

Caribou and Satellite Collars

By Dave Abernethy

O.K.....here's a group of animals off to our 11 o'clock.....here's 7 of 'em and the cow we want is on the far left.....you should see her now, she's comin' up on your side.

Got it!.....Is she still that one on the far left?

Yes!

OK.....I'm goin' out on the skid.....net gun is out the door and the round is chambered.....altitude good.....here she comes.....lookin' good.....lookin' good.....

BOOM

Net away!.....we've got a good drop on her!.....she's down and looks good!

That was the dialogue crackling over the head sets in our helmets. The helicopter worked to maneuver and fight the slight winds that beautiful day above the barrens in a remote location of the Eastern arctic. The whole event was lightening fast. From about 500 feet above the ground the Biologist picked the barren ground caribou cow that he'd like to have captured. As we started our descent I climbed out on the skid of the helicopter putting all the faith I have in the harness strapped around me. I grabbed the net gun, chambered the round, locked the bolt and lined it up on the caribou. From when the caribou was chosen for this capture, to when the net was deployed that brought the caribou rolling to the snow covered ground, only mere seconds went by. It had to be. Guidelines established by government at the time insisted that we kept our chase / capture times to no more that 1 minute. Running a caribou in the dead of winter at full throttle like that is stressful, on me and the caribou. It was already bad enough that we had to handle the caribou to get it out of the net and put a satellite collar around its neck. One could only imagine what that animal was thinking. Alien abduction came to my mind.

I've been working in the North for over twelve years now as a Wildlife Technician and Wildlife Officer with our Territorial Government. I have had opportunities and experiences that only a small handful of people can relate to.

Some of my most memorable moments included the work I was involved with that monitored the movements of barren ground caribou along the shores of Hudson Bay and the Eastern mainland of the NWT, now Nunavut. This work was intense! We had to secure the contract for the helicopter being sure that we also had an experienced pilot. The type of flying was just too fast and too low to the ground for the lesser experienced. We had to order the satellite collars from Mesa, Arizona and make sure that they were activated at just the right time. This was important in that the collars cycles had to correspond to the satellites passing over head. It would have been a very bad waste of

money if these collars were turning on when there was no satellites above it and then turning off when there was! We had to ensure that all the capture equipment was up to the task. Did we have enough .308 blank rounds, was the net gun clean and operating properly, were the nets loaded properly, was my safety harness ready to do its job?. So many questions and things to do, the list mentioned here only barely scratches the surface.

The responsibility of ensuring that all the equipment was ready and that all the necessary arrangements had been made distracted me from my future task. I would be strapped to the side of a helicopter in enough winter gear that I must have looked like the Michelin Tire Man. The temperatures in early March in that part of the Eastern Arctic often saw highs of only -30° Celsius and then there's the wind chill factor as the helicopter chased the caribou at speeds in excess of 50 km/h. I can't even begin to explain what kind of rush it was!

Why did we have to do this you ask?

Biologists have written reports and scientific papers explaining this, I will explain it in a simplified paragraph. Firstly, we captured the caribou during the winter months when the caribou could be protected from the rough terrain by a blanket of snow and ice. It makes a difference, think about it, high speed impacts with rocks and willows or snow, which would you prefer? The satellite collars send us location information in the form of Latitude and longitude to our office computers every 4 to 5 days and daily during calving in June. This location information allows us to map and monitor caribou on their summer and winter ranges as well as migration routes. We can more closely monitor and observe calving and post calving activity which begins in June. We have the ability with this technology to observe caribou activity as it relates to other land uses that we as people inflict on the caribou range and habitat. Having satellite collars on caribou makes a Biologists job a lot easier when it comes time to find caribou when surveys are to be conducted. Hunters also benefit from this information. The Northwest Territories and Nunavut are huge areas of land, I mean really, really big. Satellite collar technology is just one tool in our bag of tricks that lets us get our job done. Satellite telemetry programs exist today in Canada's north on many of its caribou populations.

It's a job, it's an adventure and I love it!