



**TAKING A BREAK** — Large herds of caribou are often seen on the move, but this herd, spotted approximately 50 miles east of Bettles, settled down to enjoy a feast of lichen. The

large herd, which covered most of one mountain and two neighboring ridges, was hardly disturbed by the sound of a passing airplane.

— Tundra Times staff photo

## *Taking A Slow Plane to Anaktuvik*

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In this age of jet commuter service among Alaskan communities, I often find myself at twenty thousand feet staring at small foil bags of cocktail peanuts, squinting my eyes to catch a glimpse of the earth below, and remembering how much fun it used to be to fly in Alaska.

Any more these days, flying seems to be about as much fun as riding a New York subway. I was entertaining this

thought on New Year's eve as I was talking with Johnny Anderson, the Fairbanks business-

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man who owns and operates Johnny's Express.

Johnny recently bought a new Champion Citabria, a two-seater with dual controls, powered by a Lycoming 150 horse engine. He invited me to join him on a flight sometime. I suggested we go out on the following Wednesday.

Johnny filed a flight plan for Bettles and Anaktuvik Pass, and we set out for the field early on Wednesday morning. He warmed the engine, kicked the skis loose of the ground, and we lifted off in the dark in less runway than one can find in the average backyard.

Dawn broke as we crossed the Yukon and we got a good view of the ice bridge the oil companies are building for the winter road near Stevens Village.

The view is much better when one can figure his altitude in hundreds of feet, rather than thousands, and when your airplane churns away at a pleasant 110 miles an hour.

We didn't have any cocktail peanuts, but Johnny's wife, Olive, had packed coffee, cookies and sandwiches, which were a whole lot more filling.

Other than speed, the only disadvantage to this method of transportation is that Champion does not build toilets in their Citabrias.

But after a brief stop at Bet-

tles, we were ready to continue our trip.

Crawling at a comfortable speed up the John River, past Gunsight Mountain and Crevice Creek, up toward Anaktuvik at a height of a couple of hundred feet, I remembered what so many Native hunters had to say about airborne trophy hunters and their hired guides during the last hunting season.

It is easy to understand why they are bitter. At that speed and altitude, there isn't much that is hidden from view. Big game is easy to spot, and even tracks of smaller animals can be seen.

We had hoped to land at Anaktuvik, spend an hour in the village, and return to Fairbanks during daylight. But as we got to the village, the weather started to close in.

A pilot at Bettles warned us against landing on the runway at Anaktuvik with skis, so we made a couple of passes over the village, catching the attention of two men on snow machines, and landed on the lake.

I began to wonder what the field must be like as we touched down on the ice, bouncing over caked snow patches and nearly scraping a wing, eventually sliding to a halt.

As soon as the airplane stopped, fog began rolling in, obscuring the north end of the pass. After five minutes ground time,

we took off again, and flew over two snow machines and five moose before landing at Bettles to refuel and have lunch.

Half an hour after leaving Bettles for Fairbanks, we ran across a herd of thousands of caribou, which covered most of Caribou Mountain and two neighboring ridges. Feeding must have been good, because they hardly stirred while we made several passes.

I couldn't see any place to land, but Johnny pointed to a snow patch the size of a tennis court and said he thought he could land there. We talked it over, but as Johnny was having trouble with his landing light and darkness was a short time off, we decided to return to Fairbanks.

Turning away from the herd, I tried to think of all that wonderful caribou stew we were leaving behind, but comforted myself with thoughts of longer flights on longer days.

We landed in Fairbanks in the last light of day. After draining the oil and replacing wing and nose covers, I began to wonder what it would take to force the airlines to resurrect the Norseman. Impossible perhaps, but at least they could get rid of those darn tiny bags of cocktail peanuts.

In some airplanes, and with some people, it is still fun to fly in Alaska.