



# DRY TIMES BRUIN

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For the past twenty-four years, I've been wandering around the mountains, foothills and deserts of Southern New Mexico in search of big game. All in all, I guess my luck has run a little better than most.

Over the years, my trophy room has been steadily increasing in perfectly preserved memories representing the triumphs of those endeavors. I love the sport. If it was in season, I hunted it. I never spent very much time on the smaller critters, just the larger beasts (you know, deer, elk, pronghorn and such). My collection of memories even includes quite a number of exotics, but until now, not a single bear. That's not to say that I didn't hunt them; I just never took one. Oh, I'd see one now and then, but something was always wrong. The brush was too thick, the shot was too far, it was a sow with a cub, or it was just a little on the small side. I never gave up hope though. I always figured that one of these days, the "big one" would be in the wrong place at the right time and I'd get my chance.

The behavior of the bears in my locality changed drastically during the summer of 1994. The previous winter had brought little moisture and bears were spotted everywhere during the long, dry summer that followed. They were coming down out of the mountains in search of food and water. Hunger can seriously alter the behavior of any animal. Even an

animal as secretive as a bear will abandon his fear of man for the possibility of a meal. The area around my hometown of Silver City has never been known for much bear activity. Oh, on occasion, someone might see one close to town, but not a regular basis. This year was a different story. The local Game and Fish Department officers were busy chasing bears through the streets of town and off the courthouse lawn. Bears were being seen in places where no one had ever seen tracks or sign before. Even the ones that didn't come into town had to change their diet to survive. Many, unfortunately, took a liking to fresh beef. Several ranchers that worked cattle in the lower elevations of the Gila Wilderness were losing calves at an alarming rate. As bear season drew closer, I had a feeling that this just might be the year.

Opening weekend found me camped at the Gila Wilderness boundary with my son, Dusty, and close friend, Tom Mort. This was one of the areas where bears were doing the most damage to livestock. We hunted on horseback for three days and my son took a nice cinnamon bruin that weekend. As for me, my "bear luck" was running true, and I saw nothing to shoot. After exhausting that area, but to no avail, I decided to spend the remainder of the season trying to locate a large bear that my father-in-law had seen near the apple orchard on his ranch on the Mimbres River.

During the week that followed, I called my father-in-law, Mike Disert, a couple of times to ask if he'd noticed any new signs of bear activity. He assured me that he was still seeing tracks and droppings, but hadn't actually seen the bear recently. The fact that he was still seeing signs made me anxious to get out to the ranch and try my luck. However, by the end of the second weekend, I still had no bear. I did notice that it now appeared there were at least two bears meandering around the area, not just one. I tried both mornings and afternoons since I wasn't sure what time of the day the bears were coming in. Still, there were no bears sighted. Mike said he figured they must be coming into the orchard in the middle of the night, so I made plans to return and try one more time the following weekend. I worked Monday through Thursday, so I arranged to contact Mike Thursday evening after I got off work. If he was still seeing signs of bear activity, I'd be there Friday morning at first light. These were very smart and elusive bears.

Thursday evening finally came and I called Mike as arranged. The news was exciting and encouraging. He said that he'd noticed some larger piles of scat the last couple of days. He thought that I'd have a good chance at the "big boy" in the morning. It was still dark when I pulled into Mike's driveway. Not surprisingly, he was up and the coffee was ready. I really enjoy visiting with

Mike, so the time passed quickly. He had one of his irrigation pumps on that had run all night, sprinkling one of his alfalfa fields, so I told him that I'd turn the pump off when I got there. Mike wished me "good luck" as I went out the front door.

I noticed that it was a clear, beautiful morning as I picked up my rifle and binoculars from the seat of my pickup. Only the slightest breeze touched my face as I circled around the house and eased my way north toward the apple orchard. I criss-crossed slowly through the orchard, hoping to catch just a glimpse of anything that moved or looked out of place. I looked into every apple tree and peered as far as I could into the dense brush that surrounded the orchard. Suddenly, looking down, I noticed the largest piles of bear droppings that I'd ever seen. This must be some bear! Cautiously, I continued my journey through the orchard and slowly made my way through the fence at the north end. Lodged in the barb wire on the fence, I noticed a couple of strands of long, dark, hair. No doubt, they were definitely from a bear. Again, I continued my stalk from the fence until I reached the two-track road where Mike had driven his truck the evening before to turn the pump on. There, in the tire marks, I found the big bruin's tracks. They were huge! The tracks were sharp and clear, obviously recent. The bear had to be around there somewhere. I followed the tracks up the road, searching everywhere for the bear. I could hear the sprinkler system quite well and figured the sound would hide any noise that I might accidentally make. As suddenly as the tracks had appeared, they vanished. I couldn't tell which way he went from the road. There was just too much vegetation. Just a short distance to the right of the road lies the muddy banks of the Mimbres River, so I slowly made my way down to the mud to check for any sign that he'd gone that way. No tracks were found. The old bruin must have gone the other direction from the road. After returning to the spot where the tracks had mysteriously stopped, I looked closer at the vegetation that bordered the road. It appeared that

some of the grass had been flattened slightly, so I continued my hunt in that direction. It just didn't make sense that he'd go this way. Just fifty yards or so in front of me was the edge of the alfalfa field where the sprinklers were. Surely, he wouldn't go out into the field. He must be in the dense brush or trees around me. I stopped and looked all around. He'd be difficult to see in the dark shadows of the brush that bordered the field, but surely I'd notice movement or the bulk of his shadow if he was there. Perplexed at not being able to locate him, I suddenly recalled the words spoken to me years ago by an old timer, "When looking for bear, remember to look up." As my eyes slowly worked their way up the trunk of a giant cottonwood tree in front of me, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end, and I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. There, not thirty yards from me, clinging to the branches of the ancient tree, was the largest, jet black bear that I could have ever imagined.

Years of hunting and searching had come to an end at this moment. This was the bear I'd been waiting for. He was in the wrong place at the right time. Needless to say, the shot was quite easy, and

the bear came crashing to the ground. The hunt had been long and hard. Over the many years that I spent searching for just one bear, I'd been given the opportunity to see some of the most spectacular and wild country in New Mexico. As excited as I was to take such a beautiful trophy I felt somewhat saddened that the chase had come to an end.

Several of Mike's neighbors, including my wife's grandparents came down to look at the magnificent bruin. With great difficulty, we were able to load the large bear into the bed of my pickup and take it to Mike's scales. The bear weighed 394 pounds, which is pretty amazing considering the poor condition from the lack of regular meals during the long, dry spell. His huge skull green scored 20-15/16, and the final Boone and Crockett measurements totaled 20-10/16 points after the sixty day drying period. To say the least, I am pleased that I was finally in the right place at the right time, and the bear was in the wrong place.

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JOHN WASSON'S SEARCH FOR A TROPHY BLACK BEAR CAME TO AN END WITH THIS BEAR THAT SCORES 20-10/16 POINTS.

