



STRANGE DANCE — Bering Air helicopter pilot Patrik Toerdal takes herder Jimmy Pushruk in the air to coax a portion of the Kakaruk reindeer herd toward Pushruk's new corral outside Teller, on Friday, June 26.

Photos by Keith Conger

• Reindeer

continued from page 1

around nervously in its customary counterclockwise direction. But the long sheets of burlap hanging along the edges of the enclosure helped calm them. Then, the animals rested until the next phase of operations commenced. Some ate leaves. Many grunted. The fawns whined for their mothers until reunited.

Toerdal's job was done, and Pushruk returned to the corral. While he waited for more workers, his life partner, Lucinda Menadelook, distributed donuts and soup that she made for their crew. She is a testament to the fact that everyone in Teller has ties to reindeer. Menadelook grew up around her late Uncle Roger Menadelook's corral near the Kuzitrin River. She was thankful that the sun had come out and was hopeful that the nice breeze would continue to chase the bugs away and keep the heat down.

Abu Oquilluk made it to the corral in the early afternoon. "It's good seeing and smelling them and hearing them again," he said. Oquilluk is the grandson of Mary's Igloo herder, William Oquilluk, who lived during the reindeer fair days at Pilgrim Hot Springs. His grandfather authored the seminal book, "People of Kawerak."

Before long, former reindeer owner Jimmy Noyakuk arrived to install a swinging door on the chute, the corral's tight V-shaped terminus where each deer is recorded and unmarked deer are given ear tags. Noyakuk, a carpenter by trade, was the project architect. He designed three small waiting rooms, called "pockets," that deer would pass through as they were transferred from the holding pen to the chute.

Noyakuk used to keep his reindeer on the north side of Imuruk Basin until they were taken away by caribou. Pushruk told him that he had secured funding from Kawerak Inc. to put up a new structure. Noyakuk wanted to be involved.

"He was a big force in building the reindeer corral. All the young people who helped us build it look up to him, really respect him," Pushruk said.

The corral utilizes gifts from an assortment of reindeer herders. Pushruk salvaged some fencing from the old Menadelook and Noyakuk corrals. Brenda and her life partner, Delbert Okbaok, a former reindeer herder, created fence posts from driftwood collected in Nome. The late Tom Gray sent extra burlap and fencing to Teller. Pushruk said Gray convinced him to add "a mothering pen" at the end of the corral, which makes it easier for females to find their offspring.

For many years, the Kakaruk operations were based at a corral at the mouth of Canyon Creek, where Tusk Channel meets the Imuruk Basin. Storms, both summer and winter, had taken their toll on the aged structures there over the years, so the Kakaruk deer have gone unmarked for quite a while.

According to State of Alaska statistics, the herd's population has fluctuated between 1,500 and 3,000 in recent years. The last time they were handled was in February of 2015, when Pushruk's operation borrowed Brevig Mission herder Leonard Olanna's corral at the northwest end of Grantley Harbor in exchange for a set number of reindeer.

As the deer relaxed in the holding pen, Cameron Okbaok raced from Nome in his truck after work. Both sides of his family were involved in the reindeer industry. Cameron's father, Jerry Okbaok, who was also in attendance, was a herder who spent days walking with various herds. Jerry's ventures included transporting deer to the Canyon Corral from as far away as the Feather River. Cameron says his father taught him the importance of "going out into the country to get your own food."

Cameron's arrival around 4 p.m. was the catalyst for the operations to go into full swing. Before long, he was leading a group of young men to move reindeer from the holding pen into the first pocket. That entailed separating a small group from the main bunch by following them around while waving their arms.

At 4:50 p.m., the first reindeer en-

continued on page 9



REINDEER DAYS — Veteran reindeer men Jerry Okbaok, Jimmy Noyakuk and herd manager Jimmy Pushruk are passing their knowledge and skills to Cameron Okbaok, far right, and a crew of next-generation herders. Pushruk's team had just moved a portion of the Kakaruk reindeer herd through the new corral on Friday, June 26.



STANDING ROOM ONLY — The holding pen outside the new reindeer corral near Teller filled up throughout the afternoon and evening of Friday, June 26. It took nearly five hours for a team of older and younger herders to mark 256 previously untagged deer.