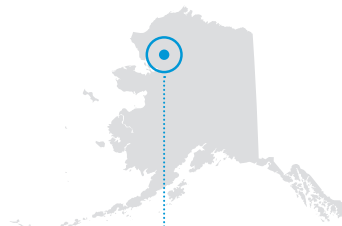




Home

Back to living instead of talking about it

BY NICK JANS



Ambler

With good help from his grandson, Leo, Clarence prepares a campfire.

STAND AT THE CHOPPING BLOCK, working my way through a pile of dry spruce rounds. The ax rises and falls, each thunk like a heartbeat, echoing in the silence. It's a frost-tinged early September morning at my friend Clarence Wood's cabin, forty miles below Ambler. Perched on a high bluff, his place commands a huge sweep of land, river, and sky. Yellow leaves steam in the warming sun; across the river, the hoarse cry of a raven is answered by another.

Seventy-nine-year-old Clarence sits on the steps with coffee and a cigarette, nursing his always-sore back. His three-year-old grandson, Leo, plays with a stick in the dirt, making motor noises. Inside, Clarence's daughter, Ila is finishing up breakfast dishes as her husband, Dave, putters down by the boat. Their dog, an

aloof chow named Bear, lies in the sun, self-appointed camp guardian.

A flicker of motion catches my eye a half mile downstream—a dark shape along a cut bank.

"Black bear!" I say, but as Dave lifts his binoculars, I recognize that straight-backed, effortless glide.

"Black wolf," Dave replies.

Clarence nods, squinting in the general direction of the wolf with his cataract-dimmed eyes, his weathered face impassive. It's too far and moving away from us.

What they and the wolf are hoping for is caribou. In a land hundreds of miles off the road grid, we're all looking for the next meal. As I watch the wolf trot down the sunlit yellow bank and fade into the land, I'm so choked with emotion I can barely hold on to myself. No one seems to notice,

During the fall migration of caribou, Clarence Wood, 79 years young, is never far from his rifle.



probably a good thing.

I'm of course thrilled to see the wolf, but it's far more than that. I'm overwhelmed with gratitude for the autumn morning, my friends, this bend in the river, the ax in my hands, the scent of damp leaves and wood smoke, and the boundless country I've known for more than half my life—all these things, and dozens more. I'm here, I tell myself. I'm home.

I'd just spent three months a thousand miles to the south, on big cruise ships in the glacier-draped fiords of Southeast—floating resorts with crystal chandeliers, casinos, showbiz entertainment, and people from around the world. My job was to bring them a taste of wild Alaska—stand on a stage before hundreds of folks in a theater, show pictures and tell stories about wolves and caribou and traveling arctic wilderness. Meanwhile, I seldom had to lift a hand to do anything for myself. Meals, made beds, and freshly folded laundry appeared as if by magic, conveyed by smiling faces. Everyone was appreciative and friendly, but the place I knew as home, and the life that went along with it, seemed light years away. Just four days after my last cruise, I was packed and headed north.

Too often, nostalgic memories and built-up expectations lead to disappointment. This time, though, I couldn't have hoped for more. As soon as I stepped off

the single-engine Cessna mail plane in the Inupiaq village of Ambler, population 250, a dozen familiar faces shook hands or hugged me and said those magic words, *Welcome home*. The Jade Mountains, just by being there, whispered the same.

Old Don Williams was there as he'd promised, to haul me and my gear down the hill to my place, past clumps of birch and aspen blazing with autumn colors. And there my house sat, waiting for me. Of course, I'd have a few days of work ahead—everything from unpacking to hauling water to turning wrenches. Plus I had a couple of past-due writing deadlines and some work to do on the house.

But before I knew it, I was headed downriver with Clarence, Dave, and Ila. I'd just gone down the hill to say hello and help them load up for their trip, and instead got invited along.

Thinking of all I had to do, I politely refused. But then it struck me: *What the hell was I thinking about? Why was I here, anyhow?* I was packed and back down the hill in under fifteen minutes. Never mind if I'd remembered extra socks or my coffee cup.

There I was, fresh off on another luxury cruise—this time piled with gear in the

bow of a seventeen-foot skiff, headed down a wild arctic river, to sleep on a plywood floor, haul water in buckets, cook food we gathered on a camp stove, and keep warm with wood we cut and split. Ports of call would include Seth's place above the Hunt River, fishing and berry-picking spots, the Great Kobuk Sand Dunes, and wherever the caribou decided to cross. No going to the theater for entertainment or the fitness center to work up a sweat.

At Seth's, we nosed into the bank and gave a shout toward the cabin. Seth, Stacey, and their daughter, China, came down to sit in the sun, visit, and talk about what we'd seen in the country. Berry picking and a hike to the Sand Dunes the next day? Sure, they'd boat down to join us. And we continued down the river as the arctic twilight painted the sky.

That night at Clarence's cabin, fresh pike filets were guests of honor in the frying pan. We caught a half dozen eating-size fish at a slough mouth where wolf, moose, and bear tracks poked the sand. That night, I stayed up late by a fire, watching northern lights reflected in the river.

So it went for three perfect days: visiting friends, wilderness travel, camp chores, and food gathering merged into a seamless whole. Never mind that the only caribou we saw were out of range, or that the big pike Dave hoped for didn't strike. Over the next weeks, there would be other chances. Most important of all, I was home again, back to living instead of talking about it. 🍓

*Nick Jans has been writing for Alaska nearly 30 years. His new book, *The Giant's Hand*, is available at nickjans.com.*



Berry-picking time is good family and friend time. Nick's good friends, Seth Kantner and family, enjoy a little nature's candy.