

# Destina

## Trophy Grizzly

### Hunting the Mountain Grizzly

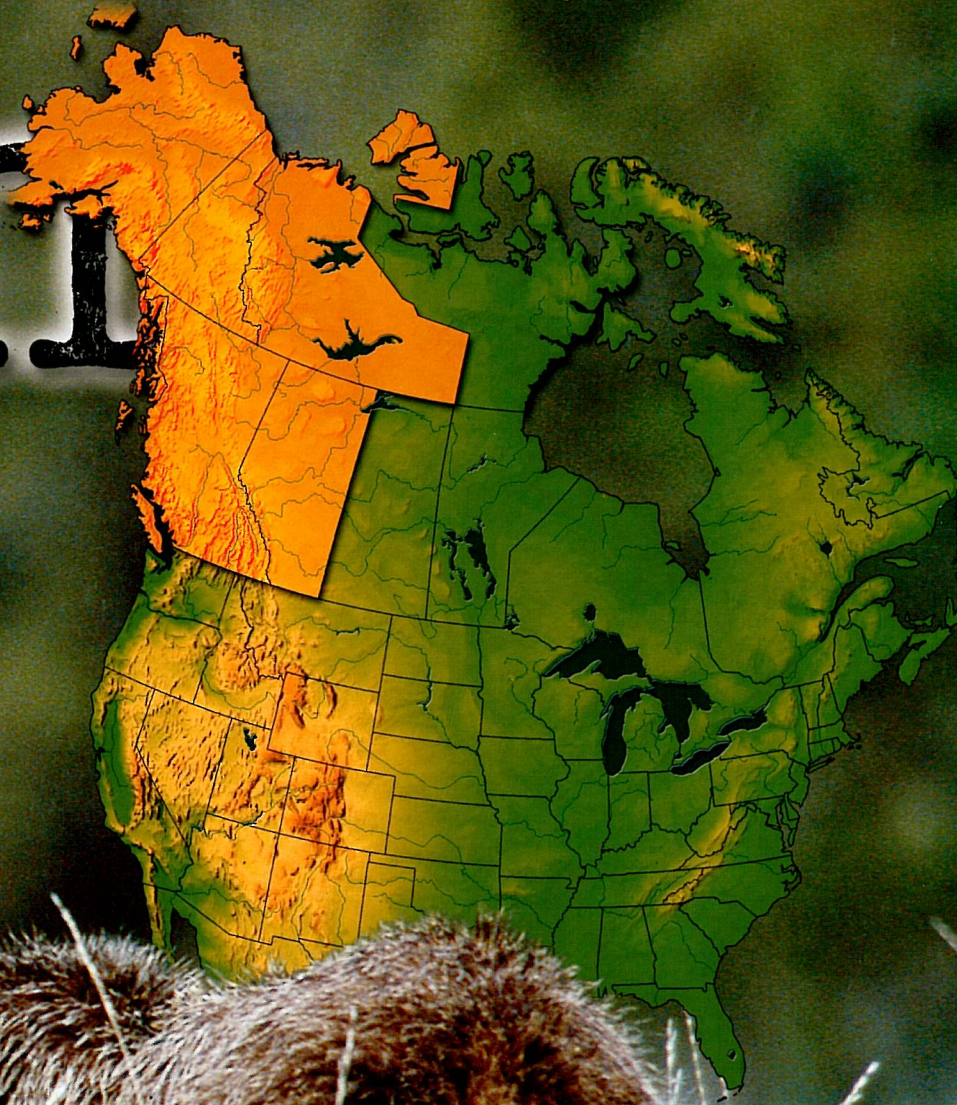
**By Bob Robb**  
B&C Professional Member

In the journals of the historic Lewis and Clark expedition, Meriwether Lewis spent much time describing encounters with the great “white bear,” as they called the grizzly. Lewis noted that these “cantankerous bears” were just as likely to attack man as leave him alone. Though great hunters, he wrote, the native Americans would never intentionally take on a grizzly, armed as they were with nothing more than a spear or longbow. Instead, they would band together in groups of between 6 and 10, hoping to accomplish with sheer numbers what they could never do alone.

**TOP GRIZZLY STATES  
AND PROVINCES  
(1996-2006)**

RANK	STATE/ PROVINCE	TOTAL ENTRIES
1	Alaska	104
2	British Columbia	60
3	Yukon Territory	9
4	Alberta	3
5	NW Territories	2

# tion



## Grizzly Hunting At A Glance

Today Alaska is home to well over half the entire North American grizzly bear population, estimated at somewhere between 60,000 to 70,000 bears. In the lower 48 states, estimates run at less than 3,000 bears, most of which live inside Yellowstone National Park, the remainder in areas of Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, and northeastern Washington.

In Canada, British Columbia and the Yukon Territory have the most grizzlies. In Alaska, estimates generally run between 35,000 and 40,000 bears, a figure which includes both the interior grizzly and the coastal brown bear, which are, taxonomically speaking, the same animal.

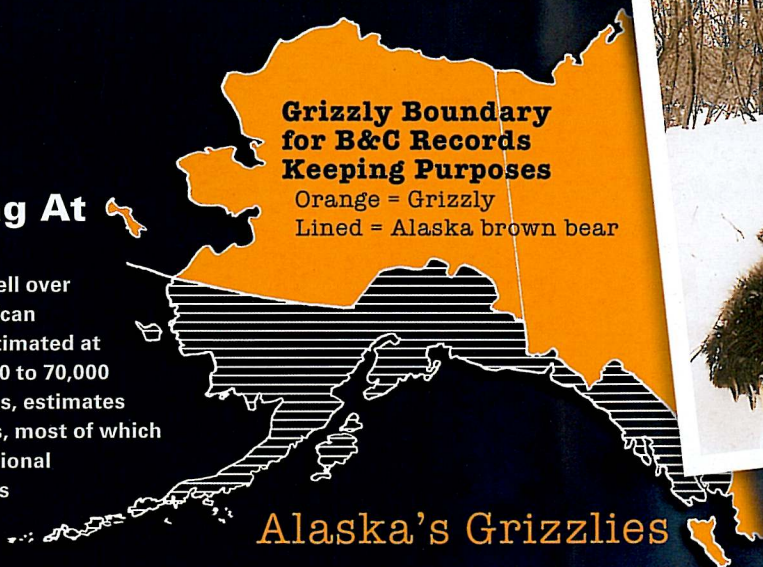
By law, nonresidents of grizzly country (including Alaska) must hire a licensed outfitter to legally hunt grizzlies, the exception being that you can hunt with an Alaska resident who is a second degree of kindred relative. Outfitted grizzly hunts are expensive, costing \$7,000 or more, and can climb another several thousand dollars when adding another species. A combination grizzly/moose or grizzly/caribou hunt is an excellent way to hunt fall bears, as you can actively pursue a good bull moose or caribou while still searching for a bear. Prime time for this is September.

Contrary to popular belief, you don't need a cannon to safely hunt grizzlies. I've cleanly taken two interior bears with a .280 Remington loaded with 160-grain Nosler Partition bullets. Cartridges in the .30-06/7mm Magnum class are good minimums, with the .300 Magnums better and the .338 Win. Mag. outstanding. My own grizzly gun today is a .300 Win. Mag. topped with a 3.5-10X scope and loaded with 180-grain premium-quality bullets. The key is to use a rifle-and-cartridge combination you can shoot well. Placing that first shot where you want it is the best insurance there is against potential trouble.

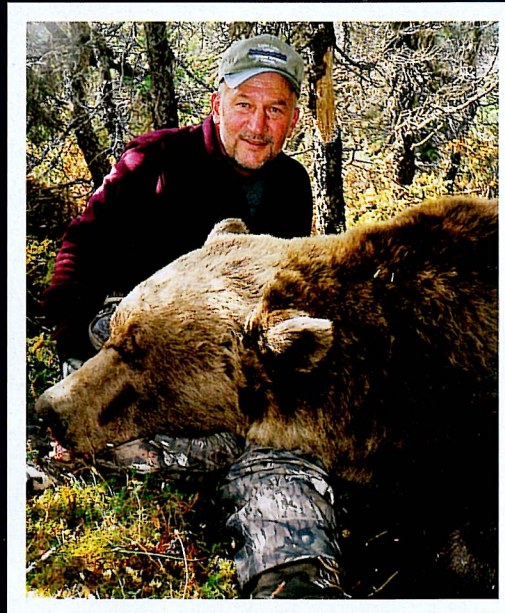
Record-book grizzlies are measured by their skull. They are where you find them, but generally speaking the area of British Columbia that borders southeastern Alaska is where the highest number of record-class bears live. If these bears cross a river into Alaska they are classified as brown bears, but on the Canadian side they are grizzlies. (See the map above for the detailed boundary.) In terms of trophy quality, though, any mature interior or mountain grizzly boar with long claws and a flawless coat of long hair is a prize to be treasured.

Far north grizzly populations are quite stable. The key, of course, is remote habitat uncluttered by the development of man. During the 2001-2002 hunting season, for example, there were a total of 1,226 brown and 511 grizzly bears taken in Alaska. That's an average harvest of 4.3 percent of the total estimated population. Given the remote locations of the best bear hunting, and with strict limits on the numbers of bears a hunter is permitted to take (the limit is one bear every four regulatory years in much of Alaska) this percentage should not increase significantly in the near future.

**Grizzly Boundary for B&C Records Keeping Purposes**  
 Orange = Grizzly  
 Lined = Alaska brown bear



## Alaska's Grizzlies



**ABOVE:** This grizzly, scoring 26-6/16 points, was taken in the Nulato Hills of Alaska by Larry A. Meyer. **RIGHT:** Chad Farley took this bear on Mt. Bendeleben in Alaska. The boar scores 24 points.





**ABOVE LEFT:** James C. Blanchard took this grizzly near Otter Creek in Alaska. It scores 26-13/16 points. **ABOVE:** Boone and Crockett Member, Remo R. Pizzagalli with a bear he took near the Koyuk River in Alaska. It scores 26-5/16 points.



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“When the Indians are about to go in quest of the ‘white bear,’ previous to their departure they paint themselves and perform all of those superstitious rites commonly observed when they are about to make war on a neighboring nation,” Lewis wrote. Obviously, these expert woodsmen had learned that when the quarry was an animal with the strength of a dozen men, the speed of a fast pony, and the disposition of the devil himself, discretion was the better part of valor.

My first Alaska hunting trip occurred over two decades ago, while I still lived in California. I had licenses for the majestic caribou, the regal Dall’s sheep, and a mountain grizzly. All my friends envied my sheep license, yet deep inside, I was more excited by the chance to hunt the grizzly bear. I had read several historical accounts of grizzlies, including the Lewis and Clark journals, and was spell-bound by the seemingly impossible things men had seen these great bears do. To be able to hunt them was to have my boyhood dreams come true.

I took my first grizzly on that trip deep into the Wrangell Mountains, a large, dark-brown bear with long claws and flawless hide. Legendary outfitter Terry Overly spotted the bear ambling up a river drainage one September afternoon as we rode horses toward sheep camp. The weather was postcard perfect, the tundra a brilliant kaleidoscope of colors set against a backdrop of cobalt sky and snow-capped peaks. We tied the horses off, climbed the 60-degree slope and fought through the alders, breathlessly coming into an open slide the same time the bear did, not 75 yards away. When he stood up on his hind legs to try and make us out, I calmly raised my little .280 Remington, took aim — and missed by a mile. I don’t think the bullet struck in the same zip code. As the bear took off across the scree I emptied the rifle, hitting him all three times through the chest as he raced into an alder thicket, where he quickly expired.

When we first got to the bear, my heart tried to beat its way out of my chest.

After back-slaps and a little good-natured ribbing about my lack of shooting skills, but before we began the skinning process, Terry, his wife Deb, and their young son Joel took a minute to paint a cross in blood on my forehead, a ritual that told the world I had been blooded and had honorably entered the fraternity of grizzly hunters. Lord, I felt like a man that day! I was shaking so much that I was useless with a skinning knife, so Deb helped me hold the legs and pull the hide while Terry did the work. When it was over they let me drape the

hide over my shoulders and pack it down the mountain to the horses. It took a week for the euphoria to wear off.

Hunting grizzly bears was once described to me as 95 percent boredom, and 5 percent pure terror. That’s a pretty fair assessment. The boredom part comes with simply trying to locate a bear to stalk. This can take days or even weeks, depending on the turn of the cards. Unlike coastal brown bears, which concentrate on salmon streams in the

fall and are relatively easy to find, interior bears are much more nomadic. A biologist once told me they can have a home range of as much as 50 square miles, in which they may cover double-digit miles daily in search of food.

This can make finding bears problematic. In years of strong blueberry crops on which the bears gorge themselves in the fall, grizzlies tend to congregate on mountains that have large expanses of berry bushes. They also dig roots. In spring they tend to follow the moose and caribou herds, preying more heavily on the newborn calves than many people think. Fresh grass shoots are a favored food in spring, too, on which the bears graze like cattle. At all times they’ll expend hundreds of calories to excavate a low-calorie ground squirrel or marmot, which must taste like chocolate to them. But while they have their preferences, these omnivores will eat just about anything, including plastic cans filled with gasoline left on remote air strips by bush pilots, and even your tent.

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## Grizzlies from B.C.

All three of these grizzly bears were taken in British Columbia within the last ten years. **LEFT:** Jerry R. Kolbe took this B.C. grizzly near Brimstone Creek. It scores 25-6/16 points. **TOP:** This grizzly bear, scoring 24-2/16 points was taken by Mark A. Nucci near Chalco Creek. **MIDDLE:** Harry E. Seratt took this bear, which scores 25-7/16 points near Elk River.

The name of the game in interior grizzly hunting is glassing. It can get boring, glassing for days and never seeing a bear. When the weather's good, it isn't so bad. The wild country in which grizzlies thrive is the continent's most stunning, and there's always something to look at. When the weather turns sour and cold, wind-driven rain or sleet eats its way under all your clothes, it's hard to keep looking. But stay at it long enough, and the chances are that you'll be rewarded by the sight of a bear working along the mountainside.

The sight of your first grizzly bear will never be forgotten. That's also when the questions creep into the back of your mind. After all, a grizzly is a dangerous animal, one that (together with his cousin, the coastal brown bear, and the all-white polar bear of the northern ice pack) is the only really dangerous game animal in North America. Your palms become a little sweaty, your breathing a little faster, your

heart begins to race. You know that you've seen the bear and he hasn't spotted you. You have a high-powered rifle, are with an experienced guide who also has a large-caliber rifle, and have the wind in your favor. It shouldn't be any different than moving in for a shot at a deer back home.

And yet, deep down inside, you know that it is different. Even the best grizzly hunt can go wrong — that's one of the reasons grizzly hunting is so special. Like I did before my first grizzly hunt, you've read all the stories about wounded bears in the alders, of bear attacks and maulings, of chance encounters won by a bear. You begin to doubt your shooting ability, your courage.

One time I was hunting Stone's sheep in the Yukon on horseback. A sunny afternoon found my guide and me riding several miles from camp when we happened upon a lone grizzly, about 100 yards off and rooting along the river bottom. The bear saw us about the same time we saw him,

stood on his hind legs to have a better look at us, then dropped on all fours and gave a gruff growl before trotting our way. I was bowhunting, and had no rifle. The guide, a grouchy old trapper by trade, carried a battered old .30-06 in a saddle scabbard. It could have been a bazooka for all it mattered, as he wheeled his horse around and galloped past me in a rush, never saying a word. It didn't take long to figure out that it was every man for himself, so I spun my knot-head horse around and kicked him in the ribs, trying to hold my seat in the saddle as we tore down a narrow, muddy trail lined with 15-foot alders. The bear chased us for perhaps a mile, and at the time I was terrorized. Looking back, I think maybe he was just playing with us. I'm sure he could have caught us had he really wanted to. After a brief time the bear stopped and went back to rooting as if nothing had happened. I didn't stop shaking for days.

If you hunt grizzlies long enough, you'll end up having stories like that to tell

around the campfire. Unless you're a hunting guide, you probably won't end up with tales of tracking wounded bears into the thick alders and brush, where things can get, as the British like to say, a bit dicey. I've gone into the thickets with friends after wounded bears on several occasions, and each time come out with a bear hide and no cuts and scratches save those inflicted by the brush. It's quite stimulating, but it's not any fun.

Most of the time, it will go something like this. Each morning you and your guide ascend from camp to an overlook, on horseback if you've got them, if not on shank's mare. After fruitlessly glassing for days, one morning you'll look up on a hillside and a grizzly will magically appear in your binoculars. The two of you make a fast plan, then use the terrain to your advantage until you reach a point from which you hope you can once again see the bear.

Often, the bear is gone when you get there. Who knows why? He may have heard you clattering over loose rocks, or the often unpredictable mountain air may have carried your scent to his radar nose. He may have just decided to go lay down in brush so tall and thick it could hide an elephant. You get into position and watch all day, but the bear may decide to simply not show himself again before it is too dark to see. If that happens there's nothing else to do but return to camp and try again the next day.

Stick with it long enough and one day you'll stalk to the edge of the hill, the hackles on the back of your neck at full attention and, like magic, there's the bear. In the fall he'll probably be digging roots or gorging himself on berries. In spring he may be guarding a moose kill, or plowing through the snow looking for his next meal. His humped back, powerful shoulders, and dish-like face immediately tell you this isn't a black bear. The dark, silver-tipped hide and those long, gleaming foreclaws tell you that this is what you've been dreaming of. A good guide will get you inside of 150 yards, but even though the bear doesn't know you're there the doubts seep back in, and you fight to control them. Your heart is beating as fast as if you've just run the 100 yard dash at the Olympics. As the guide helps you get a rest for your rifle he whispers encouragement in your ear.

The bear senses something wrong, and raises his blocky head. You try and settle the crosshairs on his shoulder, but they're bouncing around like a small boat in rough water. You can't keep the sight on the sweet spot. The guide whispers a bit louder. "Take him, now!," he hisses.

The bear shambles off across the slope, not sure why but knowing something's up. And then he stops and turns back for one more look. You know that all you've worked for, all that you've dreamed of, is riding on this moment. With

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the pressure on, you regain your composure, and when the crosshairs pass onto the chest just behind the bear's front leg bone,

you squeeze the trigger. The thwack of the bullet striking the bear sounds over the report of the rifle, and the bear goes down. Before he can get up you work the bolt and fire again. He goes down again, then rolls down the mountain a ways before hanging up in the brush.

It's deathly still for just a moment, the only sound the echoing of your shooting bouncing off the mountainside mixed with the distant sound of the tumbling creek far below. Holy smokes, you did it! In the back of your mind you can faintly hear the guide congratulating you before he starts over toward your bear. You are grinning from ear to ear but when you try to follow him, you find that your legs aren't working so good, so you wait a minute and gather yourself. After all those anxious days of seeing nothing much, everything happened so quickly. And yet you can picture every detail in slow-motion. As you gaze out across the valley, the beauty and grandeur of grizzly country seeps into your soul. Your dream has come true. You are a grizzly hunter. The memories will be with you forever. ■

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