

Bear Hunt in Happy Valley

BY CRAIG BODDINGTON
Professional Member
BOONE & CROCKETT CLUB

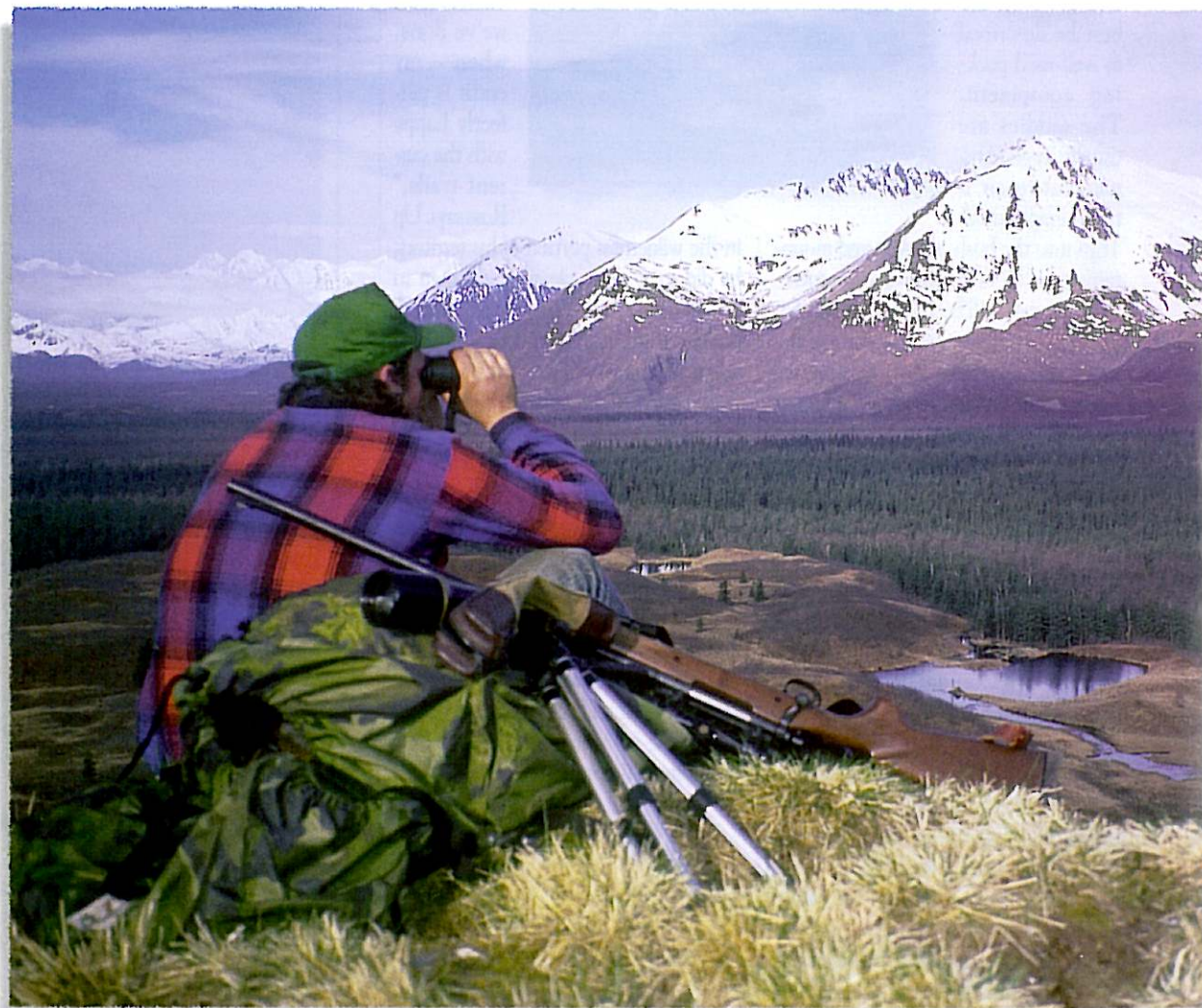
The hunt started out with a bang. In fact, it looked like it was going to be altogether too easy. We were camped in a clearing on Southeast Alaska's narrow strip of coastal swamp and forest. Just a quarter mile to the east, mountains rose steeply in a series of benches and ascending ridges that ended somewhere in British Columbia. A quarter mile to the west an isolated mesa rose above the tundra swamps and brooding forest. From a rocky outcropping

atop that mesa we could glass west almost to the ocean, and east into several ideal bear valleys that cut through the steep ridges.

Outfitter, Jim Keeline, has a comfortable base camp - I guess. He calls his company, "See Alaska," and his style is to waste no time sitting in that comfortable camp when there's some

Alaska to be seen. I arrived in Yakutat in midmorning and almost immediately was whisked south to Keeline's base camp. From there with time only for a cup of coffee and a quick sight-in session to make sure the .375 was sighted in, Jim piled me and my gear into his Supercub and whisked me off just as quickly to our spike camp. Guide, Jack

GUIDE, JACK RINGUS ON THE ROCKY OUTCROPPING THAT OCCUPIED THE FIRST HALF OF THE HUNT. IT OFFERED A GLORIOUS VISTA OF BOTH MOUNTAINS AND TUNDRA SWAMP, AND SHOULD HAVE PRODUCED A BEAR — BUT LUCK DIDN'T RUN THAT WAY.



Ringus and packer, Steve Hansen, were already there setting up. Whether I was ready or not the hunt was about to start - and it didn't really occur to me that I wouldn't see that comfortable base camp again until it was ended!

That evening we climbed up onto the mesa for the first time, reconning the route and making sure the view was as good as it seemed from below. Indeed it was. We saw no bears, but the view was awesome in all directions, and just at sunset far-off black dots of moose began to appear at all points of the compass. We were full of first-day confidence, and I knew the bears were in trouble.

The feeling persisted for several days. In fact, it got even stronger for the first couple of days. Our first morning of hunting dawned clear and cloudless, a real rarity in this region. We steamrolled up the steep sides of our little mesa, then, winded, we brewed up some coffee on Steve's mountain stove and rested for a bit before starting to glass.

The first brown bear made his appearance at exactly eight o'clock. To our west the mesa fell to a series of very low ridges. Beyond them was broad tundra swamps interspersed with the strips of scraggly forest. The bear was headed south, and we picked him up when he stepped out of the forest and into the open tundra. He wasn't a keeper; he (or she!) had that gangly teenaged appearance of a three-year old bear, with ears far too large for the head. But we watched for nearly an hour while it made its way slowly south. At least it was a bear, and a first-day bear at that.

The second bear ambled out of the forest in exactly the same place, this one promptly at 10 a.m. This one was a bit lighter in color - not blonde but reddish brown - but otherwise an exact duplicate of the first bear. And it more or less followed in the first bear's footsteps until it waddled out of sight. We surmised that they were litter mates, recently sent off by Mom to get a job and a life—and we now knew, or thought we knew, that these youngsters were following a bear trail of some significance.

We stayed on our mesa all that day, glassing moose in the swamps behind us and goats on the mountains in

front of us. The sun stayed with us all day and I wished for the sunscreen I'd figured I wouldn't need, but that was the end of the bears for that day.

Next day was a more normal Yakutat day—heavy fog until late morning, then a couple of showers. I was sunburned enough to not mind! I figured we missed our eight o'clock bear due to the fog, and for some reason our 10 o'clock bear didn't show. But our six p.m. bear was right on schedule.

This was a real bear. Great head, small ears, humped shoulders, waddling, spraddle-footed gait. He was very, very dark—almost black through the spotting scope, but with a frosting of silver guard hairs on hump and shoulders.

brush. Later I'd get object lessons in the obvious—that downhill in that brush beats uphill all to heck!

We made pretty good time, but we were convinced that this bear, like the two little ones the day before, was on a mission and we'd be fortunate to catch up. So when we got to the last little ridge that separated us from the swamp where we'd last seen the bear we had to make a choice: go to the right and come in behind the bear and lose even more ground; or go to the left around the south end of the ridge and hope to intercept him. The unanimous vote was to the left, which made all three of us wrong.

On the far side of that little ridge,

TOP: OUTFITTER, JIM KEELINE'S YAKUTAT BASE CAMP WAS A COMFORTABLE AFFAIR OF WALL TENTS ON PERMANENT FRAMES. WE DIDN'T SEE MUCH OF IT!
BELOW: GUIDE, JACK RINGUS, AND PACKER, STEVE HANSON, WITH OUR NORMAL GLASSING SETUP—SPOTTING SCOPE, BINOCULARS, AND STEVE'S EVER-PRESENT AND MOST WELCOME COFFEE POT.



Though only the second day, this was a bear worth a closer look—and almost certainly a final look if we could get close enough.

We almost did, too. He was on the exact same trail, which meant that he would be moving fairly quickly and we'd have to hustle to catch him before he made the far forest. We jumped into waders and baled off the mesa, clawing our way down through the thick Yakutat



invisible from our vantage point, was a little neck of house-high weeds. Instead of holding his course and speed, our bear had stopped in those weeds. We came out 100 yards in front of him, but of course didn't know he was there—until the wind shifted a bit, and then the weeds started moving like a small locomotive was in them. We saw the movement, realized what was happening, and I dropped my pack on a tundra tussock and flopped down behind it, chambering a round and clearing my scope caps as I did so.

The bear ran a short distance through the weeds, then turned and boiled up the side of that small ridge. I was there and ready and had the cross hairs on him as he scrambled up the slope. I could have shot, but I have lots of excuses why I didn't: It was just the second day; I had lots of time, and I wanted to see this bear a bit better before I shot. Or, better, it was pushing 200 yards and the bear was moving. I wasn't comfortable with the shot. Or, still better, I was absolutely certain he would stop and look back, or at least hesitate when he topped that little ridge. The truth is I was ready and I had the shot and I simply didn't take it. I blew it. I don't regret it, because I really did want a bit better look—which is something I had to keep reminding myself of as the days came and went.

From that point the prevailing Yakutat weather—rain, and lots of it—returned with a vengeance. We never saw another bear from our vantage point, though we were treated to a pack of wolves that played below us for a couple of hours one foggy morning. But our supply of local brown bears seemed to dry up. Which, after three days of steady rain, was about the only thing still dry. Surprisingly, too, we never saw a single black bear from our mesa, although the first benches of the mountains were absolutely ideal for them.

When we'd had enough of sitting on our mesa we struck north to a small glacial valley that we couldn't quite see into. It was devoid of sign. Then we hiked up onto the benches themselves and struck south to the next major drainage. There we actually saw a very fine black bear, our first for the trip, and how he gave us the slip I still haven't figured out. But he just plain vanished into that unbelievable thick brush, and

we never had a chance at him.

Suddenly time was starting to run short and we were fighting an absence of fresh bear sign. We discussed moving camp, but Jim relies on his guides and his country to get the job done and does not play games with his airplane. Eventually, though, we came to a con-

Eventually, though, we came to the consensus that it was time to see more of Alaska.

▲ ▲ ▲ ▲ ▲ ▲ ▲ ▲
sensus that it was time to see more of Alaska. We broke out maps, and agreed that Jim would fly Steve and our camp to a sandbar on a not-so-distant river. Jack and I would walk over with sleeping bags and essentials, thus not losing a hunting day to the same-day-airborne rule.

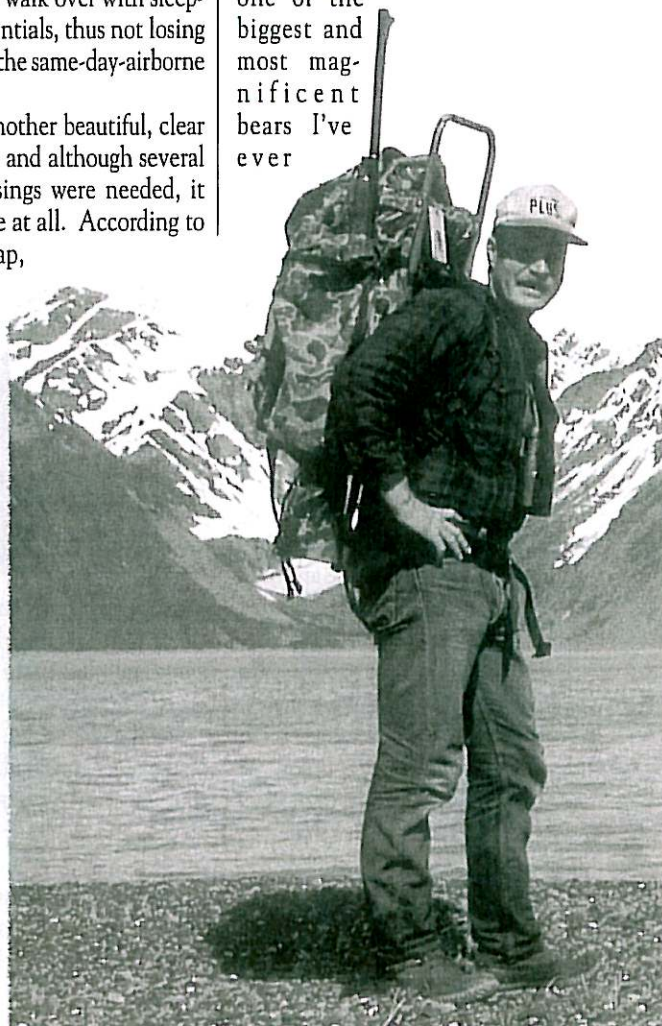
We had another beautiful, clear day for the hike, and although several hairy river crossings were needed, it wasn't a bad hike at all. According to Jim and the map,

there was a pretty good-sized hill along the river about an hour's walk upstream from camp. That hump would give us a good view up a long canyon, new country where bears of both species had been plentiful in springs gone by. We talked about going to camp first and dropping our sleeping bags before climb-

ing that hill. But when we got there I was beat, and it seemed silly to make the two-hour walk. So we headed straight up the hill and set up for an evening of glassing.

I went around to the back side to see if camp was visible far down the river. Camp was not, but through my binoculars I saw Steve wading in the river at one of its many horseshoe bends. He wasn't crossing; he was standing in the channel. He raised something above his head, and I thought I saw a metallic flash. Fishing. He's fishing, I thought. I called to Jack, and he put his binoculars on the distant form. Fishing, we agreed. Then we went back to glassing the country ahead of us.

Below us was a stream, a tributary to our river, that wandered through low hills and vanished into a steep-sided valley about three miles northwest. It was in that valley, through both binoculars and spotting scope, that we started seeing bears. Jack saw the first one, a big black playing on a snow slide. I saw the second one, a truly huge brown bear far up on the mountainside, one of the biggest and most magnificent bears I've ever



WHEN WE MOVED CAMP WE SKIRTED ONE OF THE AREA'S MANY GLACIERS. THE YAKUTAT REGION IS HOME NOT ONLY TO GLACIERS, BUT ALSO THE BLUE COLOR PHASE OF BLACK BEAR CALLED THE GLACIER BEAR. NO ONE SHOULD COUNT ON SEEING THIS RARE ANIMAL—BUT IT COULD HAPPEN AT ANY TIME.

seen. She set our hearts thumping until we saw the three small cubs trailing behind, confirming she was indeed a "she." Jack took honors for the third and fourth bears—one a small black bear quite close by, the other a monster of a black bear almost as high as the sow and cubs. And so the afternoon went. We decided to return to camp, get up early, and spike out from our camp to that valley. Only two more hunting days remained, so this was our last, best, and only chance.

We got to camp in gathering dusk, finding that Steve had caught no fish. In fact, he had no fishing rod. A big brown bear had backed him into the stream, and I had seen the flash of his rifle as he gestured at the bear with it! The bear might or might not have known he was being threatened—more likely, he thought he was the one doing the threatening. This had gone on for some time, until the bear tired of the game and wandered upstream and into the forest. We saw his tracks, good ones—but we never saw the bear!

We made up our packs that night and headed back up the river at 3:30 in the morning, already plenty light enough. Jack figured the easiest route to what he now called, "Happy Valley" would be to catch the tributary stream where it joined the river and wade up it—hardly the most direct course, but it kept us out of the brush. Our first destination was an intervening ridge that jutted off the right-hand

mountain and hid the floor of Happy Valley from our view. Part way up was a grove of stout evergreens that looked like an ideal campsite—and by climbing the ridge just above we should gain an unobstructed view of the valley and both hillsides.

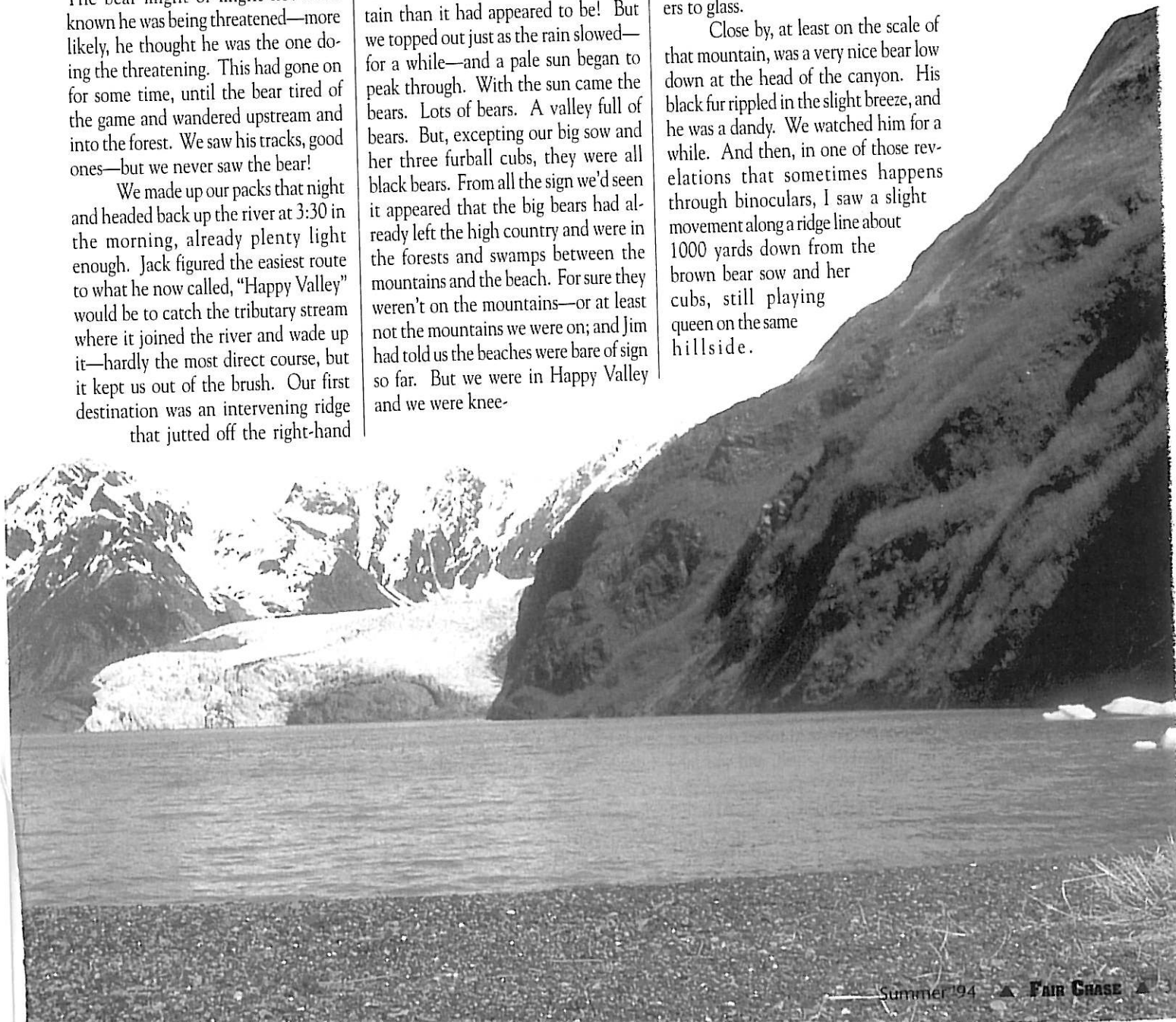
The current was fairly strong, pulling against our calves all the way—but it beat the heck out of busting through miles of brush. By 9:30, in the first of what would be off-and-on downpours, we set up camp under a huge cedar—just a big tarp folded under for a floor and stretched overhead to meet the tree trunk. After coffee, and with the rain visibly slowing, we headed up to our lookout.

It was a worse climb than it had looked. In fact, it was a bigger mountain than it had appeared to be! But we topped out just as the rain slowed—for a while—and a pale sun began to peak through. With the sun came the bears. Lots of bears. A valley full of bears. But, excepting our big sow and her three furball cubs, they were all black bears. From all the sign we'd seen it appeared that the big bears had already left the high country and were in the forests and swamps between the mountains and the beach. For sure they weren't on the mountains—or at least not the mountains we were on; and Jim had told us the beaches were bare of sign so far. But we were in Happy Valley and we were knee-

deep in black bears, so that day instantly turned into a search for the biggest black we could find.

I was hoping to relocate the monster we'd seen the night before near the huge sow—now, seen much closer, she was clearly a nine-foot bear with much left over. And that made the big black bear a seven-footer and more. But he seemed to have vanished, at midday we made a run on a bear on our side of the valley, but far up toward the head. We made a mistake on our stalk, circling up the hillside and around rather than the direct course up the valley. It was the right approach, but the brush made it a huge mistake. It took nearly three very tough hours to reach a spot where we'd last seen the bear. Of course he was long gone, but now there were others to glass.

Close by, at least on the scale of that mountain, was a very nice bear low down at the head of the canyon. His black fur rippled in the slight breeze, and he was a dandy. We watched him for a while. And then, in one of those revelations that sometimes happens through binoculars, I saw a slight movement along a ridge line about 1000 yards down from the brown bear sow and her cubs, still playing queen on the same hillside.





AUTHOR, CRAIG BODDINGTON, WITH HIS YAKUTAT BLACK BEAR, ENDURES A DRIVING RAINSTORM WHILE THE DARK COMES ON. CRAIG IS THE SENIOR FIELD EDITOR FOR PETERSON'S HUNTING AND GUNS & AMMO MAGAZINES.

The movement was gone instantly, lost to the roll of the mountain. But we put the spotting scope in the right spot, and in a few moments the bear, the same big black bear we'd seen the day before, appeared for a moment and then was swallowed again. We kept watching, and after a few minutes he emerged in a small meadow farther down, staying there to rub and play for quite some time.

It was late in the afternoon now, and getting to him would be a chore—if even possible. But I wanted that bear, not any other bear we'd seen. And Jack Ringus, a very fine guide and a good hunter, was willing to try.

We had to drop down into the valley, go downstream almost a mile, and then climb halfway up the far mountain—just for a chance to see the bear again. It looked hellish, and was far worse than it looked—the opposite slope that seemed fairly open was choked with brush, and once we started up it was hand-over-hand all the way. But we made it. In fact, the slope was so steep and so brushy and so different it appeared that we overshot our mark by several hundred yards. It didn't much matter.

That ponderous black bear was gone.

After much deliberation we finally agreed on the little meadow—barely 10 yards square—that we had last seen him in. It was almost a half-mile below us when we finally huffed and puffed to a decent vantage point. We worked down the ridge until we were above it, then stood on a big boulder trying to figure where the bear had gone. Perhaps he had dropped into a steep-sided streambed below the meadow. Perhaps he had sidehilled on around and was in the next basin. Or, just perhaps, he was still there and we simply couldn't see him in the brush.

It was past six p.m. now and daylight was growing short. I personally thought he had moved on, keeping the same direction and elevation. I voted for sidehilling likewise, hoping to catch him. Jack, I think, figured he was still there somewhere. But he seemed to agree, and he and Steve went back up to fetch the packs from where we had left them a couple hundred yards above. I stayed on the boulder watching. And while I watched, a big black head, just a dark spot in the pale dry brush, appeared about 400 yards below us.

By the time Jack returned the head had vanished again, but I had the spot and soon it reappeared. Options were limited. We could shoot from where we stood—much too far for a .375, at least in my hands. We could try to move in close, but the bear was on a brush bench and chances were we would spook him out. Or we could move on down the ridge slowly, hoping to close the distance before we spooked the bear or got so close that we were on the same level and could no longer see him. The last option made the choice simple—it was our only chance.

The bear was mostly out of sight now, only occasionally showing a spot of black as he scratched or fed. We made it to 300 yards, then 250, and the hillside was getting brushy and starting to obscure our vision. Jack spotted a clear snowfield a bit to our left, and it looked good to me. The going was noisy and slow, and the bear was not visible. We made the snowfield, and I piled up my pack frame and Jack's for a rest. And then we waited, hoping the bear hadn't heard us and made good his escape.

Apparently he had done neither. After about 10 minutes of heart-pounding waiting a black head thrust up out of the brush. I put the cross hairs on him, still waiting, and then he moved a step and I could see not only head and neck but shoulders and back, moving straight away downhill. The rifle went off about that time, and I saw the bear drop to the shot, then roll and vanish into the brush.

We moved up on him very carefully, and when I first saw him balled up in the brush he appeared much smaller than I had thought. We stretched him out for photos as yet another hard shower hit us, and he got much bigger. At this writing he's still growing, but whatever he is or was, he's a very fine black bear—and although I've shot a lot of black bears, the taking of him gave me more pleasure than any other.

We skinned him out in a torrential rain that continued through the night, and we made our "spike, spike camp" in Happy Valley just ahead of full dark.

Though nearly two days remained, the brown bear I had come for continued to elude us. Based on lack of both sign and sightings, we believed the brown bears—excepting our big sow and her children—had already left Happy Valley for the timber below. So we packed our black from our spike, spike camp to our spike camp, then returned to our lookout hill. A brown bear, a good one, had passed right below in our absence. But we never saw him, either.

Perhaps I'm getting older, or perhaps it's just because I've already shot a brown bear and don't really care if I shoot another. But for whatever reason, it didn't seem to matter. We had seen good brown bears, and we had taken a very fine black bear. I will not say that one legal hunting method is more fair chase than another, for I don't believe that. But I do know that I earned that black bear more than I have earned another—and he was reward enough for effort expended. The best news was that, having not shot a brown bear on this trip, I need not wait four years to repeat the experience. I'll be back next spring—and just perhaps the brown bears and black bears alike will be coexisting in Happy Valley.