

Opening day memories

by Robin West

The morning of August 10 last year found me making oatmeal and hot cocoa over a small camp stove on a hillside outside our lightweight nylon tent. Once breakfast was prepared I reached in the tent and gently shook my 13-year-old son awake. The day was going to be a hot one. Yesterday we had hiked to our campsite near the Indian Creek Glacier; the evening before we had motored across Tustumena Lake and hiked up to Lake Emma.

Temperatures had reached the mid-80s, making the climbing slower. Today was going to be no different, though we had no plans to hike far; rather, we would spend most of the day glassing for mountain goats. In my son's pocket was a goat permit for the area. He also had a harvest ticket for a Dall sheep and a registration permit for a cow caribou. We were looking for goats, but if a full curl ram appeared we would change course, or if we were unsuccessful with sheep and goats, we might look for a caribou on the hike out.

After breakfast we stuffed our gear for the day into our packs and worked our way to the end of a vegetated escarpment where we spent much of the day with binoculars glued to our eyes. We spotted several goats—all were tucked away across the gorge we sat beside, and high up along waterfalls and cliff faces. It was too hot for the goats to move much. Later in the evening we did spot a few goats on our side of the gorge a couple of miles away. We decided to try to find them the next day.

It took several hours the next morning to work our way into position where we had last seen the goats, but they were not there. Carefully we moved along the rim of the gorge, peering over the edge here and there looking for any sign of the animals we were seeking. Eventually we found them, lying among some boulders immediately below us. The animals were nannies with kids, however, and we watched them for a time without disturbing them. Female goats were legal, but not if they had young, and we were looking for a billy anyway.

We spent several more days hiking and glassing the countryside. The weather turned and we spent one long night in our small tent escaping the wind and

rain. The goats remained in inaccessible places, but we did supplement our dried food diet with blue berries, and with ptarmigan my son shot with birdshot in my .44 magnum revolver.

We saw eight Dall sheep rams, but none of them were “for sure” legal. Their horns must complete a 360-degree arc for the animal to be fair game. On the hike out we also saw a herd of caribou, but as irony would have it they were all bulls, of no use for our cow permit. It mattered little, anyway. We had seen much game and enjoyed some of the most beautiful country in the world. We had tasted some wild foods, drank clear clean water from a spring, basked in the sunshine on red-carpeted tundra, got some great exercise, and enjoyed each other's company. We had made memories.

On a later trip in the fall my son took his first black bear. That trip too created great memories and resulted in some of the best summer sausage our family has ever eaten. The bear hunt was no greater a success though than our earlier outing in search of goats. Each and every trip into the Alaskan wilderness with close friends or family can and should be a success, whether you take game or not. These are special times—times that allow for a degree of closeness, peace, friendship, honesty, and awareness that are hard to replicate in today's hustle and bustle.

Not everyone is able to backpack into the mountains, and not everyone will choose to go hunting, but my hope is that everyone will take advantage in some fashion of the many blessings offered by the great outdoors and our local wild creatures. Take the time to get out with special friends or family, to hunt or fish, to camp or hike, to look for animals or take pictures, to go canoeing or rafting, to picnic or just go for a drive. If you do take the time, you too will be rewarded with something of infinite value: precious memories.

Robin West is the Manager of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and enjoys sharing his love of the outdoors with family and friends. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.