

LOOSE MOOSE



PTARMIGAN CREEK

By Keith Clemmons

Two Record Trophies, A Flood And A Disguised Grizzly Spark This Episode!

THE small red Super Cub settled to meet the on-rushing patch of gravel our pilot jokingly called an airstrip. The tires made contact long before touching solid ground, as they slashed into tall grass and weeds browned by early frosts. We ground to a bumpy halt and I stepped out, glad to be free of the cramped quarters of the Cub.

It was evident Jack Frost had been here before us, leaving a trail of color that can only be found in the Far North during the fall of the year. The aspen, willow and birch were ablaze in cloaks of gold and yellow sprinkled with flashes of red. The smaller bushes and plants such as Alpine bearberry contributed their sharp reds to the spectacle of the Alaskan tundra.

This was Ptarmigan Creek in the Alaska mountain range, deep in the interior of Alaska and the site of our next ten days of hunting. It was phase two of a twenty-day hunt Ron Miller and I had planned months ago. We were being transferred from our high mountain camp, twelve air miles away, to an area where I hoped to arrow a trophy moose, caribou or grizzly. Ron was looking for a grizzly and would use a rifle during this part of the hunt.

We had been in the brush two weeks and had successfully taken Dall sheep in the high country on the slopes of Mount Hayes, a 14,000 foot peak of solid rock, ice and snow. My ram was taken with a bow. Ron resorted to a rifle after a number of unsuccessful but magnificent and difficult attempts with his bow. He was working against time, as he had to leave Alaska shortly after our hunt.

Ptarmigan Creek always has been a productive area for bowhunters and I was looking forward to the next ten days. The current Pope and Young world record caribou was taken from this camp by Bill Brown of Seattle, Washington. Bob Lee, owner of Wing Archery Company, took two beautiful caribou bulls which measured over four hundred points each. In the same year two moose were taken that carried antlers measuring sixty and seventy inches. Ptarmigan Creek is good game country. It's a migration crossing for caribou and a rutting area for moose with some grizzlies thrown in.

The Cub returned with Ron and the balance of our equipment. By the time the camp was secure, it was nearly noon. Ron grabbed the water bucket but was

Author can still offer a weary smile as he poses with his trophy moose taken in the midst of a hectic hunt.

back in minutes looking for my ultra-light spinning rod. He had spotted some Arctic grayling lingering in the clear stream and would catch a few for our meal.

I mixed hotcake batter, made coffee, sliced bacon and peeled potatoes. On my way to dump the peelings I located some blueberries. The coffee was starting to perk when Ron returned with six eating-size grayling. In a few minutes we were enjoying a meal fit for a king: canned fruit segments chilled in a mountain stream, blueberry hotcakes, crispy fried grayling with bacon strips, hash browned potatoes and scalding coffee.

When I awoke from my apres lunch nap, it was after four. Ron was gone, and it was quiet except for a slight breeze whispering through the spruce. I gathered my gear and a handful of rubber blunts, in case I was attacked by an irate grouse or rabid rabbit, and headed upstream toward the mountains.

I had been hunting for an hour or so and climbed to the crest of a hill and sat down to look. A beautiful and serene sight unfolded before me — the rugged Alaska range loftily pushing snow capped peaks into the crisp arctic sky, while below on the slopes stood

silent belts of black spruce highlighted with a sprinkling of golden birch and aspen. In the valley, surrounding the gray glacier streams, stood groves of willows dressed in fall garb. They glowed yellow, red and orange. The late afternoon sun cast shafts of light across this panorama as it dodged between the craggy peaks, playing hide-and-seek. With only the rustle of the wind across the tundra, I was alone in paradise.

Returning to camp, my reverie was interrupted by a movement in the willows near the river. Trotting toward me was a young caribou traveling as though he had no place to go and plenty of time to get there. I spotted a fallen spruce near the river and stepped off the trail to wait. The windfall would give me cover and a better shooting position. If the caribou continued his present course he would pass within a few yards. Just when he reached a decent bow range he shifted his direction slightly and disappeared behind a high dirt bank. I left the windfall, approached the edge of the bank and discovered the animal directly below me at about ten yards. When I drew back to shoot, I realized that if I shot low, the arrow would hit the bank. If I shot as little as six inches high, the arrow would clear the caribou's back. I couldn't change position as the caribou was too close and there was no cover left.

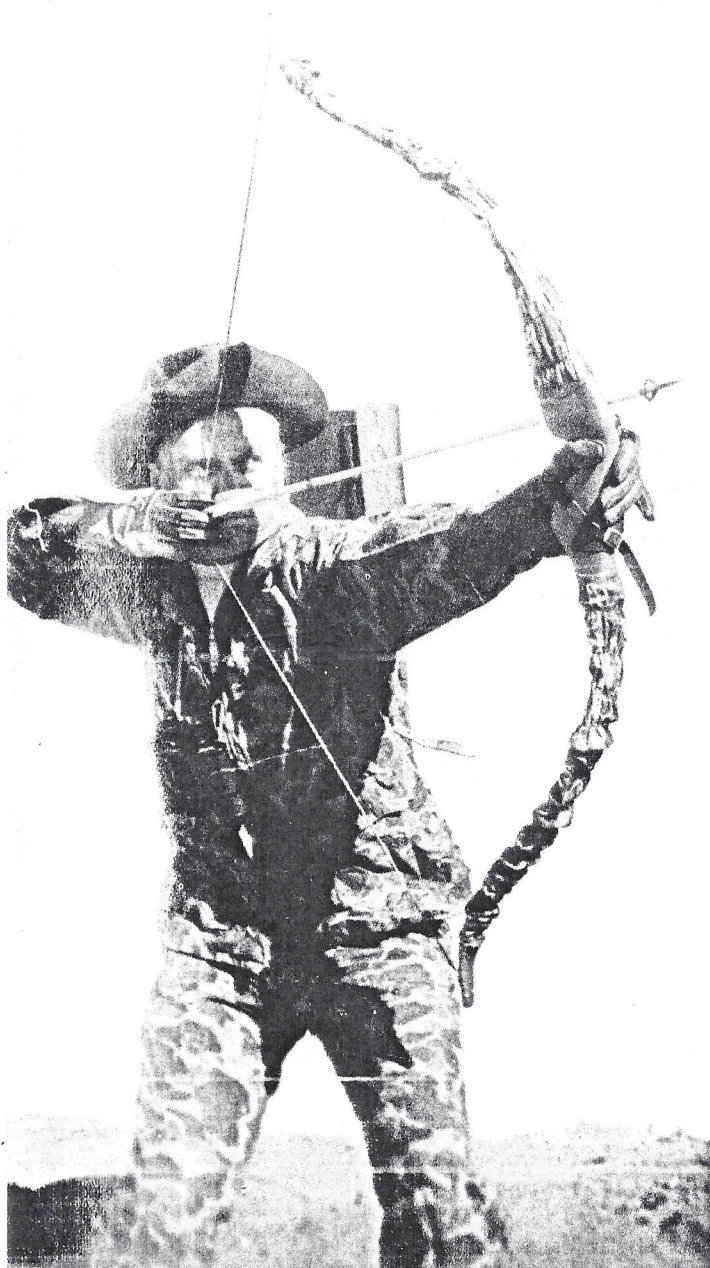
The bow twanged, I heard a loud crack and sparks flew as the arrow ricocheted off the bank. The caribou bolted, ran back along the bank for about thirty-five yards and stopped. The second arrow caught him squarely in the neck and he dropped like a ton of bricks. In all my years of hunting I never have seen an animal drop as quickly as this one. The caribou was a two-year-old cow with small horns but very fat and, as we learned later, excellent eating.

Morning broke clear and cold with a heavy frost covering the bushes and ground. We set up the spotting scope, scanned the hills for game, and in minutes spotted three large moose, several caribou and two grizzlies digging out a ground squirrel. The animals were scattered over a large area but at least we knew game was about and reasonably abundant.

A short distance from the end of the airstrip but across a raging river was a mineral lick visited by every animal passing through the area. We checked the lick and found a fairly good caribou. The river is too deep and fast to wade, but I discovered earlier when animals are spooked off the lick they take definite travel patterns. I intended to cash in on this knowledge.

Ron, who agreed to spook the beast, waited fifteen minutes and started yelling. My hiding spot wasn't very good and I had practically no cover, but it was too late. The caribou must have thought a wild man was after him and began crossing the river. He was coming fast and, if he didn't change direction, would pass within bow range of my lair.

Years of wearing camo clothing have taught me to be careful. The animals can't see you unless you move. The caribou was close now. If he didn't veer, he would run over me. When he was a few feet away, I raised to shoot. His eyes bulged until I thought they would explode. He reared on his hind legs, in an effort to halt his forward motion and threw rocks and dirt all over me as he tried to get away. I was at full draw trying



Clemmons believes in the value of camouflage for this type of hunting, but was nearly run down by a moose that failed to see him until it was almost on top of him.

to find a spot to hit, but all I could see was flying feet, bulging eyes and a wild caribou desperately trying to avoid contact with this strange enemy. The situation struck me as being fantastically humorous and I burst out laughing. When I released the arrow I might as well have been shooting at the moon. He composed himself in about fifty yards and stopped to look back, but I was laughing too hard to try again. He stared at me a few seconds, decided not to press his luck and trotted off. I missed getting a fine trophy, but I chuckle every time I think of him and the frantic fear in his eyes when I popped up in front of him.

We spent the remainder of the day and several days to come looking for good heads but they weren't to be had.

One afternoon I was returning to camp. Rounding one of the stream's many crooks and turns, I spotted a huge grizzly busily picking blueberries. My heart skipped a beat when I put the glasses on him and saw how big he was.

I am familiar with the killing power of the arrow but I know it often takes a few seconds to work. I am also aware of the speed and strength of a full-grown

grizzly. The bear wasn't in a good location for a bow-hunter. He was in the middle of a huge clearing that offered little cover for a stalk and no protection in case he charged. I had no back up and suddenly lost my desire for a grizzly rug.

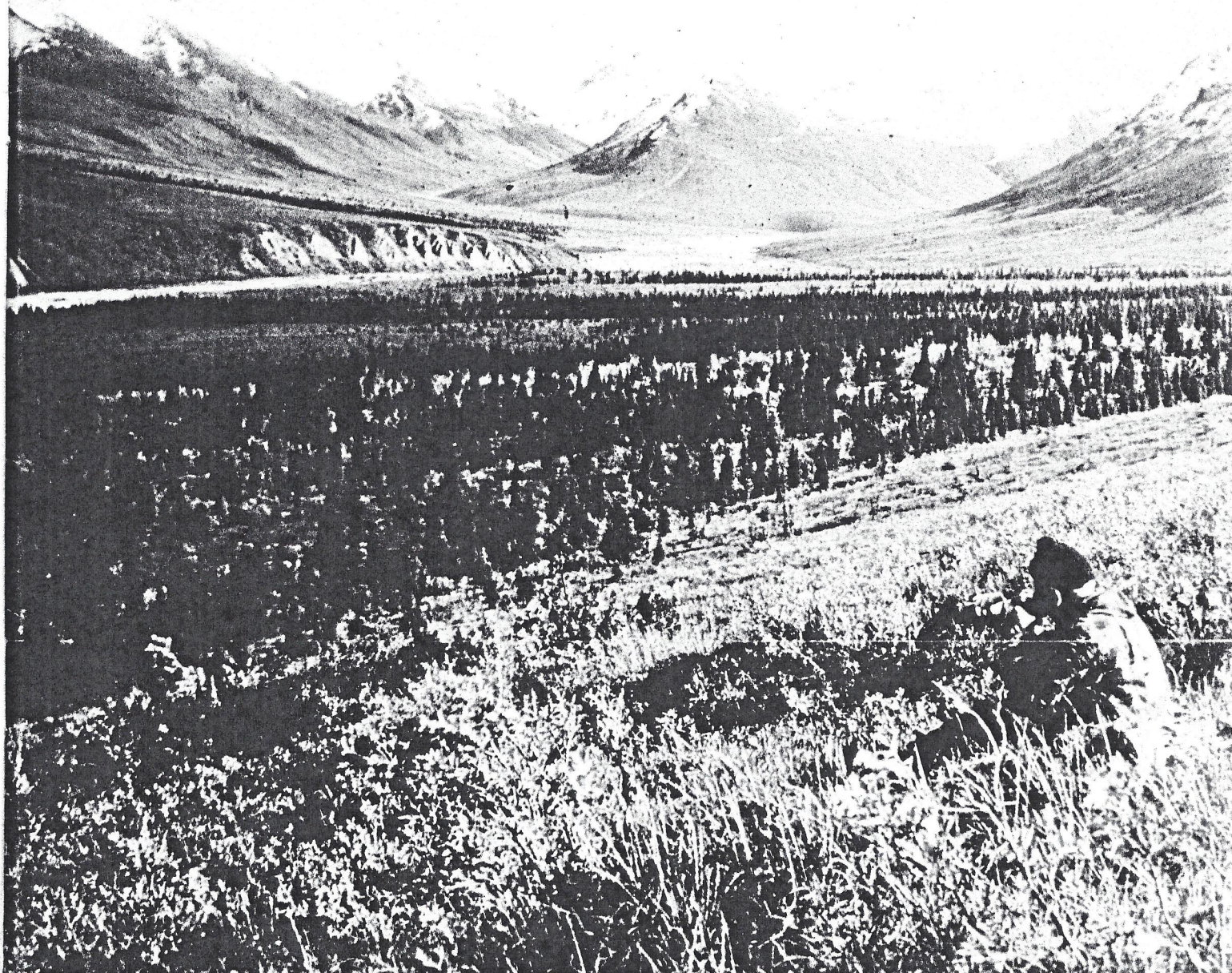
Hunting dangerous animals with a bow is acceptable provided you have proper protection and are covered in case a wounded animal gets aggressive.

One morning Ron was looking through the spotting scope and advised that three bull moose were browsing on a low ridge just above camp. I would circle the ridge and come up from behind while Ron positioned himself in the clearing at the foot of the hills.

An hour later I topped the ridge to receive a blast of wind and rain in my face. It wasn't good bowhunting weather. However, I had come this far and decided to go on. Another two hundred yards put me in position where I should be able to see the moose. They weren't in sight. I had good cover and moved along the ridge, carefully searching each ravine and clump of bushes. I was beginning to think they had gone when I heard an Army helicopter coming up the valley.

When the chopper was overhead, a large bull raised

Typical of the Alaskan terrain in which trophy animals of several species can be found is this wooded valley.



from his bed in the thick brush. We spotted each other at the same instant. I froze, hoping he wouldn't run, and we stared at each other. The chopper left and the moose started nibbling at a succulent bush. When he turned to search for more snacks I drew to shoot.

The sixty-five pound Kodiak twanged and the Ra-zorhead was on its way. At the noise of the bow the moose whirled and faced me. The arrow passed harm-lessly along his side and buried itself in the moss. He bobbed and disappeared over the ridge with me in hot pursuit. When I reached over the edge of the slope, moose were going in all directions. They had been lying down just under the top of the ridge. I spotted my bull run-ning across the slope at about eighty yards and quick-ly released an arrow which dropped far behind him. "You gotta lead 'em," I thought as I nocked another arrow. This time I put the point on his nose, swung six feet in front of him and let fly. The arrow leaped from the bow and arched high, dropping to bury itself in the slab side of the moose. He was running in heavy brush and I couldn't determine the exact location of the hit. The arrow looked a little too high to be deadly. It seems I had hit him high in the hump, an excellent spot for a bullet not for an arrow. The bull headed to-ward the river and the heavy cover of the willows.

Ron said the moose passed him doing March 2. He marked the spot where the moose disappeared and we proceeded after the animal. When we arrived at the river, blood was apparent in large quantities on the ground and bushes.

Ron said he would go down river and locate a clearing where he could watch for the moose. I planned to follow the blood trail. I waited fifteen minutes to allow Ron time to get into position and quietly moved into the willows. In a matter of seconds I spotted a movement. The moose had been standing within a few yards of us watching his back trail. The brush was too thick for a clear shot, so I waited to see what the moose was going to do.

He was in trouble and having difficulty holding his head erect. He stood motionless for a moment and with-out warning, charged. I was astounded and caught flat-footed. I had close to a ton of mad moose bearing down on me and only yards away. Fire seemed to be coming out of his eyes. His horns snapped limbs as big as a wrist, as he threw his head about and raged. I didn't know if he was bluffing or had designs on my little pink body. Not being one known to stand on cere-mony, I ran like hell.

He tired quickly and didn't pursue me very far. He went back to his retreat near the river. I waited a few minutes to regain my breath and recover from the surprise of his aggressive action. I realized how care-less I had been.

Returning to the willows I moved more cautiously. It took several minutes to find him again. I made a circle traveling away from the place of our encounter and located him standing in a small clearing. He was too far away for a good shot. I eased up to the edge of the clearing until I had closed the gap to forty yards. When the bow twanged he turned his head toward the noise, but it was too late. The bright pink fletches glowed momentarily against his black side and disap-peared into the rib cage. At first the arrow didn't seem to bother him. He took a few steps towards the river then collapsed in a thick grove of aspen.

I waited, smoked a cigarette, and approached the grove. He didn't move when I jabbed him with my bow, and I thought he was done for. I started to lay down my bow when I saw him-blink. I jumped back, and the

moose tried to stand. When the arrow hit I heard a dull "thunk" and he dropped back to the ground. Later I found the arrow had completely penetrated the spinal cord.

It was all over, and I was relieved. I hate the thought of losing a wounded animal. I feel a hunter is morally obligated to follow and finish an animal no matter how dangerous it might be, or else don't draw in the first place.

The moose turned out to be a bull with fifty-seven-inch antlers, still in velvet. I have a feeling of awe and sadness when I do in a large bull. They are the most magnificent animals in North America and are so big and ugly they have a sense of stateliness about them.

There is a saying in Alaska, "When you pull the trigger on a moose the fun is over." This animal was wedged in the damndest tangle of brush. It took the re-mainder of the day to butcher and pack the bull to camp. Each of us made five trips.

Later, approaching the area where I had killed the moose, Ron thought he had better check the remains pile to see if a bear had been working the area. As he neared the spot, he could see a bear had been there and had consumed most of the viscera. He noticed the moose hide had been pulled off into the brush about twenty yards away. He told me later he was standing there thinking about the bear, contemplating his next move, when he noticed the moose hide was breathing. It turned out to be a sleeping grizzly.

He couldn't determine which end was which so he fired at the center of the pile. The bear let out a loud roar and jumped to his feet. Ron shot again knocking the bear down only to have him get right back up. He was shooting a .30-06 Remington 760 which he had loaded with five rounds of ammunition. When he



Ron Miller, hunting with a rifle after failure with bow, took this grizzly on last day of hunt at fifteen paces.

chambered his fifth and last round, he said he was be-coming a little concerned. The brush was thick and the bear, as he found out later, was fifteen paces away. With the bear thrashing around in the thick brush, Ron was having difficulty in determining a killing spot. On the fifth shot the bear dropped for good. He was truly a fine trophy.

Several hours later I glanced at my watch. It was exactly midnight. I noticed the ground in front of the tent was white. I called to Ron to bring the flashlight. We discovered the white ground was glacier water. We were being flooded. We hurried back into the tents and gathered our more valuable belongings such as cam-eras, food, sleeping bags and clothing. The camp was located more or less on a point with Hayes Creek to our immediate south, Delta River to the east and Ptarmigan Creek to the north. Our only possible escape lay to the west, toward the mountains. We head-ered in that direction. Soon we were cut off and sur-rounded by raging rivers and rising water. We had little choice but to work our way back to camp and hope the water didn't rise much higher. When we ar-rived I took the flashlight and waded toward the air-strip. There was a slight rise in the center of the run-way, none of us noticed before. We gathered our be-longings and worked our way toward the island.

When we reached the island we were shaking vio-lently from the cold. Our legs felt like stumps and it was difficult to stay on our feet. We found we had a dry spot about twenty-five yards wide, fifty yards long and shrinking. It was one memorable night we spent on that tiny desolate piece of ground. We checked the water level like every two minutes, until it started to recede. Suddenly we were very tired and crawled into our sleeping bags for some much needed rest.

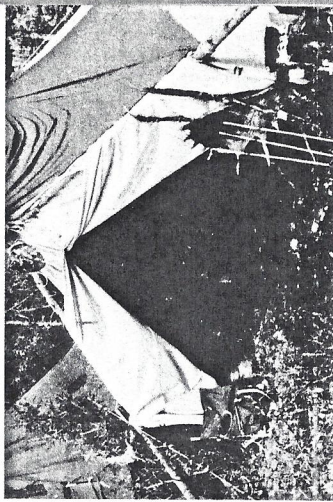
In the early hours of the morning I was aroused by a strange sound. Looking around, much to my surprise, I discovered we were surrounded by a large herd of caribou. Several of the animals were standing within a few feet, studying us. I tried to reach my camera case but it was several feet away. I tried to rouse Ron but he wouldn't wake up. The caribou milled around mak-ing strange grunting sounds, as though carrying on a conversation with each other. One inquisitive young bull approached my sleeping bag and sniffed curiously. I could see nearly fifty animals and there were more in the willows. One sudden move on my part might have stampeded the entire herd and we could be trampled where we lay. There were several nice heads in the herd, but I couldn't get my bow without scaring the whole bunch. The herd grazed around us for nearly an hour and finally moved on.

I heard a plane coming up the valley and saw that it was Dick McIntyre of the Frontier Flying Service. As he approached I could see he was going to make a normal landing and I frantically waved him off. When he passed over I signaled him to land where I was standing. The next time around was better, but he was still a little short when the wheels touched down. Mud flew in all directions and the plane nosed forward but Dick kept it under control and rolled to a safe landing.

There were only one hundred and fifty paces of usable runway left. This meant he would have to take a number of flights, lightly loaded, to get us out. I marveled at the performance of the little Cub and was thankful we had the experience of the man driving it.

It took five trips to get the meat, Ron and me back to Fairbanks. We didn't salvage much in camp equip-ment. Most of it was gone or saturated with glacier mud. The runway at Fairbanks International looked good when it came in sight.

As I look back now I can't help but marvel at this strange and exciting hunt. We planned it at fifty be-low zero. In one hunt I took three animals with a bow, two of which made the Pope-Young Record Book. Ron took two rare and highly prized trophies on what was to be his last hunt in Alaska. We lost nearly everything and our lives in a last minute disaster. One thing you can say about Alaska hunting — it is never boring or uneventful. ●



The cook tent at the Ptarmigan Creek camp site looked like this shortly before rising water inundated the whole area.



Clem with first recorded Pope and Young Club Book Alaska Moose.