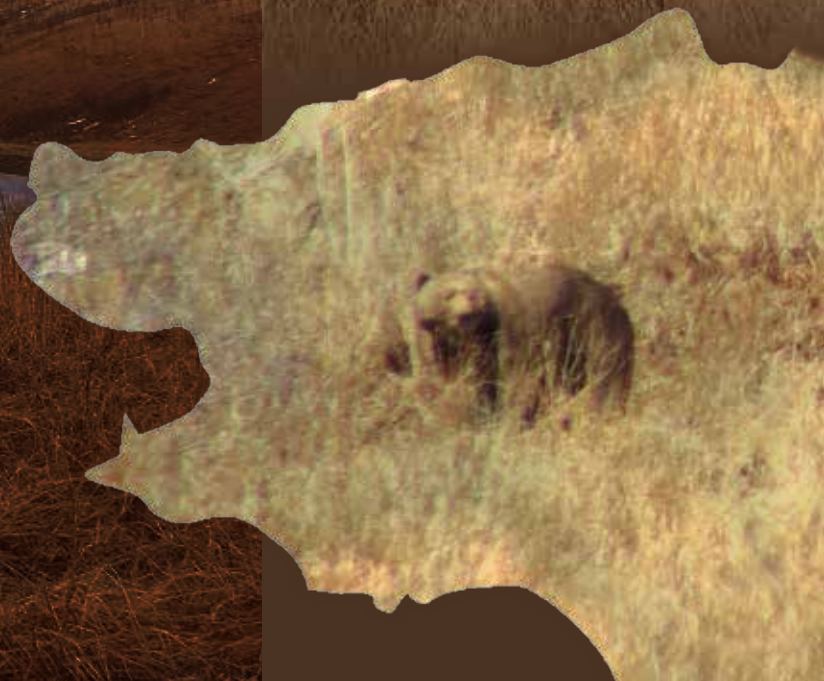


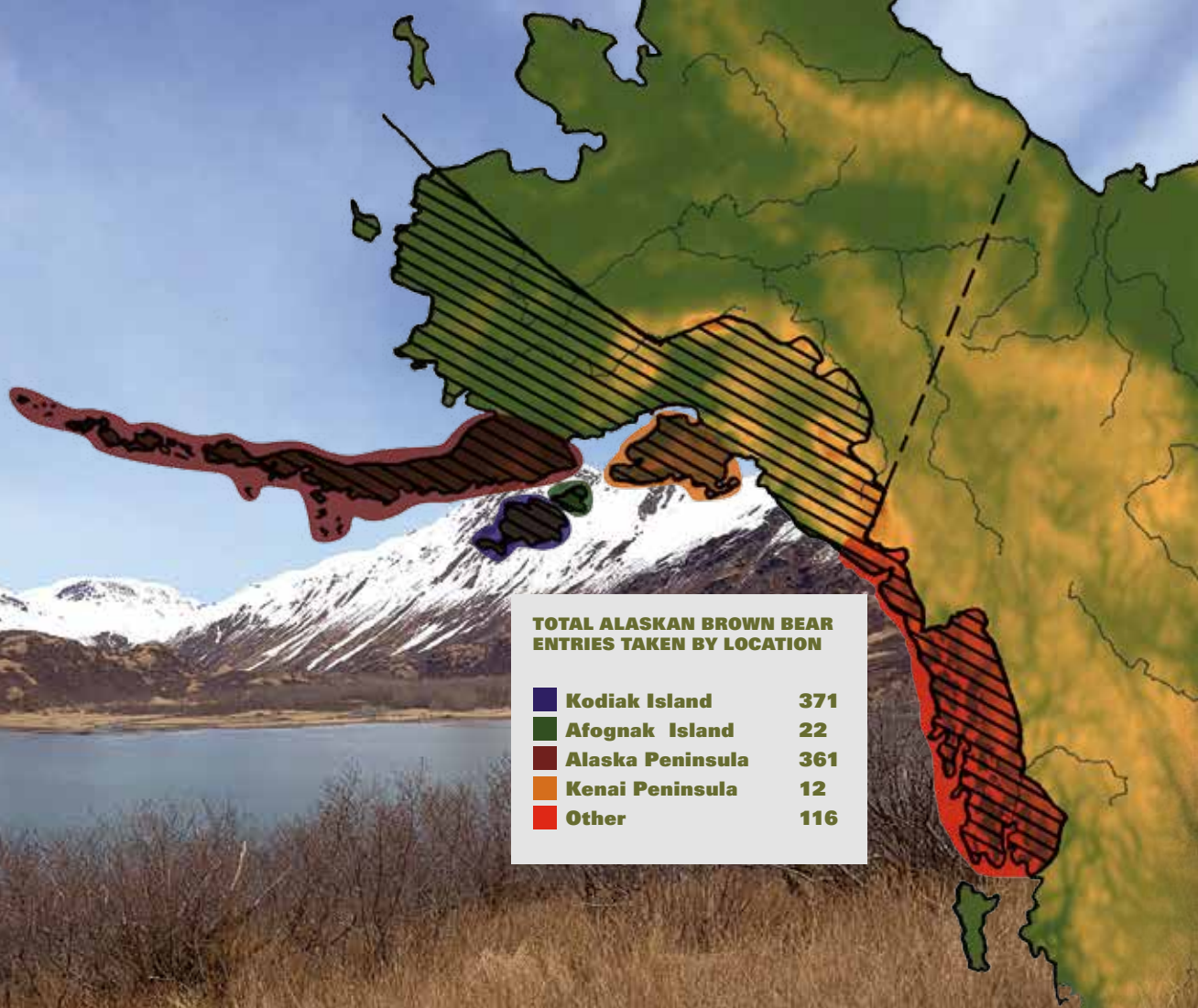
KEEP LOOKIN

The Story of My Classic Kodiak Brown Bear Hunt

By Gary English
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Photos courtesy of Author



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Kodiak. The name conjures up images of remote wilderness and mystique. At the heart of this mystique is the mighty Kodiak bear. I found out firsthand why hunting this bruin is regarded as one of the world's most classic hunts.

My fascination with the giant brown bears of Alaska started when I was about 12 or 13 years old. I remember looking through the Boone and Crockett records book, amazed that eight out of the top ten coastal brown bears—including the World's Record—came from Kodiak Island, Alaska. From that moment, I wanted to hunt this mysterious and wonderful place, in hopes I could take a world-class brown bear. Over the next 35 years the desire to hunt the Kodiak brown bear only intensified. After reading Marvin Clark's book *The Last of the Great Brown Bear Men* and looking at the incredible photos of the bears that Bill Pinnell and Morris Talifson guided their clients to, I decided now is the time, quit dreaming about it, and go hunt one. You can imagine the feeling that overwhelmed me when I read the email stating I had won a Kodiak brown bear tag in Alaska.

My hunt dates were set for April, and I was scheduled to hunt with master guide and outfitter Brian Peterson. As the Cessna floatplane touched down on Ugak Bay, it seemed like I was coming home to spend time hunting with an old friend. I had hunted and fished with Brian several times in the past with great success, and during those adventures, I have built a wonderful friendship and admiration for him. He runs a first-class operation. My hunt was lodge-based, and our plan was to use a skiff to access islands and beaches in the bays in order to glass the hillsides and snow-capped mountains for bears.

I was eager to get my 10-day adventure underway, even though I was welcomed by a heavy, steady, pounding rain wrapped in fog that continued for two days. Day three was different though: we also had snow and wind! Not unusual for Kodiak weather, so we hunted anyway, enjoying the Kodiak elements and working with them to execute our plan. Low visibility equals tough bear spotting. We only saw three bears those first three days. I knew things had to get better, but I definitely didn't expect the next seven days to be "clear and a million," with the bright sun in the Alaska sky.

With sunshine and warm weather Brian explained that the bears should really start moving. Immediately I spotted a bear at the head of the bay. "Little bear," Brian said. "Keep looking. If you put in your time behind the binoculars, you will see the bear you want sooner or later; you just have to put your time in." Things were looking up, though. The weather was great, and we had just spotted another bear.

From that day on, spotting bears was a regular occurrence. Some were sows with cubs, some were small bears, and one was a beautiful 9-footer that got me pretty excited. Again Brian said, "Too small, keep looking." On day five I spotted a big 9-1/2-foot bear that was completely rubbed to wool on over half of its body. And again Brian intervened, saying, "Too rubbed, keep looking." I thought to myself, the hunt is half over and I have seen so many bears, but none of them were what we wanted. Apparently Brian could read my mind because he looked at me and said, "You have to put your time in. Keep looking, and we will find him."

Day six and seven brought additional clear, warm weather and more bear sightings—another bear "too rubbed," next bear "too small, keep looking and we will find him, trust me." About 2 p.m. on day seven Brian spotted yet another bear. I knew this bear was different because he didn't quickly blurt out too small or too rubbed. It was just silence as he analyzed the bear. After a few minutes he said, "We might have found your bear! Let's just watch him and see what he does." The bear was a half mile away and about 400 yards above the beach on the hillside. Over the course of the next hour we watched the old boar meander across the hillside walking from alder patch to alder patch, stopping occasionally to uproot some vegetation. Eventually, he walked into an

alder patch about the size of a football field and didn't come out. After a while, Brian said, "He's taking a nap. Let's go get him."

We bailed off the knob, got in the skiff, and crossed the bay. After tying off the boat, we stayed on the downwind side of the bear and climbed the 400 yards to the edge of the most open area next to the alder patch where we hoped the bear was still sleeping. As we sat with a good vantage point at the edge of an alder thicket, we used our backpacks to break up our human outline and to shield us from the stiff breeze that was blowing in our faces. I looked at my watch; it was 4:55 p.m. As the minutes passed, I kept wondering, was the bear still in the alder patch sleeping, or had it meandered off while we were crossing the bay and hiking up the hill? Would I have to "keep looking"? Thoughts of the bear not being there and roaming through the brush-choked slopes behind me kept running through my head.



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After about 45 tension-filled minutes of looking and listening, I suddenly heard a commotion in the brush behind me. A bone-chilling shiver instantly went through my body and the hair stood up on the back of my neck. With adrenaline flowing I quickly snapped my head around only to see a willow ptarmigan just clearing the tops of the dense alder patch. Whew, that was intense.

A few minutes passed and I thought, what made the ptarmigan flush? Was our bear behind us in the brush now? My whole body was on sensory overload at this point! A combination of anticipation, fear, and respect is a constant reminder for all of Kodiak's wonder. With a drop of sweat beading up on my brow and a nervous trembling in my whole body I sat shoulder to shoulder with Brian, him with his .416, and me with my .338, waiting for the moment we would get a glimpse of the beast.

Another half hour passed and Brian was staring intensely in the alders in front of us when he leaned over and whispered in my ear, "There he is, I can see his face in the alders 40 yards in front of us." I squinted, and the image of the huge old boar's face magically appeared, and then in a matter of seconds, the image was gone. He had been there, right in front of us, the whole time. Relief overcame me now knowing the location of the bear; however it was quickly followed by nervous tension knowing how close he was. Every few minutes we could hear the bear take in a deep breath of air, process it, and then exhale. The sound of the exhale cutting through the silence gave me goose bumps. It had an eerie similarity to the whooshing sound a bus makes as it comes to a stop and the pressure is released

RIGHT: After spotting bears regularly and being told to keep looking, Gary's guide spotted a bear that wasn't too small or too rubbed.

Today, Alaska has more brown bears than at any time in recorded history. The Kodiak Island brown bear population alone has increased from 1,200 in 1972 to over 3,500 and is still growing. The current density is one bear per .70 square miles. Right now, these are the "good old days" of brown bear hunting in Alaska.

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barked, and the 225-grain Swift A-Frame dropped him, penetrating both front shoulders and both lungs. The mighty boar fell to the ground and rolled down the 30-degree slope, landing overturned in a narrow creek. My lifelong quest for a trophy Kodiak brown bear was now a reality. As we approached the bear, it was apparent that this was no ordinary bear. This was an old, white-clawed, 1,000-pound warrior, which was at least 9-1/2 feet with a great battle scar on his back.


We both stood enjoying the moment of what had just happened. Brian summed it up perfectly, "That, my friend is the bear you were looking for." He also informed me that it was the closest bear he had ever had a hunter take in his 33 years of guiding—a 1,000 pound bear at 15 yards! We skinned the bear in the fading light, thrilled by our success. I packed his skull and Brian packed his 100-pound hide off the mountain. As we descended the hillside down to the boat, I gazed off at the mountain across the bay and it appeared to be smiling at me as if to say, you finally have your trophy Kodiak bear. It was a late night, but one I had wanted for 35 years and will never forget.

Three days later the floatplane returned, and I said goodbye to my friend Brian and his beautiful lodge in picturesque Ugak Bay. As I checked my bear in at the Kodiak Fish and Game office, I asked the wildlife biologist, Larry Van Deale, how old he thought my bear was. He looked at the molars and said he thought it was about 18 years old. My bear lived many years as a trophy bear, eluding hunters in drainages and alder chokes on Kodiak Island. It was I, the lucky hunter, who harvested him. Yes Brian, you were correct. If you put enough time in you will find the right bear—keep looking. His hide squared just under 10 feet and his skull was green-scored at 27-4/16 inches B&C at the Kodiak Fish and Game bear sealing station.

Today, Alaska has more brown bears than at any time in recorded history. The Kodiak Island brown bear population alone has increased from 1,200 in 1972 to over 3,500 and is still growing. The current density is one bear per .70 square miles. Right now, these are the "good old days" of brown bear hunting in Alaska. Your odds of finding a white-clawed, lumbering, ol' boar are better than ever. I did. My advice to you, keep looking. ■



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LEFT: Gary and the 100-pound hide of his brown bear.

Gary remembers, "as I gazed off at the mountain across the bay and it appeared to be smiling at me as if to say, you finally have your trophy Kodiak bear. It was a late night, but one I had wanted for 35 years and will never forget."

from its air brakes. It was as if he was breathing down my neck. Thirty minutes passed with only glimpses of the bear in the dense alder jungle, while listening to him breathe and hearing an occasional footstep.

As I listened intently for another breath, I heard the light sound of footsteps coming closer in the grass immediately below us on the steep, terraced hillside. The sound of his footsteps in the grass continued to get

closer and louder until I heard a small twig break. I eased up and looked down to see the giant boar walking parallel to us at a mere 15 yards. How could something so massive be moving so stealthily? He didn't have a clue we were just above him crouched behind our packs. Brian whispered, "Kill him."

I found his head in the scope and continued down his neck to his shoulders and slowly squeezed the trigger. The .338