

Screw Nature

Contributed by Drew Pogge

There was an entire herd up there, 10, maybe 15 of them, climbing over rocky outcrops and around four-story cliffs. Like 2,000-feet up a snow-spackled wall in northern Labrador's Torngat Mountains National Park was the most natural place in the world for tundra caribou. But a 40° alpine face isn't, in fact, a very natural place for cloven-hoofed, 400-pound herbivores. And really, it's not a very natural place for me either. I'd probably be better served pursuing stand-and-hurl avocations like horseshoes, bocce-ball, axe-throwing—even bowling—rather than backcountry skiing. Yet somehow there we all were; hooves and helmets, antlers and ice axes.

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Despite minor cold-weather disadvantages like lack of fur (some folks more than others), poorly insulated appendages, and tiny, flotation-less feet, humans have found the perfect way to hurl ourselves down mountains and off cliffs and through deep snow, whether it's "natural" or not. Screw nature; there's powder to be skied.

And we aren't alone. All kinds of critters slide down snowy hills just for the pure, simple fun of it. Bear, wolverine, weasel, hare, fox—I once watched a pair of River Otters sliding down a 40-foot riverside luge run in Yellowstone Park over and over, racing each other up the steep, snowy bank and plunging down their near-vertical runnel like Slinkys down a staircase.

These Labrador caribou, however, were completely out of their element. The Canadian Park Rangers with whom I was traveling were thrilled; they had never seen a herd exposed in the alpine like this. Inuit hunters suggested that the only logical reason caribou would risk the climb would be to escape from the polar bears and wolves roaming the flatlands and pack ice below. Threat of evisceration is usually good enough reason for me to start climbing, too.

And the more I thought about the caribou on that mountain—slowly moving higher as steam poured from their flared nostrils in the late afternoon sun—the more I realized that our complex human lives can just as easily drive us up a wall. And for me, like the caribou, escape is most often found on the side of a mountain.

Of course, I wasn't climbing that peak in Labrador to escape. I was just exploring a beautiful place, looking for a good time and a new line. Maybe those unusual—dare I say unnatural—caribou were simply looking for the same.

-Drew Pogge, Editor