

Alice In Greenland

MUSK OX AND REINDEER UNDER
THE MIDNIGHT SUN.

By CRAIG BODDINGTON





CZ 550 AMERICAN



First morning, barely a mile from camp. We were on a low, rocky ridge overlooking a little depression of tall willows. Three shaggy animals were down there feeding, just their backs occasionally visible over the tops of the leaves. Musk oxen, and our local guides assured us that one of the three was a big bull. Yes, there he was, viewed in brief glimpses, now the body towering above the cow and calf he was with, then the curve of a heavy horn, finally a frontal view that revealed his heavy bosses.

This was indeed a good bull, so we shifted from rock to rock, trying to get a better view down into the depression. Nothing doing. The best we could see was the top third, not nearly enough for a clean shot. So we set up on the highest rock, waiting for things to develop. The designated shooter was Alice Pulochova, president of CZ-USA, and although these were the first musk oxen she had ever seen, she was calm and patient. She was also, undoubtedly, a little bit bemused and a whole lot jet-lagged on our first morning in Greenland.

The waiting game went on for quite a while. Once, the animals spooked and ran up into taller cover. The wind was good and there had been no sound, so I don't know what got them going. Now they were completely hidden, offering just the occasional glimpse of brown hair and unnaturally moving willows. After a bit they seemed to settle, and after a bit longer they started to move back down. There was just one gap in the middle of the willows, and they might cross it at something a bit beyond 100 yards. We put my daypack over a flat outcropping, and Alice took a steady rest.

We talked through it one more time. The musk ox is not an especially wary animal—the hardest part is getting to the remote Arctic environments where it lives—but it is a tricky shot. Although bulky and strong, the musk ox isn't nearly as big as he looks. He has nearly a foot of hair above his shoulder hump and sometimes two feet of long hair below his brisket. It's easy to shoot too low and hit nothing but hair, and a high shot is equally disastrous. The best shot is probably square on the shoulder in the apparent horizontal center, which, discounting all the hair, actually puts the bullet about a third up into the chest—just right.

One slow step at a time the bull approached the narrow gap, and I heard the click of Alice's single-set trigger on her CZ Ultimate Hunting Rifle. He stepped into the gap, and we verified that he was indeed a bull, a good bull. Then he hesitated for just an instant. Alice's .300 Winchester Magnum went off, and her 200-grain bullet streaked toward the musk ox.

The bull took the bullet hard, clearly a perfect shot, then recovered and made it three steps into cover.

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That was as far as he got. As he reached the willows, he stumbled and went down, and that was that, as pretty as you please. Alice stayed on the rifle while we waited a few moments to be sure, then we came off the rocks, crossed the creek and walked up to admire the beautiful musk ox bull, shaggy coat luxurious, heavy horns curving down and turning up into sharp points.



Alice Poluchova checks the zero on her CZ Ultimate Hunting Rifle in .300 Winchester Magnum.

SUMMER MUSK OX

We—Alice; my wife, Donna; and I—were in Greenland in early August to hunt musk oxen and reindeer. Videographer and field producer Conrad Evarts was with us, intending to capture the hunt for a couple of segments of *Petersen's Hunting Adventures* television. Much about this hunt was unusual.

The musk ox, in Latin *Ovibos moschatus*—"musky sheep-ox"—is an incredibly long-haired, ox-like creature of the High Arctic region, native to Greenland and northern Canada, introduced into Alaska and a few spots in the Old World's Arctic. They were badly depleted during the era of Arctic exploration, but with protection they rebounded dramatically during the second half of the 20th century. I hunted them twice in Canada's Northwest Territories, once when hunting first opened

in 1981 and again a decade later.

These were typical winter hunts, conducted by traveling on snow machines and spike-camping on the ice. The first time was in November, when there were only a couple of hours of daylight and a long, cold Arctic night. I got a great musk ox, but it was a thoroughly miserable experience. The second time was in April, when everything was still frozen hard but there was long daylight. This was a much more enjoyable hunt, but it was still plenty cold and miserable. I had no desire to ever do it again.

In 2009 I hunted reindeer in Iceland with Bjorn Birgisson of the Icelandic Hunting Club (huntingiceland.com). He was also doing musk ox and reindeer hunts in Greenland, and my ears pricked up. The hunts were done in the summer, glassing along the shoreline from a boat. This

sounded like fun, as well as a good situation for the television camera to capture. I thought Donna might enjoy it, and as planning progressed, Alice decided to join us.

WHO SHOTS FIRST?

Honestly, I didn't care if I took another musk ox. My primary interest was reindeer. The European reindeer is essentially the same genus and species as our caribou—*Rangifer tarandus*—with

our caribou and their reindeer being subspecies of each other. Greenland had native caribou as well as musk oxen, long utilized by both the Inuit natives and the Norse settlers, led by Erik the Red in 980 A.D. In the more settled areas of southern and western Greenland, the caribou were depleted by the end of the 18th century. Reindeer from Norway were introduced in 1900 and again 50 years later. They mixed with and overpowered the remnant caribou, and today there are tens of thousands of free-ranging reindeer in Greenland.

As weird as it sounds, this was my primary interest. I hunted all the varieties of North American caribou many years ago, and in 2009 I finally had an opportunity to take a European reindeer. I thought it would be fun to take a reindeer in North America. The only other free-ranging population I'm aware of was

I SHOT AGAIN QUICKLY, THEN HE WAS IN THE HERD, THEN DOWN.
MY CREW GASPED AS HE STARTED TO ROLL DOWN THE ROCKY HILL.



Donna Boddington (left) and Alice Poluchova pulled a snappy double play on two fine reindeer bulls, taken at the eleventh hour on the last day of the hunt. Donna used a CZ 550 in .270; Alice used her CZ Ultimate Hunting Rifle in .300 Winchester Magnum.

introduced into Alaska, but I also thought it would be a great adventure to hunt in Greenland, perhaps the least-known and least-visited corner of our own continent.

Neither Donna nor Alice had hunted musk ox, a truly amazing and most underrated game animal. I had no idea what to expect, so I figured it would be best if they shot first on musk ox, while I would go first on reindeer. We would hunt both animals on the islands and fjords at the southwest corner of Greenland, but not in exactly the same area, so if we ran short of time, I could forego the musk ox and we could move on to the reindeer area.

In any group where hunting must be done sequentially, as in from one boat with one set of Inuit guides, the "who shoots first" game is tricky. In an unfamiliar situation it isn't necessarily best to be first, as you have no idea what to expect, how much game you're likely to see and so forth. On the other hand, you don't know what the weather is going to do or if there will even be any chance to shoot, let alone multiple chances.

I must have a pessimistic bent, because I thought Alice was getting a pretty good deal in taking the first opportunity at musk ox. The good side: Her bull was a wonder-

ful 10-year-old, taken on a lovely summer day in gorgeous sunlight. The bad side: She didn't have the chance to see and study musk oxen before she shot, and that was a shame because those opportunities weren't forthcoming. There was, however, fair turnabout. I had elected myself first up for reindeer, which put me in the position of taking the first opportunity without really knowing what was out there.

MUSK OXEN BY THE HERD

For some reason I had an odd impression that there weren't many musk oxen in Greenland, probably

because permits have been available to outsiders for only a short time and very few Americans have hunted in Danish-controlled Greenland. Our guides had spotted Alice's musk ox from camp, recognized it as a good bull, then we'd walked out and shot it. The evening before, we'd come in by boat from the airport at Narsarsuaq to the village of Ivituut, a mostly abandoned mining settlement. We had passed part of our hunting area on the last part of the six-hour journey. We had seen no musk oxen along the shore, and there were only three in the group Alice's bull was taken from. Everything I had seen so far confirmed my belief that there weren't very many musk oxen. In terms of industry relations, priority to a hunter who hadn't taken the species and the good old rule of ladies first, it seemed a very good thing that Alice had taken this bull so quickly and easily.

While we were skinning and butchering her bull, we glassed two more herds in the same bowl above our little village, with obvious trophy bulls in each group. Having it fixed in my mind that there weren't many musk oxen around, it seemed to me that we should probably go after at least one of them as soon as the chores were finished. This was not

on the table. Bjorn and the guides insisted that we take to the boat, using the long Arctic afternoon and evening to hunt elsewhere. So we packed Alice's bull down to the shore and walked away from two herds and two mature bulls. This was the first inkling I had that there were probably a lot of musk oxen about, or at least our keepers believed there were.

They were right, and I was dead

and clouds and temperatures into the 60s, a far cry from the winter musk ox hunting I'd done before.

Apparently, the musk oxen responded, because we saw herd after herd. I quickly gained both respect for and confidence in our guides as they bypassed numerous bulls. They were actually aging them, discounting this one and that one as seven or eight years old, not

yet at its peak. I was also surprised to see that the summer coats were still long and luxurious, carrying the incredibly long hair and underlayer of wool that are as much a part of a musk ox trophy as its unique horns.

We got Donna on a huge bull with massive bosses and horns that dropped far down before turning back up, possibly the best trophy we saw, except that one horn tip was broken off. This made for a tough call.

It was still early in the hunt, without full knowledge of how many musk oxen we were going to see. This was a great bull, but that tip was clearly broken. With some misgivings we passed him, and a couple of hours later Donna took a wonderful bull, by slight margin the best of our three bulls.

Then, finally, it was my turn. With a couple of hours of daylight remaining and the reindeer await-



The author used a CZ 550 in .270 Winchester with the tough 130-grain Barnes Triple Shock bullet loaded by Federal Premium. The recovered bullet is from his musk ox and shows typical Triple Shock performance.

wrong. The coast of southwestern Greenland is a patchwork of islands and deep fjords that run miles inland, some all the way up the glacier that occupies 80 percent of Greenland's huge land mass. All the animal populations are fairly close to the shoreline, making the boat an ideal platform for moving and glassing. We caught a couple of days of mild summer weather, intermittent sun

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The author with his reindeer, taken with a quick running shot in the rain. He used a CZ 550 in .270 Winchester.

ing us a couple of hours' cruising down the coast, we glassed a herd far up on a steep ridge. There were about a dozen animals, and from the bouncing boat the bull looked big enough to me and old enough to our guides, at least worthy of a closer look. We landed past the herd to get the wind right, then worked our way up a rocky chute until we were above them.

Our guides studied the bull for a long time, and then Einar, their leader and local biologist, gave me a tentative nod. Yes, this one looked good, but we needed to get a bit closer to be sure. We moved forward across the face, the

wind perfect, and pitched up behind some rocks about 100 yards from the herd. While the rest of us stayed low, Einar studied the bull for just a few moments, then gave me a big grin and a thumbs-up. A good bull.

I picked out a suitable rock about 20 yards ahead and duck-walked to it, setting my backpack over the top, then the rifle and slithering in behind. I was shooting a CZ American in .270 Winchester, not just a light rifle for musk ox, but well below Bjorn's specific recommendation of no less than .30 caliber/180-grain bullet. I'd hedged my bet with the tough Barnes Triple Shock bullet and had plenty of confidence, but I'd have to

be extremely careful.

He was perfectly broadside, but he had a calf behind him. Then he moved a bit and was clear, but he was angling away—no good. Eventually, he turned, quartering to me, and I shot carefully for the point of the shoulder. He lurched right, stumbling, but headed downhill. I shot again quickly, then he was in the herd, then down. My crew gasped as he started to roll down the rocky hill. For a second I didn't understand. With every roll he would get closer to the boat. Then I got it—broken horns—and I gasped, too. Two slow rolls and a long way to go—with a lot of rocks. One rock was big enough and held him on the steep slope.

His herd made the defensive circle, instinctive even though there have been no wolves in this part of Greenland for many musk ox generations. They held for a while, then broke and passed underneath us at 20 yards. When they were gone, we walked up to another beautiful musk ox, as good as Alice's, not quite as good as Donna's, with a wonderful coat, and a marvelous vista, with the fjord stretching away below us.

REINDEER IN THE RAIN

During the musk ox portion, we stayed in a comfortable and well-appointed house in Ivituu, which, in my view, beat the heck out of a tent on the ice with caribou skins as a floor. For reindeer we moved to a comfortable little hotel in the seaport

THE SECOND-LARGEST BULL WAS ON THE RIGHT SIDE, OPEN, AND DONNA DROPPED HIM IN HIS TRACKS.

of Narsaq, which also beat a tent on the ice, especially since we ran out of luck with the weather. The ceiling came down, and it rained continuously for the remainder of our hunt, not a steady downpour, but a slow drizzle between showers, with low clouds that reduced visibility to a few hundred yards when it was drizzling, never mind when it was pouring.

Bjorn had high expectations for reindeer. I had taken a good one the year before in Iceland, and he expected to do better, but we just couldn't see. Even with limited visibility we glassed quite a few reindeer, but the big bulls were scarce. We had two and a half days, which would have been plenty in good weather, but we didn't have good weather. On the first day we saw one fair bull, excellent tops, good bezes, miserable shovels.

Wanting one of these reindeer really badly, it was in my mind that I should have insisted. I bit my lip and kept my mouth shut, and that was the only marginal bull we saw that day.

The next day both the weather and visibility were worse. We saw a few reindeer between the clouds, but only cows and calves and a couple of young bulls. And then, late in the



Donna Boddington's bull was the best of the three by a slight margin, with extremely heavy horns carrying lots of mass through the curve.

afternoon, as we cruised past a little knob I glanced up and saw a forest of velvet-covered antlers protruding over the top. In good light, reindeer—and caribou—shine like silver dollars, but they're lost in mist and rain. It was one of the few times on the hunt that I saw something first, and this was a good one. The "forest" was actually a small grove, several bulls

bedded together, but one of them looked just fine.

We landed, jumped off and clambered up the hill, trying to get around the wind. I could see the antlers—and only the antlers—of the biggest bull when we were halfway up, so I took the lead with Conrad right behind me with the camera. Another 10 yards up and I could sort of make out his body through the brush. The distance wasn't 50 yards, so I should have stopped right there and waited him out. If I could see him, he could see me. At last I wrapped into a tight sling and took a few breaths before I moved a few more steps up the hill.

For some reason I expected him to stand and wait for me to shoot him, at least for a second or two. Uh, not exactly. He stood, as did the rest of the group, and in the same motion he

turned and ran. This wasn't expected, but I was as ready as I was going to get. I got the rifle up, swung with him and took a quartering-away shot just as he vanished over the ridge. I had my North American reindeer.

Note carefully that in my boorish manner I had taken first shot on reindeer, while not one, but two lovely ladies (one of whom I'm married to)



Almost 80 percent of Greenland is covered by glacier, and there are only scattered settlements along the rocky coasts.

waited patiently. What goes around comes around. After I shot my reindeer it started to rain hard, and that day was over. The next morning, our last in Greenland, we had clearing skies, great visibility and a few hours to hunt before we sailed for Narsarsuaq and our flight to Reykjavik.

In a repeat of the previous day's performance, we saw quite a few cows and calves, then yet another forest of antlers above an outcropping. It was Alice's turn again, this because we had not intended for Donna to hunt reindeer. In turn, Bjorn had not intended to have a permit available...but he did. There were at least two good bulls in this group, maybe more, so we imagined a snappy double play.

Although such an opportunity is rare, I've seen it before. The concept of setting up two hunters and going,



"One, two, three" doesn't work. Almost invariably, both will screw up, one from pressure and the other from muzzle blast. So it was Alice's shot. We would stalk the herd, she would set up, they would stand, and she would shoot the biggest bull. Then Donna would move forward and set up, the reindeer would run a short distance and stop, and she would shoot the second-largest bull. Right.

No kidding, that was exactly the way it happened. We landed on slippery rocks, scrambled ashore, clambered a couple hundred yards uphill and Alice rested over a rock

with a half-dozen reindeer bulls bedded 50 yards in front of her. The largest was picked out before they stood, and when he rose from his bed, Alice dropped him in his tracks. The remainder ran, and I moved a couple of steps forward and slapped my pack on a rock. Donna slid in over the top with the CZ .270, and they stopped at barely 100 yards. The second-largest bull was on the right side, open, and Donna dropped him in his tracks as well. And, of course, both bulls were bigger than mine. This could only happen in Wonderland...or Greenland. (C)

