

arctic ale

For three days we'd had nothing to drink but stout. We extracted the brew from shallow ponds and bogs, depressing the slimy moss with the tilted side of an aluminum cup and watching the dark liquid seep over the lip, eight ounces at a time.

For a week we'd sampled the range of brews: pale ales, ambers and murky porters, but our stomachs rumbled the loudest protest at the stout. After 38 days away from civilization, our imaginations, fragile and strained by less than ideal drinking sources, were getting the best of us.

Two more weeks of canoeing loomed ahead. We were beginning to wonder whose idea it had been to paddle our last stretch on the Arctic Ocean itself. We were six women in fiberglass canoes with only sunbleached, stretched-canvas spray skirts to protect us from crashing seven-foot waves. The Tuktoyaktuk Peninsula stretched to our north, and we battled the waves and tides of Liverpool Bay as the currents sucked us out into the ocean and the whitecaps fought us back to shore.

Our trip was to end in Inuvik, the last stop on the Dempster Highway and our first chance for a shower, fresh food and a real beer in two months. Or so we'd thought, until the fresh water of the Anderson River ran out and we found ourselves drinking the ales of the Arctic.

On day 39, during yet another pitiful forage for water, we saw a white flash. It was a lone caribou standing atop a ridge. His giant rack made him look regal yet curiously unbalanced. We hadn't seen a caribou, let alone a wolf, musk ox or bear, since we'd paddled out of the sandy river

mouth and into the ocean. Just the glint of his antlers in the midnight sun was enough to give us hope.

Our caribou seemed to wait for us as we hiked through grassy tundra and over the rolling hills. He never changed his stance. Upon reaching the top of the ridge we noticed that he was not alone, but stood guard as his herd enjoyed a late afternoon drink from a large, clear lake.

The herd, about a hundred strong, was clustered around one end of the lake. We hurried to the opposite side as they watched us and continued to take their fill. We soon joined in, cupping our hands around the pure, clean water and lapping noisily. We filled our jugs with all the water we could carry.

On the way back to the canoes, we waved to the buck standing guard and hoped he might have friends who would help guide us to fresh water for the rest of our trip. From here on out, we wanted to take our lessons from the wild – and our ales from a brewery tap.

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Photo: PATRICK ENDRES

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