ANIMAL MAGNETISM

Here come the caribou, fighting among themselves, falling in love, raising families — while the people of Maine peek through the keyhole

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

FORTY YARDS APART THEY STAND, MUSCLES tightened, eyeing each other obliquely. The jealous rage of rival suitors has been simmering for weeks, turning good-natured comrades into bitter enemies. There have been thinly veiled threats, tense encounters, and now tempers have reached boiling point.

Slowly, menacingly, they begin their approach, closing the gap until, like wrestlers assuming a hold, they lock antlers. Linked into a thousand-pound mass, they struggle back and forth. It is the beginning of the strange, superheated tango of male caribou on the make.

Occasionally in such struggles, one of the combatants will flip his opponent over his head and snap the rival's neck — a show of force that can make for a Pyrrhic victory if he cannot detach his antlers from those of the new corpse. Male caribou are sometimes seen in the wild pathetically trying to drag around the carcasses of their vanquished rivals, the pair locked together, forehead to forehead, in a lethal embrace.

But this time, there is no tossing of bodies; the encounter looks more like a rugby scrum, the opponents — Burgeo and Lowell are their names — merely leaning into each other to see who can push the other back. Burgeo seems the slighter of the two, and his rack is considerably less florid, but he is thicker about the shoulders. In this, their second skirmish, he shoves his backpedaling challenger like a blocking sled twenty yards or so until Lowell capitulates, yanks his antlers loose, and runs off in shame. For the moment, the dance has ended.

Clashes between breeding males are common in the wild, of course, but Burgeo and Lowell's romantic forays — indeed

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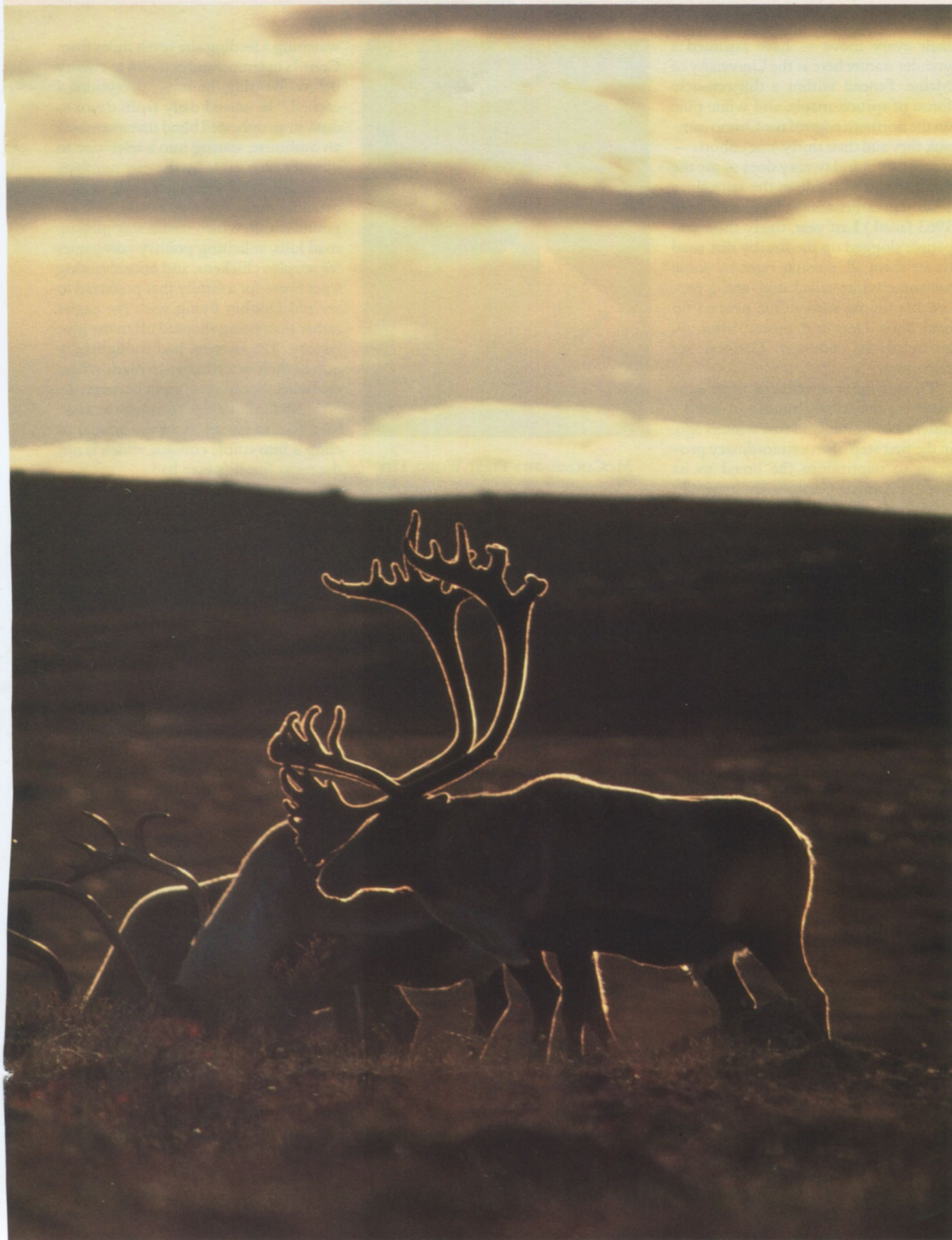

their every move — have assumed a grander stature here at the University of Maine. Fenced within a thirteen-acre forest of spruce, maple, and white pine on the northern edge of the Orono campus, they and their thirty-one cohorts — eleven calves and twenty does — are the first caribou to reside in the state since 1908. (An earlier reintroduction effort in 1963 failed.) Last year, thirty thousand people slogged up the nearby dirt road to see them all, passing right by some winsome white-tailed deer and a personable moose named Sue penned up next door. Deer and moose, after all, are relatively common. Caribou are celebrities.

These famous specimens were captured on the snowy tundra of southeastern Newfoundland two winters ago, in the first step of an extraordinary program to reintroduce the breed to its historic habitat. Caribou are generally renowned for their good nature — a trait that has caused the species much grief at times — but I visited them in October, in breeding season. Even before they locked antlers, Lowell and Burgeo had begun lining up females for their private harems, and had been prone to outrageous fits of jealousy and pique, acting like a pair of hormone-crazed Frankies on an island with twenty Annettes: lots of show-off threat displays, grunting, and general Muscle Beaching, culminating in poor Lowell's comeuppance.

Normally after suffering such a loss, a caribou will keep running until he encounters a smaller male that he might be able to push around — an option not open to Lowell here in the pen. So the two continued to go at it, with Burgeo the consistent victor, until Mark McCollough separated them with a fence. Then, because McCollough, a wildlife biologist, wanted to widen the genetic makeup of the offspring, he divided the herd between the two. Out of respect for Burgeo's dominance, McCollough awarded him twelve of the does and gave Lowell eight. This was a Solomonic solution that didn't sit well with Burgeo, who has made his feelings known ever since. Seven times he smashed down the wooden fence, and once he even broke a metal gate.

The does, for their part, remained busy trying to resist the stags. They would tiptoe about, nibbling lichen and sniffing the bushes; one of the stags would charge them, grunting lustily; the does would scatter like leaves before a breeze; the stag would reconsider; the does would resume sniffing. Morning, evening, another day.

McCollough's First Word, His Mother Says, Was "Caribou"

Mark McCollough is a shy, boyish thirty-year-old who achieved what passes for fame in Orono when he assumed leadership of the Caribou Project, which has captured the attention of the Maine public to an astonishing extent. Despite his youth, McCollough possesses stamina and resourcefulness of legendary proportions. In his previous assignment, working for the state, he monitored the development of Maine's bald eagles, which meant an entire winter of watching a feeding site seven miles from Canada in temperatures down to twenty below. Wearing, he says, "everything I owned," he stayed daily from dawn to dusk in an unheated blind that resembled an outhouse, staring into a telescope to identify each eagle by the tiny numbers on its leg band. Part of his task was to provide meat for the birds, 200,000 pounds in all, which meant scooping up road kills, soliciting poultry companies for surplus chickens, and once shooting a pet horse for a family that preferred to see old Dobbin flying with the eagles rather than being shunted off to the glue factory. The owners had thoughtfully gotten their veterinarian to mark where the bullet should go — right between the eyes. McCollough performed the task, then had to lay an ax to the animal to chop it into edible chunks, which is not the most fun he's ever had.

Caribou, McCollough believes, are like eagles. They are grand, intelligent creatures who somehow embody the spirit of the wilderness. According to his mother, McCollough's first spoken word was "caribou," which he had picked up from the nature books his parents read him. Growing up, he eschewed the typical high school social life in Freeport, Pennsylvania, for solitary rambles in the woods. He earned a B.S. in forestry, then took his master's and Ph.D. in wildlife biology at the University of Maine, marrying a colleague in the program. Six years ago he tamed an eagle named Bart that was recovering from a gunshot wound; now Bart perches on McCollough's fist like a parrot. McCollough has also developed a special fondness for one of the Orono caribou, a timid doe named Ami, and he can sometimes be seen whispering to her, telling her his troubles.

If the caribou are to come back to Maine, it will be through the diligent efforts of Mainers like McCollough. But that is only fair, since Mainers are responsible for the caribou's departure in the first place.

Caribou were once as plentiful in the North as buffalo were in the Midwest. In 1792, a pioneer named David Thompson reported seeing a herd crossing the Nelson River near Hudson Bay that was a veritable river of caribou. It ran an astonishing 180 miles long and a hundred yards wide, and probably contained three and a half million animals. Most likely, they were making their annual pilgrimage back to the herd's ancestral calving grounds to the north, following landmarks for hundreds of miles.

Two centuries later, sizable herds remain in Alaska, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories, but only one small herd remains below the Canadian border, in northern Idaho. According to a ninety-year-old report issued by the Maine Fish and Game Commission, the caribou "migrated from the state before the muzzle of a Winchester." In the nineteenth century, loggers in the state's great pine forests lived on caribou; a single animal could feed a man for weeks. Caribou were also an important source of clothing, the hides so warm and thick that

the animals themselves do not shiver in temperatures down to eighty below. And since it neither shrinks nor stretches, the hide made excellent webbing for snowshoes.

Worse for the caribou, the breed is pacifist. The animals' chief defense against wolves, their major predator, is to run away. In encounters with men, caribou often don't even try to escape, figuring as moose do that an animal with neither antlers nor fangs can't be all that dangerous. Man has taken full advantage of this judgment: some loggers used to hunt caribou with axes.

Yet man is not the only species to blame. Deer carry a parasite to which they are generally impervious, but which rather inconveniently kills caribou by burrowing into their brains. As the number of white-tailed deer rose in the nineteenth century, the number of caribou fell. Man caused the two species to come into contact. White-tailed deer spread into the Maine woods only after loggers created a favorable habitat for them by clearing the forest and allowing underbrush to grow up. At any rate, Maine's last reliably reported caribou was spotted on Mount Katahdin in 1908.

Various organizations have schemed to bring back the caribou through the years, but until Mark McCollough and the University of Maine project, the only group to attempt it was an outfit headed by a former U.S. Agriculture Department scientist named Dr. Lore Rogers and a state biologist named Francis Dunn, in 1963. The two researchers traded three hundred Maine ruffed grouse for twenty Canadian caribou, transported the caribou down from Newfoundland, and released them by helicopter on Katahdin's high tableland. For several months the caribou gamboled about the mountainside, performing their peculiar high-kicking dance in the deep snow; then, in the spring, the herd came down off the mountain, went into the woods, and was never seen again.

Everyone has a theory about what happened. McCollough believes that the caribou's migratory habits misled them in their new territory, a thousand miles from home. Unable to find any familiar landmarks, the caribou may have wandered aimlessly through the woods and eventually fallen prey to hunters and brain worm, just as their predecessors had.

Despite these discouraging results, Glenn Manuel refused to give up. At the time commissioner of the state's Inland Fisheries and Wildlife department, Manuel organized the current drive to reintroduce the caribou, back in 1986. "I wanted to correct a terrible wrong," he says. Because Inland Fisheries and Wildlife had no money for the project — its funds are limited to the yield from hunting and fishing licenses — he somewhat controversially solicited public contributions. By now Manuel has raised more than $125,000; $50,000 has come from former governor Horace Hildreth. Still, the Caribou Project reckons that at least $500,000 will be needed to see the undertaking through. Manuel assembled a board of advisers and he got the Maine Audubon Society to administer the project. And then he brought in McCollough.

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And so the project was begun, with considerable television coverage, in December 1986. Wildlife biologists tranquilized the animals from helicopters, and project team members gathered them up. Because flying was too expensive, the caribou were trucked 650 miles to ferryboats for the voyage to Nova Scotia, then trucked down to Maine. There is no such thing as good weather during a Newfoundland winter, only bad and worse. This was worse. A blizzard whited out the road for the overnight truck ride, and hurricane-force winds and forty-foot seas nearly capsized the ferry, aptly named the *Caribou*, as it chugged across the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The animals took the boat ride fairly well; McCollough was the one who felt seasick. But the journey eventually took its toll on the herd: two females succumbed to stress-related illnesses, and two more died afterward. Later, a stag died more mysteriously when, slimming down for breeding season, he lost the intestinal flora needed to process his food and starved to death. Still, when the animals trotted out of the truck and pranced around in the heavy snow of the Orono pens, project veterinarian Ladd Heldenbrand burst into tears at the sight.

Why would the plans succeed this time if they failed before? No one can be sure they will. Shane Mahoney, a Newfoundland specialist, told the Maine Audubon Society's magazine, *Habitat*, "[This] is undoubtedly an experiment, and there are no guarantees." McCollough is more optimistic. The key difference, he says, is that this time only the young caribou will be released initially, unlike in 1963, when the adults were freed as well. The migratory behavior that led the caribou astray back then is not instinctual, but is learned by example, through the extraordinarily tight bond between a doe and her calf. Confined in what has come to be referred to as the "Orono zoo," the adults will be unable to demonstrate the behavior. Also, the Caribou Project this time selected a herd from Avalon (along Newfoundland's eastern coast) that is relatively nonmigratory; the '63 collection came from a western herd accustomed to migrating as much as two hundred miles.

As for the brain worm danger, McCollough plans to release the caribou in an area where white-tailed deer are not prevalent, or are at least separated by altitude. He also notes that Maine's moose, historically prone to the disease, are no longer dying of it, so it is possible that caribou have developed an immunity as well. And finally, the caribou won't be shot, he believes, because of the steep penalties — $2,000 and three months in jail — recently enacted by the Maine legislature.

McCollough has thrown himself into the project. As the director and sole full-time staffer, he has made all the day-to-day decisions involving the caribou, and implemented most of them: constructing the pen, *(continued on page 113)*

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CARIBOU

(continued from page 67) dividing the herd, even running the backhoe to dig a trench outside their pen for a new water pipe. He has also driven all over the state giving talks to gun and fishing clubs, written magazine articles, drawn a caribou poster to sell to enthusiasts, and handled media inquiries from as far away as Japan. It is strange, he says, that wildlife biologists are trained for lonely jobs in the woods only to discover that the species they deal with most is Homo sapiens.

IN THE MIDDLE OF OCTOBER, MAINE'S new caribou started breeding. Burgeo went first. He had continued to try to work his will on his harem, and finally, on October 11, the does didn't scoot away. Instead, they held their ground, allowed Burgeo to sniff them all over, and even shared a few twigs they were nibbling from a branch. Finally, one let Burgeo climb up on her backside. He hooked his front legs about her chest and entered her. After all the prefatory grunting, the stag performed the actual deed in silence, taking only about a minute to finish. One caribou specialist, George Calef, has written that caribou copulation couldn't be any shorter "and still result in successful fertilization." But the quickness of the act isn't due to a lack of ardor: the females simply cannot support the heavy males, which are twice their weight, any longer than that. For the next week and a half, Burgeo went about inseminating his harem like a bumblebee pollinating a garden. Then, nine days after he had started, he was done for the year.

The calves conceived in October will arrive in late May and June. Now the only question is where to put them. Betsy Wyeth offered an island she owns in midcoastal Maine, but that suggestion was dismissed as impractical, since the caribou could easily swim the three and a half miles to the mainland. Five sites are currently being considered, but the leading candidate by far is Baxter State Park, home of Mount Katahdin. In the vast, 200,000-acre parkland the animals would be free to roam widely; white-tailed deer are scarce; and hunting is forbidden. More emotionally, there is a certain virtue in restoring the animals to the place where they were last seen, eighty years ago.

Yet there are problems with the site selection, and ironically the caribou's popularity, which provoked and has sustained the reintroduction project, may endanger its success in the end. The Baxter Park Authority is already distressed by the park's popularity among nature lovers, and fears that the caribou would only make the place more attractive. Jim Tierney, Maine's attorney general and the chairman of the authority, notes that cars are already being turned away from Baxter on some summer days. If thirty thousand people have come to Orono to see the caribou in pens, he says, at least that many will come to Baxter when the animals are roaming free.

Tierney also raises the specter of camera crews flying overhead in helicopters, disturbing the tranquility of the park. Though the caribou's ultimate destination won't be decided until this winter, Tierney is thinking that if Baxter State Park is to be their final home, the authority may conceal their precise location. If there is an irony in that secrecy as a final result of the public's clamor for caribou, Tierney does not see it. "The purpose of the reintroduction program was never to make the caribou a public spectacle," he says. And, of course, he's right.

BUT TO MCCOLLOUGH, BAXTER IS AN ideal choice, though he is sympathetic to the park authority's point of view. "They have their responsibility to the park," he says quietly. "I understand that." But he still hopes to return the caribou to Katahdin. Not long ago he did an acrylic painting of some caribou on Katahdin for a magazine cover, and he keeps the original at his small office at the university. With scientific precision it shows a great stag facing the breeze on the shoulder of the rugged mountain. The snow white mane on its chest stands out proudly against its handsome chocolate brown coat; its majestic antlers reach up to the heavens.

"You can't think of Katahdin," Mark McCollough says, "without thinking of caribou."

John Sedgwick, a frequent contributor, is the author of The Peaceable Kingdom, *published in January.*