

Cold Bay's GIANTS

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PHOTOS BY AUTHOR
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THE COLD BAY AREA ON THE ALASKA PENNINSULA IS KNOWN FOR ITS BIG BEARS.

The sun sparkled brightly off the snow around us as we lay on a small patch of dry tundra watching the sleeping bear in the alder patch ahead of us. We had been in this position for literally six hours waiting for the big Alaskan Peninsula brown bear to wake up and move to allow us a clear shot at his shoulder or chest area.

We, being Randy Cain of Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania and myself. Randy and I happened to be together on this patch of warm tundra because he booked this spring brown bear hunt on the Alaska Peninsula with Brent Jones, one of my partners at our booth at the Harrisburg Sportsman show. Randy said he really wanted a big bear. Brent told him that the AAA Out-fitter camp near Cold Bay, Alaska had a history of producing big bears. There was no guarantee, but he would be hunting with experienced guides in an excellent location. Now Randy was here and the bear he came after was taking a snooze. We had to wait him out.

I finally met Randy face-to-face in the Cold Bay airport terminal on May 8, 1992, when my other partner, Roger Morris, and I picked him up along with two other hunters; long time friend and client, Matt Caldwell of Mt. Carroll, Illinois, and Ian 'Chase' Dunn of Hyde Park, Utah. Randy, Matt and Chase stored their gun cases and traveling clothes in our 'Iron Hilton' storage container in Cold Bay. We donned our rubber rain gear and jumped into our boat for the short trip to our main camp on the shore of Cold Bay. At camp, we met assistant guides, Dee Deoudes and Jeff Hamburg, who had the camp prepared for

the upcoming hunt. The evening passed quickly, filled with good hunting stories topped with Roger's prediction that we would take more than one ten-foot bear this spring. We hoped he was right.

The next day was the day before the season opened. We were again back in the boats for a leisurely trip to our spike camp locations. Dee and Chase were taken to a separate camp. Roger, Jeff and I set about putting the finishing touches on the spike camp that we would share. Jeff helped us while he was waiting for his hunter, Ron Arndorfer of Greendale,

boar accompanying a young sow. We agreed to err on the safe side and not bother the pair.

Opening morning found Matt, Roger, Randy and myself climbing a nearby hill to spot for bear. As we climbed, Roger's keen eyes picked up movement on a hillside alder patch about a half mile away.

We quickly set up the spotting scopes and started evaluating the size and condition of the bear. We agreed that the bear was a ten-footer and that his hide appeared to be in excellent condition. Because Roger had spotted the bear first it was his client's choice as to whether or not he wanted to go after the bear. Matt was giving this a lot of thought and discussion. He had killed a large bear four years before and wanted to be sure that this bear exceeded the magic ten foot mark. While Matt was making up his



Wisconsin, due to arrive later in the hunt. We kept a close eye on the valley around us as we worked. Sure enough, we sighted two large bears, and touched off a controversy which lasted throughout the hunt. One of the large bears was accompanied by a smaller bear. The question was; was it a big boar with a young sow getting an early start on the spring mating season or was it a really big sow with a big cub? Even though we saw this pair several times over the season, we never did figure out exactly what their status was. By the end of the season, both Roger and I were convinced that it was a large

mind, Randy came over to where I was lying and asked me what I thought about the bear we were watching. I told Randy, if Matt choose not to go after that bear, that he and I should go after him. That could very well be the biggest bear we see.

"OK," Randy said, "I just wanted to be sure that you felt the bear was big enough."

Matt finally decided to go after the bear. He and Roger started their stalk. Lady luck decided to look the other way and the bear moved off into a large patch of alders and disappeared. Matt and Roger searched for some time but were

unable to locate him in the thick alders on the hillside. They returned to our lookout point and we continued to glass the valley.

Later in the afternoon Roger decided to take Matt and hunt the shoreline back toward the main camp. He thought that possibly the big bear we had seen that morning might have moved through the alders around the hillside in that direction. Randy and I decided to stay put and continue spotting from our lookout spot.

All through the evening I continued to get up and move over the ridge and look at the alder patch where the big bear had disappeared that morning. Finally, with the last light of day we decided to walk down off the hill to camp. I could see Matt and Roger coming along the shoreline in the distance returning to camp also. As we prepared to leave our position on the hillside, I took one last long look at the hillside below us where the big bear had disappeared earlier in the day.

Randy looked at me and said, "You really don't want to leave yet do you."

I replied, "No, this is a prime time to see a bear and I think that he is still around here somewhere. We are losing light fast so it's probably time to head down to the tent."

We had barely reached camp and started to prepare dinner when we heard shots coming from the beach. Jeff and I looked at each other and Jeff said, "That lucky Roger. He must have had one walk out on the beach right at the boat landing."

Suddenly we heard a shout, Roger came running into camp. Somewhat out of breath, he exclaimed, "We got that big bear but he ran into the water and died. We need help to haul him out before the tide floats him away."

We all ran back to the beach with Roger. When we got to the beach, Matt was standing in the surf up to the top of his hip boots, hanging on to a very nice bear which was trying to float out to sea. Working together we soon had the bear out of the water and moved above the high tide line. It was dark by that time, so using flashlights, we positioned the bear for photos and skinning in the morning.

In camp we finally heard the whole story. Apparently the big bear had walked out of the alder patch and onto the beach only moments after Randy and I left our lookout spot. Spotting the bear, Matt and Roger quickly moved up the beach to a good shooting position. Matt's shot touched off a violent reaction in the bear and instead of running back into the alders, the bear turned and ran into the surf where he died.

It was a very happy camp that evening because we already had one good bear and the hunt was just beginning.

Randy and I spent the second day spotting from our lookout. I told Randy that since we had one ten-foot bear in camp we would just have to hunt harder to find his father. Not in my wildest dreams did I imagine what the next two days held in store for us. The remainder of the second day was uneventful with the weather holding good, a rare thing in this part of Alaska. We were hunting within forty miles of the beginning of the Aleutian Island chain. This area is known as the birthplace of much of the bad weather in North America. Usually at

Cold Bay we see lots of wind and rain. As one of our guides once put it, "This is Cold Bay in hell."

The third day also dawned with good weather. The winds were mild and Matt decided that it would be a good day for a boat trip back to Cold Bay where he planned to catch the Reeve Aleutian Airlines flight back to Anchorage to do some fishing out of Soldotna for King Salmon on the Kenai River.

As Matt, Roger and Jeff prepared for the boat trip, Randy and I lay on the ground in front of the tent spotting our little valley. Just as I heard the outboard motor start up I spotted a movement high on the snow covered mountain far up the valley.

"Randy, there's a bear high up on the third mountain on the left."

We quickly set up the spotting scope and focused in on the moving bear. The bear was headed downhill into the valley, traveling in a lunging gait, sinking into the soft spring snow, up to his chin with each bound.

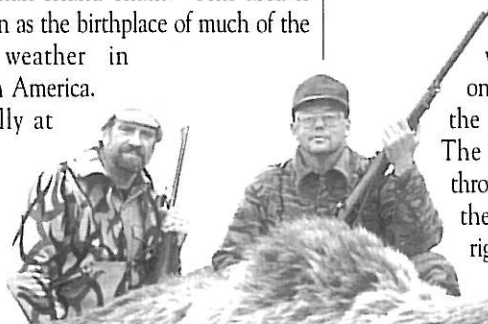
"That's a big bear," I told Randy. "But he is too far away to get a good look at him. We'll wait and see what he does because, as long as he is moving that fast there is no way to intercept him. Also our best vantage point is right here."

We watched the bear continue his plunge down the mountainside and disappear into the alders covering the valley floor.

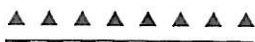
Randy and I discussed our options while keeping a close eye on the alder patch where the bear had disappeared. The bear could continue through the alders and go up the mountainside on the right-hand side of the valley. If he

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MATT CALDWELL, RIGHT, AND GUIDE, ROGER MORRIS, POSE WITH THEIR WATER-LOGGED BROWN BEAR. FORTUNATELY, WITH THE HELP OF THE OTHER MEN IN CAMP, THEY WERE ABLE TO SAVE THE BEAUTIFUL TROPHY FROM THE THREATENING TIDE.



"This is nuts, I'm going to just yell at him, so be ready."



did this we felt that we could launch our remaining boat and go up the bay to the mouth of the next valley where we would try for an intercept on the far side of the mountain. If the bear stayed in the alders or turned down the valley toward us we needed to locate the bear again to set up a stalk. Like any good hunting area, we could not see all of the terrain surrounding the alder patch. We knew there were many ways the bear could go that would make him difficult to find again.

After several minutes of waiting there was no further sign of the bear. Randy and I decided to leave a note on the stove in the tent for Jeff and Roger telling them we went up the valley to see if the bear was somewhere up there. We

grabbed our packs and started up the valley. The farther up the valley we went, the more snow we encountered. The snow was soft and we were soon up to our knees. The adrenaline kept pumping because the farther up the valley we went, the more of

the right-side of the valley side we could see. There were no bear tracks in the snow leaving the valley... a good sign.

Before leaving camp we had carefully noted a landmark that would point us to where we had last seen the bear. When we reached that point in the creek bottom several hundred yards below our landmark, we again discussed our options. We decided to climb the valley to the right. This would give us a better vantage point from where we could look down into the alders covering the valley floor in front of us. By now the snow was deeper and requiring considerable effort to climb through the alders and snow above us. We eventually reached a small bench in the alders on the mountainside about three hundred yards above the creek bottom.

"This is as good as it gets," I told Randy. "We need to do some thorough

glassing to see if we can spot the bear or his tracks to show where he went."

We put our binoculars into action and only a few minutes had passed when Randy's excited voice exclaimed, "I think I see him!"

At first it appeared to be a moss-covered rock in the alders. Closer scrutiny, revealed that it was a bear sound asleep in the alders. He was not over a hundred yards from where we had last seen him. "Can we get closer?" Randy asked.

I told him I thought we could since the bear was asleep and would probably stay that way for awhile. The wind was in our favor, blowing down the valley from the bear to us. From experience, I knew the wind direction was very unusual for this valley and I was worried that it might change at any moment. Brown bears have a keen sense of smell and more stalks have been ruined by a stray breeze than any other way.

We quickly retraced our steps back down to the creek bottom. We climbed out on the side toward where the bear lay and found a shallow gully that headed in his direction. This gully offered concealment until we were within two hundred yards of the bear's sleeping place. Although some people believe bears have poor eyesight, I have found they can see movement for a considerable distance, especially when outlined against a background of snow with only scattered leafless alders to break a human silhouette. This was our situation. We had to be careful. When we reached the head of the shallow gully we became concerned about any possible noise that our packs or foot steps might make in the snow. We decided to drop our packs and continue on closer to the bear without them. As we carefully set our packs down, I motioned to Randy to come close.

"From here on," I whispered, "Stay right behind me...step where I step and bring plenty of spare ammo. We are close enough that anything can happen and if it does it will happen fast."

The excitement of the moment was evident in Randy's eyes as he grabbed more shells and fell in step behind me:

We emerged from the gully onto an open bare piece of tundra that ran through the alders and up the mountainside, disappearing into more snow on the upper end. As we moved out onto the tundra we could see the bear laying behind a large alder across another shallow gully, level on the mountainside to us. A close look with the binoculars revealed that we were within 150 yards of the bear. As we watched, the bear raised his magnificent head, yawned, looked around, lay his head back down and went back to sleep.

Randy looked at me and whispered, "Are you sure that he is big enough?" We quietly reviewed some of the qualifications for a big bear. The distance between his ears, the size of his head in relation to the alders and the overall size of the bear as we had watched him come off the mountain earlier indicated he was big.

The bear was laying curled up in a ball behind the alders so it was difficult to estimate his overall length from where we were now sitting. I told Randy that I felt very comfortable that the bear was over 10 feet. We were unusually lucky in that we had plenty of time to look the bear over as he lay sleeping.

We carefully moved around on the open patch of tundra in an attempt to set up a clear shot. There did not seem to be a way to improve our position. We finally set up where Randy had the best view of the bear and waited for him to make the next move.

After about two hours with no change we decided to see if there was any way to get closer to the bear. The ground was snow covered between us and I thought that I could see a way that might improve our chances for a clear shot. We decided that Randy would stay where he was while I tried to find a way to get closer. I worked my way through the snow and alders until I was about forty yards from the bear. I still could not improve the sight picture through the alders. Being down in the alders, that close to the bear, reduced our ability to see around the bear. If he moved he would go out of sight much more quickly. The open piece of



CLIMBING TO A HIGH VANTAGE POINT ENABLES THE BROWN BEAR HUNTER TO SEE DOWN INTO THE ALDERS COVERING THE VALLEY FLOOR.

tundra where Randy was sitting was slightly elevated and represented the best view and the best shot.

I quietly worked my way back to Randy where we patiently spent the next four hours watching the bear. At the point where this story began, we were starting to think that this bear could stay in place all evening or even all night. It was then that we decided it would be better to deal with the bear now while the light and wind conditions were in our favor. What we needed was a way to make him curious enough to stand up.

We thought that any noise other than a human sound might do the trick. I had heard that a predator call was a good way to make a bear move. Unfortunately, my predator call was in my pack several hundred yards back down the hill. Randy then said that he could make a squeaking noise on the back of his hand, so we decided to try that first. I told Randy that if the bear moved and gave him a clear shot to take it and not to wait for me to speak. With that in mind, Randy started to make loud squeaking noises. To our amazement there was absolutely no reaction from the bear except a twitch of his ears and a slight lift of his head. He tried again with no success. Randy and I looked at each other and I motioned that I would try. I tried a call that I had learned years ago when moving cattle out of deep timber in eastern Oregon. Again, no success except that the bear lifted his head a little higher than before.

I looked at Randy again and said, "This is nuts, I'm going to just yell at him, so be ready."

With that I stepped away from Randy a few paces to get what I hoped would be a better angle and started to yell, "Hey bear, hey bear, get your lazy butt up." Again no reaction, so I yelled again. While I was making all this noise, we were watching the bear through our rifle scopes. With the last yell, the bear's response was immediate and unbelievable.

He came off the ground in one fluid motion, and came at us in a dead run. I have never seen anything fill up



a rifle scope so big and so fast. Before I could yell at Randy to shoot I heard the flat crack of his .338 Magnum. The bear disappeared out of my scope as if it had never existed.

The disappearance was so fast that I found it all hard to believe. I yelled at Randy, "What did you do?"

"I shot the bear," was his immediate response. I still could not see the bear so I moved a couple of steps to one side. Now I could see the bear laying on his belly in the snow.

Randy and I looked at each other, hardly believing what had happened. "What a shot and what a bear!" I exclaimed.

"Was he really charging us?" was Randy's excited reply.

"Well, if that wasn't a charge, he sure picked the wrong way to run. That was one fantastic shot you just made," I told him again.

We quickly worked our way through the snow and alders to where the bear lay. Randy stood to one side and covered me as I approached the bear from behind. The closer we got the bigger the bear became. Confirming that the bear was dead, we had a chance to take stock of what we had. This was truly a magnificent bear. He was very blonde for such a large bear and had a beautiful coat without rubs until you looked at his legs. The bear had been traveling through deep snow and the front of his forelegs were nearly bare of hair. Evidently, his great weight caused him to break through the snow with every step.

We tried to wrestle the bear into position for pictures and quickly found

that it was all the two of us could do to move him. We finally accomplished the set up and took many pictures. By the time we finished the picture-taking session, Randy had a perpetual grin locked on his face. We knew that this bear was something special but still didn't realize his true size.

Before we rolled the bear over, a task that we could barely accomplish, I hung a blue space blanket up in the alders to signal Roger and Jeff back at camp. I knew that we were going to need all the help we could get to skin and pack this monster back to camp.

Roger and Jeff had arrived back in camp from Cold Bay just when we started working on the bear. They read my note and spotted our blue signal. They hustled up the valley to join us.

With four of us working, we skinned the bear close to reduce weight. We also fleshed some of the meat off the skull. We each estimated the green hide weighed 150 to 160 pounds. I knew it was a real load and was really glad we had help getting it back to camp.

Subsequent measurements by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Refuge office in Cold Bay confirmed the measurements at 11'3" squared hide and a 30" skull. This was the largest bear ever checked through the Izembek office and was the largest brown bear killed in Alaska in 26 years. It scored 30-1/16 points placing it in the top 20 bears in the all-time records.

This was truly a bear for all of us to be proud of and a great way to start the first week of bear season.

RANDY CAIN BEAMS WITH PRIDE OVER HIS TROPHY BROWN BEAR WHICH SCORES 30-1/16 POINTS.

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