

by Andrew McKean



THE FIRST FRONTIER

HUNTING MUSK OX AND CARIBOU ON THE SCoured ROCK AND ICE OF GREENLAND REQUIRES A KNOWLEDGEABLE GUIDE AND A GOOD BOAT • PHOTOGRAPHS BY LUKE RENARD

Successful caribou hunters return from the uplands to their guide's boat.

THE MUSK OX LOOKS LIKE HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN CHISELED OUT OF THE VEINED ROCK OF THIS FJORD. THE ONLY MOVEMENT IS HIS COAT, A TANGLE OF TAWNY DREADLOCKS THAT

ripples and waves in the stiff wind. Then his head slowly pans, following the passage of our little boat through the electric-blue water.

We've apparently gotten too close for his comfort, because as we motor within rifle range of the bull, he breaks his gaze and trots parallel to the shore, a goofy hoof-flailing canter as he gathers the cows around him in a defensive circle. They all stand, rumps together and a dozen shaggy heads forming a perimeter of hooking horns and watchful bovine eyes.

Frank Feldmann cuts the boat's throttle and peers through his binocular.

"He's a young bull," Feldmann says. His Scandinavian accent sharpens the first word into "Heeze."

"You see how his boss is a little weak and his horns don't drop down. We can do better."

Then we're off, motoring

to the very back of this bay, where the towering headwall of a glacier fractures into a field of house-size boulders and a snowmelt stream that threads its way to the bay. We're still a mile from a grassy bench between water and ice, but already I can make out maybe a hundred musk oxen grazing in herds of a dozen or so. And I can see how we can ambush them by following the stream. Feldmann notices my gaze.

"We'll work in on the biggest bunch and look for an old bull," he says. "There are a couple in this valley, 8-year-olds, maybe 9-year-olds."

Maybe Feldmann also notices my slight disappointment. When my buddies Rafe Nielsen, who runs the marketing department for Browning firearms, Shane Meisel of Leupold optics, and I planned this hunt

a couple of years ago, I had imagined that we'd make the final stalk for musk oxen on snowshoes or wobbly skis—or maybe on a dog sled, mushing across treacherous sea ice. I never imagined we'd troll into range on the power of a 300 hp diesel inboard.

We aren't done with boats just yet. As Feldmann unstraps an inflatable kayak from the gunwale of his 26-foot motorboat, I think back on all of the conveyances that delivered me to this place, a deep, narrow fjord stabbing into Greenland's southwestern coastline. Two days earlier, commercial flights took our hunting party from the United States to Copenhagen, Denmark, the imperial capital of Greenland, which is considered an autonomous province. Then another jet back west across the North Atlantic to Greenland's international airport, the stepping-off outpost of Kangerlussuaq. Then a prop plane to the village of Narsarsuaq, where we boarded a 10-seat cabin cruiser locals call a "water taxi" for the five-hour boat ride to camp. Our fellow travelers on the water taxi are Danish soldiers headed to a decommissioned American military base to conduct environmental testing at the World War II-era facility. Feldmann's boat, and finally this flimsy kayak, deliver us to the rocky shore of Greenland and the musk oxen that don't care about our long, circuitous approach.

I'd love to tell you the final stalk was full of

drama and doubt, but once we find a bull worth our attention, we set up on a ridge and wait for him to separate from the cows. I'm worried about a stiff crosswind sailing my bullet, but the bull's hair is so luxuriously long that it serves as a wind flag. I make the windage correction, dial my scope to the distance, and send the bullet.

The whole hunt takes maybe a half-hour, and I'm neither wet nor cold when it's over. Meisel's hunt follows in much the same way. The next day, Nielsen is treated to a little more suspense when he has to make a mile-long stalk on an old and solitary bull feeding in the most profuse vegetation I saw on Greenland—a thicket of waist-high willows stunted by what might have been a thousand winters. The way the bull moves through the cover, head down and heaving from side to side, reminds me of a honey-haired grizzly scrounging for berries.

In each of these hunts, the anticlimax of the stalk is tempered by awe at the animal's anatomy. Above the impressively broad shoulders is a hump resembling that of a Plains bison, but the hair of a musk ox is more like a mountain goat's, long and corded, with a woolly underlayer to insulate it from the arctic cold. The hooves are splayed like a cow's, but the horns look like those of Cape

buffalo, with thick battering helmets that drop into graceful hooks with ivory tips. Their meat is sweet and mild, not heavy like beef.

Native Inuits call musk oxen "the bearded ones," and while they look like modern mastodons, they're more closely related to wild

WE'RE STILL A MILE FROM A GRASSY BENCH, BUT ALREADY I CAN MAKE OUT MAYBE A HUNDRED MUSK OXEN GRAZING IN HERDS.

sheep and goats than to cattle, or to mammoths. After posing for photos with each of our bulls, I find myself lingering beside the dead animal, my hands burrowing deep in the warming wool.

The herds we hunt are transplants, brought to southern Greenland from the northern part of the is-

land 40 years ago to provide meat for local Inuit villagers. Feldmann, a native Dane who had guided hunts in Lapland for decades, recognized that Greenland's musk oxen could also sustain a sport-hunting economy, and gained permission from the provincial government to guide international hunters, mainly bowhunters. He has since acquired an additional hunting concession farther north, where transportation is by helicopter instead of boat—and, he says, the bulls are a little older and a lot bigger.

AN ELEMENTAL LAND

If you imagine Greenland, as I did, as one continental-size sheet of ice, you're not far off. The world's largest island is depicted on maps as uniformly white for a good reason. Something like 90 percent of it is covered by an ice cap a thousand feet



Clockwise from upper left: A musk ox bull squares off with an approaching hunter; caribou hunters Shane Meisel, the author, and Rafe Nielsen take a break from packing heads and horns from the highlands down to the bay and the outfitter's waiting boat; the Greenlandic town of Narsarsuaq.

thick, which is why I anticipated hunting in arctic conditions. Where the ice meets the edge of the island, towering glacial headwalls calve icebergs into the bays, requiring boats to dodge and dart around the floating obstacles, some of them as shockingly blue as anti-freeze, some as big as Kentucky courthouses.

But the coasts, especially along the southern shore where we are hunting, are surprisingly hospitable, with anywhere from a mile to a dozen miles of ice-free vegetation squeezed by the North Atlantic and the ice cap. The coastline is where humans live, in little clusters of brightly colored houses clinging to slopes above bays that are iced over for half the year. It's where Feldmann's cabin is located, on a little jut of granite that he found by studying satellite photos for a year, identifying a place protected from the wind and the waves but with easy access to the bay. He doesn't own the land—no one in Greenland really does—but the cabin is his as long as he uses it. When he's gone, it's a refuge for a boater blown off the water or for a hunter lost and alone.

It's a comfortable base for a weeklong hunt, a hard-sided cabin with a gas stove, bunk beds, and a break-water moorage for the boat that took us to hunting spots along the coast.

Feldmann likes hunting where we are because it's convenient to his home in a village of 40 mostly Inuit families just around the corner from Arsuq Fjord. It's handsome country, a mix of tight glacial valleys and relatively gentle uplands that step up to alpine basins and jagged peaks that contain the interior ice cap. All the ridges and bays tame



the temper of the North Atlantic, but during a couple of days, the wind blows so hard that we have to hug the shoreline in Feldmann's boat; even going slowly, we're drenched by spray that blows the tops off the strafing waves.

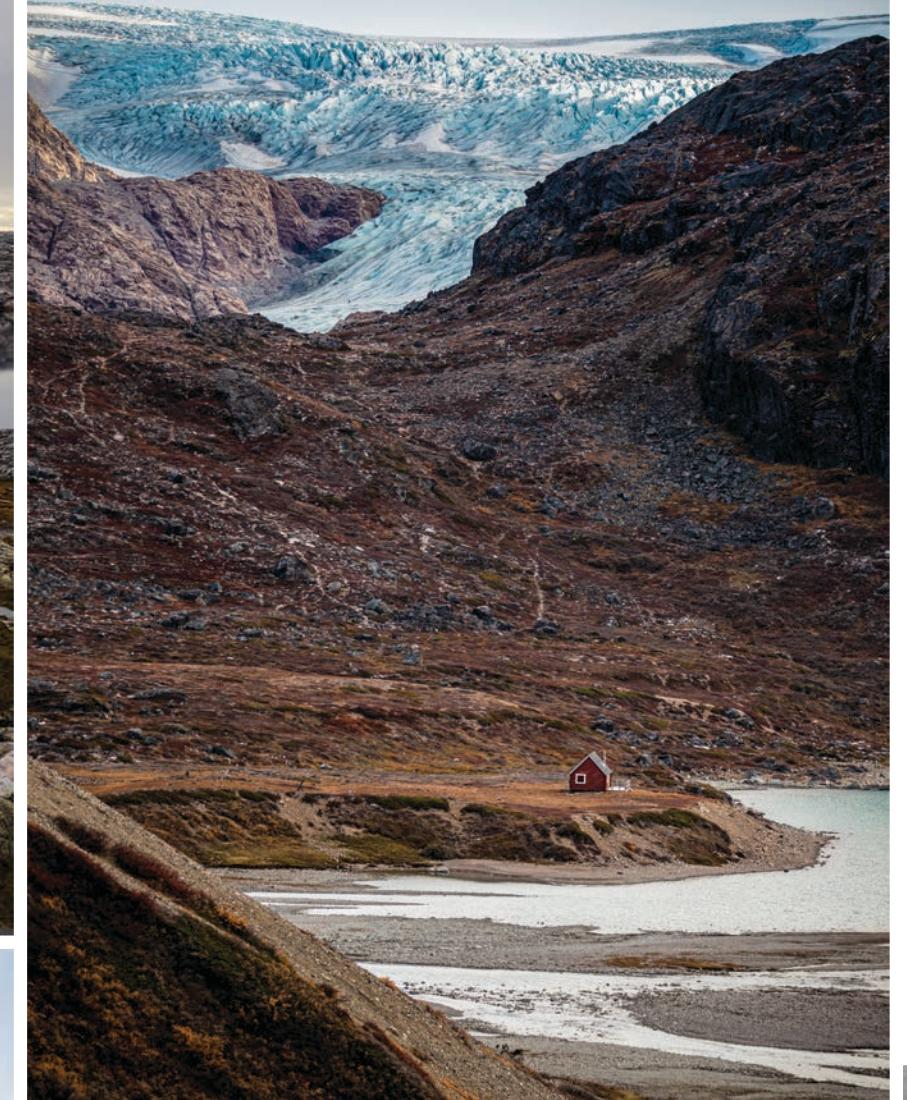
Just a few more fjords to the east is Cape Farewell, where Erik the Red, banished from Iceland, estab-

lished the first nonnative settlement on Greenland a thousand years ago. It's from this first frontier that Erik's son, Leif, sailed west to discover the next frontier, what Europeans called the New World. The geography of the place, and Greenland's position as the northeasternmost chunk of

North America, seemed abstract until I arrived here and realized it's twice as close to Montreal than it is to Copenhagen. Its size and remoteness—there are no roads linking any of the island's dozens of coastal communities—gives Greenland strong notes of the Last Frontier of rural Alaska. Greenlanders' self-reliance and make-do adaptation in its unforgiving climate further cement the comparison. Feldmann, 57 and as vigorous as a man half that age, is something of a modern-day Erik the Red. Weary of what he described as crowding in Scandinavia, he gravitated to Greenland for its desolation and untapped opportunity. But he says it's the communal mentality of Greenlanders, not escapism by rogue loners, that allows him to operate here, 100 miles from the nearest cell signal or power line.

"People here rely on each other to get by," says Feldmann, who hires local families to skin our animals in exchange for the meat, which they share with fellow villagers or sell in stores in the larger towns. "It's a culture of sharing. Musk ox are the same. A herd relies on all its members to defend against polar bears or wolves or any other threat. They may seem stupid or aloof to you. That's not it. They are gathering because they know that they're stronger together than alone."

Feldmann tells me this as he snacks on the only rations he packs for a day in the field: a fillet of



Clockwise from top left: Feldmann's boat leaves the sound where his cabin is located; an ice field spills down toward a Greenlandic bay and the cabin used by the hunters; the hunting party poses with Shane Meisel's musk ox; photographer Luke Renard, Rafe Nielsen, the author, and Meisel gather at the Kangerlussuaq airport.

WITH ITS STRESS ON SELF-RELIANCE AND MAKE-DO ADAPTATION, GREENLAND HAS STRONG NOTES OF THE LAST FRONTIER.

dried cod, obtained from a native neighbor—unsalted, chewy as attic insulation, with all the briny funk of a tide pool limpet. He tells me he can survive on nothing but dried cod for a week. I try a plug, and then spend the rest of the day picking fishy shreds out of my teeth.

Later, I ask Feldmann to speculate on the future of Greenland. The entire island is occupied by fewer than 60,000 people, about 10,000 of them European and the rest native Greenlanders. It has abundant natural resources: fresh water, minerals, fish, and stunningly beautiful landscapes. The logistics of visitation stymie tourism, and the lack of infrastructure slows investment, but he says that's fine with him and with many of his neighbors.

"We look across the water at Iceland, which has become a Disneyland for tourists," Feldmann says. "We don't want to become Iceland, so we put up with long distances and what you see as difficulties of travel. We see those as assets."

HARD-FIGHTING FISH

In a lull between hunts, we had our own chance to gather bounty from the water, first by jigging hefty cod out of the ice-cold fjords, and later by casting bright spinners in the plunge pools of waterfalls for arctic char. The latter have mostly finished spawning and moved back to the salt water for the winter, but the few hangers-on in the streams are ravenous and hit my hardware like fish twice their size.

I hike up an ice-melt torrent that has carved a deep, narrow trench in the rock, casting into any pool that looks like it might hold fish. One after another, hand-size char, as orange as apricots,

Ice-melt from a glacier pours into a plunge pool before spilling into the North Atlantic.



Left to right: The author with an arctic char, which hit a spinner in an ice-melt stream; outfitter Frank Feldmann chews on a hank of dried cod; musk ox wool; the author with his "Norwegian" caribou; and the heavy boss and curving horn of Rafe Nielsen's musk ox.



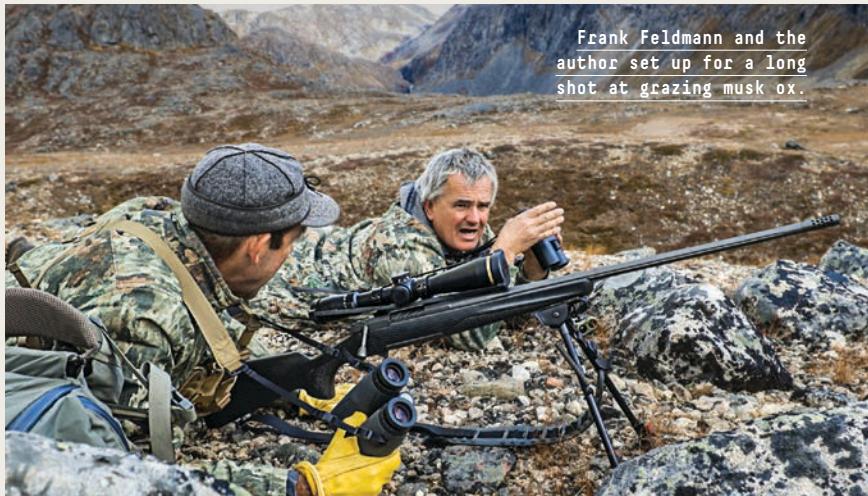
Gear For Tundra Hunting

We hunted with Frank

Feldmann, whose outfit specializes in both musk oxen and caribou (greenlandoutfitters.com).

While the weather on our hunt was mostly good—warmer on the Greenland coast while we were there than it was back at my home in Montana—conditions can turn cold, wet, and miserable overnight, then sock in for the next week or longer. We opted for double-tough rifles and optics built for mountain hunting and the longish shots that are sometimes required for open-country animals such as caribou and musk ox. We shot Browning's X-Bolt Pro Tungsten rifles, chambered in .300 WSM. Weighing just under 6½ pounds, the short-action rifle has a carbon-fiber stock built around rigid vibration-dampening foam. A Cerakote finish protects the stainless-steel action from the elements, and the threaded muzzle brake reduces recoil. The rifle retails for \$2,270 (browning.com).

My Browning was topped with Leupold's VX-5HD riflescope in 3-15x44. The scope has all the range I needed for both close-in musk ox and out-there caribou. Long shots are further enabled by Leupold's CDS dial, which is tuned to the specific bal-



Frank Feldmann and the author set up for a long shot at grazing musk ox.

istics of the 185-grain Browning BXC Big-Game bullet. I was able to dial the scope for hold-on shots out to 600 yards, but the scope's lockable zero meant I didn't have to worry about the elevation dial straying as the rifle slipped in and out of scabbards, boats, and backpacks. The VX-5HD with CDS dial retails for \$1,235 (leupold.com).

We all used Leupold's new RBX-3000 HD 10x42 range-finding binocular. The

incline-adjusting unit features 1-yard accuracy out to 1,000 yards, a dimmable LED readout, and a fast and precise operating system that delivers angle-adjusted ranges in the blink of an eye. I tuned the rangefinder to the specific ballistics of my .300 WSM load. The binocular's best attribute, though, is its tack-sharp image, even in low-light conditions. The RBX-3000 retails for \$3,900 (leupold.com).—A.M.

throw themselves at my Vibrax spinner. I wrangle the treble hook out of their mouths and slip them back into the frothing water.

INTO THE ALPINE FOR CARIBOU

Our musk-ox tags filled and our interest in fishing satisfied, we turn our attention to caribou.

Because southern Greenland's caribou are non-migratory, finding a herd is the second-hardest part of hunting them. It's like wild-sheep hunting, Feldmann says. You must cover miles of similar-looking rocks and hanging valleys before finding a herd, and then you must solve the hardest part: figuring out how to get into rifle range in an open, featureless landscape with vegetation no taller than a coffee can.

There's another consideration: deciding between native caribou, which are a variation of the Quebec-Labrador barren-ground species, or what Feldmann derisively calls the "Norwegians." These are descendants of domestic reindeer that were introduced to Greenland a century ago from Scandinavia. A few escaped and joined the native caribou; their offspring are generally smaller in stature and headgear than the natives.

We're either lucky or good because in our first prospecting hike, we find a herd. The caribou are 3 miles up a gorgeous valley full of musk oxen, and cheerful waterfalls. We walk through ankle-high blueberry bushes loaded with glossy purple orbs sweetened by frost and so ripe, they fall into your hands when you shake the bush.

We're strategizing an approach on the main herd

when a band of two dozen caribou trot out of a draw. Meisel props his rifle on a rock, and I call the shot as the caribou file up and out of the drainage: "Cow. Cow. Young bull. Cow. Calf. Third one after the spike bull. No. Not him. Yes! Him!" He shoots, and we all help field-dress and cape a spectacular native bull.

After posing for pictures and cheering our good luck, we again start hiking toward the main herd when a pair of bulls emerge from a boulder field along the drainage

ONE IS WIDE, WITH A CRAZY MAIN BEAM THAT BENDS BACK ALONG HIS SPINE. THE OTHER HAS A GREAT FRAME AND MASS.

below us. We've interrupted their nap, and they're milling and nervous. We have only a few seconds to assess the bulls before they run out of rifle range. As I pan from one to the other in my riflescope, each gives me more reason to shoot than to

wait, but I can't decide. One is wide, with a crazy main beam that reaches back along his spine. The other is smaller but has a great frame and mass. Then he turns slightly, and I see a profusion of toffee-brown points.

I throw my pack down and get behind my rifle. Almost as soon as I shoot, Nielsen is at my shoulder, nudging me aside so he can shoot off my pack. Within seconds, he has the wide bull in his scope, and just like that, we have two more bulls down, within 100 yards and 20 seconds of each other.

As we break down each of our three caribou, Meisel's native and the two Norwegians that Nielsen and I shot, we pluck blueberries from the low-slung bushes and fill our canteens with water from the sluicing stream nearby. We lash the capes and antlers onto our packs and turn toward the coast, a couple of miles down the valley. We can just see Feldmann's boat, which will take us to his warm cabin perched on a cold rock in a lonely bay. 🌲🌲🌲