

# FEATURE STORY

## FROM THE 24TH BIG GAME AWARDS BOOK



### GRIZZLY BEAR

**First Award and  
New World's Record**

### SCORE

**27-5/16**

### SKULL LENGTH

**16-11/16**

### SKULL WIDTH

**10-10/16**

### LOCATION

**Toklat River, Alaska - 1998**

### HUNTER

**David F. Malzac**

**STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAVID F. MALZAC**

I wish I could say that this started out to be a bear hunt, but it didn't. My friends and hunting partners, Robert Caywood and Harold Bryant, long time Alaskans who live, breathe, and sleep to hunt, my father, Gerald Malzac, and I started out on what was supposed to be the moose hunt of a lifetime!

After our 1997 fall moose hunt we decided it was time to find a different place to hunt where there was more game and fewer hunters. The winters in Alaska are long, so this gave us plenty of time to study maps and make plans for the following year's hunt. After spending several evenings together looking at area and topographic maps, Robert and I had decided to check out the Bearpaw Trail. The Bearpaw Trail is 75 miles north of the majestic Denali (or Mt. McKinley as outsiders call it) and southwest of Nenana, Alaska. This trail was the original route to the northern Denali gold fields, built at the turn of the century, and was accessed by steamships from the Nenana River and the town of Nenana. The Bearpaw Trail and its roadhouses were consequently abandoned in the 1930s when the Stampede Trail was built 30 miles to the south. When the current road into the park was built about 20 years later, the Stampede Trail was abandoned. Since then a few trappers

have used the Bearpaw Trail, keeping it cleared mainly for snowmobiles and dogsleds.

I contacted Alaska Fish and Game and spoke to the area biologists, as well as several air taxi operators, some of whom mentioned seeing quite a few large bulls in the area. During the summer Robert and I flew over the area to scout the trail and terrain. From the air the trail looked spotty in places, but seemed to be accessible. But, you cannot trust what you see from an airplane! Overall, the area, which was 90 to 100 miles from the Parks Highway, looked promising. Our minds were made up; the Kantishna River and eastern hills that form the headwaters of the Kuskokwim River would be our destination!

Robert and I talked with Harold and he was game. Then I called my father in Arizona to see if he would like to join us. He was ready to go before I hung up the phone.

I had met Harold and Robert years ago through a very good friend and expert hunter, Bill Newman. Bill is renowned throughout the state for his design, development, and construction of the finest all-around hunting buggy anywhere. These buggies are vehicles built on old army M-17, 1 1/4-ton jeep frames with 4-foot tires. They stand roughly 9 feet high, 8 feet wide, and can be as much as 24 feet long. With gin poles that will hoist any moose off the ground, it makes for fast, efficient, and clean butchering. Each buggy is hand-crafted to meet the individual needs of each owner. Their basic design is what makes them work so well in the Alaskan terrain. Large tractor tread implement tires give the buggies one quarter the ground pressure of a man walking. Small V-8 and 6-cylinder engines, and a low gear ratio in the drive train, produce high torque and a top speed of 15 miles per hour. These buggies have been referred to as an Alaskan grocery cart!

Robert's buggy is one of Bill's original buggies. Bill has since left us for the great hunting grounds in the sky, so Harold built his own buggy using Robert's as a model and following Bill's basic guide-

lines. With these buggies, we could take in a luxurious camp 120 miles from the nearest road, get to areas that even air guides would like to hunt, and still haul back a couple of moose, one or two caribou or bear! This is essential because it is not uncommon for our hunts to last from 20 to 25 days, much to the dismay of our wives and girlfriends. As more and more land is being gobbled up by special interest groups, these rigs are a necessity for those of us who live and work in Alaska, depend on its natural resources to feed our families, and want to have a true wilderness experience by getting away from the crowds.

On September 1st and 2nd the equipment was packed into the buggies. I had my 8-mm video and 35mm still camera packed also, hopefully for some unforgettable footage.

By the 4th we were on the trail! The first 20 miles were fantastic, taking us about 5 hours — easy trail and beautiful country! A large 60 to 65-inch bull moose crossed the trail in front of us and stood watching us pass.

We didn't want to take any game yet since it was hot and meat would spoil if not hung and cared for properly.

Our first night was spent on the Teklanika River, at a calm 50 degrees, with a nice campfire, good food and conversation, an absolutely beautiful sunset as the backdrop, and the distant roar of the river. There was no problem with sleep that night!

We awoke to an overcast morning. After a good breakfast, we hit the trail and in the next few days would find the next 30 miles to be a living hell! Most of the trail was no more than a moose path, which had been overgrown for the last 60 years. The only way we were able to find some of the trail was to use our Global Positioning System (GPS) and topographic maps. The GPS was new to us. We knew better than to rely on this new fangled contraption completely, because it is a machine and machines break down! Besides, Murphy (of Murphy's Law) usually rode shotgun! The second day was spent clearing trees and brush

for 14 hours only to make two miles. Camp that night was hastily set up in pouring rain.

Day three was mostly easy going. There were two streams and a gully, which we needed to build makeshift log bridges to cross, because the original bridges had either washed out or collapsed over the years. We traveled until dark and were so close to the Toklat, but the trail was swamped. A trail through or around needed to be found and that would require daylight. A campsite was set up, again in a moderate rain.

Up and going by seven o'clock, we found a trail through the swamp. After going through two chainsaw chains, seemingly endless brush clearing, getting lost twice and stuck a few times, and four 13-15 hour days, we finally made the Toklat River. We had traveled only 50 miles of the planned 100. I think we were all beginning to question our sanity! Do we really want to hunt this bad? Would this be a great outdoor experience? Was a moose or bear worth all this? Undeniably, YES! We were adventurers, gatherers and, above all, hunters!

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## FIRST AWARD GRIZZLY BEAR

We arrived at the Toklat River around noon on the 8th, the sixth day of the hunting trip. After walking the trail west of the river for a couple of miles, it was decided that we would not go on to the Kantishna River, which was another 25 miles away! The trail was getting worse and we'd had all the bushwhacking we could handle. A campsite was selected on a high, dry gravel bar. We spent the rest of the day setting up camp, which consisted of two 10 x 12 wall tents with carpet, a covered kitchen between the two tents, barrel stoves, tables, chairs, cots and of course meat poles. It was a very comfortable camp. After a large meal, we relaxed, reminisced about the trip in, and planned our hunt for the next day.

After a hearty breakfast of eggs, chorizo, tortillas and pan-

cakes, we scouted a couple of square miles around camp and found very little moose sign. There were plenty of bear tracks, some wolf tracks, but none of the swampy areas moose prefer. The next five days were spent taking the buggies to different areas and hunting the small ridges, sloughs and clearings. Many hours were spent still-hunting the heavy forested areas, and then everyone met back at the buggies at dark to go back to camp. With no luck close to camp, we would travel five to ten miles away, putting us into areas that had more moose sign. All the tracks we saw were from mature moose — none from calves or yearlings. The bears and wolves were clearly taking a large toll on the younger population. Why can't those animal lovers understand this? Everyday there would be fresh bear tracks in our foot or buggy tracks. It would be nice to get a bear or two even if we couldn't find any moose. The area biologist had told me a few months earlier that the bears and wolves were decimating the moose calves in this unit. It was apparently true. Wolves and bears are protected in Denali Park, which was just eight miles to the south. These predators are rapidly migrating outside of the park because of higher concentrations and a dwindling food source.

On the fifth day of the hunt, after no game sightings, my father had to leave. I had arranged for a bush plane to fly in and take him out to Fairbanks. I was quite heart-broken because this was his first trip to Alaska and he still hadn't seen a moose or bear. He later told me that on the flight out he did see a cow and calf moose, a large bull and a grizzly bear, so I felt better. He said he would not have traded the experience for a million bucks! That's the sign of a true sportsman!

September 13th was another long and frustrating day, just as the last eight days before it had been. We had been in the area for six days, and still hadn't seen a single moose. This was unbelievable. Here we were, literally in the middle of Alaska, 50 miles from the nearest road, and NO MOOSE! We were beginning to test our friendship and were hardly talking, as all of us had

different ideas about what we should do next. After calling, rattling and everything else we could think of to root these creatures out of the dense brush, we were desperate. But desperate times call for desperate measures! Our legs were burning and plum worn out from high stepping through the brush and bogs!

It had been raining lightly all day, and we had been sitting on a bend in the river glassing, just hoping a moose would cross somewhere so we could put on a stalk and hopefully take one. It was cloudy, a mist was in the air, and heavier rain was eminent, plus it was starting to get dark. We didn't have much time left, maybe an hour or so. I was anxious to get back before dark because camp was so hard to find in this flat country, with no hills or landmarks anywhere. We had to rely on our sense of direction, gut feelings and to a small degree, the GPS.

"There is another bear," Robert said flatly. We had already seen five bears, three grizzlies and two blackies. Every morning there would be fresh tracks around camp. There were some exceptionally large tracks that we had seen in the riverbed close to camp. It would be nice to see and take the maker of those prints we thought to ourselves.

"Too many bears. This place needs thinning out really bad," Robert remarked a few minutes later. When there are more sightings of bear than moose, this indicates something is wrong! I turned my glasses to where Robert was looking.

"Yeah", I said. It looks big, but at this distance and in flat light they all look big. Since I have worked in the Alaskan bush as a heavy equipment mechanic for the past 10 years, I've been fortunate enough to see lots of bear, so I am able to judge size fairly well.

"What do you think?" Robert asked. "Well, lets get a little closer and see," I replied. "I don't want anything puny," I answered. I have always refrained from killing a bear just to take one. I wanted a big one.

The bear was a long way off, about a half mile, and in the



**The bruin was small for a fall bear but his head was huge! The condition of his teeth gave away his age. They were worn down, one canine was broken, and another front tooth was just hanging by the gum.**



middle of a 300-yard wide river. So, heading straight up the center of the river and using what little cover there was, we quickly made our way toward the bear, knowing that if he headed for the brush there may not be any chance of a shot. When we were within 200 yards I brought my binoculars up, and my heart skipped a beat. I was amazed at how large its shoulders were, plus seeing its huge block-head and small looking ears, I knew he was a monster! His shoulders and back glowed in silver. This was a bear worth taking!

"Well, do you want him?" whispered Robert. I answered, "You bet." The bear was down over a bank so only the top of his back was showing. He was occupied with something in the water with his head down most of the time. There was one more minor problem; he was in the middle of the river leaving very little cover for us! We would stick out like sore thumbs! So do I wait and hope he makes his way to me? He could stay out there for a while. Or do we try to get closer? Either way I would

have to shoot him far enough out in the river to ensure at least three more shots. I wanted him down for good before he could get to the thick brush and trees, or to us if he charged. Tracking a wounded grizzly into the brush in the dark was not high on my priority list! Either way, quick and accurate action on my part would be essential. I was glad I had Robert as my backup. He's a crack shot and this is absolutely necessary, especially when on a potentially dangerous hunt like this!

Man, I thought to myself. If he gets a whiff of us, he'll go straight away and I'll never get a good shot. As we approached, his body came into view, and I knew I wanted this bear! We could see him next to some small bushes and watched him feeding on something. Then I realized that the clump of brush was actually across the channel on the other side of him. In the flat riverbed with the light fading fast, the colors of the bear, brush and gravel blended together. I hoped we hadn't made a mistake. All we could do is keep closing the distance.

At 150 yards, the brute suddenly lifted his huge head and began to quickly look around. He winded us and we froze in our tracks! He jumped up on the bank nearest us! Still looking around, he wasn't sure what he winded, but he knew he didn't want to hang around. He was HUGE! He turned and started to slowly bound to my left and slightly toward us, still looking around. I clicked the safety off and brought the sights to his shoulder. He wasn't really spooked, just more anxious to know what that smell was. He was headed toward the trees at the river's edge, and then he stopped for a moment.

The crosshairs of my Leupold 1.5 X 5 were right on his shoulders as I let the hammer down on my Winchester .375 H&H. I

**When we started the task of skinning, it was apparent this guy would not have survived another winter. He barely had a half-inch of fat on his rump, and because of the condition of his teeth, he probably was not able to provide enough for himself to survive another long Alaskan winter.**

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jacked another shell into the chamber as I looked over the top of the gun. I heard the unmistakable thud of a solid hit. He stumbled, but didn't go down! He was loping again toward the edge of the river and thick trees. I fired again! Bang! He went down on his haunches and turned so his chest was facing us. I fired once more! Through my scope I saw a large spray of water come from his massive chest. I jammed another shell into the chamber! He was swatting and snapping his teeth at his chest and letting out some horrific growls like he was being stung by an angry swarm of hornets. I stood still, my rifle trained on his chest.

Then, he just sat there for what seemed like a full minute. I watched the life draining from this wonderful bruin's body. Then he just turned and fell forward onto his chest. He didn't want to fight anymore. It was as if he just gave up, accepted the fact that he had lived a long life, and it was now his time to go. As we approached him, I felt sadness come over me, as it always does when I kill any animal. Another life gone. At 20 yards we waited. It was just about dark as the bear took a long breath and exhaled the last of the air from his lungs. His eyes clouded. He was dead.

Robert went back for the buggy. We decided to take the whole animal back to camp since it was dark and started to rain again. Using a come-along, we hoisted the mammoth body into

**After taking care of the bruin, the hunters decided to leave the area and move to another unit. Harold and the author took small bulls, while Robert got a nice 69-inch bull.**

**BELOW: The author with the new World's Record grizzly bear scoring 27-5/16 points taken near the Toklat River.**

the bed of the buggy. I took a few minutes of video, and then slowly we made our way back to camp.

The next day after breakfast, we took a few pictures and marveled at the size of the bear. I knew he was a larger-than-average bruin! His body was small for a fall bear but his head was huge! We knew he was old just by the condition of his teeth. They were worn down so far that nerve endings were showing. He had one broken canine tooth and another front tooth was broken off, just hanging by the gum — this was not a happy bear!

When we started the task of skinning, it was apparent this guy would not have survived another winter. He barely had a half-inch of fat on his rump, and because of the condition of his teeth, he probably was not able to provide enough for himself to survive another long Alaskan winter. He wasn't fit to eat. We just skinned him and cleaned the skull. We spent the next two days cleaning the skull and fleshing and salting the hide. After these chores we decided to leave the area for lack of moose, and to hunt another open unit for an extra five days.

The trip out was uneventful and took only 19 hours. We used the GPS to find the trail, making it easy to get to previously marked coordinates. It took a couple of days to get into the other area to hunt, and all three of us came back with our moose. Harold and I took a couple of small bulls while Robert got a nice 69-inch bull!

Robert called me a couple of weeks later and asked what measurement Fish and Game had taken from the skull. I didn't know, so we did our own measurements and were surprised to get a green score of 27-5/16 points! It could be a new World's Record! Because I didn't have any luck finding a beetle colony in Alaska to clean the skull I made the mistake of boiling it myself. I was sure this shrunk the skull. The 24th Big Game Awards Judges' Panel officially declared my grizzly the new World's Record with a final score of 27-5/16 points. It was the finest hunt I can remember! ▲▲▲

