



The author with his Yukon moose.

By Mike Axelrad

Hunting with The "Duck"

It was with great anticipation that I climbed out of the Super Cub at Bonnett Plume Outfitter's Head of the Wind camp in the Yukon Territories, Canada. I had waited for a moose hunt for many years and now, here I was, ready to hunt a majestic Yukon moose. I had traveled from Houston to Seattle, to Vancouver, to Whitehorse, to Mayo, to Bonnett Plume's base camp, and finally to camp. It takes longer to get to camp here than it does to get to camp in Africa. With all that flying, and time to think, I developed quite an expectation. I pictured some old grizzled Yukon hunter meeting me as I got off the plane. Hugh was the first person I saw. Hugh, however, was the cook and wrangler. Ben Loewen, aka "Duck" (nicknamed for reasons that were never really explained with any particularity) appeared next. I was shocked when he was introduced as my guide. He did not look a day over 13.

We quickly unloaded the plane (doesn't take long with a Super Cub) and Chris McKinnon, who owns Bonnett Plume, wheeled the plane around, headed down the gravel bar, into the stream, and up into the air to continue shuttling the hunters to their respective camps. We carried the gear to our cabin and settled in for a 10-day moose and mountain caribou hunt.

After the pleasantries were dispensed with, we mounted up and headed out in order for me to get a sense of the area we would hunt. After about an hour of riding, it was apparent that bad weather was rapidly approaching and so we headed back to our cabin. That evening, we went from blue bird weather to socked-in blizzard for three full days. During this period of intense cribbage, hearts, and spades, I was able to discern that Duck was an experienced and able guide. His ease around the horses and his general knowledge were impressive, given his youthful appearance.

On the fourth day, the weather was marginally better and we decided to head up the valley to the Continental Divide to see what game we could spot. We had been in the saddle for about four hours and were soaking wet and decided to stop, build a fire and warm up a bit. About 30 minutes later the weather broke into a picture book setting. The juxtaposition of the fresh snow against the blue sky was spectacular to behold.

We climbed up on an outcrop to survey miles and miles of the valley. I was preoccupied with glassing low in the valley, somehow thinking from all my preparation that the moose would be in the valley. Duck noticed this, chuckled and explained that at

this point in the season, the moose had already assembled their harems and moved them to high ground to keep them from other bulls. Any bulls wishing to make a challenge would have to do it by heading uphill.

As we sat on the outcropping, I noticed a group of moose high on a mountainside across the valley from us about 2 miles away. Duck put the spotting scope on them and determined that this was a bull that needed closer attention because he had two droptines. We carefully rode to the base of the "hill," as Duck put it. The horses were tied up and we headed uphill through the red willow that was about shoulder height. We had climbed for about 30 minutes when we could see the bull's rack about 50 yards ahead. Between us and the bull stood a small calf. The calf winded us and the herd bolted down the hill. My final vision of

ever shot that did not require any posing for the pictures.

Walking up to your first moose is incredible. To say that they are large is akin to calling Godzilla a mere lizard. They are enormous and this one was no exception. His maximum width was 65 inches and his paddles are more than 45 inches long. He has two perfectly matching droptines and he missed making the book by 2 inches. Three days later, we had all of him back at camp. When we weren't hauling meat, cape, and horns, Duck was flensing the cape, turning the ears and nose. He worked tirelessly and with great humor. On the evening that we finished with the moose, another guide (who had closed the nearest camp) Leland Gilberg and his wrangler came into camp. He was the guide who taught Duck. We had a great evening eating chicken-fried moose and cream gravy (I thought these

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him was about a 10-second pause on his part about 175 yards away. He was magnificent to look at.

This is the point of the hunt where guides are worth their salt. Duck was positive and excited and indicated that we would come back first thing in the morning and get this bull. I had my doubts. My doubts were rewarded the next day when I awoke to low clouds that would impede our ability to see up the hill.

Duck, however, was confident and assembled the horses and mules and off we went. It was our plan to set up on a small hill that was separated from where we were hunting the night before by a deep ravine. As we rode up to the knoll, we hopped off our mounts with our attention directed towards the spot we saw the bull the night before. I was tying off my mule when I glanced up the hill that we were on and saw a bull moose. I motioned to Duck and once I had his attention, whispered to him that a moose was up the hill. He took one look at him and said that it was not just a bull moose, it was MY bull moose.

I quickly took my rifle, chambered in .375, out of the scabbard and cranked up the magnification of my 1.5-5X scope. I never had any idea I would be long-distance shooting for moose. Duck informed me that the shot was 325 yards. The bull was enamored with our horses so there was plenty of time to find a good gun rest (using a fir tree like a pair of shooting sticks).

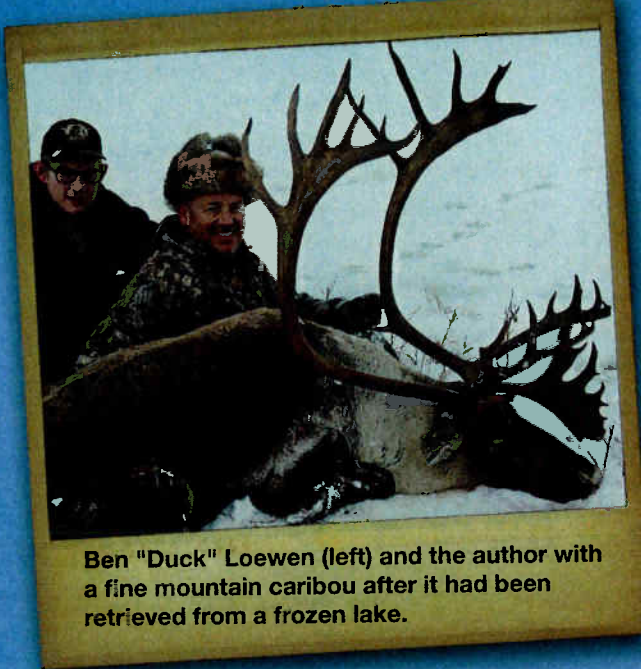
I squeezed off the first shot and the bull lunged forward about two steps. He turned around and I hit him in the shoulder from the opposite side. He stood there while I put another 300-grain cartridge into the chamber and touched it off. With that, the bull collapsed brisket first. It was one of the few animals I have

boys needed to learn how to really eat.) We made plans to hunt mountain caribou the next day and went to bed.

It was a treat to watch two great friends hunt together for your benefit. We spotted the caribou at about a mile away and followed them around the base of the mountains as they made their way to the valley. After about 6 hours of trailing them, we finally located them in the valley. We piled off the horses and made our way through the frozen muskeg (swamp) to get into position. We stalked for about an hour to get into position and finally got to what we thought was 300 yards. As I squeezed off the first shot, the caribou froze. I figured I had mortally hit him, but shot again to make certain. Nothing. We had been ever so vigilant to be stealthy in our stalk and these caribou did not budge after either of the shots. Leland came up and excitedly



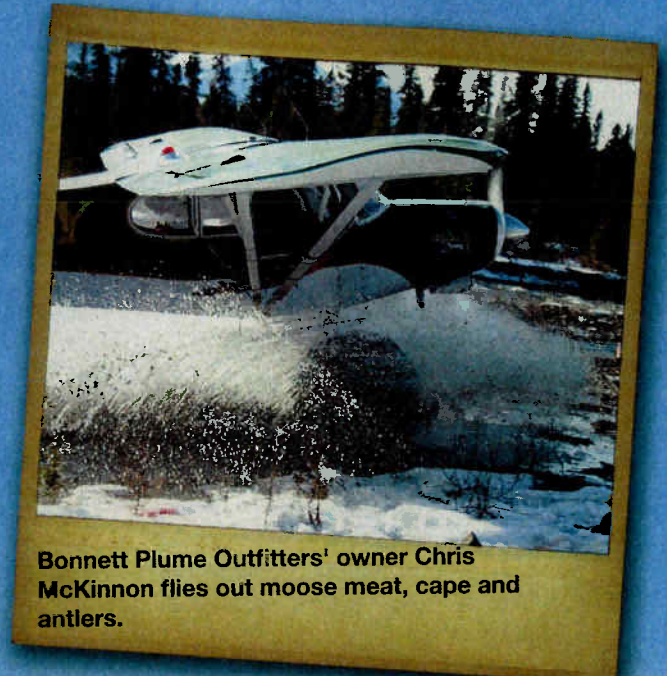
Head of the Wind camp located about 2 miles west of the Continental Divide.



Ben "Duck" Loewen (left) and the author with a fine mountain caribou after it had been retrieved from a frozen lake.

the next day and rode to the next camp (about 6 hours) where Chris would pick me up.

It was a glorious day and the last I would see of Duck. I had planned on going bear hunting with Duck in Alberta, but was informed to my sadness that Duck had suffered a horrendous crash on his horse in Alberta the spring after our Yukon adventure. Duck has progressed in his convalescence and intends to guide again. I plan to be there with him as soon as he gets back into the swing of it. *by*



Bonnett Plume Outfitters' owner Chris McKinnon flies out moose meat, cape and antlers.

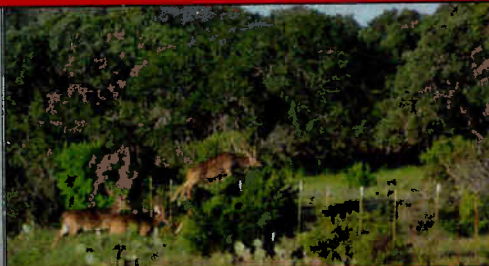
(nice phrase) told us that we had missed. He ranged the animals at 400 yards and I made the adjustment and touched off the shot. The caribou was hit and walked out onto the frozen lake. Two shots later, the caribou was ours.

Now the fun began as Duck had to lie on his belly to go out on the lake because as the two of us walked out, we could hear the ice cracking. He got a rope on the bull and skied back on his belly. Duck and Leland made quick work of the caribou and we sang the entire way back to camp. We closed up the camp

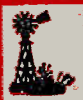
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