

What the Caribou Taught Me About Being Together, and Apart

Disappearing in the Arctic wilderness for half a year, a traveler discovered there is always a way forward.

By Caroline Van Hemert

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Over the past week, as each thread of our ordinary existence unravels and travel feels like something we used to do, I've been holding tight to a single mental image. The deep brown gaze of a caribou calf as it passed inches from my face. The whites of its eyes as it glanced at me in surprise. The animal's fear of the unknown dwarfed by its clarity of purpose.

On St. Patrick's Day, 2012, my husband and I had set out on a 4,000-mile, human-powered journey from Bellingham, Wash., in the Pacific Northwest to Kotzebue, Alaska, far above the Arctic Circle. For nearly six months, traveling by rowboat, ski, packraft, foot and canoe, we'd made our way across some of the most remote landscapes on earth.

In the last days of our trip, we were canoeing down the swollen Noatak River in the Brooks Range of northern Alaska. Winter had arrived early that year and we paddled through the damp chill of rain turning to snow. Bundled and shivering, we never imagined we'd find ourselves hunkered down on a riverbank surrounded by caribou, our breath mingling with theirs.

But late one afternoon, as we rounded a bend in the river, I noticed what looked like a branch floating downstream. And then another. By the time we realized we weren't seeing branches, but antlers, two caribou had landed on the far shore. They pranced and shimmied, water flying in beads off their coats. Waiting at the river's edge were dozens more animals, poised to cross. We pulled our canoe out at the next eddy and stopped to watch. When the last of the animals had finished their swim, we hiked along the brushy bank to find the trail they'd followed to the river. At our feet was a crisscross of tracks, pressed freshly into the soft mud.



In the Brooks Range of northern Alaska, humans are dwarfed by the scale of the landscape. These mountains lie entirely above the Arctic Circle. Patrick Farrell

At first, everything was still. Then a wave of sound approached like a squall across the water and we crouched down to hide in the bushes. We felt the wave of energy before we saw the first animals, funneling down the hillside toward us. Suddenly we were embedded in the migration of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd. So close I could have reached out and touched their backs, the animals passed in single file on the path beside us. There were dozens of caribou, then hundreds, and soon we lost count. Breath steamy in the cool air, tendons in their legs clicking audibly, black noses moist and shiny, the urgency of their motion was palpable. They stopped only briefly to gather at the riverbank before crossing.

In magazine spreads and documentary footage, caribou migrations look perfectly choreographed. From the air, tens of thousands of animals move synchronously as they dance across the tundra in sinuous waves. On the ground, backstage with the dancers, I discovered a different scene entirely. Instead of an orderly procession, the migration felt jumbled and jostling, anarchic and frenzied. Picture a schoolyard of kindergartners lining up from recess, limbs flailing, bodies in motion, all jockeying for position.



The Western Arctic Caribou Herd crossing the Noatak River on their fall migration. Patrick Farrell

This was made worse by the fact that the river crossing had formed a bottleneck: Each caribou had to decide whether to leap from a six-foot bank into the swirling gray water below or to continue down the trail to another entry. In the moments of indecision, it was almost always a cow and calf that first took the plunge. The calves held tightly to their mothers' sides, each pair exchanging quiet grunts as they splashed in the swift current. They were the ones with the most at stake; they were also the ones that couldn't afford to delay. Still, they hesitated and stumbled, sometimes stepping forward only to jolt back a moment later, letting another caribou pass. I hadn't ever imagined such disorder among these highly social animals, such chaos in their movements.

But the longer I sat and watched, the more I began to notice the nuances of the herd's dynamics. Each animal's actions were driven by something larger than itself. Behind the chaos was the collective need to move. And no matter how frantic the motion felt, no matter how many more animals came down from the hills and joined the bottleneck of the river crossing, I never saw a single shove. No caribou were pushed into the water or trampled against the bushes. It was as though a safety bubble hovered around each animal, with an unspoken, absolutist rule shared among the herd: *Do not harm thy neighbor*. One large bull even stepped carefully over my husband's outstretched legs, adjusting his gait to whatever obstacles lie in his way. The caribou's movements might not have been synchronous but I could see how they were intimately and essentially connected.



The author hiking among driftwood along the coast of the Arctic Ocean near the border of the United States and Canada. Patrick Farrell

I'd left on this expedition not because I was looking for an escape, but because I needed to find my way home. I had recently finished my Ph.D. in wildlife biology, feeling more disconnected than ever from the natural world. Though I'd begun my studies committed to solving an ecological mystery — a strange cluster of beak deformities that had emerged among Alaskan birds — I'd become disillusioned with research. Instead of communing with the environmental legacy of Rachel Carson, I found myself stuck in a laboratory, peering through a microscope and lamenting the fact that science often holds more questions than answers.



Of course there is never just one reason for why we choose to travel. For me, there was also the press of time, which suddenly felt insistent and rushed. My dad, who had always done whatever he set his mind to, had recently received a diagnosis that no amount of mental fortitude could reverse: Parkinson's disease. My younger sister was expecting her first child while I faced my own decisions about starting a family. The future no longer stretched as far and wide as it once had. And though there are plenty of other ways I might have reckoned with these questions, I chose mountains and rivers to serve as my proving ground. In turn, the natural world delivered what it always does best: perspective.

In the nearly six months since we'd been away, the rawness of the landscape had distilled our needs to their most basic forms: food, shelter and love. Instead of juggling emails or worrying over the deadlines I'd missed, I scanned for bears on the horizon and anchored my tent against a building storm. I felt for the tenor of the wind against my cheek and probed the strength of the snow like checking for a pulse. I read the tundra as if by Braille, always in search of solid footing. As we'd traced the curvature of the earth with paddle strokes and footsteps, the world grew and shrunk at once.

By most definitions, we'd been extremely isolated. For 176 days, our close contact had been solely with each other, with whom everything, from sleeping quarters to cookpot, was shared. But we'd never really felt alone. On glaciated peaks and in mossy coves, over steep mountain passes and through raging spring storms, we shared the company of winged and four-legged companions, each on their own remarkable, unsung journeys.



Caribou antlers silhouetted against a building rainstorm near Anaktuvuk Pass in Alaska. Patrick Farrell

After launching hand-built rowboats in a hailstorm, after facing mosquitoes and avalanches and a predatory bear, I had learned to focus on one thing: the *now*. Just days before we'd met the caribou, we'd waited in a rainstorm on a riverbank for a food resupply that didn't come. We'd lain in our tent, shivering and scared, and wondered if we'd meet our end by this most slow and plodding of means. We discovered the limits of our bodies, and then some. For almost five days, we survived on two crumbly granola bars, a few tablespoons of olive oil and a package of instant ramen. Impossible questions hung beside us in the already heavy sky. *Had we asked too much of ourselves, and of the land? Was it really worth it in the end?*

When the plane finally came to deliver our resupply, we ate until we were sick. As we paddled away the next morning, I wasn't sure what lessons we had gained, except the fact of our own obvious and humbling mortality.

But on that rainy afternoon, in the collective energy of bodies in motion, hurtling themselves into the current of a cold Arctic river, grace abounded. For hundreds of miles we'd traveled in the shadow of caribou, trusting their wisdom to guide us over terrain that often felt impenetrable. By following their hoof prints and rutted tracks across the mountains, we'd learned that there was always a way forward.

When a caribou calf stopped to sniff me then skittered away to join the others, I realized I'd found what I was looking for. Faith in the unknown. Beauty when I least expected it. The visceral relief of bearing witness to something much larger than myself. After nearly starving on a riverbank, the delay in our food resupply felt serendipitous beyond belief.

In the evening, we set up camp on a nearby island. As dusk fell, we sat in silence with our shoulders pressed together and watched the steady stream of animals crossing. Later, as I lie in my sleeping bag in the dark, I heard them splashing still. By morning, the caribou were gone.



The author, above, hikes into the mountains of Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve in Alaska, nearing the final leg of a 4,000-mile, human-powered journey. Patrick Farrell

We set off down the Noatak River again, each paddle stroke carrying us closer to the Chukchi Sea, and the end. We understood in principle that it wasn't possible to disappear into the northern wilderness for half a year and come back unchanged. What we couldn't envision was what this return might look like in practice. Suddenly, I knew it didn't matter. There are some things we can't understand until we live them. To have been among the caribou was all the closure I would ever need.

Like all of us, I'm grasping for connection in a time of uncertainty. I hear the school bell ring down the street and listen reflexively for the children's voices that don't come. I stand six feet from my sister and feel the void stretch deep and aching between us. I hug my children close, because I still can. And then I shut my eyes and imagine the caribou bedded down in the snow, trusting the sun to rise and warm their backs, knowing that the night will pass.

We are not caribou. We don't pound our hooves against the earth each spring and fall, in search of food and shelter. We can't survive on frozen lichen and the warmth of our fur coats. Mosquitoes and wolves aren't our greatest foes. The ordinary facts of our human lives *do* matter, and deeply. But even now, when I most want to believe in happy endings, I find myself turning toward

the harshness of an Arctic river. In the wild eyes of a floundering calf separated from its mother, in the bleached white skull of last season's casualty, I take solace in simply being present. The caribou remind me that we must reconcile the tenuousness of our existence with the preciousness of what we stand to lose.

In the end, perhaps we aren't so different from the caribou crossing the river. As we struggle against the current, we're buoyed by the fact that we're not alone. We greet our neighbors on the screen, through windows, at distances that feel strained and unnatural, and exchange silent blessings, recognizing that for us, like for caribou, community is everything. Even cloistered in our own invisible bubbles, we sense the momentum of the herd pouring down the hillside. We know that there is no one to save us except ourselves.

By gathering the courage to jump, waiting for the shock of the cold water to pass, and feeling the ripples of our individual choices, we begin to move as one. To survive together, we must be brave. We must be compassionate. We must learn when to step forward as leaders and when to step aside so others can pass safely. And during those moments when fear steals my breath, I will remember the steam rising from the backs of caribou, see the mothers plunging boldly into the cold water with their calves by their sides, and let myself believe that we, too, can find our way.

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