

DEADLINE

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Illustrated by Al Schmidt

I was on Admiralty Island hoping to add an Alaska brownie to my list of predator trophies—if the rain gods would let me

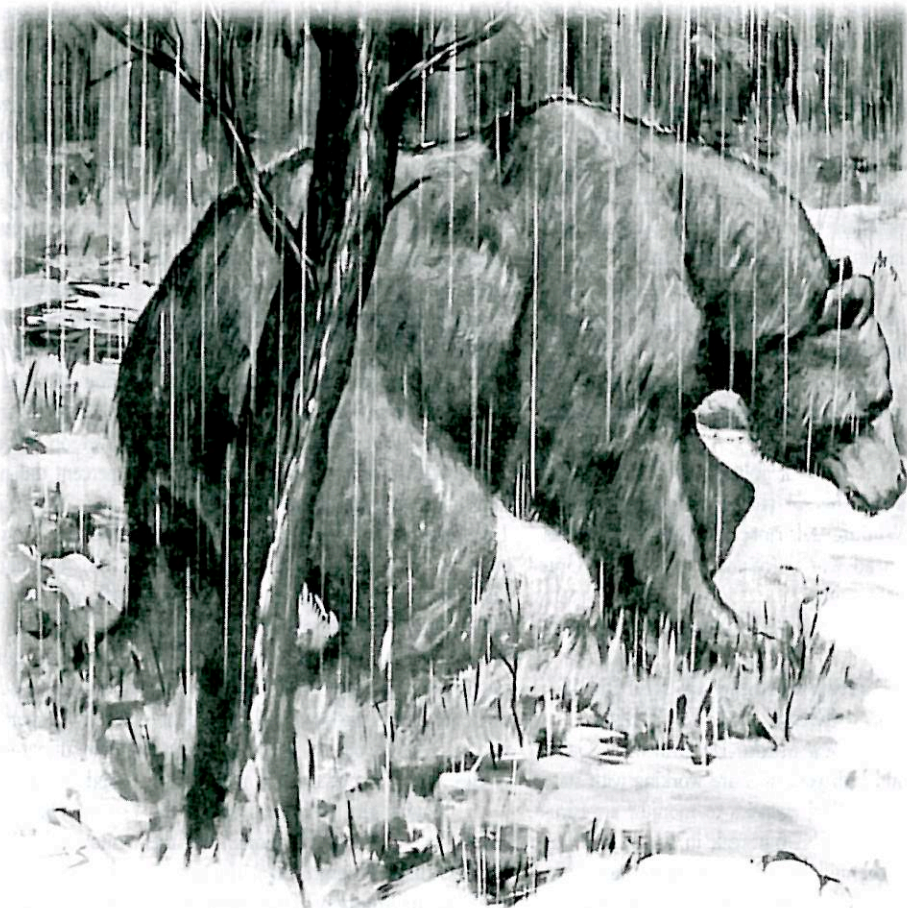
For a long time there was nothing up at the head of the bay nothing but a narrow strip of yellow-brown sedge against the dark purple-green of the primeval forest. It was all sedge, water, and forest, the smell of kelp and the sea, the cries of circling seagulls, and the pulsing undertone of hooting blue grouse. The rain came down steadily, sometimes little more than a drizzle, sometimes so hard that the drops drummed on the driftwood and danced in little white balls on the gray sea's surface.

Then all at once, as if a genie had materialized him from a bottle, a bear appeared right in a spot I'd been watching. When I'd looked away for a moment, he'd walked out of the forest and onto the sedge flat and had begun to graze. It's a way bears have. One moment there's nothing, the next there's a bear covered with hair, full of red blood and uncertain temper, going about his business in his nearsighted, self-centered way.

This was a very special bear, the first wild Alaska brown bear I'd ever seen. I took my 7 x 50 binoculars out of the case, got him in the field, and looked him over. Like his cousin the grizzly, he had the concave profile and the shoulder hump characteristic of his kind. Unlike most mountain grizzlies I'd seen, this fel-

low showed no light-tipped or silvered hairs. Instead he seemed dark, chocolate-brown all over except on his rump, where he'd rubbed himself down to an undercoat of a lighter shade.

Then Lew Bulgrin, the Owen, Wis., target shot and arms jobber and my hunting companion, showed up. Like Ralph and me, he was dressed from head to foot in rubber and rub-



A moment later Ralph Young, our guide and outfitter, quietly appeared behind me.

"I see you've discovered the bear," he said. "Small one, rubbed, no good for a trophy."

"Well, he's the first Alaska brown I've seen," I said.

"About a five-year old," Ralph told me. "It takes a long time to raise a trophy bear."

berized cloth-hip boots, knee-length raincoat, rain hat. Gun nuts that we were, Lew carried his .30/06 and I my .375 Magnum in cases, but Ralph just leaned his own iron-sighted .375 up against a log or a tree and let the rain fall on it. But since he cleans, dries and oils it every night, this casual treatment hasn't caused rust.

The three of us sat on a soggy log watching the bear as he fed, com-

pletely unaware that he'd been examined and found wanting. Presently another bear came out of the woods and onto the narrow strip of sedge. He was perhaps 600 yards away and directly across from us. Ralph took a look at him through his 6 x 42 Sard binoculars, grunted his disapproval.

This was my second day of hunting the great Alaska brown bear. The Umatilla, Ralph Young's boat, was anchored in a quiet little cove at the head of one of the several arms of Gambier Bay on famous Admiralty Island. At the moment we were hunting 10 or 12 miles away, at the head of another. The water inside the bay was rough to landlubbers like Lew and me, but outside a storm was raging and fishing boats had been driven to shelter. The day before, Ralph and I had gone by outboard skiff to another arm of the bay where for a couple of hours we'd waited in pouring rain for bears that never showed. "Lousy luck" Ralph had said. "Bears don't come out much in hard rain. They don't like to be wet and uncomfortable any more than we do."

We saw four bears that day, all either too small or too badly rubbed. All came out of the woods to feed on sedge that grew in narrow strips between forest and sea. Ralph and Lew stalked one while I watched with the glasses. He was a large one, but closer examination showed his coat to be in bad condition, so they left him.

In May days are long and nights are short in Alaska, and that day we watched for bears until 10 p.m. when the light began to fail. When we got back to the point near where we'd left the skiff, the tide was in and it was midnight when we reached the Umatilla for a hot buttered rum and a good dinner.

Because bears don't come out of the woods to feed until late afternoon, the hours an Admiralty brown-bear hunter leads are odd. We had dinner anywhere between 10 p.m. and midnight, slept late, and usually boarded the skiff to go glassing about 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

Mostly the man who hunts brownies in the spring just sits, waits, and looks. I remember one interesting afternoon. We'd tied up the skiff and had cut

through a quarter of a mile of a wonderful forest of moss, devil's-club, and great ancient trees to a protected cove bordered by yellow sedge. Clams squirted as we walked by, and in the shallow water several pairs of Canada geese courted noisily. Blue grouse were making love too, and their hollow booming sounded with the regularity of a heartbeat.

For an hour nothing showed. Then, directly across from us, a sow and a cub walked out of the woods. Then another cub, and a third. All were little brown fellows as lively as crickets, but their mother, with her long, light-tipped hairs, looked like a Rocky Mountain grizzly. She was a beauty.

Lew and I were watching her when Ralph went around a point about 100 yards away and then came hustling back quivering with excitement.

"Come with me," he whispered. "I'll show you a real bear."

We crept back through the woods and onto the beach and hid behind a dead tree that had been cast up by the sea. Across the tidal arm, lying in the open on a sedge flat, was a bear that looked enormous. He was lighter

"Who wants to try?"

I sized up the great bear gloomily through my binoculars. He looked to be a good 300 yards away. I thought to myself that a poorly placed shot might mean a broken jaw or a broken leg followed by a fight and follow up in heavy timber. The bear made the decision for us. Though bears are supposed to have poor eyes, I think he saw us. We had the wind on him, but he was looking right at us. He got to his feet, turned ponderously, and rolled back into the forest. He was the largest bear I saw on the trip, his behind, disappearing into the woods, looked as big as the rear end of a 10-ton truck.

Lew drew first blood one afternoon when, miraculously, the rain stopped for a time and the clouds thinned so that the sun shone with a pale and ghostly radiance. We were glassing from a little round island in a beautiful bay surrounded by heavy forest and great snowy peaks when a handsomely furred brownie walked out of the woods about half a mile away and started chomping sedge. Lew and Ralph grabbed rifles and cameras and took off. Ralph rowed the skiff across the water and tied it up at a point some distance from the bear. Then he and



THE BEAR CAME LUMBERING ALONG IN THE DOWNPOUR. ONCE HE CAME TO THE FALLEN LOG, I DECIDED I WOULD EITHER KILL HIM OR RUN.

than most Admiralty brown bears, and as he faced us his great head seemed to be two feet across.

"That," said Lew breathlessly, "is a bear!"

"Can you take him from here?" Ralph added tensely.

Lew disappeared into the woods.

For long minutes I glassed the beautiful bear as it fed, expecting at any moment to hear a shot. Then I suddenly saw it stagger; at the same time mud and water flew up 30 yards beyond it. Lew was using the 250-grain Barnes



NOT THE BIGGEST BROWN BEAR EVER SHOT, I'LL ADMIT, BUT ANOTHER TROPHY FOR OLD BETSY, THE BEAT-UP .375 I'M HOLDING.

bullet in his .30/06 with a charge of 56 grains of No. 4831 powder. The bullet had sailed right through the bear's chest and kicked up mud beyond.

The bear reeled and wobbled into the woods. I heard Lew shoot again.

Presently he and Ralph came out of the woods carrying the hide. It was that of a lady bear, not particularly large, but silky, long, and beautifully colored. To my untrained eye the hide looked exactly like that of a she grizzly Jack Holliday shot by the Smoky River in Alberta when the two of us were hunting bighorns and grizzlies many years ago.

My turn came some days later. Lew, tired of the rain, elected to stay dry that afternoon, so Ralph and I went out alone. We spotted a bear that looked pretty good from a distance, and rowed to the beach about half a mile from it. What with the rain and wind, Ralph never got a really good look at it, and since the tide was dropping rapidly, someone had to stay with the skiff to keep it from going aground. I had to tackle my first Alaska brown bear alone with no guide to counsel me and hold my hand.

I waded ashore, walked to the woods, and stalked the bear quietly along the edge. I could see the brownie and I could also see Ralph bobbing in the skiff. When I was what looked to be about 250 yards from the bear, it struck me that it was about time to burn a bit of powder. From then on I hadn't a vestige of cover, and I remembered the big fellow that had seen us and waddled off into the woods.

I lay down in the muck and got into a nice tight sling, my left hand hard against the front swivel. I have great

faith in that old .375 Magnum. It's a standard-grade Model 70 Winchester remodeled by Griffin & Howe of New York, and it wears a Lyman 48 receiver sight as well as a Kollmorgen 2 3/4 X scope on Griffin & Howe side mount. I've used it in Africa and Asia as well as North America, and have shot all sorts of odd and improbable mammals with it. This day I fed a cartridge into the chamber, wiggled a bit to get solid, waited for the bear to turn broadside, then held for a shoulder shot with the cross hairs a bit high to allow for bullet drop.

The rifle cracked and the bear dropped, both shoulders a mush from the new and experimental Silvertip bullet I was shooting. As he lay there struggling, I quickly fired two more shots. Then he lay still. Old Betsy, my beat up .375, had become one of the few rifles in the world that have taken all three great predators—African lion, Indian tiger, and Alaska brown bear.

When I paced off the distance, I got 290 yards, but I seriously doubt that the bear was that far away. I'm sure I can't pace a yard over wet and sometimes mucky beach in hip boots. It was probably closer to 250 or 260 yards. The bear, I found to my sorrow, was only as big as a medium-size mountain grizzly. When Ralph and I got together, he told me he'd been able to get a good look at the bear and saw that it was small. He'd tried to yell a warning to me, but the pounding rain and the screaming wind had drowned him out.

We saw other bears. I remember a stalk Lew and Ralph made while I watched. We'd spotted a good bear over a mile away, and the two had gone after

it. For long minutes I watched the animal feeding peacefully on the brown sedge, a big, dark fellow against the smoky green of the forest. I also saw Lew and Ralph sneaking along like a couple of burglars. The bear moved toward them as he fed, until finally all that was between them was a great dead fir that the tide had torn from the bank.

Ralph crept over to it and cautiously climbed up on it to spot the bear. He didn't know it then, but he and the bear were about 20 feet apart. As he raised his head over it the bear happened to look up. The big creature fell backward in surprise and ran into the woods so fast it's a wonder his path didn't smoke. They are wilderness bears, these brownies, but they're the spookiest ones I've ever seen.

As the defeated stalkers slunk back to the skiff I saw another bear come out of the woods, strike the rancid man-smell in their trail, and tear out of there as if pursued by a pack of rabid wolves. A brownie may not have good eyes, but he has a very good nose.

On another occasion Ralph and I were cruising in the skiff in the last few minutes of light not far from where the Umatilla was anchored. The wind was from the shore toward us, there was a bit of a chop on the sea, and the waves were tipped with white. I was wondering what Hack, the cook, was going to feed us that night when Ralph suddenly shut off the motor, grabbed his binoculars, and turned to scan the beach.

"Big bear," he whispered, "and he's in our laps. It's the luck of the Irish."

"Yes indeed," I repeated. "The luck of the Irish." But as it turned out, whoever sends that luck must have learned that my Irish is pretty well diluted with English, Scotch, Dutch, German, Danish, French, Spanish, and probably a few other nationalities.

The bear looked as big as a horse. Strolling along as if he hadn't a care in the world, he disappeared behind a ridge of rocks. I thought that all I'd have to do was to sneak up, peek over, and let him have it. I was so relaxed I almost hummed a tune. Side by side, Ralph and I waltzed up the little ridge like a couple of soft-shoe vaudeville artists, and I was thinking what a dirty trick it was going to be to clobber that giant at 30 yards.

But when we looked over we did a double take. The bear was gone. I rushed around to a little cove, convinced it held the bear. It didn't.

"Fret not, my fine fellow," Ralph said smugly. "The woods here are narrow and there's a tidal flat on the far side. Our bear has just turned back to the woods, after deciding that the interior sedge has a better flavor. We'll find him gulping spinach over there."

So we hotfooted down the beach, around a wooded point, and into the interior tidal flat. Still no bear.

Complaining bitterly that we'd been taken and that this bear was low and unprincipled, we retraced our steps, splashing and kicking rocks. I was in the lead. I walked around the wooded point and right into a bear. To my startled eyes he looked as tall as a horse and as heavy as a rhino. He slid to a stop, and so did I. For a moment we gazed at each other in horror.

Then he whirled and made a dive for the woods about 36 yards away. I swung up my old .375, got the cross hairs on his shoulder, and followed him. With no guide at my elbow to tell me whether to shoot or not, I had but two or three seconds to make up my mind. Was this the big one I came after, or wasn't he? As he took off he didn't look quite so large. I was still trying to decide whether to press the trigger when he disappeared.

Ralph could see me, but not the bear. He knew I had thrown my rifle to my shoulder and he suspected the worst.

"Smatter?" he asked, as he pounded up. "Bear?"

"Don't think it was the big one but it was pretty big," I said.

So Ralph made bear talk, snarling, snapping, huffing, and puffing, telling that brownie to put up his dukes and fight. I don't think the bear had smelled me; I believe he thought I was an odd-looking object which he didn't crave to know better. He stopped not far off in the woods, and for a moment stood there and told Ralph he was the same and more of it. But presently he gave up answering and when we sneaked into the woods we found he'd gone. It was almost dark when Ralph and I crept back to the skiff.

"Damn this weather," Ralph said suddenly. "Rain, rain, rain, and more rain. If the weather would only get decent we'd be up to our hips in bears. We'd see them in herds, coveys, flocks, prides-whatever a lot of bears are called."

That night the Juneau weather report said another storm was rolling in from the Gulf of Alaska right on the heels of the one that was already plaguing us. It

was raining hard when I hit the sack, twice as hard when I got up next morning.

Came 4 p.m. and time to go bear hunting. Lew put his head out of the cabin door, and in an instant his head looked as if someone had thrown a bucket of water on it. "You can include me out on the bear hunt: he said "I don't mind getting wet by a bear but I don't want to drown."

Feeling a little like a man going to his own hanging, I put on my hip boots, eiderdown jacket, raincoat, and rain hat. We'd moved the Umatilla that morning, and now we were in a calm little bay around which Ralph said he'd seen many bears.

Not much beyond half a mile from the boat, we sat down on soaking sedge under drippings firs. I watched gloomily as my .375's leather case soaked up the rain. The tide was well out, and the dark tidal flat ahead of us was littered with kelp, shellfish, driftwood, a battered duck decoy, a glass float lost by some Japanese fisherman, and an empty whisky bottle.

"Texas fellow killed a beauty here once," Ralph said. "This very spot."

Rain fell steadily, and wind gusts tore at the lofty trees above us. Suddenly Ralph leaped to his feet, fumbling for his binoculars. "Bear," he said. "See him? Clear across the bay. He's walking this way. Big one. Let's go."

I put the glasses to my eyes. Even at that distance and greyed by the pounding rain, the bear looked big. He was walking rapidly at the forest's edge.

Instead of going around, we cut right across mud, muck, and pools of sea water. Ralph whispered, "Go up by the timber and wait. He'll come right to you. I'll go over here for a better look."

I almost got stuck in the muck, but I managed to fight my way clear and scramble to firm ground. At the edge of the woods I turned and looked for the bear. He was less than 400 yards away, still headed toward me. If he came straight on I know he'd disappear around a cove, then come into sight again by a wooded point about 150 yards away. I looked toward Ralph. The bear had traveled faster than he'd counted on, and because he'd run into soft muck Ralph himself had gone slower. Now he was caught in the open, and if he moved the bear might see him. He lay in the muck and wait.

I got into a prone position and slid a cartridge into the .375's chamber.

The rain had been pouring down ever since I'd uncased the rifle, so I decided I'd better look through the scope. Ocular and objective lenses were both streaked; I couldn't see a thing. I hastily took a handkerchief out of my pocket and wiped them, off, but it was raining so hard that the handkerchief got soaked almost instantly. Since the rain was coming straight down, I thought that if I held the rifle horizontal the lenses wouldn't get wet.

I didn't have many seconds to lie there. The bear rounded the wooded point, rolling along purposefully and looking five feet wide. I could either kill him or run. Otherwise he'd walk right over me. Between us lay a log that had been washed up by the sea, and I made up my mind that it would be the deadline.

As he came on I put the intersection of the cross hairs on his left shoulder, the downhill side. The bullet tipped him over as his leg went out from under him. Hurt, surprised, broken, he sprawled in the rain and bawled in a way that almost made my hair stand on end. I bounced to my feet and cracked him through the lungs offhand. Then he lay still.

Ralph and I ran up to him. He was a fine bear with a hide that would square about eight feet four inches-not the biggest brown bear that ever was shot but, with his fine, wide head, a great trophy.

Ralph and I did a few steps of the Nez Perce buffalo dance, and then it dawned on me that maybe I should take some pictures. I did, trying to keep the lens of my camera dry. Later we learned that Hack and Lew had seen the bear and had been watching it when I shot. "Look," Hack had said, "there's something wrong with that bear. He fell down." Then they heard the shot.

The hunt was over, and we headed back to Petersburg in a heavy rain and high wind. Next day when I flew to Ketchikan and then to Seattle, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The sea was blue and the little green islands of the Inside Passage, all surrounded by white beaches, seemed to be floating in indigo.

Bill Cole, a chap I know in Seattle, and his wife went on a hunt with Ralph right after I left. You guessed it. The weather was perfect-warm, sunshiny, calm. It was Hawaii with bears, they said. Bill Cole saw browns and blacks in herds, droves, packs, and coveys. Such is the luck of the Irish.



RALPH AT HIS NIGHTLY CHORE IN BOAT'S CABIN—CLEANING AND OILING OUR WATERLOGGED RIFLES.