

Tales from the bush

A WILD WORLD OF RIPPING YARNS

WHO?



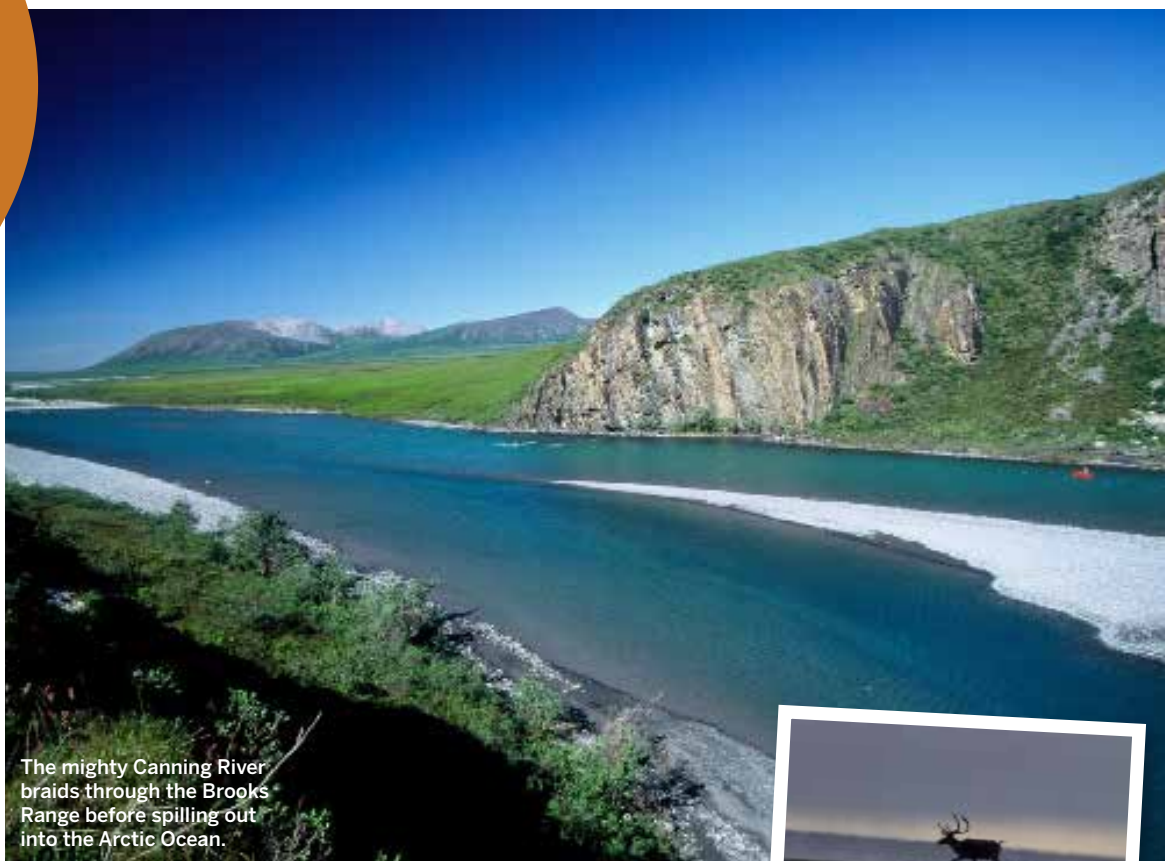
CHUCK GRAHAM is a kayak guide at California's Channel Islands National Park, a beach lifeguard, a writer and a photographer.
<http://chuckgrahamphoto.com>

WHAT?

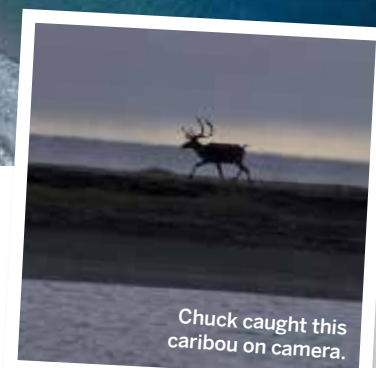
CARIBOU (AND MOSQUITOES)

WHERE?

NORTH-EAST ALASKA, USA



The mighty Canning River braids through the Brooks Range before spilling out into the Arctic Ocean.



Chuck caught this caribou on camera.

THERE ARE WORSE PLACES TO GET LOST THAN THE ARCTIC WILDLIFE REFUGE. IT'S JUST A SHAME ABOUT THE MOSQUITOES...

There was only one word for it: lost. I was paddling somewhere along the Canning River in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the largest wildlife reserve in North America. But I'd taken a wrong turn on a gravelly channel that pushed me miles east of the rest of my group. The four of us were on a two-week, 250km rafting trip, but I had decided to pump up a one-man pack raft and spend a day experiencing this vast wilderness on my own – well, except for a billion and one mosquitoes.

Withstanding their attentions, I had to concentrate on getting back in touch with my group, which meant taking a westward-leading channel whenever I could. They had three times my paddling power, and if they got too far ahead it was possible we might not cross paths again. I had to paddle hard, paddle fast and not stop unless I saw something astounding.

That turned out to be a bull moose, its massive antlers wreaking havoc on some spindly willows that were no match for

the big brute. I couldn't resist him. I calmly manoeuvred the raft to snap a few shots while drifting up to the cobbled shoreline. As soon as I beached my raft, the biggest mammal in the refuge vanished with such stealth that the willows barely swayed. He knew I was there, and I wasn't about to follow him into the tangled vegetation.

Paddling on, I kept to the left, straining my neck to locate the west side of the Canning. Three hours later I converged with the main channel, but my friends were nowhere to be found. A convenient bluff towered over the river, standing some 30m above me.

I paddled into a shallow eddy and dragged my raft out of the muck and onto the cobbles. This looked like a popular meeting place frequented by shaggy musk-oxen and caribou – their tracks were evident in the mire. More evident still were my old enemies. Biologists

say that if you compare the biomass of the 130,000-strong Porcupine caribou herd with that of the countless mosquitoes within the refuge, the bugs win – and I can believe it.

As I scrambled up the steep, muddy bluff, mosquitoes swarmed all over me. I was wearing shorts and barefoot, and the bugs were in full assault mode – hundreds of them were going to town on my legs. I wiped them off, the black slime on my hands appearing like some oily gunk.

Scanning upriver with my binoculars, I spotted my mates less than 1km south, and floating in my direction. Mosquitoes hummed in my ears, caked my nostrils and probed my eye ducts, but my relief at rejoining the main expedition group outweighed any discomfort.

I side-slipped down the bluff and dived into the nearly freezing water, washing away insects and grime alike. I was ready to raft onto the refuge's breezy coastal plain, a haven for the caribou who know that its icy winds keep the bugs at bay. 🐾

"I WAS WEARING SHORTS, AND THE BUGS WERE IN FULL ASSAULT MODE – HUNDREDS OF THEM WERE GOING TO TOWN ON MY LEGS."

● Do you have a tale that you would like to share? If so, please email a synopsis of your idea to james.fair@immediate.co.uk