

BEATING THE



**CASEY AND HIS FATHER GENE, GLASS THE
LOWER PORTION OF MT. ISANOTSKI ON UNIMAK
ISLAND IN SEARCH FOR A MATURE BROWN BEAR.**

CASEY L. DINKEL

60TH PARALLEL ADVENTURES

CO-OWNER

Photos Courtesy of John Whipple

ODDS

Growing up on a farm in northeast Nebraska, hunting was a major part of our life. Every fall we religiously hunted for pheasants, doves, and of course, whitetail deer. These animals graced our table and supplemented the home-raised beef and vegetables we grew. At a young age, I learned about the outdoors from my father, who would take time out of his busy farming schedule to teach me. Under his tutelage, I learned about the value of conservation, ethics, and stewardship of the land. These fundamentals would be the very foundation I would build upon throughout my life.



When my father was a young man of 18, he stumbled across a story in a magazine that would change him forever. He read of a man in Alaska who embarked upon a brown bear hunt. The man unfolded his adventure of pursuing a monstrous bruin that led him through many ups and downs, ultimately with him taking the bear with a pistol as it charged him. This story really lit a fire within my dad, and he told this story over and over again for many years. Every time a brown bear entered a conversation, my father's eyes would light up with excitement, and I would chuckle as I knew the story that was to follow. Over the years, his dream of hunting a brown bear never came to fruition, and as time passed even further, my father began to believe that it would never happen. Fate, however, had a very different plan that neither my father nor anyone else could have predicted.

Several years ago, my parents uprooted their life and moved to Alaska. I had been living in Alaska for about six years and convinced the empty nesters it was time to start living their life. It didn't take much persuading, and in the summer of 2016, my parents hit the Alcan Highway with new adventures on the horizon. However, as we made our way toward the last frontier,

there was a bittersweet feeling over all of us. About a month prior to the move with their home already sold, my father was diagnosed with a highly aggressive prostate cancer. As one can imagine, it had taken us all by surprise, but in his typical good spirit, my father stayed very positive as we made our way north. Once in Alaska his treatment started almost immediately with little to no time for my parents to enjoy their beautiful new surroundings before the cold, dark, Alaskan winter set in. My father's prescription was to undergo radiation treatment three times per week for no less than nine weeks. That November during his last week of radiation, I approached my father about his desire to pursue brown bears the following year. "Well, I am not dead yet," he replied when I asked him about applying for several coveted draw tags throughout the state. After a few hours of mulling over options, he applied for moose, muskox, caribou, and of course, brown bear. During our discussion, I explained to my father that all the tags he applied for had very low draw odds (less than 5 percent), with brown bear being the lowest at 1 percent. In fact, I knew several local hunters who had applied for this particular brown bear tag most of their lives and had not been fortunate enough to draw it. We

both knew it was a long shot, but I figured "what the heck, someone has to draw it."

On the morning of February 17, 2017, I awoke and immediately grabbed my phone to check the draw results. My eyes still a blur, I scanned over each tag several times hoping to see a YES in the successful column. Unfortunately, I had drawn a big goose egg. My father, on the other hand, had been awarded a highly sought-after Unimak Island brown bear tag. Later that morning, after breaking the news to my dad, he was in a state of disbelief. With such low draw odds and only a handful of tags handed out each year, it was crazy to think that he had drawn on his very first attempt. Whether it was luck or fate, we felt very blessed, and I couldn't have been happier for my father. However, drawing the tag would be the easiest part of this adventure, and a lot of preparation would soon follow. Since the tag was for the spring of 2018, I would have a little over a year to help my dad line everything out. This was great, since planning a trip to Unimak Island can be a logistical nightmare, and considerable time would be needed.

At 72 miles wide and 59 miles long, Unimak is the first Island on the Aleutian chain, separated from the mainland of the Alaskan Peninsula by a sliver of water called False

LEFT TOP TO BOTTOM: The remains of an old cottage and a boat dock tell their story of a past fishing village that used to operate on the Island in the early 1900's. A lone fox searches the beach for any easy meals that might have washed up from the previous high tide. A glass ball from a Japanese fishing buoy rests among the rocks having survived many years at sea. An old boot shows its scars of many years of labor and use from a fisherman's life.



A nameless island adjacent to Unimak juts from the sea as it displays the ruggedness of Alaska's wilderness.



Standing over 8,000 feet high, Isanotski peak towers high above us and smolders as it threatens its next eruption.

Pass. Unimak is trapped between the Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea. The island is mostly a barren landscape with little to no cover in most areas. It is also within the ring of fire and boasts several active volcanos across its 1,571 square miles. Unimak is known for its extreme weather and occasionally holding its visitors hostage for days on end. It is not uncommon to encounter 100 mph winds, sideways rain, freezing fog, or be covered in volcanic ash should an eruption occur. Last but certainly not least, Unimak is home to caribou, wolves, sea lions, walrus, and of course, some of the largest brown bears on the planet. It is an adventure-hunter's paradise, and my dad was holding the golden ticket. After more than 50 years, he was finally going to get the chance to embark on his dream hunt.

Fast-forward to May 2018, and I found myself staring into the north face of mount Isanotski, the second-tallest volcano on Unimak Island. As I stood and admired the 8,000-foot peak, it was hard to believe we were finally here. All the preparation, planning, and anticipation was finally over, and it was time for the adventure to begin. Several months prior I had asked my good friend and hunting buddy John to join my father and me on this little getaway. John happily accepted the invitation and teamed up with us. Having John along gave us the extra muscle needed to help my father throughout all aspects of the hunt. Working as a team not only made us more efficient hunters, but it added an extra level of safety that was reassuring in such a

remote environment. Unimak is not the place you want to get seriously injured. Even if the weather was good enough for a rescue attempt, the island is so remote that help might not make it to you in time.

The three of us had been traveling all day, taking several flights and a boat ride to reach our hunting location. In my research over the previous year, I had stumbled upon an area that looked to be a natural funnel for wildlife, especially bears traveling in the spring. As we set up camp, my research was already paying dividends. We spotted two bears about a mile away, one of which looked to be a large boar. Tired from travel, we elected to eat dinner and catch some much-needed rest. With so many bears on the island, we knew we would see more bears in the days to come. We had allotted two weeks on the island if needed. After all, my father had been waiting his entire life for this hunt, so why not take the extra time to enjoy it?

The next morning, I awoke to the distant sound of waves crashing on the nearby beach and the smell of saltwater in the air. As I rolled out of my sleeping bag and exited the tent, I found John collecting photos of the volcanos behind our camp. On the day of our arrival, most of mount Isanotski was covered in clouds. Overnight the clouds had lifted and not only revealed the rest of Isanotski but completely unveiled a second volcano as well. As John captured some photos of camp, I began to glass a large open basin about a half mile away. The sun was just peaking over the horizon when I spotted a sow



A large sow and her three cubs take an afternoon stroll down the beach as they search for the remains of an expired sea lion.

with three cubs making their way across a small river that cut through the basin. I knew my father was probably still exhausted from the previous day's travel, but I woke him anyway. The morning scenery and action was just too good, and I didn't want him to miss it. After spotting several bears on the other side of the basin, the three of us decided to grab a protein bar and make our way to a small cliff about 300 yards away. From the cliff we could see a much larger area and watch a distinct trail that bears utilized to access the beach. As we sat and ate our breakfast, it didn't take long before John spotted a nice-sized boar following a blonde sow about a half mile away. Unfortunately, a bear's walk is comparable to a human's running speed, and the boar followed the sow as they switched direction and moved into the brush line away from us. We continued to glass until noon, seeing a few more bears across the valley too far away to pursue. Brown bear hunting is a waiting game; we knew there would be a lot of sitting and glassing. One mistake a lot of hunters make when brown bear hunting is hiking all over the place and tracking human scent around.



RIGHT TOP TO BOTTOM: The 60th parallel team poses for a photo, before heading out to scout for bears. Casey's father makes sure camp is secure before heading out for the evening to hunt. The simplicity of adventure back pack hunting makes one realize how basic one can live, home sweet home! Bear hunting is about patience. Casey and his father spend countless hours behind their optics in search of a mature bruin. A smile is worth a 1000 words, Gene's excitement turns to tears after he harvests his first brown bear.



A SMALLER SOW WALKED TOO FAR INSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE AS SHE CURIOUSLY CHECKED OUT JOHN AND CASEY.



Gene proudly displays the massive paw of the bear.

I had learned this lesson the hard way several years prior, when a large boar caught my scent on a trail I had walked five days prior. When the bear cut my scent, he looked up popping his jaws in distress and literally ran the opposite direction as fast as possible. We didn't want to make the same mistake on my father's dream hunt, so as painful as it was for me to sit for long periods and glass, that's exactly what we did.

Around 8:00 in the evening, the bears started to move around again. Typical bear behavior is to be active in the early morning and late evening, while they lie around in the middle of the afternoon. That evening we spotted a smaller bear that was working the trail at the base of the cliff below us. Even though the bear was in shooting range, we let him pass by since the bear was likely a 3-year-old adolescent. I did, however, use this opportunity to teach my

father how to judge a small bear from a larger mature adult. Around 10:30 in the evening, the sun dipped low enough behind the mountains in the distance that we called it a day. It was still light enough to shoot a bear, but I didn't like the idea of chasing a wounded bear in the brush at night. We ate a late dinner and crawled into our sleeping bags. Still a little tired from all the excitement day one had offered, I dozed off as the ticking sound of the electric bear fence rocked me to sleep.

The next morning, we waited patiently on our cliff lookout for the sun to rise and shed some light on the valley below us. The sun had no more than broken the horizon when I caught some movement about 600 yards downhill below us. First a bleach blonde—almost white—sow appeared from a small alder patch, and just like clockwork, a large boar was in tow directly behind her. The two bears would

be in striking distance if they stayed put long enough for a stalk. We quickly grabbed our packs and proceeded downhill about 200 yards. Before we could get any closer, the boar and girlfriend turned and started walking away from us. Knowing that we would never catch them once we left the high ground, we abandoned the stalk. However, we continued to watch the giant bruin through the spotting scope for the better part of 30 minutes. It was a true pleasure to watch him court his female mate. At literally double her size, he swaggered back and forth across a sedge meadow letting every other bear in the area know he was in charge. Giving the scope to my father, I watched the smile grow upon his face. My father watched the bear for several minutes in awe of its sheer size. "They are like modern-day dinosaurs," he said as he watched the bear. A few minutes later, John was

taking his turn watching the bears that were now about a mile out, when the unexpected happened. "He's fighting a wolf!" John said looking through the spotting scope. In disbelief I pushed John aside and looked to confirm his ridiculous statement. Sure enough, the giant boar of more than nine feet was indeed fighting a large gray timber wolf. We all took turns watching them spar for nearly 10 minutes as the wolf buzzed around the bear, lunging in every so often to bite the boar wherever he could. The large bruin tried to swat the wolf but he was too slow, and the two danced around and around. It was like watching a heavyweight boxer fight a featherweight. Eventually, the giant brownie became tired of being bitten and slowly backed away, giving victory to the wolf. The three of us had certainly never seen anything so amazing in all our travels. After the street brawl was



TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: Casey explains key points of bear judging to his father, as they glass a younger bear across the valley. Gene settles in for a shot on a mature boar, while Casey spots to confirm shot placement. Casey and his father cautiously walk towards the downed bruin with a round chambered in their rifles. Father and son admire the bear that Gene waited so many years to pursue. John and Casey pose with Gene and his 8-foot 6-inch bruin.

over, my stomach told me it was getting close to noon. To my amazement, when I looked at my watch, it was about 3:30 pm. The wind had picked up slightly, and we were all a little chilled from sitting all morning, so we decided to walk back to camp for a snack and a midday nap.

I was jolted awake by the sound of John's voice, "Hey Casey, there's a good bear walking down the beach. Get your dad over to the cliff!" Shaking off the haze of sleep, I leapt from my tent grabbing my rifle and pack. My dad, still fast asleep in a separate tent, had no idea the chaos that was about to ensue. After unzipping his vestibule, I shook my father awake and calmly told him "Get up! There's a giant bear coming down the beach! I guess in hindsight I could have been a little more diplomatic in my approach. Although, I was quite impressed at how fast my dad collected his gear in the heat of the moment. We sprinted roughly 300 yards to the cliff's edge where we spotted the bear about 600 yards out and closing the distance fast. In relatively fluid motion, my father and I moved across the cliff face and set up for a shot.

Ranging the bear, he was now at 280 yards. The bear paused and sniffed the trail for several moments allowing me to get a good look at him and confirm that he was a mature boar. "Whenever you're ready, Dad." I had no more than muttered the words when the shot pierced the air, the bullet striking the bear low and behind the shoulder. The boar turned and began to run away as if not fazed by the 250-grain slug from my father's .375 Holland & Holland. A second round struck the bear again behind the opposite shoulder, this time stopping him temporarily, where he began to thrash and roll. The third bullet gained purchase on the bear's chest, hitting his center mass. Again, he began to run as he displayed his refusal to expire. With the fourth and final shot, the giant boar crawled to his final resting place; a brief silence fell over the three of us. For almost a full minute, my dad stared at the motionless bear as if in a state of total shock at what had just transpired. This moment had been a long time coming, and emotions ran high as I shook my father's hand and hugged him. "Congratulations Dad, you got your bear!"



Gene is all smiles as he poses next to the bear that he dreamed about for so many years.

With only a couple hours of daylight left, we couldn't waste too much time celebrating. The cliff was too steep to descend, so we were forced to walk around the backside of the hill in order to reach the bear. My father spotted the boar about 75 yards away; the ridge of his back displayed the massive hump upon his shoulders just above a small rise. As a precaution, we approached the bear cautiously, each with a round chambered in our rifles. At the bear's side, my father stood quietly looking at the beast. "Well... put your hands on him Dad," I urged him. My father ran his hand over the bear's fur, picking up his head and then the bear's massive paw. The bruin was absolutely beautiful. His fur, blonde upon his back, transitioned to tan, then chocolate colored upon his legs. My

dad's smile said it all as we took photos of him and the bear. John and I worked into the night, skinning the boar and taking our time to carefully flesh the hide. My dad stood guard with his rifle, on the lookout for other bears that were out searching for a late-night snack.

It was around 3:00 a.m. by the time we got back to camp. It had been a good day, and we were all ready to turn in for the night. Even though I was completely exhausted, I had a hard time trying to find sleep. My mind kept playing the moments of the evening in my head over and over again. It had been an amazing adventure and an experience of a lifetime. After all, it's not every day that you get the chance to share something so special with your father. I am forever grateful for our time spent together. ■