

The Giant Bruins of KODIAK ISLAND

A tribute to hunting Alaska browns with master guide, Bill Pinnell, of Olga Bay.

I HAD HEARD ABOUT TEN-FOOT BEARS BUT I HAD NO APPRECIATION OF WHAT THEY WERE LIKE. IN DISCUSSING THIS SUBJECT WITH FRED MOSLEY, A LONG-TIME HUNTING FRIEND FROM ANCHORAGE, ALASKA, HE SUGGESTED THAT IF I REALLY WANTED A GIANT BRUIN, GO TO KODIAK ISLAND. IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR TROPHY BEARS, YOU NEED TO HUNT WITH MASTER GUIDES, BILL PINNELL AND MORRIS TALIFSON, WHO HAVE 150 YEARS OF GUIDING EXPERIENCE BETWEEN THEM. THEY HAVE PUT MORE HUNTERS ON TO GIANT BROWNS THAN ANY OTHER OUTFITTERS IN ALASKA.

I took Fred at his word and called Bill Pinnell and booked a hunt for the following spring of 1989. I was fortunate to get an opportunity so soon, only because there had been a cancellation and my timing was perfect. In the next seven months, I had many telephone calls with Scott Milure, the field guide, to go over all of the details of the hunt. The time went by very quickly and before I realized it, I was at O'Hare airport saying good-bye to the family.

The flights to Anchorage and on to Kodiak were as uneventful as you would like them. However, I could feel the excitement that every hunter feels as his hunt starts to unfold. That evening I had dinner with Bill Schmoie (Boone and Crockett Club Member and President of Remington Arms, now retired) from Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Bill had also booked with Pinnell and Talifson and was as equally excited as I was about what lay ahead of us for the next 15 days.

We purchased some supplies the following morning and about noon we met our chartered flight. An hour later, we were landing at Olga Bay. This was the base

camp for their operations. The base camp was an old salmon cannery that operated before World War II but was put out of operation by the large refrigerated ships. The accommodations were very comfortable and the food as good as anyone could ask for. After dinner, Bill Pinnell, age 93, and Morris Talifson, age 81, entertained us with stories of bear hunts they had guided over the past 60 years. You quickly realized why these two fine gentlemen are called "The Last of the Great Bear Hunters."

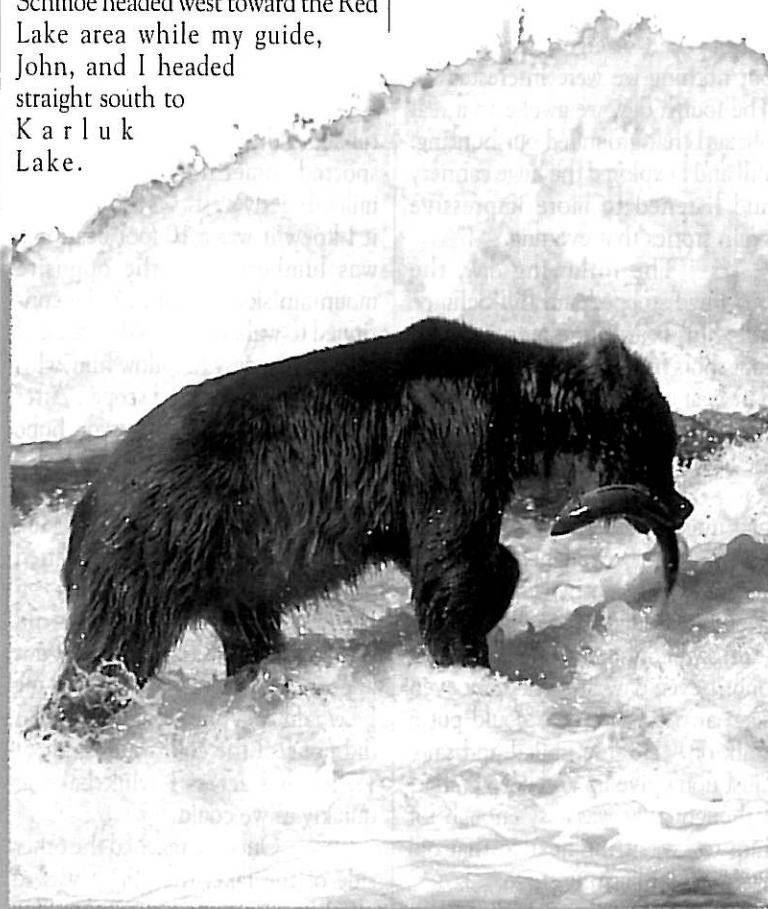
The next morning Bill and I were up early and ready to begin our adventure. Scott and Bill Schmoie headed west toward the Red Lake area while my guide, John, and I headed straight south to Karluk Lake.

We walked a few miles, found an old boat and a motor that had been dropped earlier and crossed the lake. We then climbed half way up the mountain to the east and set-up our scouting operations. The walking would not have been bad except for the need of hip boots to negotiate the boggy tundra. We were right on the snow line of the mountain as we dug in to scope for the giant bears. We glassed all day but only saw a sow and two seven foot cubs, four miles away. I asked John how he knows when he spots a ten foot bear. His answer of, "don't worry, you will know when you see him," left me a little bit puzzled.

BY WILLIAM G. JAMES

Master Guide, Bill Pinnell passed away, the year after Bill James took his trophy Alaska brown. Pinnell and his partner, Morris Talifson, who went to Alaska with aspirations in gold, began guiding at Olga Bay in 1949.

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As darkness drew in, we headed back to camp. We enjoyed another fine dinner and more bear conversation from our senior hosts.

The next two days were

and I got an early start back to Karluk Lake. The going was slower and the snow line had moved to the base of the mountain. Slowly we climbed the slippery and very soggy moun-

downwind from him. John and I quickly went through about 400 yards of the thickest bunch of alders I have ever been through. Since there are no trees on the island, there are large patches of alders with the rest being filled in with waist high golden-brown tundra grass. John kept pushing me, saying "hurry or he might move on us." We had lost sight of him as we began our climb. I took a number of rest stops but we finally broke out in a grass opening where John thought the bear was. We sat down and started looking to see if we could spot him. I was totally wet from having to crawl the last 300 yards. We did not want to go any further for fear of coming right up on him sleeping in the tall grass. The advantage would then become his. After twenty minutes, which seemed like forever, we heard a noise about 125 yards in front of us. John said, "get ready, because he could be close."

I took the safety off my .300 Weatherby and was awaiting the shot of my dreams. The noises got louder and louder when finally two bears, both about nine to nine-and-a-half feet, broke out in the open and started a fight that set the hair on the back of my neck on end. John said, "Don't shoot." They were slightly over 100 yards away and I was ready to take either one for my trophy. Quietly, John said, "I don't think that either of these bears are the bear that we are stalking."

We watched in awe as these monsters tore into each other. You could see their blood soaked wounds and hear their deafening cries of battle. If only I had my video recorder. As I reached for my camera, John said not to move or they might sense us and charge. As we watched this battle of the giants, I suddenly noticed movement about 250 yards to our right and slightly higher than we were. When I pointed out to John, he said, "I knew these two bears were not the bear we scoped." We patiently waited until this bear decided to find out what all the noise was about. When he broke through the alders and started walking toward the two bears in combat, I knew what a ten-foot bear

more of the same, spotting a number of seven or eight foot animals, but nothing we were interested in. The fourth day, we awoke to a real blizzard that grounded our hunting. Bill and I explored the huge cannery and listened to more impressive bruin stories that evening.

The following day, the snow had stopped and Bill Schmoe killed his bear in the morning with four shots from his .416 Remington. The bear turned out to square at 9'3" and was a real trophy. That evening we had a new orator at dinner.

The next three days we had more snow and poor visibility. The walking got tougher because of the snow and mushy tundra. That evening I told Bill Pinnell that I was losing my confidence in getting a big one. Seven days and I had not even seen anything that we could put a stalk on. He just smiled and said, "just don't give up and keep going." I thought that was easy enough for him to say, sitting next to that old warm wood-burning stove.

The next morning John

tain to set up our scoping operations in our regular position. We scoped all morning and saw six bears, all eight foot or less and most of them rubbed badly. After we had lunch, I spotted something back about 5 miles directly west. As soon as I saw it I knew it was a 10 foot bear. He was lumbering on the opposite mountain side from us. As he continued to walk in the golden colored grass, it was easy to follow him with our 20 power spotting scope. After 20 minutes, he did what you hope all bears will do and that was to lay down and appear to go to sleep. We gathered up all our gear, made a good mark on where he was and started on our stalk. Quickly we got down the mountain and into the old wooden boat. John said he did not appear to be rubbed and assured me he would be a fine trophy animal. I did not feel the cold water spray as we headed across Karluk Lake as quickly as we could.

Once we reached the other side of the lake, the object was to climb the mountain, trying to stay

THE OLGA BAY LODGE SERVES AS HUNTING CAMP FOR BILL PINNELL AND MORRIS TALIFSON'S GUIDE SERVICE. PHOTO COURTESY OF WILFRED P. SCHMOE.



was! He was massive in body and lumbered back and forth in his every move. John said that he was about 200 yards and for me to take him when he hit the middle of the opening. He also reminded me to make sure the first shot was good because he would charge down the mountain like a locomotive and would be at 100 yards before I was ready to fire a second shot. The third shot he said, "was to be saved to put into the bear's mouth or mine, which ever you chose."

He hit the middle of the opening and the cross hairs of my 9 power scope were right on his front shoulders. I squeezed off the 240 grain round. It hit the bear with a solid thud. But he only quivered slightly. The bear did exactly what John said it would do. He came

charging like a locomotive and John hollered, "shoot again!"

The second shot caught him in the chest at 100 yards and put him rolling into a thicket. We

proached cautiously, but he was dead. The pounding in my chest proved that my bypass surgery had been done well.

It took us four hours to skin out the bear and another two hours to pack out 180 pounds of hide and skull. I don't even remember the five mile walk back to camp for I was reliving the great events of the day. Once in camp we stretched the hide and took a preliminary measurement on the skull. It squared

WILLIAM G. JAMES WITH HIS ALASKA BROWN BEAR THAT SCORES 28-14/16 POINTS.



could hear him thrashing around but could not see him. John watched the two other bears quickly disappear.

As we tentatively walked up on this massive beast, we were in awe of his size and of the strong fish smell the older bears have. We ap-

proached slightly over ten feet with a skull measurement of 29-1/2 inches.

Bill Pinnell told me I would get a good bear because I was in the best bear country. He was right. Both Bill and Morris made my trip of a lifetime come true.

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