

SPORTSMAN'S

SPECIAL WHITETAIL ISSUE!

HUNTING

YEARBOOK 2003

**BUCK SIGN
THAT SAYS**

**'HUNT
HERE!'**

**Tracks & Trails Reveal
Deadly Ambush Sites!**

**Also:
Varmints
Moose
Caribou**

**CREEK BOTTOM
BIG-BUCK BONANZA!**

**Woods-Wise Strategies
To Beat the Crowds!**

**10 SUREFIRE WAYS
TO BAG A BUCK
THIS SEASON!**

Plus...

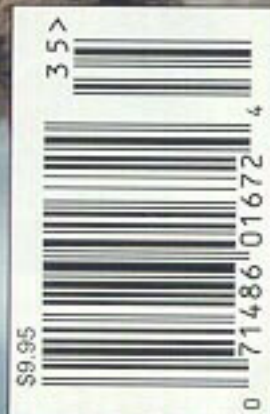
- **FAILPROOF TREESTAND SET-UPS**
- **DEADLY GROUND BLINDS**
- **HOTTEST SCENT PRODUCTS**
- **DEER CAMP MEMORIES**

how to hunt

CATTAIL SLOUGHS WHERE SUPER-BUCKS HIDE!

**BLACK BEAR
CHARGE!**

**Amazing True Story
Of Terror On A Hunt!**



BARREN GROUND BONANZA!

Caribou on the tundra, moose in the forest, the skies filled with birds— what more could a hunter want?

The author poses with his trophy caribou.



Bull caribou were plentiful in Ken Gangler's hunting areas.

Being located nearly 200 miles from the nearest road, the only way to get to Ken Gangler's Canadian Sub-Arctic Hunting Lodge is by air.

By Bill McRae

"Few have seen the cliffs of Baffin or the eskers of the tundra, but we all live cheek by jowl with the wilderness and all of us, I think, feel the empty and awesome presence of the North."

Those words from the book, *"Why We Act Like Canadians"* by Pierre Berton, came to mind as our plane loaded with aspiring caribou hunters winged its way north over the grandly desolate wilds of boreal Manitoba.

When hunting, among the things that fascinate me most is the topography of the land and how it relates to the various species of wildlife. That is, the animals are inextricable parts of the environmental fabric. Imagine, if you can, mountain goats without mountains, pronghorn antelope without prairies, or whitetail deer without brush. Nowhere is this truer than of the caribou, which survive and thrive in the grandly desolate lands of the midnight sun and northern lights.

We were much too high for spotting game, but I got

a grandiose overview of Manitoba's immense northern wilderness. My first impression was that the terrain consisted of at least 50% water. (In reality, rivers and lakes cover nearly one-sixth of Manitoba's total area.) There were few, if any, discernable hills except for strange-looking ridges that meandered aimlessly over the landscape. They resembled overgrown roadways, except that there were no bridges where they intersected rivers. Later I learned that they were the "eskers" of which Pierre Berton had written. They are, in fact, ice-

age relics consisting of long, narrow, winding ridges of stratified sand deposited by subglacial streams and rivers. Eskers range from 20 to 100 feet in height, from 160 to 1,600 feet in width, and a few hundred feet to tens of miles in length.

My hunting companions were Jim Riley, a fishing and hunting consultant for Cabela's Outdoor Adventures (which sponsored my hunt), and Alex Wick, a first-time moose hunter from Des Moines, Iowa. The outfitter was Ken Gangler's Canadian Sub-Arctic Hunting.



Guide David McFadzean backpacking the meat and antlers of my caribou back to camp.

general vicinity, and I was flown to a lakeside caribou camp some 80 miles to the north where I met my guide Dave McFadzean—an affable young man from Winnipeg who guided both fishermen and hunters for Gangler. Except for stunted spruce trees and brush near the water's edges, the ground cover consisted of lichens and mosses growing on thin rocky soil, identifying it as typical sub-arctic tundra or, so called, Barren Grounds.

'Barren' In Name Only!

In the morning, we awoke to the sounds of ptarmigan talking and the melodious honking of snow geese heading south. More important, there were herds of caribou on the horizons. Rather than using a boat to get around, as most of the hunters and guides did, McFadzean and I set out on foot for a narrow isthmus, between two bodies of water, that migrating caribou sometimes used as a thoroughfare.



Bull caribou are plentiful in the water world of Manitoba.

At 9 a.m. a herd of roughly 40 caribou, including cows, calves and about 20 bulls, passed very close to the spot where we had hunkered down behind some bushes. Several of the bulls were keepers, but, with it being so early in the hunt, I decided not to shoot. Later, when drifting air currents betrayed us, another herd of some 50 caribou took to the water and swam about 400 yards across an arm of the lake. They seemed as much at home in the water as on land, and I was amazed by how fast they swam. At times we heard distance gunfire, meaning that others from our camp were getting action. That evening there were several fine caribou racks in camp—the best of which was a magnificent trophy taken by a 20-year-old Manitoba hunter named Clayton Nicolajsen.

The next morning McFadzean and I followed a similar routine, except that, to avoid a chilly 10-mph wind, we took cover in a spruce and brush thicket near the lakeshore about a mile beyond the isthmus. Unlike many types of hunting, where you go looking for game, hunting migrating caribou is mostly a matter of watching and waiting for them to come to you. Though sometimes you must

change your position quickly to intercept them. And, to help avoid unnecessary moves, you need good optics to spot approaching animals and determine whether they are worth intercepting.

My optics included a superb Cabela's Alaskan Guide 8x42 binocular and a Bushnell Stalker 10-30x50 spotting scope. My rifle was a Browning A-bolt, chambered for the .280 Remington and topped by a Cabela's 3.5-10x44 Alaskan Guide riflescope. Other indispensable items were a Bushnell Yardage Pro 1000 laser rangefinder and a Magellan 315 GPS that in such trackless wilderness offers great peace of mind.

A Spectacle of Wildlife

We had no sooner gotten comfortable than six very nice bulls appeared on a ridge about a mile away and started feeding. And, while we were watching them, two bunches of caribou, including some reasonably good bulls, passed within 150 yards of us. Then, as if to prove that this wasn't barren ground, a large flock of snow geese landed on the nearby tundra and began feeding on something, only to be harassed by a raven, which caused them to fly away. Finally, adding to the wildlife cornu-

copia, eight sandhill cranes strode into view and also began feeding.

After about two hours, the six bulls on the distant ridge began quartering to our left, which meant that they would either swim the lake or pass between it and us. The closer they got, the better they looked, which left me wondering which one I should I take? Once they decided to move, the caribou covered ground quickly and were soon in the brush with us where we could no longer study the lower parts of their antlers.

Then one of the bulls spotted us and spooked, causing them to head back toward the lake before exiting the thicket on the far side. We hurried to intercept them, and I got into a kneeling position using my walking stick as an improvised rest. "I'll rely on you to tell me which one is best," I told McFadzean, who was behind me glassing the bulls as they came out and began circling us, at about 100 yards, in typical caribou fashion. (Given the extreme remoteness of the area, these caribou had probably never seen humans before and they were curious.)

"The fourth bull from the front is a real dandy," McFadzean said, "take him!" which I proceeded to do. He was a beautiful bull with good tops, long main beams, extremely long bez points with good palms, and a wide single shovel.

A 'Different' Caribou

Though appropriately excited about the hunt, I was nonetheless a bit apprehensive. The caribou is one of my favorite game animals, and after having hunted them in Alaska and British Columbia, this would be my first experience with the Central Canada barren ground subspecies. As a westerner at heart, I thought, "This can't possibly be as much fun as hunting in the mountains."

When deplaning on a dirt airstrip near Gangler's North Seal River Lodge, I was astounded by the outstanding trophy quality of the more than 20 caribou racks that were awaiting transit out with departing hunters. For that kind of success an outfitter needs an outstanding hunting area, which Gangler has in spades. His hunting area measures 80 by 90 miles (7200 sq. miles), boasts seven river systems and almost a hundred lakes and is nearly 200 miles from the nearest road. In short, it's a sportsman's paradise.

The arriving hunters were divided into reasonably sized parties and taken by floatplanes to various camps. Riley and Wick went to a moose camp in the

Fellow hunter Dean Sandulak with his bow-killed trophy-class caribou.





A honker's-eye view of our hunting camp and the Manitoba tundra.

Several minutes later, while I was posing for the obligatory hunter/trophy photos, another herd of bulls passed directly behind me, enabling McFadzean to get live caribou in the same picture.

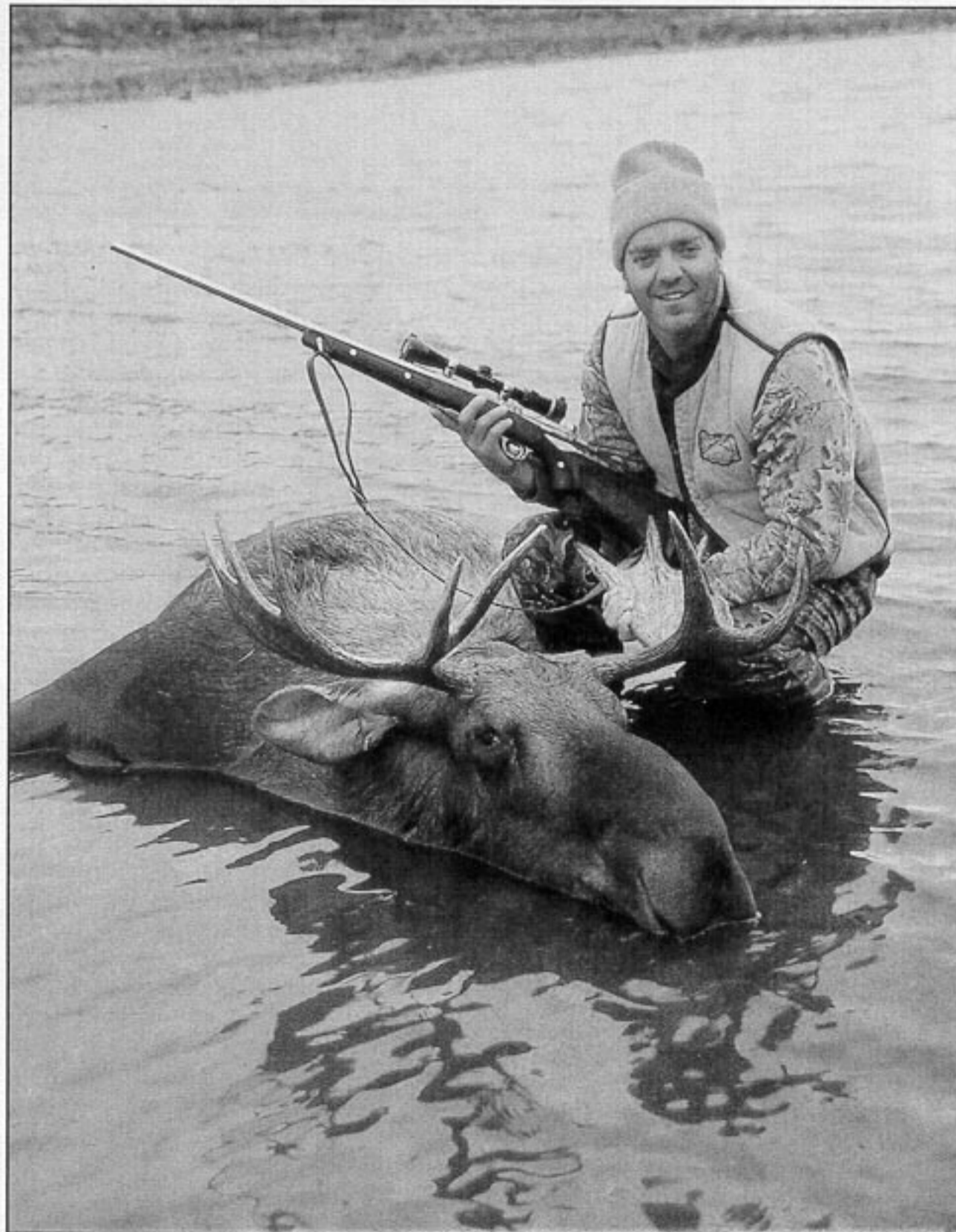
When backpacking the caribou back to camp we encountered fellow-hunter Dean Sandulak (Manitoba Outfitter on a postman's holiday) who was carrying the meat and antlers from a bow-killed caribou that would, no doubt, rank well in the Pope and Young record book. Though I had never voiced my earlier misgivings to anyone, I now admitted to myself that caribou hunting in this wonderland of water and tundra was every bit as exciting as hunting them in the mountainous terrain of Western Canada and Alaska.

Moose Country

That evening, with the sun sinking in the west, McFadzean and I boarded a float-equipped Cessna 185 and flew 75 miles south where Jim Riley, Alex Wick and their guide Larry Henton were hunting moose. "I still haven't seen a moose," Wick said dejectedly, "but the fishing here is fantastic." Judging from the delicious pike and lake trout fillets that Henton prepared for dinner, the fish were also great eating.

This lakeshore camp consisted of permanent wooden-frame buildings, including a very welcome hot shower. Besides the ubiquitous rivers and lakes, the habitat consisted of homogenous spruce and birch forests transected by

Alex Wick poses with his moose where it fell in the water a few feet from dry land.



sand and gravel eskers, which made hunting easier by serving as elevated walkways and vantage points. I had a moose license, but, having taken excellent specimens of both the Alaska-Yukon and Canada subspecies, I was far more interested in helping Alex Wick get his first moose than in taking one myself.

Two days later we located a young bull tending a cow on a small island about 15 miles uplake from camp. The island, which was roughly 300 yards long and 150 yards wide, was separated from the mainland by a narrow channel. Our first challenge was getting onto it without spooking the moose, which we did with commando-like stealth by first rowing and then donning hip boots and towing the boat through shallow water at one end of the island.

Figuring that the bull and cow would head for the mainland, Wick took a stand next to some very thick willows where he could cover the entire channel. I remained within sight of him near the

end of the island to cover that escape route, and the others circled around to the back of the island in an attempt to push the moose toward Wick. Within five minutes the bull came crashing down off a higher spruce-covered part of the island and into an area of tick willows between Wick and me. It sounded as if he would come out of the willows right on top of me, but, instead, he stopped where neither of us could see him. Moments later a very large cow crossed the beach about 75 yards from Wick and swam across the channel. Not wanting the bull to come out my way, I nervously moved into the willow in an effort to drive him toward Wick. After going about ten yards I heard the bull crashing away followed by the sound of two shots from Wick's Ruger M77, .300 Winchester Magnum rifle. I hurried back to the beach where I saw the bull lunging toward the mainland showing obvious signs of having been hit. Then, as the bull reached shallow water and was struggling to climb out, Wick fired again, dropping him in the water.

"Damn!" I said, thinking about how difficult it would be to butcher the moose in the frigid lake water. The alternative would have been to let the bull get into the forest, where, if he hadn't been fatally wounded, he might have traveled for miles. As it was the first two shots had gone through both lungs, meaning that he couldn't have gone far. The bull had a 36-inch spread and was probably about 3 1/2 years old.

Our final tribulation came when the motor on one of our boats quit as a result of hitting a submerged rock in hair-raisingly rough water, and we had to tow it back to camp. As outdoor adventures go, this Manitoba hunt was a humdinger. •

The bull in this photo is similar in size to the one taken by Alex Wick.



PLANNING A HUNT

A prerequisite to a successful and safe wilderness hunt is being well equipped, and, if you don't already have everything that's needed, there is no better place to look than Cabela's. The only quid pro quo regarding my hunt was that I would help them field test some Cabela's brand products, such as clothing and hunting and fishing gear, which I can honestly say performed wonderfully well. Trip planning contacts include:

Cabela's Outdoor Adventures, One Cabela Dr., Sidney, NE 69160; (800) 237-4444 or www.cabelas.com.

Canadian Sub-Arctic Hunting, 4020 N. Candlewood Dr., Beverly Hills, FL 34465; (352) 527-2318 or www.cansubarc.com.

Manitoba Department of Natural Resources, Box 24, 200 Saulteaux Crescent, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3J 3W3; (800) 214-6497.