

# I've Nothing Against Bears

Black bears have their priorities straight: Eat, then eat more. This Alaska bear has salmon on the menu.

Mostly they just want to eat and sleep. Why interrupt?

Despite the wall of black spruce anchored in black mud and a record hatch of black flies, I was in a bright mood. Winds that had bent the forest had given way to a gentle westerly. A scarlet sun hung in slivers between the trees, two hands from gone. Muscling my chair around to face the oil drum, I fought with the mud to level it. Then I sat and reached down into my day-pack for my book on Jim Bridger.

A shadow shifted on my flank. Still doubled over the pack, I moved only my eyes. The bear was perhaps 30 feet away, and closing. But its gait showed no threat. Silently it shuffled through the windfall, halving the distance. It passed me as if I weren't there, to a log spanning a pool. Testing it with a tentative paw, the bear glided across as if on hard earth. It plopped in front of the drum, facing away, and started lapping up grain.

Black bears seem always to have their priorities in order.

Before leaving me in this wooded swamp, miles from a serviced Alberta road, Zach had tended the 55-gallon drum, chained upright to a spruce. He'd dumped in a pail of past-date granola and secured the top. Scattering unprocessed grain outside, he'd set a stout stick at an angle into a melon-size hole in the drum's midsection. "A bear will knock the stick aside to reach in," he said. "Proof of a visit."

Zach hadn't been gone 10 minutes. My front sight steadied on the bear's plump behind. The rifle didn't shake. It seemed to know I wouldn't take such a shot.

So, apparently, did the bear. It lay by the drum 20 minutes, filling its belly. Then it rose and stood to show me its ribs. It was a sizable bear.

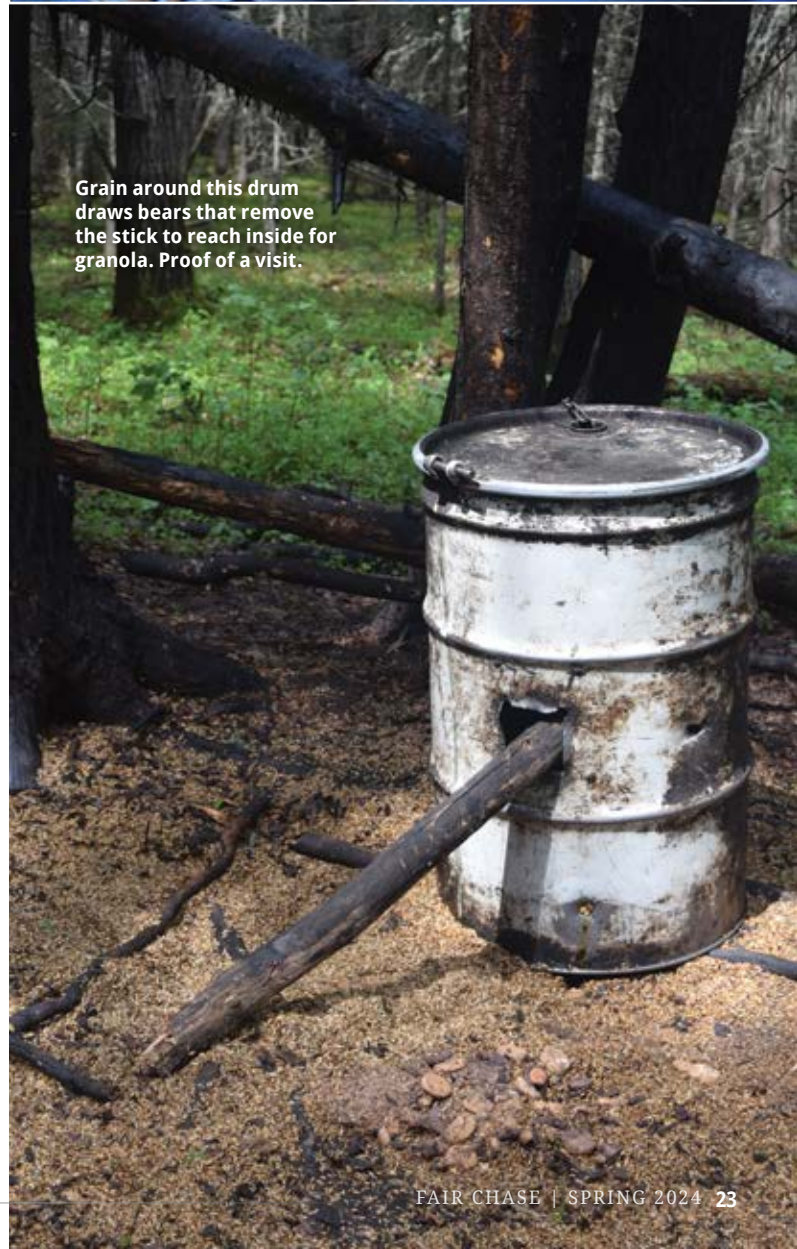
Walking through the woods in a lazy arc close on my other side, the animal paused in a crease in the shin tangle behind me, downwind, to drink. Then he was gone. I laid the .45-70 on my lap and picked up Bridger.

I have nothing against bears—partly because they're generally so obliging. How can you plot the demise of a creature that unassumingly dares you to pull it off?

Or that gives you multiple chances. Long ago, my first evening on a board tacked to a tree in the Maine woods pitted the scent of old steer bones against that of creosote-based Woodsman's Fly Dope. I barely escaped assassination by squads of



M&Ms as bear bait? With grain and granola, peanut butter, molasses and table scraps, they work well!



Grain around this drum draws bears that remove the stick to reach inside for granola. Proof of a visit.

no-see-ums. The next day I doubled the Fly Dope and donned a head net. Again the bear came to the bones late.

Night was closing on my third effort when the conifers coughed up the bear. Pulse at jackhammer pace, I brought the .303 to cheek. Alas, the netting had the effect of dark glasses. I could barely see the rifle, let alone its open sights. Slowly, disregarding the insect Luftwaffe, I lifted the veil. The bear looked up from the bones.

But as I wished the bullet away, the veil fell. All went dark. I took my trigger hand off the rifle to lift the mesh again. The bear was peering now. The sky had bled nearly all its light. I squinted and quickly milked ounces from the trigger. But not fast enough! Again the netting dropped. Frantic, I lost all caution, ripping off hat and all as if it were alive with ants. The bead was somewhere near the rear sight and the bear when I yanked the trigger. The blast silenced the crickets. Muzzle flash blinded me. In the violence of the moment, the bear left.

I found it dead nearby. It was of average size—smaller than it had looked over the steer bones. Skinned, it struck me as almost human. Roasted, the meat was sub-standard.

Hunting black bears over bait has its detractors. But in the northern U.S. and across the Canadian Shield to Alaska, some forests are so vast, baiting is the only practical way to get desired harvests. South of the Ohio Valley and into the Desert Southwest during the 19th century, hounds brought most bears to bag—even for Davy Crockett. Born in 1786, Davy ran off at age 13 to make his way at sea. In Baltimore he had second thoughts, and returned to his father's tavern on Tennessee's Nolichucky River. There he "delighted most in bear hunting." He named a .48-bore rifle, bought in 1803, after his sister Betsy. A 40-caliber flintlock presented him by the State Assembly in 1822 became, reportedly, Old Betsy. By the time he entered the Creek Wars in 1813, local bears "had been much hunted."

While Crockett served three terms in Congress, he

preferred rural life. In 1821 a flood claimed his mill and distillery. Moving to the Obion River's unsettled south fork, he found more bears. On two short hunts with a friend and his son, he reported killing 32. One annual tally reached 105. Davy was known to "spin yards," though he may not have counted stricken bears lost in the canebrakes (grass jungles).

Six years after Crockett's death at the Alamo in 1836, Robert Bobo was born in Mississippi. After four years as a Confederate soldier, Bob walked home, only to find it and most of the county under water. He canoed to a patch of "almost impenetrable forest and canebrake, where wild beasts flourished..." By Bobo's death in 1902, that remote plot had become a 2,000-acre estate, with "some of the best hunting...in Mississippi."

An avid bear hunter, Bobo trained his Walkers and Redbones with a tame bear he led through the woods. In an 1887 *Forest and Stream* article, Bobo declared that in 1869, after renting out the farm, he had lived "in the

swamp" with his hunting friends, supplied by hired help "three months at a time." Their collective bag included 304 bears. "One season I killed 150 [and] lost only two runs." Bob Bobo's biggest bear, shot at night in a cornfield, was too heavy for four men to lift into a wagon. Roped behind an axle for the retrieve, it later scaled 711 pounds.

Meanwhile, Ben Lilly was eluding education. Alabama-born in 1856, he moved with his parents to Mississippi just before the Civil War. He fled a military academy in war's aftermath, to work for an uncle in Tennessee. With no heirs, the uncle gave Ben property in northern Louisiana, where the young man tilled its soil, hunted bears.

Lilly would marry twice and sire several children, but was known for his wild ways and physical prowess. He was claimed to jump out of a tall barrel without touching its sides and backpack 125-pound loads. He studied the ways of bears. By 1887 he'd left the farm to hunt. He camped with his dogs, a pony and a servant. The years distanced Lilly from normal life, if not from legend—though he adored children and didn't work on Sundays. He preferred the ground to a bed. He'd go three days without food, bathe in snow, sole his boots with tire scraps. Once, when a bear killed one of his dogs, Lilly emptied his rifle into the beast and charged it with a knife—then out-ran it.

After a decade with this eccentric vagabond, Lilly's second wife told him: "Next time, just keep going." In 1901 he gave her his property, bade her and their three children goodbye and left to hunt bears in Tensas Parish. There he also worked for the Biological Survey. In 1906, after reportedly taking at least 105 bears, Lilly wandered to the Big Thicket of Texas. There he met Ben Brackin, who would claim 300 bear kills in a lifetime.

Since this photo, many more bears in the East and Upper Midwest have been taken by deer hunters.



I've not followed hounds after bears. In fact, for years after the mosquito netting drama in Maine, I had little to do with bears. Then in Oregon, I arrowed an elk at dusk. Rather than push the animal in the dark, I took the trail at dawn. It was short, my broadhead having pierced the liver. But a bear had found the bull. Salvaging most of the meat, I decided this bear had crossed the line. So before shouldering my pack, I cleared a path through the lodgepole litter for a quiet approach to the carcass. That bear might return.

It did. Early the next morning I found it on the elk and sneaked toward it on my trail. At 20 steps, the bear's head in the ribs, I sent a shaft from my recurve. It sped true, a flicker with the *pphitt!* of a hit. The bear fled from the carcass. To my astonishment, however, it stopped within a few yards, stood on its hind legs and stared back. Seconds later, it ambled into the forest, healthy and puzzled.

My search turned up neither the arrow nor any sign of a hit. Was the sound of contact instead that of deflection?

Another humbling discovery came at the carcass. Where the bear had buried its head in the ribs, the droning of bees was so loud I could have walked up and swatted the beast's behind. Duh.

"Ya gotta respect 'em," said a pal. "Resourceful. Clever. Lucky."

"Wait a minute," I retorted. "How can you respect lucky?"

"Well," he said, "that bear was lucky, and you weren't. The bear won. Nobody respects a loser."

Despite that barb, I thought kindly of bears. Then I met one in California. Booked for a night in a lake-side cabin, I arrived early for a walk around the nearby resort. A crowd had gathered on the edge of a broad porch behind its lodge. A bear was rifling through kitchen

leavings strewn about the three garbage cans it had up-ended.

"Best back off," I told the wall of tourist cameras. "A garbage bear can be dangerous." Getting no response, I decided to chase the bear off with my big angry bear repertoire. The bear turned and snarled. I snarled back, waved my arms and threatened an approach, barking orders that evidently made no sense to the bear. It went back to a picnic plate, leaving the potato salad to tuck into baked beans. Publicly stapled to my mission, I edged closer with a menacing growl. The bear spun and sneered.

A charge was my last option. The bear stood it admirably, but at the last second scampered down the porch steps. Triumphant and now looking down on the animal, I barked more orders. Humiliated, the bear was very angry now, and still keen for barbeque. It was having second thoughts. More snarls. At last it shuffled off. The vacationers tossed me looks of disgust. Had I saved them? No. The bear would be back, with the histrionics useful in keeping at bay people who would deny it food.

Hunters bridle at bears that raid their camps, though the bear's defense (just being a bear) has a lot going for it. Bears are omnivores with catholic tastes and great appetites. Like people, bears prefer not to work for food if free food abounds. Clean camps have fewer bear problems. Automobiles that jettison food give bears the idea of entering automobiles. Bear logic is robust. I once hunted and shot a bear that had climbed through a cabin window and left quite a mess. The bear's defense was weakened by the fact that the window had been closed.

A bear's legendary taste for honey gets it into trouble. Summoned by a beekeeper with several valuable hives, I hauled in a culvert trap to capture the nocturnal beast. I baited the trap with a cartload of tempting treats, from melons and hamburger to pastries and granola. The bear stayed true to the hives. Freshening the smorgasbord every other day ran up a big grocery bill. Eventually, the bear got curious enough about the culvert to climb inside.

To get the best sport (and experience the most disappointment) hunting

bears, I still-hunt them. While bears have weak eyes, they hear well, and their noses are peerless. Agile as cats, they slip through timber like smoke with a tail-wind, silently threading shin tangle that pulls me to a slow, snap-cracking stumble. Often I emerge bleeding.

There's no satisfaction like that of sneaking through the bush after a solitary animal that makes no noise, leaves no tracks, and can hear and smell you farther than you can see.

Late summer is an empty time for many hunters. Big game seasons have yet to start. Coyote pelts are worth nothing. Prairie dogs estivate. But as wildfires smudge western skies, bears are afoot in patches of ripening huckleberries, elderberries, and wild plums. One evening after a pal brought his Cessna onto a grass strip over the Snake River Canyon, we split to scout for elk on the rims. During the last hour of light I walked up on nine different black bears. They'd converged in the canyon heads to gorge on berry bushes heavy with fruit. Yet I've hunted there for days in September without seeing a bear.

Their pads give even big black bears an almost noiseless step. Grizzly claws are longer and straighter.



Anthony Neidlinger of Whiskey Mountain Outfitters added a cement mixer to his bear camp east of Hells Canyon on Idaho's Salmon River. "It helps us mix granola and table scraps with peanut butter. Great bear bait!" But in

early fall, his hunters also glass from ridges for berry-hungry bruins. To host me on these steep, Michael McMichael took a break from his Boise shop, where he makes bullets under the shingle of Accura Outdoors.

Mike had trailed an ATV to reel in elevation on ranch two-tracks snaking up the grassy coulees. A foot one afternoon at mid-elevation, we separated. I climbed on a north-side path that threaded brushy, spring-fed draws feeding the steep coulees below. As evening fell, a cow elk emerged from a thicket and looked back. But not at me.

I inched closer along a game trail. The bear appeared as shards a tad blacker than the shadowed cover. Slowly, I rocked the hammer back. There! A shoulder came clear. Recoil and smoke from the stiff load hid the impact; but the shot had felt good. The bear lay dead 22 steps on. The close, dark place, and its sudden silence, brought to mind the Maine woods—and a later hunt in Alaska.

"I've never booked a hunter with a .30-30," said Mark Gala, his thumb

crooked over the wheel of Bear Necessity. The boat cleaved gentle waves as low sun lit a shimmering path to Japan. "Frankly, I'm not thrilled. Sure, they're black bears. But they're big and fast, and they don't drop much blood. They live in thick places."

The powerful inboard diesels had whisked us from Wrangell at seven knots. Peaks vaulted from tidal beaches fronting forests that swallowed up to 18 feet of rain each year. We anchored in a cove near an abandoned fishing village.

Next day we took Mark's skiff up one of myriad creeks lacing Prince of Wales Island. Mindful of huge tide swings, he moored with a long line. Bear trails led us through coarse, waist-high grass toward forest's edge. In and out of alders, conifers and small meadows, we watched rain clouds and the afternoon slide



In vast forests of the North and West, baiting may be the only tenable way to meet bear harvest goals.

Bears are faster and more agile than they look. They move like cats, and even in shin tangle, as quietly!



by. Then Mark hissed, "Bears!" There were two. Crosswind we threaded the opening, careful not to splash in the creek. Crawling as we closed, I led. Then the breeze pivoted. Both bears raced for cover.

On my knees, I swung the .30-30 to catch the trailing boar in my 2½-power scope. He paused. The 170-grain flat-nose struck audibly. Then he was gone.

Hurrying forward, we found no blood. A crease in the grass pulled us into deep forest with chest-high ferns. Dusk was fast draining light when a crimson ribbon appeared. Great splashes signaled the end. In ferns that hid everything beyond arms length, we came upon the heart-shot boar, dying.

That was years ago. As Alberta's night approached, the black bear that had dined earlier returned. I looked up from Bridger and watched him glide by.

Then behind him, in jack-straw blowdown, an enormous red head appeared. A bear the likes of which I'd never seen. Massive shoulders followed. But this great beast was cautious. It dismissed the path taken by its companion to move behind me, downwind. I hadn't a chance.

Most of an hour passed.

Against all odds, the russet bear reappeared, in slices between trees, as dusk swallowed the sun. It ghosted downwind. Gone. At last light I was still staring into the shin tangle from whence it had come.

Then, as if conjured, that big red head was staring at me. Nightfall paused as the animal turned. A third chance again! The bead was faint against its ribs. But the aftermath left no doubt it had been in the right place.

A hunter just being a hunter. It's not that I have anything against bears. ■

**BOTTOM LEFT:** Wayne took this bear still-hunting in heavy forest with guide Mark Gala on Prince of Wales Island. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** A faulty cap cost this hunter a chance. He shot the same Alberta bear with a patched ball the next day!



Alaska's southeast coast holds many bears, and they grow big. Off logging roads, still-hunting is a challenge!

