



Scientist at Work

Notes From the Field

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Surveying Wildlife in Alaska

By [STEVE ZACK](#)

Steve Zack A photo of caribou near oilfield structures from a previous trip to Alaska.

While packing the waterproof “dry bag” with clothes and supplies from my duffel, I find I am missing the bug hat. I have the right clothes and layers to keep me warm and dry across changing Arctic conditions, but finding the bug hat represents the difference between being sane and insane on warm windless days. It is a baggy net of sanity.

We are at our Anchorage hotel in advance of our journey. Eleven of us, nine eager folks like me and two guides, are preparing for our raft trip down the Utukok River into the Utukok River Uplands Special Area of the [National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska](#). We are debating the trade-offs of chest waders versus rain pants and rubber boots as the daily wear on the rafts. We will fly to Kotzebue from Anchorage via Alaska Airlines, then be flown by bush plane to the makeshift landing strip near the headwaters of the Utukok River, just south of the Brooks Range.

We will be in the most remote area in North America, as measured by distance from roads and communities. We will raft down the Utukok through foothills; if the timing is right, we will be surrounded by the largest caribou herd in Alaska while they are bearing their young. They number some 375,000 strong now and have recently been half a million. With such potential prey are predators — wolves, grizzly bear and wolverine. We could see a lot.

I have organized this opportunity for five of my

Steve Zack, left, with Kent Redford, Joel Berger, Jodi Hilty, and Steve Sanderson.

peers with the [Wildlife Conservation Society](#) and three interested others to experience and explore this remote region for eight full days. We will raft down this rarely traveled river to gain imagery and insight on this important area, and perhaps to identify how best to initiate wildlife studies to highlight this region’s conservation importance. It is one of three large Special Areas in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, which is the largest public landscape in the United States.

We join many others who are seeking protection of these special areas in advance of oil, gas and mining development in this landscape rich in extractive and wildlife resources. We seek a balance of energy development and wildlife conservation in this place rich in both resources. It is an uphill conservation battle. A large part of that battle is in engaging

an American public unaware of this remote, immense public landscape and its tremendous importance to wildlife. Currently, there is virtually no development in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska's 23.5 million acres (bigger than 13 of our states). That will soon change. Leases have been sold throughout much of the coastal plain region of the reserve. Mining interests are pressing in the southern part, in the Brooks Range and in the coal-rich Utukok Uplands. Our interest is in securing that balance in advance, rather than fighting for every acre, every lease.

Sanity assured (at least with regard to mosquitoes). The black bug hat was found in the corner of the black duffel. I am packed and ready. Tomorrow at 4 a.m. we start our trip.

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