Being Caribou

An Interview with Karsten Heuer

by Jennifer Esser

IN APRIL 2003, WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST AND PART-TIME NATIONAL park ranger Karsten Heuer, with his wife, Leanne Allison, a freelance filmmaker, set out on a five-month journey to join the annual migration of the Porcupine caribou herd. The animals travel from their wintering grounds in central Yukon to their spring calving grounds on the coastal plains of Alaska, and back again. For Heuer and Allison, the 1,500-km journey not only allowed them to witness one of the last great mammal migrations in North America, but also afforded them the opportunity to bring attention to the threat posed to the herd by oil and gas exploration in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Their NFB film *Being Caribou* earned acclaim at the Calgary International Film Festival, the Vancouver Film Festival and the Wild and Scenic Film Festival in Nevada, introducing this important issue to hundreds of filmgoers. In September 2004, Jennifer Esser, managing editor of *Wild Earth*, a magazine published by the Wildlands Project, interviewed Heuer about the journey, the film and the fight to save the Porcupine caribou herd.

JENNIFER ESSER: **For five months you migrated on foot with the Porcupine caribou herd. What inspired you to make this trip?**

KARSTEN HEUER: I had a three-season assignment as a park warden in the extreme northwest corner of the Yukon, in Ivvavik, a national park established to protect the Canadian portion of the Porcupine caribou herd's calving grounds. The Porcupine caribou herd—about 123,000 animals—is the same herd that uses the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska for their calving grounds. Ivvavik borders the Arctic Refuge.

As I was experiencing this caribou herd coming through every spring on the way to the Arctic Refuge and coming back every summer as they returned from their calving grounds, there was always a curiosity in my mind: where exactly were they going? What were they doing? When they migrate through, they're coming through for days. And it's not just the caribou; there's a stream of life that's coming along with them, whether it's golden eagles or jaegers looking for calves to pick off—or the grizzly bears ambushing them in the willows along the rivers—or wolves and foxes trying to isolate individual animals as prey. I couldn't sleep when they came past: there's 24-hour daylight and the dramas are happening constantly. When they finally disappear over the ridge, it's pretty hard. The landscape that was full is suddenly silent, and you miss it.

I felt a yearning to keep going with them, which translated into a lot of research about the caribou. I learned more about the potential oil and gas development in the Arctic Refuge that could threaten their calving grounds. What bothered me about all the stories, documentaries and articles was that none of them addressed what these caribou go through during their migration to the calving grounds and their return to the wintering grounds. The story of the caribou hadn't been told.

So my wife, Leanne, and I (she had experience with migration as well while she was working on a film project) started hatching this crazy idea to try to migrate with the herd, to try to be caribou. We decided to try to bring the landscape alive, telling a story through the eyes and ears and movements of an animal. Our intent was to move with the caribou herd for anywhere between four and seven months as they migrated and to try to become part of the herd. Because caribou don't migrate along the same routes every year and don't depart or arrive at the same times each year, we couldn't really plan our route. We couldn't plan food caches, since we didn't even know how long we'd be out there.

That was a really tough thing to get our minds around—to let go of the very human approach of having goals and objectives and a plan.

For 23,000 years the Porcupine caribou have migrated from the Yukon to Alaska. In 2003, two humans joined their journey.

Besides letting go and just following the caribou, what were some of the other challenges you faced?
Initially we were overwhelmed with all the unknowns, and our lack of experience in subarctic environments. We have quite a bit of experience in mountains below treeline in more temperate regions, but here we were going into one of the remotest places on Earth, having to put our complete faith in the caribou. As we slowly surrendered to the caribou, some wonderful things started to happen.

When we got to the calving grounds we had an incredible experience where animals were giving birth outside of our tent. We couldn't move. They had become so skittish during that time that we couldn't even get out to go the bathroom. So we'd go to the bathroom in our cups. We would have to wait until the animals had moved off a little bit and crawl on our bellies to the river to get water for the next two days and then crawl on our bellies back, and talk in whispers. For 10 days we couldn't get out of our tent. They are extremely sensitive as they're having their calves, and protective of their newborns when the calves aren't that mobile. We saw golden eagles come in and try to get some calves. Grizzly bears came in and caused complete havoc.

We followed the caribou as they left and got into the bug season. We were moving so fast, among a huge rush of animals, that we were sleep deprived, traveling all hours of the day and night. We'd nap for an hour or two, walk for five or six, nap for an hour or two. Our whole sense of time got messed up. We didn't know what day it was or what time of day it was because of the 24-hour daylight. We were constantly surrounded by caribou or behind caribou or on their fresh trails. They're shedding their winter coats at that time, so we had hair in our food, hair in our sleeping bags, caribou hair everywhere, like you get sand everywhere when you're at the beach.

And we were hungry. By that time we were two and a half months into the trip, and we couldn't possibly carry enough food to replace the calories we were burning. Between this perpetual state of hunger and the sleep deprivation, we were quite dizzy, and it was almost like we were entering into a different state—much like a shaman might go on a fast and work himself into a trance.

We would lose the caribou once in awhile and, initially, we would to try to find them using an analytical method—visual tracking, looking for signs such as tracks and droppings on the tundra, and sometimes calling up on our satellite phone to other biologists, trying to determine where the few satellite-collared animals were. But as the trip progressed and we got into this unique state of consciousness, we started to plug into different signs and signals and we started to have vivid dreams and visions—of where we would find caribou next when we'd lost them. We started following those dreams and visions. We would tell them to each other before we headed out and then exact scenes that we had described to each other would play out.

There was also a vibration in the landscape, and it wasn't from the hooves; it was more like a singing through the landscape. You felt it more than you heard it. We would hear it when the caribou were in large groups. It was subtle at first, but as the layers of our lives dropped away, our senses were sharpened. We started to tune in to this sound—which I call thrumming—and that began to inform our decisions about where we went when we had lost the caribou, and we would find them. It was a really magical development in the trip.

In the span of five months, these two white people from the city of Calgary, which is where we both grew up, had another dimension opened up to them. Our experience matches the description Gwich'in people talk about, a distant time when people could talk to caribou and caribou could talk to people. And we felt that—it was unbelievable. How do you come back

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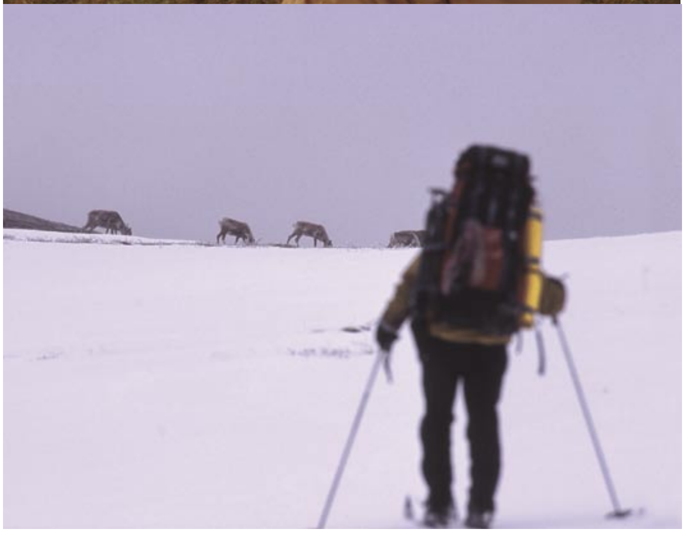

This page: Top, Karsten Heuer experiences the Alaskan bug season. Bottom, the five-month journey took Heuer and Allison into one of the remotest places on Earth.
Next page: Leanne Allison hikes the Alaskan tundra with the Porcupine caribou herd, including new calves, on their annual migration.
Over: from left, the caribou are extremely sensitive and skittish when they are calving and highly protective of the newborns. Allison relaxes as the caribou look on undisturbed. The Porcupine caribou herd covers 1,500 km in its annual migration.

from a trip like that and go to Washington, D.C.—which is what we did—and communicate *that* to Representatives and Senators and their aides? How do you explain what's at stake? I think that's what we're really struggling with even now in trying to capture our caribou experiences in a film and in another book.

I imagine that experience permanently changed your view of the world.
It's like Leanne and I are strangers in our old lives. Even the people that are closest to us, our parents, don't really understand that we're not the same people anymore. This other possibility opened up to us—and then we came back and felt it close again behind us. As we got inundated with all the advertising and everything else that fills the human world, we felt the barriers go up again, and of course we were cut off from that other world. The dreams and the visions and the thrumming stopped, and a big loneliness and depression came in to fill that space.

I think we experienced in a shortened period of time what many Native cultures have experienced over the last many decades—it's a ripping from between worlds. Now Leanne and I are faced with the quandary of how we bridge back and forth—how do we exist in both?

Did you try to observe ecological patterns such as herding behaviour, and to understand the thrumming from a scientific perspective?
Certainly. You can envision the herd as different groups of hundreds and sometimes thousands of animals. At the calving grounds is really the only time when the whole herd—123,000 animals—is together. The rest of the time they're split up into a few groups, but those groups co-ordinate their movements. Despite being hundreds of miles apart, all groups will shift and head south at the same time. There is a huge level of co-ordination. There's some level of communication going on that we don't understand, some communication that's able to transcend those distances. I think the thrumming is an infrasonic wavelength, just on the edge of human hearing, which is also what elephants use to communicate over long distances.

There's a story that biologists and First Nations people tell about how four bulls that were marked in this huge caribou herd came together in different places. It wasn't always the same place, but it was always these same four bulls that came together at around the same time of year from hundreds of miles away from each other. There's no explanation for that. There's also no information about caribou communication in the literature, which is incredibly exciting to me as a scientist. I think some

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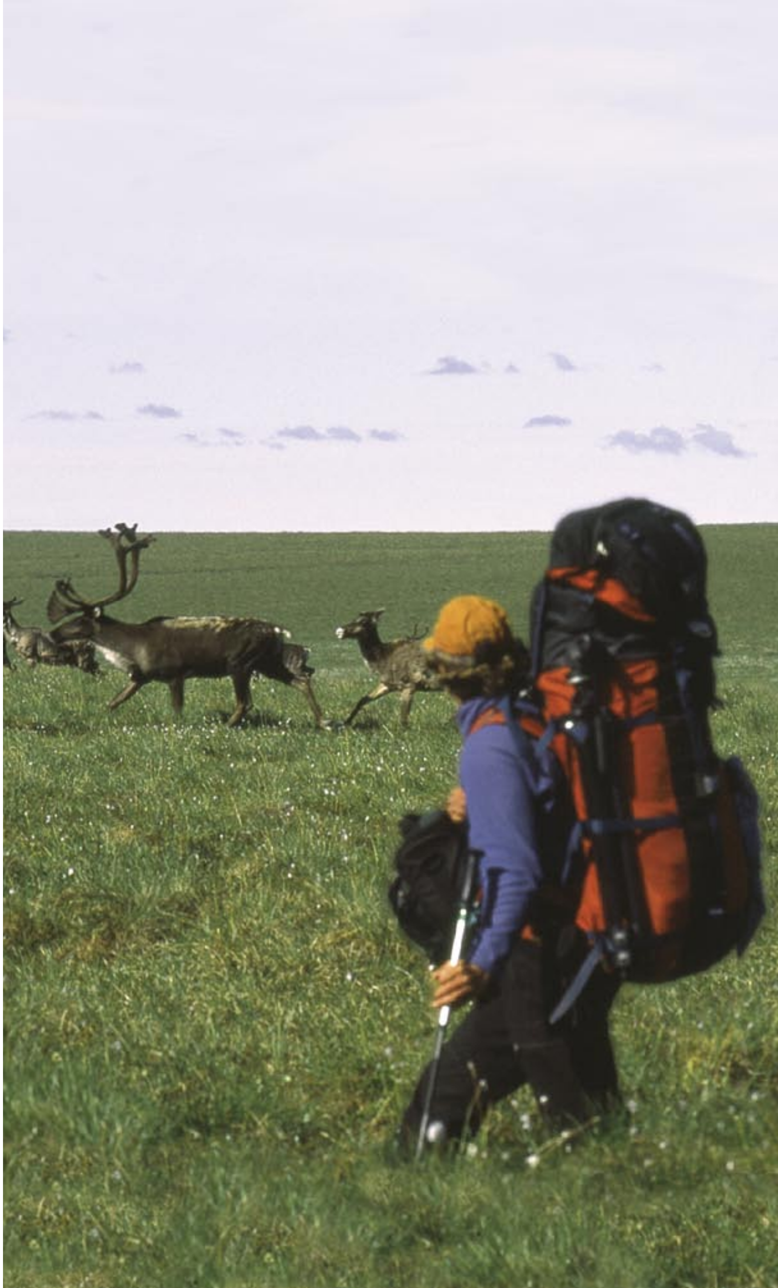
of the greatest discoveries in science are really mystical as well. They not only bring to light new facts about animals, but new dimensions about the world, and open up a new breadth of possibility. I talked about this thrumming to some caribou biologists and they were really excited, but I don't feel the need to know the mechanics of how it works; it does work.



Migration might be understood not simply as a movement of animals, but as a flow of natural process. Can you tell us more about this river—not just of caribou, but of life?

When that caribou herd moves across that landscape, it's towing an entire ecosystem with it. That's what this idea of connectivity is getting at—allowing animals the freedom to continue to move, allowing ecosystems to be dynamic. There are all the obvious things that move with the caribou—the wolves and foxes and grizzly bears and birds—but there are things we don't see, as well. For example, all the bugs that go along with them once the bug season starts. The caribou movement is dispersing these bugs across the landscape, and the bugs are feeding the hundreds of species of birds that are nesting on the tundra. The caribou are eating in one place and defecating in another, so there's seed dispersal going on, and redistribution of nutrients.

When you start thinking about the services that 123,000 animals constantly on the move are doing, it's overwhelming. The ecology is very complex, and the problem is to try to communicate all this to elected representatives in a way that their eyes don't glaze over. What Leanne and I have discovered is that storytelling is an ancient human tradition and it's part of our genetic makeup. What we're trying to do is distill some of the wonder and this overwhelming complexity into relatively simple and inspiring stories to try to reignite awe about the natural world.

Are you working right now to try to influence policy-makers directly, and are you trying to educate the general public as well?

We have tried to lobby in the conventional sense—put on your suit, polish your shoes and walk the halls of Congress and Capitol Hill in D.C. and Ottawa and provincial legislatures in Canada—but you go into those meetings and the person has just had the American Automakers lobby there and you're the next meeting and you've got five or ten minutes to communicate your point. Leanne and I have come to the conclusion that that's not our strength. Our role is to inspire the masses and try to bring these stories to the bottom of the political process, if you will. We try to motivate and mobilize that constituency.

Is that what you're trying to do with the projects you're now working on—a film and a book, as well as ongoing speaking engagements?

On the calving grounds, Leanne and I had this terrible feeling we just shouldn't be there, that it wasn't right and we would never go back. The only way we could justify being there was by staying in our tent and by having a firm commitment to bring this story to a lot of people and to make a difference for caribou. We feel a huge responsibility to share our insights. The truth—which sounds kind of romantic and naïve—is that my heart is telling me to find a way to explore further what we felt with the caribou and the thrumming and the visions. But that wouldn't mean we'd go back to the calving grounds.

I believe that that other dimension—whether it's what the Koyukon Indians in the Yukon call distant time or the aborigines of Australia call the dream time—exists. My desire is to access it more deeply and to learn from it, but that's selfish and meanwhile it's at risk. We scientists talk in terms of minimum viable populations and connectivity and these relatively formal terms, but there is so much mystery. Now we have to try to communicate that it exists. We're certainly not the first people to do this, but we might be able to help to bridge some distance between worlds—a mental distance. These are long journeys on the ground, but really they're journeys from the head down to the heart. Our role is to try to help people along those journeys for themselves.

Did you see evidence of oil and gas development, or was the territory relatively pristine? Were there any barriers across the caribou's migratory path?

We saw a bit of evidence of past oil and gas development: some old tracks on the tundra from seismic exploration, and a couple places where fuel barrels and firing wires and other debris from oil exploration was left. But overall you can probably count on your fingers how many times we encountered those things. We were in a huge, wild area—you can probably count the number of such places that still exist in the world on your fingers as well.

There were no trails, no roads, and apart from a couple of cabins and a ranger station, no human structures. Yet there's all this history on the land: we're following the caribou across these mountain hillsides and passes where there are trails carved into scree, rock and the earth that are like trenches. There's caribou dung in layers and some of it's covered in lichen.

Archeologists have identified some of the crossings that the caribou use today as the same river crossings used by caribou and native people to hunt the caribou as long as 23,000 years ago. So, what Leanne and I experienced was this very short segment of a huge circle of life that's been going on for thousands of years. To describe it in numbers, to compare that kind of history to a six-month supply of oil for the U.S.—the highest estimate of oil and gas that could be under the ground in their calving grounds—it's just a ridiculous decision in our minds.

We know the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is at risk. What about other areas the caribou use—are those mostly protected areas?
A lot of the caribou herd's territory is protected. Ivvavik National Park and Vuntut National Park in Canada are directly adjacent to each other and adjacent to the Arctic Refuge. All of it is wilderness except for the million and a half acres in the calving grounds. There are some other agreements in place for much of the rest of their migration route. While it's not the only one, the Arctic Refuge really is the biggest missing piece in the puzzle. We're not very far from having achieved something really special here and it hasn't come easy so far: Adolph Murie, Margaret Murie, Bob Marshall worked hard for the establishment of the Arctic Refuge. The intent wasn't to have oil and gas development in the middle of it, in one of its most sensitive areas. This work has been going on for over eight decades and we really need to finish the job.

Are you hopeful that the refuge will be protected? Do you think it's a likely outcome?
It's a necessary outcome. When I talk to people and get feedback after lectures and after pieces have aired on television about the trip, my sentiment is that the majority of people feel the same. So if development happens on the refuge, it will be a huge tragedy, not only for the caribou and for everything else that depends on that area, but also for democracy—because if it happens then democracy doesn't work.

Refuge under attack

Oil and gas exploration in the Alaska Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) has been hotly debated in the U.S. for over two decades. Originally proposed by the administration of George Bush Sr. in the 1980s, the idea has been brought back to the table by President George W. Bush. While most Democrats, the Canadian government, various conservationists and the Gwich'in First Nation of Alaska oppose the idea, the current administration is pushing forward. This despite strong public opposition: a recent Gallup poll showed that 45 per cent of Americans thought drilling in the ANWR should not proceed and they would be upset if it does, while only 19 per cent thought drilling should proceed and they would be upset if it does not.

In April 2005, the U.S. House Resources Committee backed drilling in the ANWR. In May, the U.S. Senate passed a budget resolution that included a provision to allow exploratory drilling in the ANWR.

According to the Department of the Interior and the U.S. Geological Survey, the most likely area for a major oil discovery is on the coastal plains, the site of the Porcupine caribou's calving grounds. Although drilling in the area is being justified on the grounds that it will decrease American reliance on foreign oil and gas, it's estimated that the ANWR will yield a mere six months' supply of oil.