

THE King of PRINCE OF WALES ISLAND

By Joel Pat Latham
B&C OFFICIAL MEASURER
PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

There are approximately 150,000 black bear in Alaska and about 2,000 harvested annually, with 250 being taken from Prince of Wales Island, our nation's third largest island. Prince of Wales Island teems with every kind of wildlife, from eagles and bats to sea otters and whales, black bears, and beavers, but no grizzly bears. Here the black bear is at the top of the food chain.

Temperatures in summer range from 46° to 70° Fahrenheit and in winter averages from 32° to 42°. Because of the prevailing Pacific current, rainfall measures from 60 inches to 200 inches per year and snow levels vary drastically. Basically, this is a mossy rain forest. Tides on the east coast run 14-1/2 feet and on the west coast about 8-1/2 feet.

My friend, Pete Bausone, invited me to accompany him on his self-guided black bear hunt after two of his buddies were forced to cancel at the last minute. Pete is a recycled metal dealer, as tough as scrap iron, and a veteran of this bear country. I was not concerned in the least about conditions getting too tough for him. When I met his friends, Jim Preston and wife, Sherry, I felt even more at ease.

Jim is retired from the Army and the Marines and Sherry is a native of the northwest bush country.

For 10 years, They have lived on a floating raft house they built themselves. Imagine, wintering on a raft house in Sea Otter Sound, Alaska

a cook, a woodcutter, a fisherwoman, and is pleasant company. She knows and uses nature's abundance; and is a hunter's dream-come-true-type companion.

Jim, having endured several tours of Vietnam, buys one case of beer on the first of each month to celebrate being alive. He and Sherry thrive on Jim's military pension of \$912 per month, spending about \$100 for Tops brand roll-your-own smokes, \$200 for gasoline for their 1978 Ford pickup and their 35 hp outboard motor, a few dollars for the propane needed for cooking and making oven jerky of all kinds and a little for coffee, flour, sugar, lead, and gun powder. Jim says, "By

applying a little effort, we can come up with clams, shrimp, crab, fish of many kinds, Sitka blacktail deer, bear, mushrooms, fiddle top fern, seven kinds of wild berries and a host of eatables that Sherry gathers."

for 10 years. I was sure they had experienced everything, as the Alaska wilds are a cradle for adventure.

Sherry is a master survivalist. She is a hunter, a gatherer, a Skinner,



INSET: OUR FEARLESS CAPTAIN, SERGEANT JIM PRESTON, NAVIGATING HIS 14-FOOT SKIFF.

OPPOSITE PAGE: ONE OF THE MANY STREAMS LEADING INTO THE TUXECAN PASSAGE.

OPPOSITE INSET: SHERRY IS A MASTER SURVIVALIST. SHE IS A HUNTER, A GATHERER, A SKINNER, A COOK, A WOODCUTTER, A FISHERWOMAN, AND IS PLEASANT COMPANY.

It was a sheer delight wandering the coastal rain forest and tidelands with Sherry as she gathered her greens and other eatables. She was able to creep up to and touch a mink as it napped on a creek bank. It jumped, then came back and sat on her boot and sniffed it. She held a wild baby gosling, and the magic of Alaska showed its magnificent face. I was glad that Pete's friends had canceled.

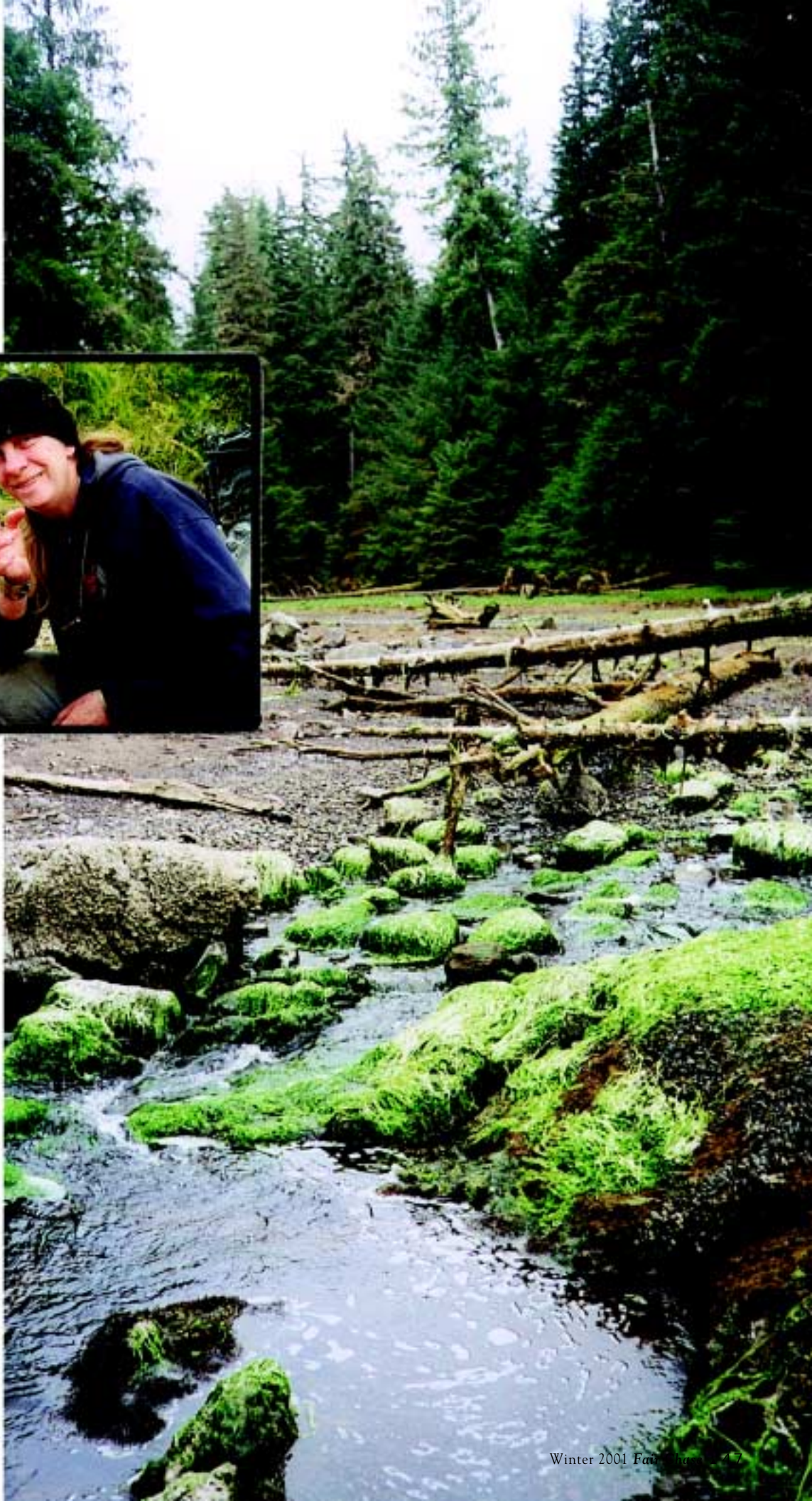
Dinner that first night was a classic coastal Alaskan feast of mashed potatoes, brown gravy, stir-fried Sitka black-tail deer, all washed down with a glass of merlot from the magnum we had brought.

We made our tent camp about five miles south of Kaukati Bay on the northwest side of the island just off Tuxekan Passage. Tides greatly affected our hunting as we planned to hunt mostly from a 14-foot skiff with Jim's 35 hp Evinrude. We were hunting the nation's largest national forest, the Tongass. Its 17 million acres is approximately the size of the state of West Virginia.

The next day's hunt plan was made and Jim assured us that we would not need an alarm clock. He said, "nature will provide." Sure enough, at precisely 4:00 a.m., a pair of nesting Canadian geese skimmed our tent honking excitedly as they approached and landed on a small lake nearby. From that point, I believed everything Jim said.

We were in the skiff by 5 a.m. and plowing through the waves. The spray was exhilarating to say the least, but bear hunting is wet, cold, and hard work, no matter what part of the country you're in.

Using his 10 x 40 Zeiss binoculars, and just 40 minutes away from the floatplane dock, Pete spotted a bear. Come to think of it, Pete was the first to spot all ten bears we saw on this seven-day trip. (Coincidentally, I know a Mouseeater In-



dian named Ten Bears, but that's another story).

Pete decided to make a stalk even though the wind was not in his favor. He maneuvered to within 70 yards of the grass-eating bruin. His Sako .375 H&H performed as expected on the black bear's shoulder and he was down and out without the need for a count. With great difficulty, we loaded him into the skiff, and even though it was only an hour into our first day's hunt, we decided to return to camp to process the bear before rigor mortis set in, making the job much more difficult.

Arriving at camp, Jim dumped the bear out and asked Sherry to skin it, telling her we would come back with another one soon. Sherry says that a spring bear renders about two gallons of cooking lard that is white as snow and very tasty. She was grateful to have the meat and anxious to begin the canning process to store it up for next winter's supply.

Eight hours later with empty hands and stomachs, we returned to camp to find that Sherry had fleshed the skin of the bear out so well that there was no need for salt. It was the best job of skinning I have ever seen. The carcass was hanging from the meat pole cooling nicely. She was ready to serve a dinner of fresh Dungeness crab salad, tideland asparagus, fresh fat stir-fried oysters, and crabmeat, rice, carrots, and fresh baked bread. After dinner, Sherry eloquently entertained us by reading some of her International Poetry Society's award-winning poetry.

We had the same wake up call next morning and soon we were in the skiff at low tide. There is a saying in Alaska that when the tide is out, the table is set, meaning that at low tide there is a smorgasbord of eatables available for man and beast. This was prime feeding time for the coastal bear. There was, however, one problem. A fog bank lay just off shore and we had to go five miles due east across the sound. There was no wind and the forecast was clear and 75°. Jim has ten years of experience sailing these treacherous waters and I felt he was qualified. He plunged the skiff into the fog bank and it was so thick the skiff would only go at a crawl because the drag was so great.

Crossing our wake for the second time and circling to the left, I realized our captain was left-handed and I understand that people tend to circle to their dominate side when lost. I thought it wise to consult my wristwatch compass. Re-setting our bearings, the skiff soon busted out of the fog bank, making a giant sucking sound. The ocean was slick as glass and we found bright sunshine and 70° weather and our landing target just 100 yards away. Without a compass, we could have easily been wearing kimonos and drinking sake in about six months.

At 11: 30 a.m., Pete spotted our first bear of the day. We could see him plainly from 3/4 of a mile away. Capt. Jim slipped the skiff through the rocky, shallow water with ease, and we were surprised when the bear stood up on his hind legs, looked directly at us, then laid down to rest. We eased behind an island and landed the boat about 400 yards from the bear. I quickly and quietly made my way through the woods and was amazed to find his lounging area just inside the thick growth at the water's edge. There were many mountains of 2-inch diameter spore in this spot overlooking the bay. It was unapproachable without detection and a perfect spot for a bear to spend the day. The bear, I guessed, was on the beach munching lush, green grass and basking in the sun. This mistake would cost him his life, I thought.

Surprise! He was not feeding on the beach as I had expected. If not there, where, I asked myself. My instincts told me to whirl 180 degrees. I crouched and widened my stance, anticipating the worst. To my great relief, he was not behind me either. How could a six-foot, 400-pound black bear disappear silently into a green forest? Although my opinion may be contradicted, I am convinced that bears can see very well near the water, can hear even better there, and can smell my armpits from over 300 yards.

With the phantom bear still on our minds, we headed back to camp only to discover that an uninvited black and hairy visitor had helped himself to some camp supplies. Fortunately no real damage had been done. Bruins seem to be well distributed and in ample sup-

ply on this island. We booby-trapped our camp with beer cans filled with rocks and rigged with fishing line. We enjoyed a large bowl of hot chicken soup, and I laid down for a nap with my 7mm Mag. loaded and nearby.

The next day, Pete spotted three bears and I stalked them all. One finished grazing before I could get into position and walked back into the dense underbrush and stayed there for at least an hour until I gave up. If spooked, a black bear rarely returns to the same beach. As I watched helplessly, the second one got my scent as the wind changed and he charged into the woods with a great crashing noise. It had only been about a week since I had a bath, and I hadn't noticed that I smelled all that bad.

The third bear was more than a mile away. I could see him well without the aid of my binoculars. This has to be a monster, I thought. Determined not to repeat our previous blunders, we looped the skiff downwind and proceeded with the utmost caution. Our landing point was well over 500 yards from the bear, as well as completely out of sight. Excitedly, I gathered my daypack and rifle and began to close the distance. The wind was right and there was absolutely no sound, as the ocean was extremely calm. I was able to get within 100 yards of the animal when I realized that this one was truly a monster bear.

I continued to sneak toward him and grabbed what I thought was a tree limb for support. It was a devil's club plant and its many thorns dug into my tender flesh. I gritted my teeth to keep from yelling. Gathering my composure, I found a fallen log in the tideland, crawled behind it, and rested my rifle on top. This massive animal sported a magnificent, glistening jet-black coat that shifted on its body as it walked. I centered the crosshairs on its right side and moved it to the heart position just behind its massive shoulder. I took a deep breath and let out half, and just as I began to squeeze the trigger, he sat down and flopped over on its side, blowing my opportunity for a perfect shot. I knew better than to shoot at a reclining animal as I had paid for

that knowledge years ago while sheep hunting in the Brooks Range of Alaska.

Waiting for my bear to stand and begin feeding again, I admired my situation. I was in this gorgeous rain forest of Alaska with the ocean at my side, a backdrop of snow-capped mountains coated with virgin spruce, hemlock, fir, and cedar cascading to the rapids in a salmon-filled stream. All of this in full view of a flotilla of sea otters bobbing on their backs in a pasture of kelp. A bald eagle perched in a spruce tree took to air and emitted its classic scream. Birds of the forest and water took to flight trying to escape the imminent grasp of its talons. This caused the bear to get up on all fours and look in every direction for possible danger. I could hear the dead driftwood branches crack under its tremendous body weight as it began to slowly walk toward me.

I thought the bear was surely bigger than my sliding barn door back home. He easily turned over boulders the size of my desk and gobbled up the scurrying crabs, squirting clams, starfish and wiggling eels. My heart started to pound and my eyes bulged at every beat. My hand was shaking like a schoolboy's

on his first date and suddenly my bladder was about to burst. I realized I was having a severe case of "buck fever" and I was unable to control it.

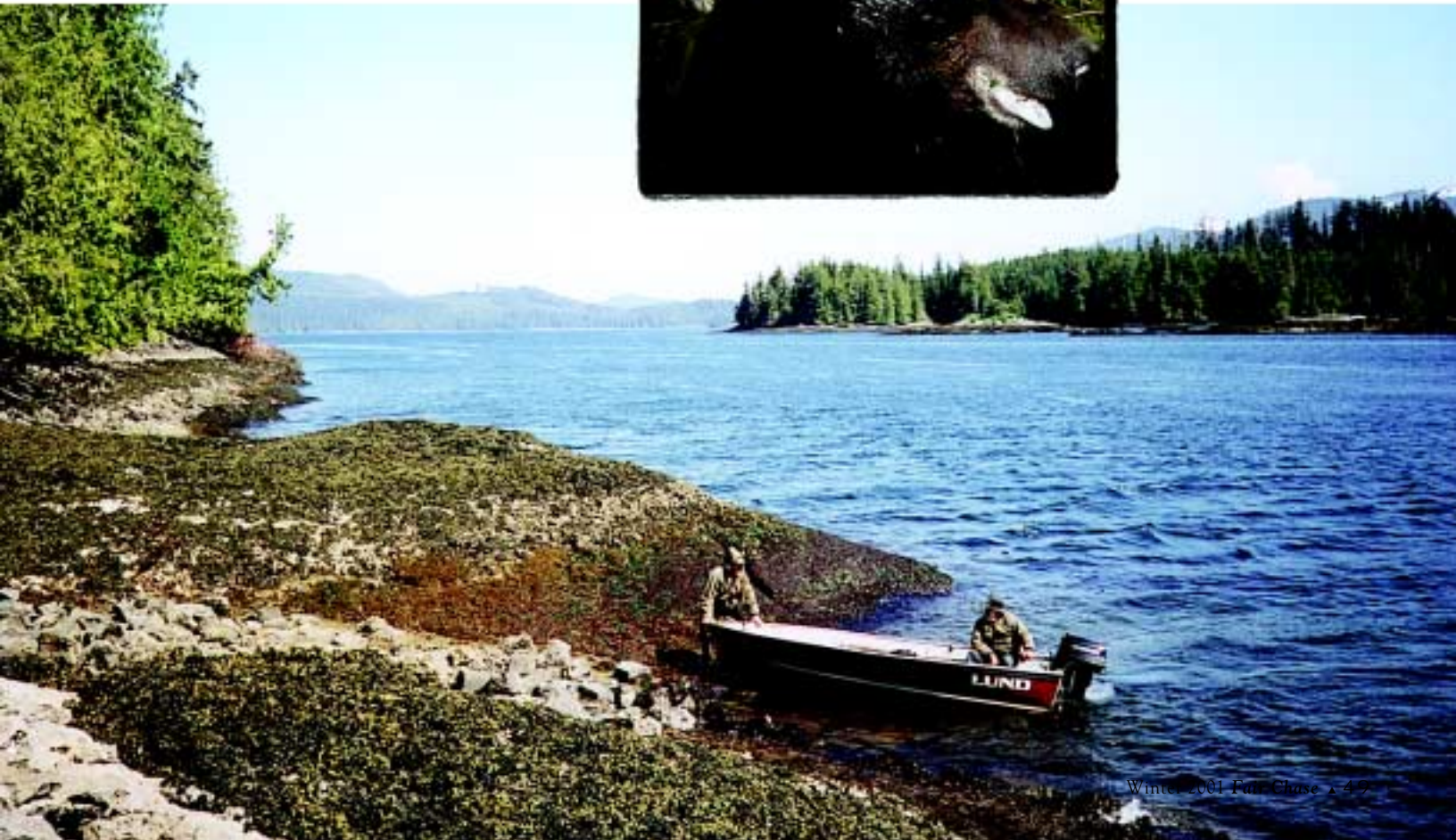
As I lay there shaking, I felt the wind change to my great disadvantage. Just as he raised his head and sucked in my scent, I quickly placed the crosshairs at his heart, the thorns in my right hand screaming for attention as I squeezed the trigger. The rifle fired and in slow motion the recoil subsided and my scope again centered on the bear. I watched the 160-grain sierra boat-tail slam into his side. The long, black hair gave off a puff of dust at the point of impact. He humped his back in response to the bullet entry and with only two steps, he disappeared into the moss-laden forest. I heard the impact and gunshot echoing in the harbor. I was confident of the accuracy of my shot.

I heard the outboard motor start and watched as Jim and Pete came into the small harbor. I gave them the thumbs

up and Pete let out a yell. The skiff landed and Pete dug out the thorns in my hand. I successfully exchanged my buck fever for the fear and trauma associated with the lack of Pete's doctoring skills and bedside manners.

We discussed our next step and I proposed that I would wait on the beach and watch the boat while Pete and Jim went into the underbrush to track the wounded bear. That discussion went on for a while and I saw that my idea was not selling so I reluctantly adopted Pete's plan. I removed my hat, rain jacket, parka, wool shirt and cotton safari shirt, flashlight, folding knife and extra ammunition. Bear in mind, I was bare-handed, bare-headed and stripped down to the bare necessities, now I had to work a little

LOW TIDE ON TUXECAN PASSAGE -- THE CAPTAIN PLUNGED THE SKIFF INTO THE FOG BANK AND IT WAS SO THICK THE SKIFF WOULD ONLY GO AT A CRAWL BECAUSE THE DRAG WAS SO GREAT. INSET: THE AUTHOR'S HUNTING PARTNER PETE BAUSONE WITH THE KING.



more on my attitude. Another five minutes passed and I gave Pete and Jim another opportunity to become leaders. It was clear that I was not going to make a close on this sale either, so I chambered a homemade 170-grain hollow point, took a deep breath, held it and crept into the thicket.

Slowly, I mean slowly, I made my way forward. I'll admit that I was not looking for a blood trail. I was moving my head from side to side like a rotating fan on high speed, anticipating the wounded bear's charge.

I had instructed Pete and Jim to be absolutely quiet as I made the stalk but they only laughed and joked at my awkward position. Occasionally, I turned and glared in their direction but they continued to laugh loudly. I had tried to convince them that things on this end were very, very serious, but all I received was more laughter and a little song they sang loudly that had something to do with Davy Crockett when he was only three.

Just then, a mink jumped to a log about 20 feet away. It couldn't have scared me

more if it had jumped down my collar. The adrenaline was flowing as I stepped from behind a thick virgin cedar and ten feet in front of me was a mountain of the black bear lying motionless. I thought it must weigh over 850 pounds. It was a massive, colossal beast and surely this was His Majesty, King of Prince of Wales Island. I told myself to close my gaping mouth or the white-sock bugs, mosquitoes, and bats would fly in. The bear's forearms were bigger than my thighs and its head was so big it wouldn't fit into a bushel basket.

I didn't nudge it with the gun barrel like the big boys do in the movies. Instead, standing safely behind a big spruce tree, I threw sticks and limbs at him until I was sure that this volcanic mountain of a black bear was not going to erupt. I paused for a moment of thanksgiving then yelled to the guys that it was stone dead and from the size of this bear, they should bring our lunches over. We would be here for a while.

We were dripping with sweat and heaving for more air when we finished skidding the beast the 30 feet to the ocean edge. The tide was going out rapidly and the window of escape was closing fast. We tilted the skiff and placed logs under it to

keep it steady. We pulled, pushed, heaved, grunted and growled to load it into the bow. Kicking out the support logs, the skiff righted itself. Another round of pulling, pushing, heaving, grunting, and growling and we were able to get the skiff back into the water. The bow was only a few inches above the water's edge and we had to sit aft to try to counter-balance our load.

The boat ride across the five miles of open water was not one of the safest, as the water was so rough; however, Capt. Jim masterfully maneuvered the over-loaded skiff across and between the swells to safe harbor.

Five hours later, we had the skin fleshed, ears and lips turned and feet bones removed. The carcass was quartered and hung to cool on the meat rack. Sherry organized the rendering plan, Jim arranged the pressure cooker outside on the burner. Pete's mother would have been proud of him for the elaborate, authentic, Italian dinner he cooked that evening in celebration. We finished off the Merlot and agreed that bear hunting is cold, wet, hard work no matter where you hunt, and that the black bear is truly the King of Prince of Wales Island. ▲▲▲

FOG BANK ON
TUXECAN PASSAGE --
THERE IS A SAYING IN
ALASKA THAT WHEN
THE TIDE IS OUT, THE
TABLE IS SET,
MEANING THAT AT
LOW TIDE THERE IS A
SMORGASBORD OF
EATABLES AVAILABLE
FOR MAN AND BEAST.
INSET: PETE BAUSONE
NEXT TO THE
AUTHOR'S BLACK
BEAR.

