

HUNTING THE GREAT COASTAL BEARS

THE ALASKA BROWN BEAR IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST GAME ANIMALS—

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It's about nine o'clock on a lovely spring evening in Alaska. The sun is just going down and the white-coated coastal mountains are slightly pink now. I'm at the tail end of my fourth—and I hope not my last—hunt for the coastal variety of *Ursus arctos*—what hunters call the Alaska brown bear.

In truth the “brownies” are just well-fed grizzlies, but the protein-rich salmon diet combined with milder, shorter winters along Alaska's southern coast have allowed the development of “super-bears” once thought to be an entirely different species. Today we know that there is just one long-clawed, dish-faced, hump-backed bear, and he ranges (discontinuously today) from the mountains of Spain eastward all across Asia, through Alaska, down through the Rockies, and on east to the barrens of Northwest Territories. But even though biologists have long agreed there's just one *Ursus arctos*, hunters continue to separate the bears of Alaska's southern and southeastern coast and offshore islands from the grizzlies of interior Alaska and Canada.

Well they should, for the Alaska brown bear is a true giant of a bear, arguably the largest predator on Earth. The argument is caused by the polar bear. The hides of the largest bears of both species are comparable in dimensions, and the largest skulls are similar as well. Live weights of wild bears of either species are rarely obtained, but since the polar bear is more streamlined for better swimming ability, I'd bet on the brown bear being the heavier of the two.

Regardless of whether the brown

bear is truly the largest or merely a tie with his maritime cousin, he's still an awesome creature, in all ways one of the great game animals of the world.

Not that the interior grizzly isn't. He ranks right up there as well. Interior grizzly populations tend to be more scattered, thinly distributed over huge, rugged country. Hunting them is thus generally more difficult, and I would rate a large grizzly a superior trophy to a large brown bear. But not as impressive, oh, my, no! Nor, generally, quite as enjoyable to hunt.

Most grizzly hunting involves endless glassing in vast country, with the hope of ultimately seeing one suitable and shootable bear. Glassing is also endless for brown bears and country is also vast. But coastal bears are much more concentrated due to better food supplies. Generally you see more bears—and the sight of a great bear is always worth an adrenalin rush.

Some of the coastal areas are very brushy, some are heavily forested—and a few are both. In such country you won't see a lot of bears—but you'll know they're there.

They'll leave their distinctively long-clawed pad marks in the gravel of streambeds and in the soft mud of muskeg. You'll come around the bend of a stream and you'll see water seeping into deep-cut tracks—but all around the bush is silent.

You'll see signs of their feeding as well—in the springtime, fresh rootings where the bears have gone after choice new growth. In the fall you'll find still-flopping salmon along a brush-

lined stream. Sorely lacking in imagination is the hunter who fails to catch just the faintest taste of primal fear—and then wonder how a thousand-pound creature can vanish so silently and so swiftly.

Just the last few days we've been sitting on a little hummock overlooking some lovely meadows and swamps and a huge expanse of open gravel bar. There's been a bear feeding just 100 yards below us, in a thick, wet patch where the skunk cabbage has been growing before our eyes. Also growing were the spots the bear had rooted up. For three days the bear managed to feed while we were in camp—and we never figured out if it was midday, first light, or last light. Finally we saw her—a medium-sized and very pretty blonde sow.

Blonde “brown” bear? You bet. How about that thousand-pound figure I mentioned? Is that literary license (or just typical writer's exaggeration?) Not a bit. Both color and size of brown bears are sources of much misconception, if not downright deception in the latter case.

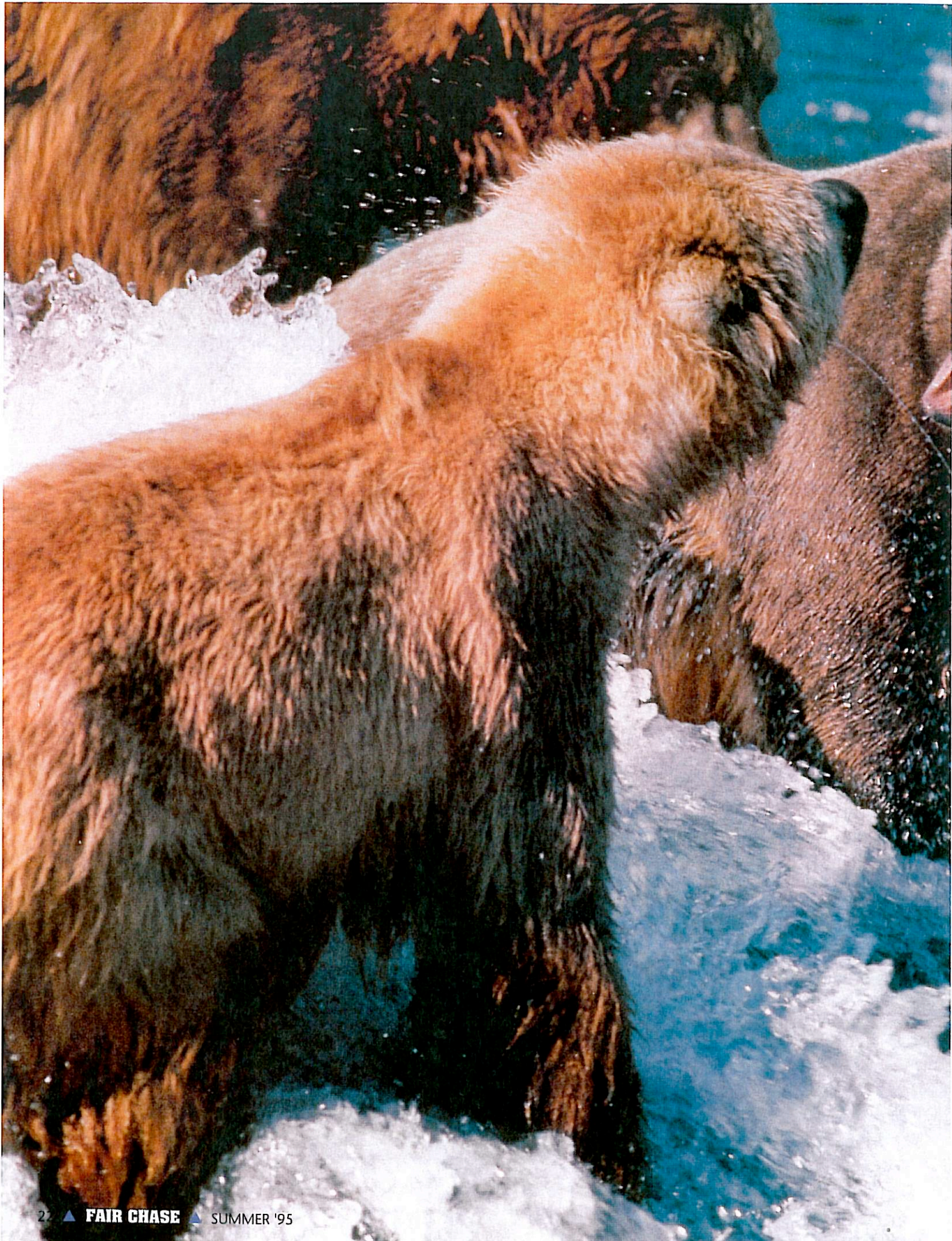
I'll deal with color first since it's the easiest. Brown bears are not necessarily brown. Period. Grizzly bears aren't necessarily grizzled. Period. Some shade of brown, from clover honey to dark chocolate, is the norm for coastal bears—but they can also be very, very blonde—especially on younger bears—or very, very dark. To my knowledge bears of the *Ursus arctos* species are never truly black like a black bear, but they can be so dark as to appear black in binoculars or spotting

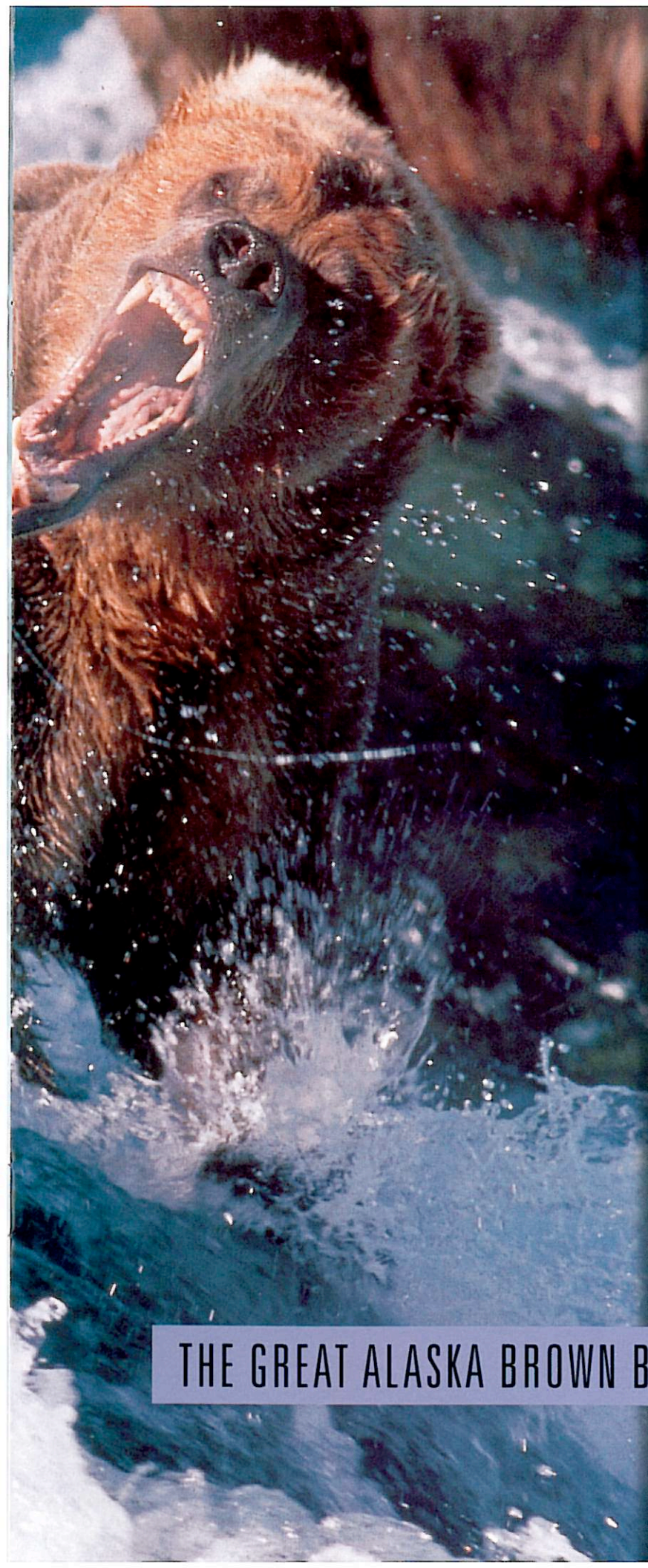
INSET PHOTO: TRACKS ALONG THE RIVERS ARE SOME OF THE MOST VISIBLE SIGNS OF BEARS—FAR MORE VISIBLE THAN THE BEARS THEMSELVES. THESE TRACKS WERE MADE WITHIN THE HOUR.

BACKGROUND PHOTO BY DICK HANCOCK

—AND HUNTING HIM ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST THRILLS.







THE GREAT ALASKA BROWN BEAR

scope. They can also have the white-tipped guard hairs but find the “grizzled” or “silvertip” appearance more classic to mountain grizzlies. Larger, older bears seem unlikely to be light-colored, but that’s also not hard and fast. My hunting partner, Joe Bishop, shot a very big and very blonde male on a hunt we shared a few years ago.

The situation is actually very similar with interior grizzlies, except that the silvertip coloration that gives the grizzly its name is somewhat more prevalent.

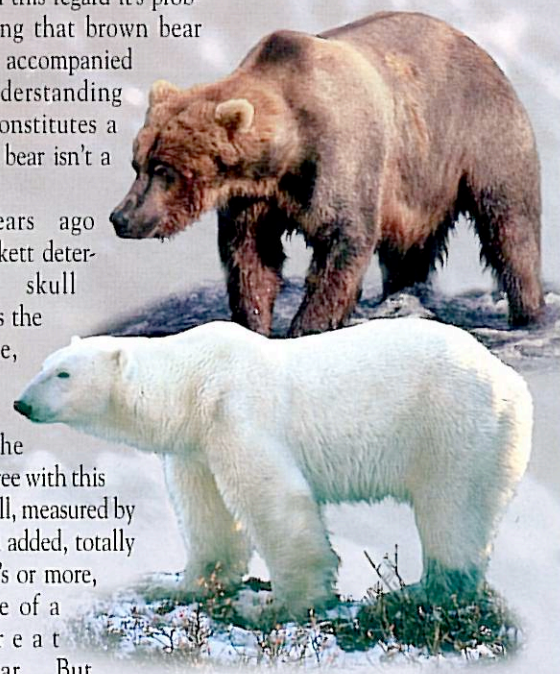
Hunters may set out with the thought that a honey-blonde bear would make a lovely rug, but size—and an unrubbed hide of any color—is what most brown bear hunters are looking for. The rub comes not from the hide, if you’ll pardon the pun. It comes from determining what’s big and what isn’t. That’s very difficult on the hoof—er, pad—and almost equally when the bear is down.

In terms of trophy judgement, I’ll fall back on Jack O’Connor’s famous line, “The big ones look big.” Big bears have big bodies and seemingly short legs, while young bears are leggy and more slender. Big bears walk with a roll and a swagger—but field judgement is very hard, and in this regard it’s probably a good thing that brown bear hunters must be accompanied by a guide. Understanding what actually constitutes a shootable brown bear isn’t a great deal easier.

Many years ago Boone and Crockett determined that skull measurement was the one unrefutable, unalterable means of accepting bears into the record book. I agree with this totally. A big skull, measured by length and width added, totally into the high 20’s or more, is proof positive of a

great bear. But skull dimensions are almost impossible to see on a bear, let alone judge. Hunters speak of hide dimensions—and nothing is so easily stretched, if you’ll pardon another pun.

WHICH BEAR IS THE LARGEST?
IT’S A TOSS UP BETWEEN THE ALASKA BROWN BEAR AND POLAR BEAR. DUE TO THEIR MASSIVE SIZE IT IS VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO GET A LIVE WEIGHT FOR EITHER BEAR. AS YOU CAN SEE BY THE EXAMPLES BELOW THE OVERALL APPEARANCE OF THEIR BODY SHAPES IS QUITE DIFFERENT. THE ALASKA BROWN BEAR IS SOMEWHAT MORE STOCKY WHILE THE POLAR BEAR IS MORE STREAMLINED FOR BETTER SWIMMING ABILITY.



TOP: WHILE MOST "BROWN BEARS" ARE GENERALLY BROWN, THE SHADINGS ARE ENDLESS. THIS GOOD BEAR TAKEN BY JOE BISHOP WAS VERY BLONDE, UNUSUAL FOR A BIG BEAR.

BOTTOM: THIS IS A VERY BIG BEAR, TAKEN ON THE ALASKAN PENINSULA. AGED AT 27 YEARS, THIS ONE IS A VERY GENUINE 10-FOOTER -- WITH NO STRETCHING AND QUITE A LOT TO SPARE.

With hides, we talk of squared measurements. This means a green skin, laid out flat, no stretching, measured nose to tail and front paw to front paw, the sum of those measurements divided by two.

The Holy Grail is a bear "squaring" 10 feet. I have seen it written that bears squaring 10 feet by honest measurement don't exist. They do, but they're rare. Bears squaring 11 feet also exist, but they're rarer still. And I sus-

pect bears have been taken that square 12 feet and more. On the other hand, it's awfully easy to stretch any 8 1/2-foot bear and turn him into a 10-footer. Some Alaskan outfitters are famous for a little stretching (at least among their peers), but the most blatant example I know of occurred when Russia opened her coastal bears a few seasons ago.

It seemed that all the bears taken were 10-footers, or so the advertisements said—but somehow almost none

of the field trophy photos quite measured up to experienced eyes. Russia's coastal bears are also fish-fed and grow large, but the climate there is more harsh, and even at their largest Russian bears probably don't get quite as big as Alaska's best bears.

Stretching the hides a bit is quite harmless, since only skull measurements count—but the danger is that hunters start to expect 10-foot bears. Or reactionaries, aware of all the stretching, claim there's no such thing. Ten-foot bears do exist, just like seven-foot people—but they're uncommon. In truth, they're just as uncommon in the famed areas of Kodiak Island and the Peninsula as they are in Southeast Alaska. The game department's statistics show the average for both Kodiak Island and the Alaskan Peninsula is about the same at plus or minus 7 1/2 feet.

With a good, unrubbed hide, an honest 7 1/2-foot bear (which can easily be stretched into a nine-footer if you must) should be considered a very acceptable trophy. An eight-footer is a very nice bear, and an honest nine-



footer is big. Make no mistake, a nine-foot bear by honest measurement will weigh half a ton. Bigger bears weigh more—perhaps much more.

Back in 1981 I was fortunate to take a very big bear on the Alaskan Peninsula with the late Don Johnson and his son, Warren. By honest measurement, laid out on a gravel bar, it measured 10'8" by 11'2", for a square of 10 feet 11 inches if my math is correct. I have no idea what it weighed, but it was one of the biggest things I've ever seen. I've shot many Cape buffalo, and I know a Cape buffalo bull weighs from 1500 pounds upwards to, rarely, close to a ton. That bear was as heavy as any Cape buffalo I've personally shot—and I know the skin, less skull, weighed over 150 pounds. My guide, "Slim" Gale, was young and tough. I was much younger and stronger myself. All we could do was 100 steps each, then stop and switch packs.

Skull size is the only irrefutable measurement available, but skull size doesn't always follow body size. A bear as big as that (and as old; it was aged at 27 years) might have had a 30-inch skull—but it didn't. By contrast, bears in the nine-foot class might carry record book skulls. Sometimes you can see that a bear has a clearly outsized head, and that's a good sign—but unlike horned and antlered game, there is no surefire way to field-judge for "book" or near-book proportions. Better to not worry about it, and look instead for a well-furred, fully mature bear.

My buddy Randy Brooks, owner of Barnes Bullets, admits now that he was one of the guys who had a "thing" for a 10-foot bear. He made numerous trips and passed a great many superb trophies—some that he now realizes probably reached his goal. He never got a 10-footer, but the bear he finally shot was in the upper nines and is a fabulous trophy. Now that his four years of waiting have expired, he's going bear hunting again—but he maintains that his "10-foot fever" has left him. He'll look for a very big, very mature, well-furred bear—but he's done counting inches on an animal like that that virtually defies precise judgement.

Back when I lucked onto that monster I thought brown bear hunting was pretty simple, except for the packing job. I just didn't know, or

appreciate, how truly lucky I'd been. I know better today. In my hunting career to date I've been successful on two of four brown bear hunts, while I've scored on two of three interior grizzly hunts. I can absolutely write the brown bear failures off to my own pickiness, slowness, poor shooting, or all three. But even so, that career average is about the reverse of what it should be. Nothing is certain on big bears. Fickle weather, more fickle bears, early winters, late thaws (or the reverse), and plenty of tough country preclude sure things. Even so, a good outfitter should come close

to 75 percent or better for coastal brown bears, while 50 percent is a very good average for interior bears due to the bears' more nomadic nature.

Conventional wisdom has it that Kodiak Island and the Alaskan Peninsula are the hotspots, but I no longer believe that to be true. They're good—very good—but not necessarily better than Southeast, Prince William Sound, the ABC Islands, or wherever. Big brown bears exist throughout the range, and big bears are simply where you find them. Some of these areas are more difficult to hunt, but are hunted much more lightly and may actually hold more older and larger bears.

In recent years I hunted moose on the Peninsula and never saw a bear except from the air. Likewise, I hunted Sitka blacktails on Kodiak, and while we saw a couple of bears from the boat, I only saw one on the ground. Mind you, I wasn't hunting bears—but in bear country you're always looking for bears, if only so you can stay away from them!

The bear I saw on Kodiak was a wonderful creature, bucket-headed with wind blowing his long winter fur. He came like a cowboy to the chuckwagon bell when he heard me shoot a buck—but was gentleman enough to sit patiently on a ridge above us while we—



very hurriedly—boned the meat and made up our packs. As we moved off he swaggered in for his share.

Mind you, Kodiak and the Peninsula are very, very good—but their reputations and limited permits or seasons carry a premium price tag. The last couple of springs I've been hunting Southeast Alaska with Jim Keeline's See Alaska outfit (Box 1333, Juneau, AK 99802, phone (907) 784 3711). It's a good, honest foot hunt in tough country, but the coastal mountains are beautiful and there are plenty of bears—and big bears. There are also numerous wolves and black bear—and, around Yakutat, the long-odds chance for a glacier bear, the rare blue color phase of black bear. I've seen three glacier bears on this hunt, an unheard-of number.

The salted hide of the largest of the three is at Jim's base camp now. That undoubtedly used up my luck for this hunt—and that will be okay, because it means I won't have to wait four years to follow those great tracks along the gravel bars and glass the big-headed, hump-backed bears on the hillsides one more time.

TOP: LIKE ALL GRIZZLIES THE COASTAL BEARS HAVE AWESOME CLAWS—BUT THEIR PRIMARY PURPOSE IS FOR DIGGING, NOT AS WEAPONS.

MIDDLE: BROWN BEAR HUNTING IS PRIMARILY A GAME OF PAINSTAKING GLASSING—OFTEN FOR DAYS ON END. IT'S A PLEASANT WAY TO HUNT PROVIDED THE WEATHER COOPERATES.

BOTTOM: ANKLE-FIT HIP BOOTS ARE THE ONLY SENSIBLE FOOTGEAR FOR BROWN BEAR HUNTING. THE TERRAIN ISN'T ALL THAT SOGGY IN MOST PLACES, BUT YOU'RE CONSTANTLY WADING THROUGH RIVERS AND STREAMS.