

TRAVELS AMONG THE GWICH'IN

BERT GILDART AND JANE GILDART

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Abstract

Bert and Jane Gildart have been traveling among the Gwich'in people for over 12 years. During the 1991 to 1992 school year, they worked as teachers, then returned for four more summers as summer school teachers. Because their passions had been aroused, they then resumed the type of work Bert had conducted for almost 25 years: specifically, work as a writer and photographer for many national magazines, including Smithsonian. The following represents an excerpt from one of Bert's many stories that he wrote about the Gwich'in Indians and the land upon which they depend: specifically, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. This introduction was part of a story that appeared in National Wildlife Magazine, and it provided much of the material the Gildart's used in their slide lecture, "Hunting For Their Future."

Key Words

Arctic Circle, porcupine caribou, native culture

Above timberline, above Arctic Village, Alaska—120 miles (193 km) above the Arctic Circle—my wife, Jane, and I watch with Kenneth and Caroline Frank, a Gwich'in Indian couple, as the first caribou of the season return from summer calving grounds located along the Arctic Ocean. Though Kenneth is a hunter, he restrains himself. Customarily, the Gwich'in permit the first caribou of the season to pass so they won't turn tail and alarm the closely trailing major herd. "We should wait," says Kenneth. "There will be more in a day or so."

For Kenneth and Caroline—and for all the Gwich'in—the return of the caribou is a major event. For many of this most northern of all Indian tribes, spanning 2 nations in about 13 different small villages, the return means that stomachs will be full when it is 70 degrees below zero (-57 °C) and game is not moving. But there is more. Now, when the caribou return, the migration is cause for even more celebration, for it means the Gwich'in have thwarted another year of attempts to undermine their way of life. If petroleum companies have their way, they will



Figure 1. Last summer, the Wilderness Society flew the Gildarts into the heart of the calving grounds for the Porcupine Caribou herd. Although petroleum companies refer to the area as the 1002 Area, it is, in fact, the exact area cow caribou seek out because of the abundance of protein-rich cotton grass. No other Arctic area so completely satisfies the requirements of cows and their calves as does this area, which is located adjacent to the Arctic Ocean.

construct oilrigs in the precise area where members of the Porcupine Caribou Herd have always calved. The Gwich'in are firmly united in their denunciation of these efforts by oil companies, and say so in a variety of ways that represent their concerns for themselves and the caribou.

“Our children draw pride from the caribou,” says Caroline. “The herd reaffirms our way of life.”

“If we are to save our culture and prevent social ills,” says Gwich'in minister Trimble Gilbert, “we must preserve the calving grounds.”

“Our culture is thousands of years old,” says Kenneth. “Is just a few years of oil worth all that? Or will the white man always want to destroy the land and the most beautiful animals on it?”

That night we return to Arctic Village to wait for the herd's return, and dream of the days ahead. Caribou! Magnificently antlered animals. Great aggregates of tawny beasts, flaying the tundra with their hooves,



Figure 2. “An Arctic waste land?” That’s the way some politicians interested in promoting oil exploration in the core calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou herd have described it. But pictures are worth a thousand words, and Bert and Jane Gildart took exception to such statements made on Tim Russert’s “Meet the Press”.



Figure 3. Moses Sam was a man who had once followed a trade route to the Arctic Ocean, which the Gildarts also followed.



Figure 4. Had Gwich'in matriarch Sarah Abel of Old Crow, Yukon Territories lived another year, her life would have spanned 3 centuries. When she passed away, most thought she was 102. She was born into a stone-age hunting culture and accompanied her parents, who followed the season of the salmon, the pulse of the caribou.

white chests glimmering in these endless Arctic days, streaming along the flanks of Datchanlee Mountain... (The lecture continued, recounting not only the Gwich'in way of life but provided a glimpse into the

life history of caribou. As well, the lecture recounted the annual subsistence cycle of the Gwich'in Indians of northeastern Alaska and northwest Canada.)



Figure 5. For 1 year, the Gildarts lived in this remote cabin in Venetie, Alaska, gathering information for their many stories and stock photographs of the Gwich'in Indians and their concerns about the Arctic Refuge.