Caribou Camp

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by Karsten Heuer
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Sounds pull me from my slumber – the same sounds that interrupted the last nap and the nap before that: snorts, groans, coughs, sneezes and footfalls, punctuated by the clip-and-pull of grass. But there's also something different – something new and urgent. I shuck off the damp sleeping bag, fumble for my glasses, and open my eyes, trying to discern if it's day or night.

Judging by the softening light it's late evening. Leanne is already up, silhouetted inside the vestibule, hunched over the whirring video camera. Without looking up from the viewfinder, she flashes me a smile and drops a shoulder, silently inviting me to come alongside. I lean forward and kiss her weather-beaten cheek, then squeeze past to look out the tent door. There, 100 feet in front of us, a groaning caribou cow lies on the tundra, her ribs rising and falling in great heaves.

It is June 2. We have migrated alongside the Porcupine Caribou Herd for six weeks and 400 miles to witness this moment, and despite the demands of my bladder, I stay put. I watch as the thin cow struggles up then drops to her knees again, sliding into a nest of dwarf willow bushes and grassy tussocks. She's surely uncomfortable, even in pain, but of the thousands of animals sharing this fertile strip of ground with her, Leanne and I are the only ones who notice. Dozens of other pregnant caribou continue to graze, a nearby pair of Brant's geese continues their courtship, and the Lapland longspurs keep filling the air with their trilling songs.

This indifference, however, is redressed by how well the cow fits into this corner of Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Wedged between the 8,000-foot peaks of the Brooks Range and the icy Arctic Ocean, this 20-mile-wide swath of coastal plain is more caribou than anything else. The sun-bleached tines and mossy beams of antlers cast by the millions – if not trillions – of laboring cows that came here before our cow protrude from a mat of tundra layered with hair, scat, bone fragments and afterbirth that are generations deep. From these layers grow the protein-rich grasses she'll convert into high-fat milk for her newborn, repeating and completing a nutrient cycle spanning tens of thousands of years.

Perhaps it's this history that graces our cow with such confidence. In her eyes is the same calm fortitude and patience that Leanne and I saw in the caribou during each wolf chase, river crossing, blizzard and grizzly encounter that peppered the spring migration. It's as though the land itself gives these animals courage, speaking in tongues of trampled rock and breaths of scat, urine and other traces left by the legions of animals that have come before them. I watch as the cow closes her eyes, places her head on the ground, and taps into that ancestral language. A moment later, she shudders as a wave of contractions sweeps down from her shoulders and grips her bony hips.

It's not the first birth of the year – a few one- and two-day-old calves already cavort in the curtain of caribou milling in the background – but because of fogbanks rolling off the nearby Arctic Ocean, it's the first we've seen. We watch as a miniature muzzle suckles the air, then gasp when, minutes after emerging into the world, the tiny torso rises up off the tundra and teeters on oversized legs. It's amazing how disproportionate they are – four stilt-like limbs wedged beneath an undersized body – ready for a life of journeying to begin. For now, though, the calf falls, blinks, then falls again, a fragile bundle of misfiring muscles and undeveloped nerves short-circuiting under paper-thin skin.

For the next half-hour, Leanne offers whispered updates of the calf's progress – standing and nursing in five minutes, walking in 20 – while I fiddle with camera gear, cook breakfast, clean up and finally attend to my bladder, all within the confines of our 4-by-6-foot tent. It'd be better to go outside, but the caribou will have nothing of it. Contrary to what the oil companies and pro-development politicians proclaim, these

expectant and new mothers are skittish. Here, on the cusp of birth and nurturing a newborn, they bolt at the sight of anything non-caribou, even if it's half a mile away. We remain still, hidden and quiet, hostages in our tent.

When I next look out I'm astounded by what's happened. A wave of births has swept across the tundra, and in its wake jaegers, gulls, terns and foxes dart in and out of the newborns, vying for the blood-rich placentas already soaking into the earth. In the center of all the activity, I find the calf I'm looking for. Covering the hummocky ground in smooth, stumble-free leaps, it arcs around its mother, orbiting like a new moon around a tired sun.

I watch it for a long time – longer than it takes the glaciated flanks of the Brooks Range to go yellow and then pink, trying to imagine what the same place might look like with airstrips, pumping stations, pipelines, drill rigs, compressors and the other infrastructure required by oil development. While I watch and ponder, birds that have been quiet since late morning begin singing again, seemingly confused about whether it's another day that's coming or simply another sunny night.

I, too, am confused. I lean back on my sleeping bag and close my eyes while the now-familiar sounds of birth, courtship and bonding continue to unfold around me. My heart is in turmoil, my mind torn by two competing realities: one of timelessness, another of time running out.

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