



Walks with Caribou

by Michael Engelhard

It is my last day guiding a weeklong backpacking trip in mid-July from the East Fork of the Chandalar to the headwaters of the Hulahula. We are camped on the western bank of the Hulahula in the broad, treeless valley an Ice-Age-glacier incised. Because the morning is drizzly, my peeps still hide inside their sleeping bags. Over a contemplative cup of Joe in the kitchen area—a stone’s throw away from our tents—I notice shifts in what in the flat light resembles a boulder field.

“You might want to come outside. The whole hillside is crawling with caribou,” I rouse the sleepyheads, unaware yet that I’m seeing a vanguard of ten thousand, a quarter

mile down the valley, a prong of the Porcupine herd's southbound trans-border migration. I feel we have suddenly struck it rich.

We soon sit and breakfast, quietly, for about three hours, afraid that a loud word or brash gesture would turn the approaching herd. When it reaches our campsite, the tide of furred bodies divides and flows around us. The animals' gamey, dense musk hangs in the air. We hear arthritic old-man grunts and with each step the clicking from cartilage that pulls back their hooves and helps them save energy. The animals are fat from the sedges, willow leaves, flowers, and mushrooms clothing the Arctic Coastal Plain. Cows have shed their antlers after dropping gangly calves there in early June, reallocating their bodies' calcium for milk, but bulls are still geared up for the fall rut near the tree line.

Having broken camp after realizing that our presence does not deter them, we hike against the current, down-valley through the herd without causing so much as a ripple. The drifters eye us inquiringly: *Don't you know winter is coming? You are headed the wrong way!* They're ready to tackle Guilbeau Pass, a Brooks Range gateway in the Continental Divide commemorating the twenty-six-year-old son of a Black pastor and scout leader, a geology student who died there in the early seventies on a solo quest from Arctic Village to Barter Island.

After the rush has subsided, we travel freshly churned grooves, past wisps of fleece caught in bushes and dung pellets soft in the tracks. We run into stragglers. Five cows shadowed by their stilt-legged offspring—the Moms; a bull with a dozen cows—the Harem; and, heartbreaking, the Casualty, a calf limping after its mother. The doe keeps turning back as if to encourage the little fellow, but we're certain it will end up feeding a bear or some wolves. Tooth and claw will distribute a share of this wealth.

The Inupiat's neighbors in Arctic Village, 150 roadless miles to the south, call themselves the "Caribou People." They, as well as the residents of fourteen other Gwich'in villages on both sides of the US–Canada border, depend on the Porcupine caribou herd. It provides over half of all food for Gwich'in families plus material for clothing and tools and for stories, dances, and songs. Twice a year, the slopes and flats come alive as caribou hone in on their destination: summer calving and grazing ranges on the refuge's coastal plain—which under Trump were slated for drilling—and wintering sites in

the boreal conifer belt, Vinijàatan, where caribou “settle down and lie around and just eat.” This journey—reminiscent of early nineteenth century bison abundance, upward of 200,000 caribou at last count—is the continent’s largest land-mammal trek, and at 3,000 miles, the planet’s longest. By the age of nine, an average lifespan for a caribou lucky enough to survive calthood, a cow will have effectively circumnavigated the globe.

The villagers named the refuge’s contested 1002 Area, a nursery almost as big as Delaware, Iizhik Gwats’an Gwandaii Goodlit, “The Sacred Place Where Life Begins.” Their creation story reminds all Gwich’in that humans and caribou were one once, long ago. When they split, they kept a piece of the others’ heart inside their own, so their fate and their health will forever be linked. While caribou nourish the people, people should take no more than they need and protect the herd and its home, which also is theirs. It is disrespectful to waste any meat, to touch the living animals, or to kill them in a manner that causes suffering. Gwich’in hunters let the vanguard pass, fearing the herd could turn as these veteran caribous lead the rest between their summer and winter ranges. Tradition dictated that their Eskimo neighbors not butcher animals or leave bones near migration routes, from concern that this would spook any herds.

“We have a spiritual connection to caribou. They are everything to us,” says Sarah James, an elder and board member of the Gwich’in Steering Committee, spearhead of resistance against oil development. For the Gwich’in, preserving the caribou and their range is a social justice issue and an environmental one.

Biologists and the Gwich’in fear declines of the herd mirroring slumps in Canada and Siberia. As environmental conditions change, so do caribou highways. Gwich’in hunters in Arctic Village remark that, as the region gets bushier with willows and alders marching north in lockstep with climate change, sighting game now is harder. On average, the Arctic greens two weeks earlier than it used to, and pregnant cows reach the smorgasbord too late for their calves to take full advantage. Consequently, more, weakened offspring succumb to wolf packs, diseases, lone bears, parasites, or the elements. Still, the herd’s losses translate into carnivores’ gains only short-term, until starvation catches up with *them*. If caribou numbers nosedive, zealots will surely blame wolves and clamor again for drastic controls—the aerial shooting of packs and the baiting of bears.

To me, caribou have been teachers rather than dinner or competition. They choose the most straightforward route always (at least from their perspective), like water seeking the path of least resistance. Yet they avoid ankle-busting cobbles and brush and prefer stretches that afford views of slinking predators. I'd like to think big game laid out all our original roads. Flying through tussocks, causing speed envy in me, caribou high-step while throwing their legs sideways like flappers doing the Charleston. They sail through swamps where I founder. I follow their trails especially when they cut through alder thickets or traverse steep scree, though the narrower caribou hips can make walking in the ruts awkward.

You appreciate the web wandering generations have scored into turf differently when you're airborne. At times, it braids like the North Slope's gravelly rivers, since herd members too can be choosy, steering divergent courses. In passes or similar bottlenecks, multiple strands become single lanes, tokens of one directional will. Staying on tracks, besides being safer, saves calories. Break a leg in this country, and you're in trouble. Running on empty spells the same. The routine inherent in trail hiking relieves the mind of route-finding tasks. This allows flights of fancy, and I wonder where caribou aim that freed mental focus.

Treading caribou trails I, for one, can better scan my surroundings for beauty and threats. I seldom resist donning cast-off antlers, impersonating a 'bou. Doing so, I look over one shoulder for hungry grizzlies.

I've always been lucky on the Hulahula, except for one scary bear charge. Thrice I've witnessed the timeless congregation there. Approaching Old Woman Creek, a Hula tributary, on my wife's birthday, our Cessna banked above the gravel landing strip, and we faced tundra teeming, oddly flecked. Momentarily spooked, dozens of caribou splashed through the shallows before climbing the loamy far bank. While elk lope, moose stilt, and deer pogo, caribou tiptoe through tussocks at top speeds, ballerinas among the Cervidae. Think *Swan Lake* performed in a swamp but more scattered, less choreographed.

Multitudes milled about, or surged like a tawny flood into foothills. As the pilot throttled the engine and swooped in for a touchdown near the river, a cow and her calf

cleared the runway barely ahead of the propeller. It felt like having a front seat on *Animal Planet*.

By the time we had sorted our gear, the departing plane's drone had faded back to silence. The animals had settled down, attending to the matter at hand—putting on pounds. It was June, and the Porcupine herd was fueling up for its return to the woodlands in late July.

Having pitched tents on top of a knob that also housed a ground squirrel colony, we observed the scattered crowd, when one of my clients spotted a griz'.

"What's it got in its mouth?" he asked.

Through my binocs, I saw. A bloody hindquarter so large it dragged on the muskeg. Just then, another bear on the opposite bank waded in to join this free-for-all.

Needless to say, I did not sleep well that night.

My own attempts to get Arctic venison into my belly and freezer have amounted to nothing tangible. The first time, about to drive north on the Haul Road toward Deadhorse, Prudhoe Bay with my neighbor and friend, all packed up and piled in, we did not even leave the driveway. His truck wouldn't start. The second time, two National Outdoor Leadership School instructors and I managed to reach the Brooks Range, where zero caribou entered our crosshairs. Sitting around our campfire, so much younger then, we took potshots at a shirt I'd volunteered and hung from a spruce tree. I wore it for years afterward, proudly displaying the bullet holes.



Michael Engelhard is the author of [*Ice Bear: The Cultural History of an Arctic Icon*](#) and, most recently, of the [*memoir Arctic Traverse: A Thousand-Mile Summer of Trekking the Brooks Range*](#). He lives in Fairbanks, Alaska, and guided wilderness trips for twenty-five years.

* Photograph of Caribou trails in the northern foothills of the Brooks Range is by Lisa Hupp, US Fish and Wildlife Service.