouping and locating another ram.

As Lenz, Ritz, Teeter and I climbed, we took numerous breaks, reaching the craggy peaks by 3 p.m. That sounds late, but it wouldn't get dark until midnight. A well-defined trail ran the entire ridge from horizon to horizon, and caribou were traveling it constantly. We set up at a boulder-strewn knob near the trail and began to glass for traveling bulls. After a while, cows and calves walked by unafraid and at hand-shaking distance. They were followed by some smaller bulls and then some shooters. Yet in the distance, we saw a huge bull feeding and walking along the trail.

It's always awe-inspiring to be archery close to wild animals, and caribou are no different. The light coat and manes of a big bull are gorgeous, and



Super Slammer Gary Bogner shows off a beautiful hard-horn mountain caribou taken in 1999. Look at those giant arrows and vanes we used to use.



Marketing professional Adam Flod of Harrisburg, Pa., has 21 species in pursuit of his Super Slam. Here, he poses with a beautiful mountain caribou arrowed in Canada's Northwest Territories. "The challenges of bowhunting have helped me to overcome many obstacles in everyday life, and the outdoors is always an inspiration"

the velvet antlers look like silk. The clicking of caribou hoofs is unmistakable, and hearing it adds to the excitement of the encounters. For me, there's nothing like bowhunting, and to be at that spot and see the caribou gave me a feeling of satisfaction I couldn't achieve any other way. All the caribou were passing by at 20 yards or

## EQUIPMENT ESSENTIALS

If you think a mountain caribou hunt will be similar to a barren ground caribou hunt, you're in for a surprise. Mountain caribou deserve their moniker, inhabiting steep mountain basins and carving out a living in areas suited well for sheep.

Aside from obvious gear choices for mountain hunting, one piece of equipment that saved my hunt was a sleeping pad. That might seem strange, but when you're far enough north to encounter a mountain caribou, you'll realize that daylight almost never ends.

You can plan on hunting for 18 or even 20 hours a day, if that's what trips your trigger. That's how much daylight you'll have. The increase in daylight wreaks havoc on your sleeping habits, and that's where the sleeping pad comes in play. Quality rest is hard find in a high-country spike camp. It's even harder find when the sun is blazing down on your tent, and the rocks beneath your body jut upward like rhino horns. A sleeping pad simply lets you be more comfortable when you try to grab a few hours of much-needed sleep. Further, the pad offers a welcome cushion between your body and the unforgiving, rocky earth you're almost guaranteed to be camped upon. Last, that pad will keep you elevated just enough to ensure you don't wake up wet from being too close to the tent floor in the mornings. Deep sleep lets your body recover from the previous day's rigors. If you sleep better, you'll feel much more confident and energetic throughout your hunt. That will increase your odds of tagging out on a mountain caribou.

To increase your odds of success, cover yourself from head to toe in appropriate camouflage. For me, the best pattern was Realtree's Max-1. Even through most of my original experiences wearing Max-1 revolved around prairies and critters that munch on sagebrush, I found it to be perfect for mountain caribou territory. Max-1 is unique because it functions well in open terrain, which is ubiquitous where mountain caribou live. Max-1 also features elements of brush, rocks and in-depth shadow detail. Whether you're belly-crawling through an open basin to get in front of a traveling bull or plastering yourself against a rocky outcropping to avoid detection, Realtree's Max-1 is a great choice.

Choosing the correct camouflage has its place on every hunt. Research the terrain and available patterns, and make an educated guess about what pattern you should bring. That's the route I chose when I knew I'd be hunting mountain caribou, and it paid off with a beautiful bull that was oblivious to me even though I shot him at point-blank range.



closer, and it was like Christmas shopping.

There was a tiny patch of snow near our hideout in the boulders, and many of the caribou visited it. It seems like snow patches are magnets to mountain caribou at that time of year. I'm sure the four of us and the TV camera looked like a Boy Scout jamboree in the rocks.

"There's no way a big bull is going to just walk over here with all of us sitting here," I thought.

But the rocks helped hide us, and the caribou kept coming.

TV hunting has taught me not to be greedy, so I knew the first good bull that walked into range was dead. Within an hour of setting up, we had seen numerous caribou in range, but a shooter bull finally crested the ridge and began closing the distance. Because of the setup, we saw him coming for 600 yards, so there was plenty of time to assess his antlers. A mountain caribou must score 300 to make Pope and Young, and to achieve that, a bull must have long main beams, long tops, good bez and a double shovel. That bull had that and more. As he got closer, the velvet-racked bull saw the snow patch and had to visit. It was perfect. When he stepped onto the snow, I knew he was mine. Already at full draw, I waited for the bull to clear a large boulder, and then I touched the release. The two-blade Rage zipped through the bull's lungs, and as he ran, I saw the arrow flip 360 degrees after passing through him.

Ritz was stoked. He was right there at ring-side, 15 yards from the action, and had witnessed the entire hunt from a spectator point of view. He said it was the coolest hunt he'd ever seen. We shot our TV reversals and went looking for the bull.

After running about 100 yards, the bull had succumbed to the arrow. But when he went down, he really went down, rolling into a slot above a very steep cliff-like area. The rocks were like marbles and footing treacherous. It was difficult for us to reach the bull, and we couldn't move him for fear he would go over the edge. So we did the hero and photos as we found him, and then caped and quartered him on the spot.

As I type this, I'm preparing for another trip to mountain caribou country, this time to the Yukon. Once you're infected with the adventure bowhunting bug, you never lose it. 🎯

## ▶ FROM THE DVD



Lenz and I hike in a drainage. There's a mountain caribou skull and rack in the foreground.



This is our caribou base camp. We set up farther from the river, but a huge overnight rain pushed the water close to the tent. One more night of rain would have forced us to move.



This is my bull just before I shot him. The snow patch he's standing on was at 15 yards.



The A Team: Lenz (right), Martin Teeter (center) and I display our P&Y bull. The bull ended up in a slide, and this photo doesn't do the mountain justice. One step back, and we'd go to the bottom. You can't beat a two-day bowhunt.

## MOUNTAIN CARIBOU HUNT STATS



**Quest 17:** Mountain Caribou  
**Date:** August 2008  
**Outfitter:** South Nahanni River Outfitters  
**Location:** Mackenzie Mountains, Northwest Territories  
**Guide:** Chad Lenz  
**Transportation:** Helicopter  
**Cameraman:** Martin Teeter  
**P&Y score:** 314-3/8  
**Shot distance:** 15 yards  
**Shot angle:** Broadside  
**Impact:** Lungs  
**Pass through:** Yes

**Animal ran:** 100 yards  
**Hunting days:** Three  
**Time of day:** Afternoon  
**Weather:** Sunny, 70 degrees, with bugs  
**Hunt cost:** \$4,000  
**Number of same species shot with a bow:** One  
**Type of hunt:** Spot and stalk  
**Camo:** Advantage Max 1  
**Bow:** Mathews Drenaline  
**Broadhead:** Rage two-blade  
**Arrow:** Carbon Express  
**Scent control:** Scent Blocker

**South Nahanni Outfitters Ltd.**  
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