DARK TIMBER GRIZZLY

Eugene C. Williams' grizzly bear was awarded first place at the 25th Big Game Awards program with a score of 26-14/16 points. It is currently ranked 14th in the 15th Edition of *Records of North American Big Game*.

Looking into the forest shadows, I could see a form that looked out of place against a backdrop of thick spruce. I shouldered my rifle and peered through the scope. The image observed through the riflescope electrified me as I realized I was only yards from the monster grizzly—and I was clearly the focal point of its attention.

This hunt started days before, on April 28, 2001, when local area Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologist Glenn Stout and I went on a snow machine ride into the Kaiyuh Mountains south of Galena. Our day's adventure was driven by the notion that we wanted to see some new country. Spring thaws had settled the heavy mountain snow pack, opening up some backcountry that is rarely visited. We each carried rifles with us on this occasion, just in case we spotted a distant wolf or possibly a bear, though it was a bit early for bears to be emerging from hibernation.

Breaking out above the line of timber and onto the open alpine tundra, we were met with snow flurries and low clouds that blanketed our intended destination with a thick carpet of white—so dense that to press on would risk getting us lost or driving off a cliff.

Backtracking to lower elevations near the upper tree line, we came across a several-days-old track of a large grizzly bear. The bear had moved up out of the timber of one drainage and slipped down into the head of another. We guessed the bear's destination to be the bottomlands along the Yukon River, approximately seven miles to the northeast, where the monster would likely stalk and pull down a moose to feed what had to be a ravenous post-hibernation appetite.

As the day's plan was no longer workable, we elected to satisfy our immediate curiosity in the enormous track by following it a short distance into the heavy timber. Glenn joked that he would defer any bear shooting that day to me, as I was carrying a .30-06, and he was packing his .223 varmint rifle. The direction taken by the bear put it on an intersecting course with the Yukon River. Curiosity in the tracks quickly vanished as the deeper, unsettled snows of the steep timbered slopes caused our snow machines to bog down and us to perspire freely and often in digging out mired machines. With the excitement of this game now gone, we retreated back the way we had come.

Thoughts of the monster bear haunted me for the next two days. On the evening of April 30, I gave Glenn a call to see if he was up for another trip to the bush to look for the bear. He declined, electing not to waste a day of his vacation time to pursue my fanciful notion of finding a large bear in the thousands of square miles of roadless wilderness south of Galena, Alaska, where we lived.

My wife was reluctant to allow me to go on my own, fully understanding the risks of snow machine failure, weather, and terrain — not to mention risks associated with confrontations with bears. What probably worried her more than anything was the notion of me crossing the Yukon River on a snow machine this time of year. It was spring. Snow pack was melting. River ice had to be thawing. She signed off on my plan for the solo trip, but only after I promised to wear a life jacket while on the river and grilling me as to the contents of my day pack in case I had to spend a night in the woods. I left her a topographic map, on which I defined the area where to look for me should I not return. She was also advised that Glenn would know where to begin to look for me if need be.

I left the house at 6 a.m. on May 1. The temperature was 10°F. With six extra gallons of fuel and a pair of snowshoes, I headed out on my snowmobile. My plan was a simple one. I would follow an abandoned, decades-old dozer trail that started on the south bank of the Yukon River upstream from the village of Galena. One branch of the trail led through the hills and then cut down to and across Kala Creek, about two miles off the Yukon, and terminated at an old military radar site on Ketlkede Mountain. The other branch led up to and across the Kaiyuh Mountains to an inactive mining claim. As Glenn and I had taken the west fork to access the Kaiyuh Mountains on the earlier trip, I decided to travel the east fork of the dozer trail down into Kala Creek. This was new country I hadn't been in. I reasoned, too, that this course had the potential to put me in a position to intercept the trail of the bear discovered earlier, or at least possibly into the country where the bear might be.

This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt strongly believed that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.

Eugene C. Williams
STORY FROM *LEGENDARY HUNTS, SHORT STORIES FROM THE BOONE AND CROCKETT AWARDS*

It didn't take long, once leaving the south bank of the Yukon River, to travel the two miles of old dozer trail into the bottom of Kala Creek. To my amazement and delight, there in the frozen slush atop the creek ice was a lone set of very large bear tracks headed away from the Yukon and back up into the mountains.

There was no way to gauge the age of these tracks. The slush, or "overflow" as it is called locally, could have been the result of any of the freeze/thaw cycles of the several previous days. Overflow can be a trap for unsuspecting snow machiners or dog mushers. The condition typically is hidden under an undisturbed surface crust of snow, where seepage from snow melt, springs, or adjacent wetlands collects. Breaking through the surface crust into several inches (or several feet) of slush/water can ruin your day, particularly if aboard a 600-pound snow machine. As temperatures had dropped into the single digits the previous night, and coupled with settling from the recent warm weather, the overflow here was frozen hard clear to the creek's surface ice in most places.

I followed the bear's trail up the creek on the snow machine out of curiosity, with little thought about the possibility of a bear in the last tracks on the other end. But after 200 yards of following the creek, with open water peeking through and gurgling sounds below, I thought more about cold wet feet and the dreadful notion of pulling a waterlogged snow machine out of a hole in the creek ice. I retreated.

Returning to the first point of intersect with the tracks, I headed off on the old dozer trail toward Ketlkede Mountain in search of more tracks. The run to the mountaintop didn't take long and no other tracks were discovered.

I returned to the creek, electing to follow the bear track on foot as a form of morning entertainment. The weather was crisp and the skies clear. Winds were light and variable. I was intrigued by the meandering course the bear had taken upstream. It was interesting to note, as I followed its path, what objects or odors caught its attention. Occasionally, the bear would turn at 90° angles and move off a few feet to investigate something in its surroundings. At one point, its nose told it there was a shed moose antler buried under two feet of snow, which the bear dug up and bit into. The heavy print of the bear was obvious and easily discernible well ahead along the creek's course. Occasionally, it broke through the crust into the intermittent overflow or soft snow beneath. In contrast, I was leaving little evidence of where I had been.

After two hours of fanciful pursuit on foot, I decided I should return to the snow machine, as going overland with the machine to this point on the creek was an easy option. I would also be that much closer to a ride home when I elected to call it quits. I returned with the machine, and struck off again on foot on the tracks of the grizzly.

The bear was still sticking to the creek bottom. I told myself that if it stayed in the bottom or turned east into the tundra/open scrub black spruce stands, I would follow. That was, of course, providing the snow crust would carry me. If the bear turned west into the timbered slopes of the Kaiyuh Mountains, where snow was deep and soft, I would give up the pursuit.

The grizzly regularly cut across the points of land in the creek's many meanders, but sometimes would stick to the creek channel and follow it around the bend. If the bear took the shortcut and I could see through the timber to the other side, I would follow. If it took a shortcut through the trees and visibility was poor, I would follow the meandering channel around and pick up the track on the other side.

Over the course of the morning's trek, it became apparent to me that the grizzly's trail here had been made since the temperature had plummeted late the previous evening. Where the animal had walked on snow-free southern bank exposures, it had tracked dirt and spruce needles out onto the clean snow. Had the dirt been tracked out onto the creek the day before, the tracks would have been melted out by the sun's warm rays being absorbed by the dark material. These tracks were not. I now knew I had a chance for this bear.

I removed my shooting glove, checked my firearm, and assured myself that my scope was on low power. I was carrying a .300 Magnum Browning BBR, a companion on countless previous hunting trips.

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The game of simply following a track in the snow had transformed into a cautious pursuit. The pursuit remained much the same as the previous three hours—in and out of the timber along the course of Kala Creek, going upstream. The sun was still low in the clear eastern sky and morning shadows were long. Once more, I followed the grizzly's shortcut across a narrow point of land at the bend in the creek channel. I had broken with the morning's discipline of not following the track into the timber when I couldn't see bear tracks in the snow in the creek on the far side. The point of land here, though narrow, was of higher elevation. There was very little plant understory.

I felt secure, and assumed the bear had simply returned to the open channel on the upstream side. The giant bear had not! Once in the trees, the grizzly had come across a maze of moose tracks along the far bank and elected to follow them—and travel by stepping into the tracks left by the moose!

I no longer had a clear picture of where the bear was. I scanned the creek channel upstream and downstream—no bear tracks. My attention turned to the moose tracks at my feet. I couldn't discern which direction the bear had gone. I looked to my left and spotted a form that didn't fit with its surroundings. I shouldered the rifle and peered through the scope at the strange form. It was the grizzly! The bear was facing me head-on, while standing with front feet atop a downed tree. It was huge! The bear's intent stare told me it had seen me before I saw it. The grizzly was too close! I knew full well it was a mere few seconds away. A charging, running bear can outrun anything afoot in these parts.

As the safety came off and my finger found the trigger, my mind was asking the question of what would happen next. Would the bear turn and run at the shot, or would it come for me? The rifle fired and I quickly worked the bolt to chamber a fresh round. As if in slow motion, the bear reared up, roared, threw its head back with front paws high in the air and tumbled over backwards. Then all was quiet. The grizzly got up momentarily behind the blowdown timber and then sank out of sight. It remained quiet!

As it turned out, the bear had been napping behind some blowdown timber along the creek bank, in a bed it had prepared for itself by scratching away the two feet of snow and ice down to bare earth. Remaining hidden through my approach, it had heard me approaching, or possibly caught my scent in the variable breeze that was blowing, and got up.

I looked at my watch. It was 11:45 a.m. I waited a full 10 minutes before walking in a big semicircle around the bear on the creek side. The grizzly had tumbled backwards down the bank into the creek channel. I approached cautiously. When close enough to lob in some tree branch projectiles, I did so, to ensure the animal was dead. As I got close enough to use the gun barrel, I poked the grizzly with it to ensure no life was left. The bullet had struck the bear at the midpoint of its sternum and traveled the length of the body, stopping just under the hide of its right hip. The 200-grain bullet had done its job.

Eugene C. Williams took this grizzly bear on a solo hunt near Kala Creek in Alaska, in 2001.

The animal was in excellent physical condition, but with very little body fat remaining. It was an old bear with some long-ago healed dental problems, likely created by an encounter with a flying moose hoof. I had been on the track since 8:00 a.m., having followed it for over five miles on foot.

There was a healthy bounce in my step as I returned to where I had last parked the snow machine. I carefully guided the snowmobile up the creek from where it was parked and was able to maneuver to where the grizzly lay. Skinning the animal was easy, other than the two feet of soft snow, which made it difficult to turn the animal over.

It was an interesting ride for the two of us on the snow machine during the trip home. The distance to my home's back door from where the bear fell was 35 miles.

This was my first grizzly. At this point, I knew I had harvested a nice trophy, but had no idea how big the bear really was!

I called a taxidermist in North Pole to tell him what I had. Charlie Livingston of Alaska Wilderness Arts and Taxidermy was skeptical, at best, as I described the size of the animal to him. "How big? You have to be kidding!" he said.

Mr. Livingston had worked with scores of grizzly trophies and had not seen anything like I described. Unofficially green-scored by Glenn Stout, and subsequently by Mr. Livingston, it was pointed out that it may be within a few sixteenths of the World's Record grizzly.

The news that I had taken a big grizzly passed through Galena quickly. Galena, a traditional Native Athabaskan community, consists of about 650 people. Though half white now in cultural mix, many Natives still adhere to a lifestyle dependent upon natural resources. The interior grizzly is respected and typically not hunted alone. Many were in awe of the notion that I went out on a solo bear hunt.

I returned to the kill site the following weekend to reflect on the last moments of this hunt. I collected the moose antler the grizzly had dug up and chewed on. I measured the distance from where I was standing when I shot to where the bear was located at point of bullet impact. It was only 38 yards!

I am certain that it was this bear that had left the large tracks Glenn and I had spotted earlier. There aren't that many big grizzlies out there. Most larger interior Alaska grizzlies taken by hunters measure six to seven feet in length. This one measured 8 feet 3 inches! This animal clearly is a trophy of 10 lifetimes.

To be able to step out and hunt from one's back door and do a day-trip grizzly hunt is easy enough to do when living in rural "bush" Alaska. To cross paths with a Boone and Crockett bear is an entirely different matter. Mr. Livingston advised me, "My friend, you will not outdo this monster ever again." ■