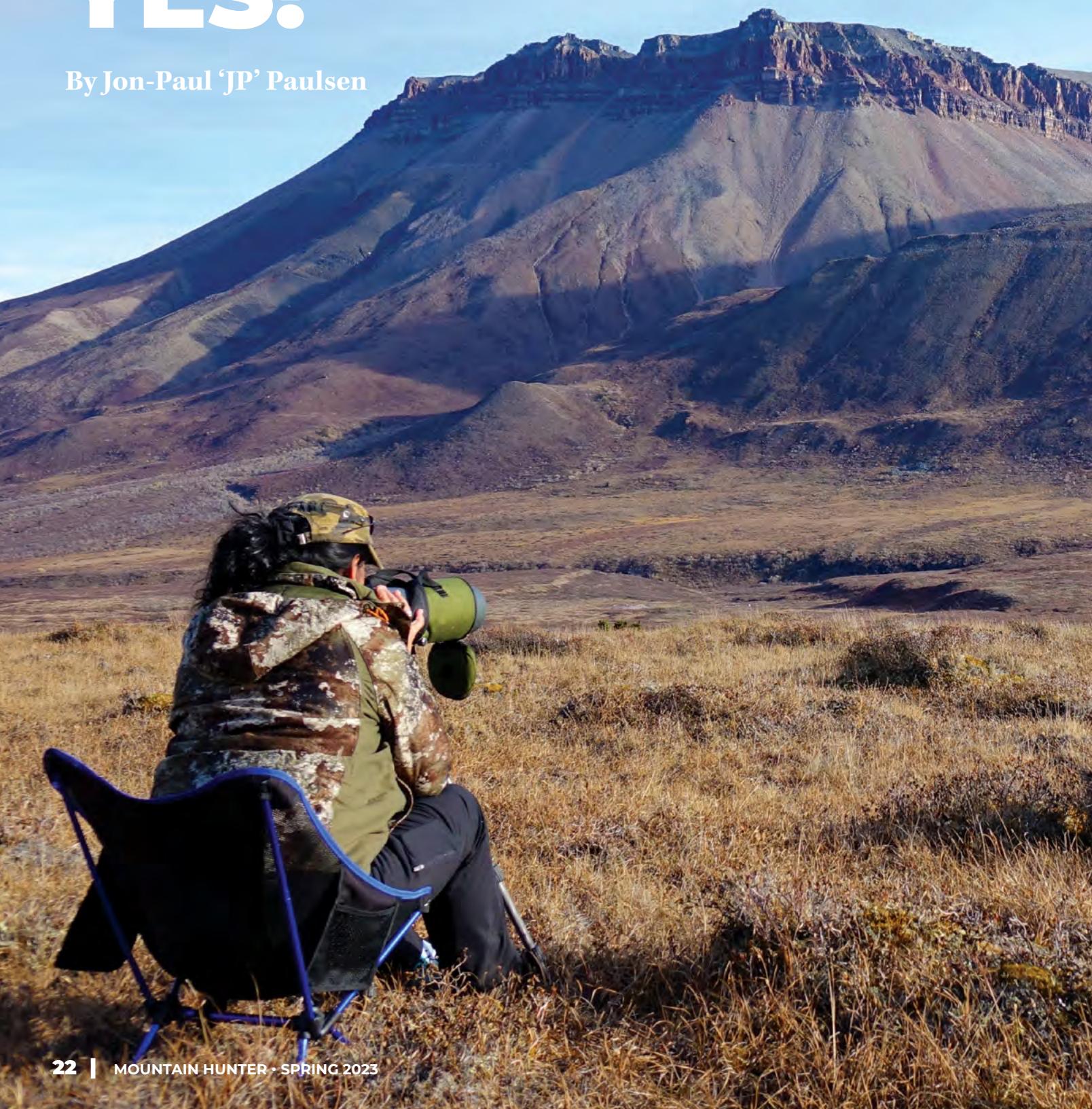


SHE SAID YES!

By Jon-Paul 'JP' Paulsen



Long before I was old enough to hunt big game, I tagged along with my father as he hunted high desert mule deer, pronghorn antelope, called predators, and pursued waterfowl. We lived very rural, and at 8 years old, “big game” hunting for me consisted of chasing blacktail jackrabbits through the tall sage with my Chesapeake Bay retriever, and a twenty-pound bear recurve bow. Even at that age, it was simple, I was hooked on hunting for life.

Through young eyes, I read the outdoor magazine stories of hunters traveling far north, taking float planes into remote areas in pursuit of caribou, moose and even the white ghost (Dall sheep). We call them dream hunts for a reason, and the far north float plane hunt was mine.

I met Jacqueline in high school in 1983 (...sorry Jacqueline). While we did not date back then, she had grabbed my heart from the first second I laid eyes on her. Life has an interesting way of working out, and our paths crossed a few times until finally, I got the nerve to ask her out (25 years or so later, but who is counting?). I have always loved that she is adventurous, so in 2014 I asked her, “If you could hunt anything anywhere, what would it be?” Without hesitation, she replied “Caribou!”

I began squirrelling away funds and spent hour upon hour researching the hunt. For Christmas in 2018, I presented her with a caribou hunt proposal and asked if she would like to go to the Northwest Territory, in 2019, on a hunt with Raven’s Throat Outfitters. She said “YES!” and the dream hunt was on!!!

The days drag but time flies, and before we knew it, we were in Norman Wells, NWT where we met others in our hunt group. A van arrived, and took us to a float plane hangar, where we repacked and weighed our gear. The hunting community is wonderful, and we felt as though we were amongst friends before the Twin Otter float plane was even fully loaded. As the pilot engaged the hand throttle, the plane rumbled like a late sixties muscle car. Jacqueline gripped my leg tight, and I could not get the grin off my face. Our dream hunt was finally coming true!

The flight of 120 air miles through snow covered peaks offered a few glimpses of Dall sheep and endless miles of untouched wilderness. The float plane landed smoothly on Hay Hook Lake, and we were warmly greeted by the entire Raven’s Throat team. Griz and Ginger are the owners of Raven’s Throat Outfitters and right away we knew we had chosen the right outfitter. They could not have been more professional and treated us as family right out of the chute. They introduced us to our hunt guide James Elliot. A strong handshake and humble mannerism confirmed what we already knew. No surprises, this outfit was top notch.

Our gear was unloaded and taken to our sleeping quarters by the guides while Griz and Ginger encouraged the hunters to head on up to the dining hall for supper. The territory which



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Raven's Throat Outfitters may hunt is over six thousand square miles. To best manage hunters' time in this expansive territory, hunters are deployed to their perspective hunt camps via a Bell Jet Ranger helicopter. As with many areas in North America, the NWT does not allow hunting for 12-hours after hunters fly. For that reason, after eating an unbelievable supper, hunters are promptly moved to their remote spike hunt camps to start the clock.

Upon our arrival at spike camp, we quickly went to work setting up camp with James. The country was breathtakingly beautiful, and I did some brief spotting. No animals.

The next morning, we awoke to dense fog, and as the early sun strained to poke through the vision-choking layer, we enjoyed breakfast and coffee. When the fog finally lifted, we found ourselves surrounded by hundreds of mountain caribou, as if they appeared out of the fog itself.

James, a seasoned NWT guide, stated that he had never seen anything quite like it. We packed a lunch, pulled on our packs, and headed though the marshy bottom to a ridge where we could glass more country. The caribou were everywhere we looked, it was unexpected, and nothing less than overwhelming. As the morning progressed, we glassed bull after bull, and James coached Jacqueline on field judging mountain caribou. Soon we were singling out potential bulls to further evaluate. Jacqueline was not looking to shoot an animal on day one, and James respectfully cautioned that although there were hundreds of caribou, they could just as easily disappear as the fog had, with little sign and no chance of catching them.

Hours of vigilant glassing produced three larger than average bulls. The large sweeping antler frames stood out from those we had watched thus far, and I heard James softly say, "We need to get that caribou." Jacqueline agreed. The bull moved across the valley approximately 2000 yards away. James and I glassed, trying to map a route which might allow us to approach. Jacqueline broke the silence, "What is that behind the bull?" James and I swung our spotting scopes, it was a large white male wolf, chasing the bull Jacqueline now wanted. James threw his pack on and said, "Let's go, we have to cut them off!"

James hustled down the slope with the two of us close behind. As we neared the point where the timber ended and the sparsely vegetated valley floor began, he dropped his pack and sat down with his binoculars. I stacked my pack on his and Jacqueline eased in behind them, using the packs as a make-shift shooting bench. With James giving the signal, I ranged the bull and Jacqueline squeezed off one well-placed heart shot. She had done it, successfully completing her dream hunt, and with an amazing, heavy antlered bull to boot!

James caped the head, and we boned out the meat. Following two days of wolf hunting, we were picked up and taken back to base camp where our cozy cabin named the "Wolf Hunter"

awaited us. The next day found Jacqueline and I sipping wine on our little cabin deck, marveling at the view, and listening to a loon's lonely call. It was my birthday, and I had a surprise planned. After all the years, I was nervous. I got down on one knee, and Jacqueline looked at me in askance. I pulled a little camouflage pouch from my pocket, removed a diamond ring, and proposed to my high school sweetheart. After asking me "What were you thinking?" she said "YES!"

Great food, campfires, comradery, and a few pocket-scrabble games later, we wrapped up our 2019 dream hunt in the NWT. Griz and Ginger could not have been better hosts, and friends. So much so that we could not see ourselves never returning, and we booked another hunt.

COVID threw a wrench in the middle of, well, all things normal. We pushed our next NWT adventure out to 2022, and mid-September of 2022 found us headed back to Hay Hook Lake! This time, Jacqueline was hunting moose and I would be hunting caribou. The rumble of the Twin Otter as we throttled up for takeoff reminded me that Jacqueline had not lost any strength in her grip, and again, I could not wipe the smile from my face.

The Twin landed smoothly, and we were greeted by Griz, Ginger and the entire team. We recognized most of the guides, a testament to a top-shelf outfit! We were greeted as family, with hugs instead of handshakes. Oh, and our guide? It was Alex "Al-a-Blamma" Elliot, the son of James Elliot from our 2019 hunt! We knew Al, as he had guided for Raven's Throat in 2019, and we could not have been more pleased.

Matt, the skilled pilot of the Bell Jet Ranger, held a safety stand-down about "chopper" etiquette and Ginger pulled us aside to say that we needed to check our rifles at the range, and hustle to our cabin quarters to pack five days of gear. We were the first group to deploy to the field.

Forty miles from base camp, the chopper gently touched down, dropping Jacqueline and I, with our gear, on a long willow covered ridge in the heart of moose country (we hoped). Al had been dropped an hour prior with tents and his gear, so camp was set. We tossed our packs and gear in the tent, and with the evening light fading quickly, we set our spotting scopes. Al spotted a large bull with nine cows on a ridge approximately three miles away across a large gorge. The sun faded behind the distant horizon, temperatures dropped, and we settled into the tent for a Peak Refuel freeze-dried dinner. We felt right at home and slipped into our sleeping bags for the night.

In the early morning darkness, I heard Al's voice, "Good morning, I have coffee." He stepped into the tent as I fired up the little wood stove, and the day's hunt strategy conversations began!

Sure enough, the large old bull was still managing his cows along the same distant, timber covered ridge. Unwelcome



news, the mountain winds were strong, and blowing inconsistently. Attempting a stalk would be very risky and possibly blow the entire herd out of the country. The next day and a half proved to be similar with respect to inconsistent winds. We were seeing moose, bulls and cows, but all were miles away. Continued glassing revealed a handful of caribou around the 5-mile mark, two grizzly bears, two wolves, and a black bear. Utterly amazing.

The following morning, Jacqueline was ready to make a move, winds or not! We glassed again to be certain no moose had moved in close during the night. We pulled on our packs and began wading through the thick brush towards the deep gorge which ran between our camp and the first bull moose we had spotted. He was still hanging with his cows on the ridge we now called “bull ridge.” The travel was slow and steady, with Al grunting periodically to help account for the noise we were making. We worked our way down the willow-covered slope to the edge of the gorge. We glassed for a bit, and heard a long low grunt, below and to our left. We all looked at each other... moose? Sure enough, we heard another grunt, verifying our suspicions. It was on!

The wind direction was good, and for once, it was steadily coming from the north. We slowly worked our way along the ridge, glassing, moving, glassing, moving. Then, a flash of an antler paddle, the moose was a good bull! I ranged him at 563 yards, steeply below us. He had one cow, and chased her periodically back and forth through the timber. We decided to split up. I was to remain at the vantage point on the ridge to keep an eye on the bull, while Al and Jacqueline made a move to the next finger ridge, where they might have an opportunity to sneak in closer.

As they worked worked down the finger ridge, Al looked back with his binoculars. I motioned the final movement the bull had made with his cow, Al gave a wave and disappeared with Jacqueline. I watched the bull rake his antlers aggressively against a clump of willow brush, grunting occasionally at his cow as he pushed her back and forth. I knew it would be some time before Al and Jacqueline could possibly position for a clear shot, if at all. The willow grew thick on the finger ridge... *Boom!* I didn't expect it! The bull moved and was out of sight. Jacqueline had done it! A single heart shot at 331 yards. I hiked down to find Jacqueline and Al-a-Blamma all smiles.

After thanks was given for this unbelievable moose, photos were snapped and Al began caping. Jacqueline asked “What is my job?” to which Al replied, “You are on bear watch.” This was thick grizzly country, and bear awareness is a big part of safely hunting the NWT. The guides carry InReach devices to maintain satellite communication with base camp. When a moose is taken, the guide messages for the “Moose Extraction Team” to come assist. It wasn't but 45 minutes before we heard the steady *whop, whop, whop* of the chopper coming in. I grabbed a moose paddle and flashed it for Matt (the pilot) so see. The Team had arrived!

Jacqueline's moose was ‘slung’ back to base camp and heavy rain set in. The Extraction Team, along with Jacqueline and I, pulled on our rain gear and waited, reliving the details of the hunt, tired and grateful for such an experience.

Matt is an experienced helicopter pilot. Fighting wildfire with his chopper is his “normal” job, and he flies in the off-season for Raven's Throat. Through the heavy rain, we heard the chopper returning. The “ceiling” was dropping quickly, and the weather was getting worse. Matt picked us up and flew us the

40 miles back to base camp. The guides would return with the chopper the next day to retrieve our camp and gear, once the storm had passed.

A few warm meals and two nights in our base-camp cabin allowed us to dry out our rain soaked gear.

Then Ginger came down to notify us that we were moving out to a caribou camp. We quickly grabbed a few days worth of gear, and were off again!

Caribou camp was completely different country. Thirty miles from base camp, in the opposite direction from our moose camp. It, too, was breathtaking. The area consisted of a large winding river bottom canyon, surrounded by towering rocky cliffs. From time to time, we would hear the smashing impact of huge natural rock slides high in the cliffs above. It was sensational, and made one feel small.

The plan was for Matt to drop us in an existing camp, and pick up the caribou hunter who had just taken a nice bull.

We made the swap, threw our gear in our new tent, and grabbed our spotting scopes. From our campsite, we could see for miles. There were a few caribou scattered about, and one very nice bull about a mile or so from camp. We had to wait until the next day to hunt, so we settled in, ate a warm dinner, laughed, and shared fun stories with Al-a-Blamma.

As so often happens, the large bull was nowhere to be found the next morning. Al and I spotted two wolves working the opposite side of the river bottom. They were not overly interested in the caribou, and thankfully, they slipped through without causing much disturbance. Our glassing continued.

Finally, a distant herd of caribou held two sizable bulls, one of which really had my attention. The three of us decided to close the gap to get a closer look. Hours of hiking and a river crossing later, we were 800 yards from the bull. He and his herd of 40 caribou were all laying down. Al looked at me, and I knew what he was thinking. I gave him the thumbs up, this bull was a shooter. Due to the location of the herd, we had to let them move before we could advance. Just about the time we wondered if the herd would move before dark, they all got up and began moving. As hunters of the far north know, a caribou's gait can eat up territory in a hurry. We had to move quickly. Hunched over and trekking in squishy boots (from crossing the river), we closed the gap. We had to adjust multiple times before the right shot presented itself. At 403 yards, with light fading, I gave Al the thumbs up. I waited for the final signal from Al, took a breath, let some out, and squeezed the trigger.

There was no Extraction Team this go-around. We gave thanks, took photos, and went to work on caping and boning out meat. Jacqueline was back on bear watch! As Al and I worked, the sun dipped below the horizon. A noisy raven flew curiously overhead, squawking loudly. I laughed as Jacqueline announced



Outfitter SPOTLIGHT



Raven's Throat Outfitters

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to the raven, “Nothing to see here!” We didn’t need to attract any uninvited guests in large predator country! We bagged the meat and placed it on large rocks for pick up the next day. Al loaded the cape and head on his pack, and we began the hike back across the valley to camp with headlamps turned on.

After a few near heart attacks from ptarmigan erupting at our feet, we reached the banks of the Redstone River. Not able to selectively choose our crossing in the dark, we went right in. Al in front, Jacqueline in the middle, and me bringing up the rear. As we crossed, the river reached thigh-high, I took a firm hold of Jacquelines pack in hopes of keeping her on her feet if she stumbled. It was exhilarating, and we crossed without incident. A two-hour trek found us back in camp, firing up the wood stove to dry out, and fix a little dinner. The following day we were extracted by the chopper and returned to base camp.

Our remaining time in base camp was amazing as well. The cooks, Ron and Hilda, surprised me with a wonderful back country birthday cake which was enjoyed by all! Several nights we woke to the loud and lonely sound of wolves howling, and the aurora borealis did not disappoint either. Griz and Ginger

offer buckles to the guides who guide their hunters to the largest animal, for each species type, for the season. It’s a fun incentive and highly coveted by the guides. We were humbled, and grateful, to hear that Al-a-Blamma took home the moose buckle for 2022! Thank you, Sir, and to Griz, Ginger and the team as well!

The Mackenzie Mountains will touch your soul, and without a healthy respect for them, they’ll take it just as quickly. Griz, Ginger and the team, work tirelessly to ensure that hunters’ dreams come true, safely. Our time in the Mackenzie Mountains was coming to close. Prior to making the trip, Jacqueline and I had discussed how this, our second trip to Ravens Throat Outfitters, might compare to the first trip. We knew it would be inspiring, as it is more than a hunt, it’s an adventure. As it turned out, in every way, our second trip was more than we ever could have expected. We made new friends, and reconnected with old ones. We sat at the table in the lodge, enjoying our final morning in camp, and I asked Jacqueline: “Would you like to come back for a sheep/caribou combo hunt?” ...and she said “YES!” 🐦🐦



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