

I can hear the creek in the valley a thousand feet below. Clouds drift through the mountains, covering and unveiling peaks and cliffs. A breeze is blowing across the wet tundra, cold on my soaked legs. To avoid a chill I stop only occasionally to glass the valley and hillsides, looking for the telltale white neck and rump of caribou. On the pretense of glassing the next valley I am making my way toward the ridgeline, though truthfully, I just want to get out of the soft tussocks in the lowlands.

Panting, I place one foot in front of the other. Eventually I reach the top and as I cross to the other side, a ptarmigan stands up from its hiding place ten yards to my left. I remove a blunt-tipped arrow from my quiver, fit it to the string and draw the bow to my cheek. The arrow flies straight and true, hitting the bird with a smack and knocking it cleanly to the ground. Suddenly the air around me is filled with wings as the flock lifts from the tundra. In a flurry of white, they disappear behind the sloping ridge.

Many miles of hiking later, I drag myself back to camp along the road. No caribou revealed themselves; apparently my timing is off. Caribou have been scarce along the road corridor this year, living up to their reputation for unpredictability. Hunting the Haul Road is a matter of timing. One hunter I spoke with told me he and his partner saw one bull on their five-day trip, but they took it home with them. Another timed his trip perfectly and saw a herd of over a thousand. He had the luxury of picking his animal from hundreds.

Stretching 414 miles from the community of Livengood to Prudhoe Bay, the Haul Road covers about every habitat and terrain interior Alaska has to offer. Before reaching the north slope and its caribou, the gravel and potholed pavement passes through the boreal forest of the Tanana uplands and White Mountains, across the Yukon Flats and its hundreds of lakes, into the hills and valleys south of the mountains, over dozens of crystal rivers, climbing to the crest of the Brooks Range at Atigun Pass before dropping down onto the North Slope.

The highway was built over six months in 1974 as part of the construc-



The Haul Road

By David Shaw

tion of the Trans-Alaska oil pipeline. After several years, the road was opened to the public and renamed the James Dalton Highway, though the locals still know it as the Haul Road. A permit was required to drive the road until 1995, but now anyone with the inclination can head from Fairbanks nearly to the Arctic Ocean whenever they wish.

In fall, the region is ideal for bowhunters. A corridor running five miles on each side of the road from the Yukon River Bridge to the Arctic Ocean is open to archery hunting only. Many big game species inhabit the area: black and grizzly bear, moose, caribou, Dall sheep and musk ox. Snowshoe and arctic hares, spruce and ruffed grouse and two species of ptarmigan are available to those after small game. Though fall is the traditional time for a hunting trip, any time during the summer can be great for a visit.

If hunting is not the only item on your itinerary, northern Alaska is home to a plethora of rivers offering great opportunities for fishing. Enormous arc-

tic grayling inhabit the rivers south of the Brooks Range, while north of the mountains, the Sagavanirktok or "Sag" River offers the only arctic char fishery accessible from Alaska's road system. Opportunities for hiking and backpacking in the Brooks Range are virtually endless, with hundreds of trail-less valleys and ridges to explore.

One summer in early July, my brother and I hiked a 40-mile loop from the road into the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Each day blended seamlessly with the next as the sun made one lazy circle after another overhead without ever setting. We watched a grizzly ambling up the far side of the valley, found a beautiful lake unmarked on any map, and disturbed a herd of Dall sheep on a ridge-top. We also waged constant war with swarms of mosquitoes. As Margaret Murie observed her book *Two in the Far North*, "the mosquitoes couldn't have been any thicker unless they'd been smaller." One evening my brother set a one-handed record when he crushed 37 on my back with one slap. We hiked for five days

Traditional Destinations



without seeing a person or a human footprint, and never heard the sound of an engine. For a while at least, the Arctic remains a wild and quiet place.

I unlace my boots and place them on the tailgate of the truck and sit down next to them with a sigh. The day has remained gray and ominous but there is no snow and the brutal winter is still a week or two away. I stare at the clouds and imagine that they are starting to clear. Perhaps tonight, like many nights in the north, I'll wake up to see northern lights floating in a starry sky.

As I clean the ptarmigan I can't help but wish I were quartering a nice caribou instead. Hunter success varies somewhat from year to year and greatly from week to week along the Dalton. Some years, the central arctic herd never ventures toward the road, and only a few straggling bands and individuals appear. At other times, the herd bunches up and passes through the

region in a matter of days, and if one's timing is off a hunter might not see an animal. Despite the variability, combined hunter success rates for both archers and gun hunters in these units have ranged from 45% to 57% since 2000 (ADFG).

I pull on a thick, dry sweater against the cold and my mind wanders from the missing caribou to my last trip up the Dalton when the weather was quite different. It was June, spring in the far north, and instead of a longbow I was carrying a pair of binoculars. Atop Atigun Pass, I sat watching a black and white snow buntings foraging in scattered patches of tundra. From a hundred feet up the slope I heard a rock tumbling. A small herd of Dall sheep was working its way across the rocky slope. Through my binoculars, I could tell that they were all ewes and last years' kids. The youngsters were battering each other playfully and I could hear the thud of their horns smacking one another. When they eventually moved on down the slope, I slipped back to the truck and continued down the valley.

Later, I was crossing the huge expanse of the coastal plain. This was not the empty wasteland portrayed by some politicians. Not far to the east lay the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a wilderness of mountains, plains and migrating caribou. Those who claim that this expanse of tundra is empty have never visited it in June. Every one of the abundant ponds was filled with ducks, shorebirds and loons. I saw a lone bull caribou loafing at the base of the ominously named "Oil Spill Hill". I can't help but wonder how another network of roads, rigs and pipelines would

affect the herds moving through the Haul Road corridor. What if one year the caribou just stopped coming?

Returning to the present, I'm getting ready to crawl into my sleeping bag when a pickup goes rattling by on the road, the fourth in the last hour. The solitude of spring and summer has faded with the shortening days. There are plenty of vehicles plying the road in late August and early September. In fact, if one sits still long enough, the same truck may pass a half-dozen times. Road hunting is the method of choice for many if not most hunters along the Haul Road. These "hunters" burn gas "cruisin' for bou" and leave the rest of the tundra to those of us willing to use our feet. Hike two or three miles off the road and one can find some solitude; stay closer and you'll have company. In years with few caribou, half a dozen hunters have been known to simultaneously stalk the same animal, and more than one perfect ambush has been destroyed by mindless archers trying to shoot their caribou by chasing it on foot, as fast as possible. For this reason, animals can be skittish near the road. I hike the ridges as much for the solitude as for the hunting prospects. In terms of filling tags, I'd probably be better off driving up and down the road below. But for me, harvesting an animal is only one and perhaps not the most important gauge of success.

Later, it is getting dark and traffic has virtually ceased. From my tent, I can hear only the hush of the river as I study a topo map by the light of my headlamp, planning tomorrow's strategy. A creek in the next valley looks enticing and I imagine a bull caribou walking down the streambed through the willows. There I'm certain to be alone, my favorite way to hunt. My decision made, I zip my sleeping bag against the cold and quickly drift off to sleep.

Before dawn I am walking again, longbow in hand.

David Shaw is a wildlife biologist and avid traditional bowhunter living in Fairbanks, AK.

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