

ETHICS

FAIR CHASE

BIG GAME HUNTING

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THE FIRST IN A SERIES:

Bear Baiting

By Jim Zumbo
B&C Professional Member
Photos courtesy of Author

Controversies routinely swirl around hunting and hunters, but bear baiting is a favorite subject that arouses much emotion. At any given time, some people, somewhere, will be litigating this very unique hunting technique. Indeed, even some hunters will be lined up with anti-hunters (not in an organized way, of course), to defeat this practice.

What is it about baiting black bears that draws the ire of so many people? After all, we bait other species of game, notably whitetail deer, but no one seems to care, at least, as much. Why the fuss about bears?

First, I think we need to look at the public perception of black bears. They are presented as cuddly, charismatic creatures. Most people, I think, are enchanted with bruins. Hollywood has succeeded in portraying bears, among other animals, but especially bears, in a very anthropomorphic way that allows them to appear as sensitive, intelligent, and reasoning.

It comes as no surprise, then, that we have a public that embraces bears in a way that is similar to that of porpoises and whales. Bambi might be a powerful example of extending human qualities to animals, but I don't believe he's much of a match compared to Yogi.

Then too, whereas deer are pests in urban areas, where most people live, they are nuisances, and commonly referred to as "rats with antlers," because of the destruction they cause to gardens and landscape shrubbery. A bear, on the other hand, is much more furtive, and seldom seen, though I've observed bears living peacefully in backyards in urban Pennsylvania.

A bear has a unique lifestyle in that the sow must nurture her cubs for a long time after birth, unlike deer, where fawns are weaned and on their own just a few months after they're born. If a sow with cubs at her side is killed, either by a hunter or a semi, the cubs will most assuredly die. This is the logical and credible explanation for laws that prohibit the taking of a sow with cubs anywhere in North America where bears are classified as big game animals.

Because cubs are born when the sow is in her winter den (bears are NOT true hibernators, by the way), it's imperative that the hunter be certain that the quarry is not a mother sow. Therein lies one of the irrational and unfounded reasons that spring bear hunting and baiting is frowned upon. It's alleged that many cubs are orphaned each year by hunters who shoot mother sows. This was, in fact, one of the prime reasons that Ontario, which allowed baiting, suddenly prohibited spring bear hunting three years ago. Those allegations were not only false, but were founded on wild assumptions that nicely fit into the agenda of animal-rights groups. The wildlife department in Ontario had only one record of a hunter being arrested for taking a sow with cubs. Despite appeals and challenges, spring bear baiting and hunting is still illegal in this enormous province that has well over 100,000 bears.

I've hunted bears from Newfoundland to British Columbia, and all over the U.S. I've taken exactly 15 bears, 3 of them over bait, though I've sat over dozens of baits without success, mostly because I didn't see the bear I wanted. I've seen plenty of



sows with cubs approach baits, but I've never been tempted to shoot a mother sow as she approached, because in every instance, her cubs were either bouncing along with her or shortly behind her. Unlike spot and stalk hunting, where cubs can be up a tree or out of sight, hunting over bait gives the hunter plenty of time to make an assessment of the incoming bear. I believe that hunting over bait protects a mother sow far more than other methods.

The issue of accidentally killing a mother sow is both biological and ethical. We shoot doe deer and cow elk in the fall with fawns and calves at their sides, but we know that the young animals will be accepted into the herd and will survive. That's essentially a biological aspect. The far bigger issue with baiting black bears is that of ethics. The act of setting out an odorous bait and shooting a bear that comes in to eat it is profoundly unacceptable by many people. In their minds, we're taking unfair advantage of the bear, appealing to its appetite. Compounding the scenario is the bait itself, which may be stinking and putrid meat in a barrel, although some states and provinces designate what the bait may consist of and how much may be set out.

In my mind, there isn't a whole lot of difference in shooting geese over a barley field, or sitting under a mast-laden hickory tree for a squirrel to appear. Are we not appealing to an animal's dietary needs? I think the justification here is that we're using natural baits rather than artificial ones as in the barrel.

To carry it a step further, what about the ethics of hunting waterfowl or turkeys with decoys? And how about enticing elk to the gun or bow with an artificial call, or whitetails with rattling antlers, or moose with a grunt call? And shucks, while we're at it, we'd better look at bird dogs that locate and retrieve our quarry, and scopes on rifles, and compound bows, and on and on. These are all ethical considerations, are they not?

Some people, hunters included, say we must draw a line in the sand and decide what's ethical and what's not, and eliminate the latter. That would be very nice, but it could be divisive, and exactly what animal rights people want to happen. Fighting amongst ourselves is self-destructive. That's not to say we can't abide by fair chase standards, which the Boone and Crockett Club has built its reputation on since its inception.

Ethics are exclusively moral judgments made by and for humans. Let's not confuse ethics with wildlife regulations that

tell us we can't start hunting big game until a half hour before sunrise, or that we can't have more than three shells in our shotguns when we hunt ducks. Those are laws that govern wildlife harvest, and also offer a degree of protection to the quarry. But having said that, sometimes unwritten ethical values and written wildlife laws do intermingle on some aspects.

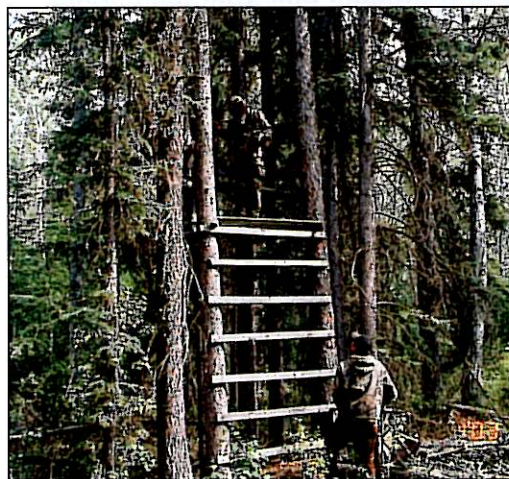
Herein lies the crux of the matter: An animal does not care about ethics. Dead is dead. It matters not at all to the bear if it's killed by spot and stalking, or over a bait. I believe we adopt ethics to make ourselves feel good and wholesome, some of us perhaps believing that our high moral standards justify taking the life of an animal.

In some cases, ethics and laws are thrown out the window to achieve certain wildlife objectives. Take the snow goose situation. Because snow geese have exploded in numbers, they've destroyed their arctic breeding grounds, which also serves as critical habitat for other bird species, some of them endangered. To kill a million extra geese each year, we can now hunt them with unplugged guns, electronic calls, and in some places the limit is 20 a day with a possession of 60, or no limits at all. Goodness. If we had tried any of that a year before those rules were enacted, we'd still be in jail.

I have no problem shooting a bear over bait, because I've accepted the notion that I just expressed – that ethics have no value to a dead bear. I don't approach a deceased bruin next to a bait barrel with any more – or less respect than one that I've hiked a mile to get within rifle range. Nor do I feel any guilt in shooting a bear with a cookie in its mouth, rather than a bit of wild fescue.

There is a very practical reason why baiting is essential in some states or provinces, namely, you'd have a tough time seeing a bear in the thick woods and foliage if it wasn't attracted to a bait. To be sure, plenty of bears are taken in dense forests, but the bears that are shot are usually seen while the hunter is after deer or elk, or the hunter is very lucky or very skilled. Bait is set out to draw a bear out of thick woods and make it available to the hunter. Therefore, the odds of seeing and getting a shot at a bear are infinitely better if you're sitting over a bait.

Most of my bear hunts have been in western Canada. Interestingly, British Columbia doesn't allow baiting, but that prohibition doesn't negatively impact the bear harvest because much of that province is either open country, or it has plenty of logged-over areas and roads where bears can



TOP: Bait can range from beaver carcasses as seen hanging from the log in the top photo to cookies in a barrel although some states and provinces designate what the bait may consist of. **BOTTOM:** Sturdy and safe stands are a must for a hunt over bait to be successful.

readily be spotted. It's also mountainous, where bears can easily be observed on open slopes. That's not the case in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, provinces which typically have flat terrain and heavy "bush." I've hunted with one outfitter in

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Sitting over a bait, however, offers a different kind of anticipation. This is a silent game, where every sound in the woods is magnified to your ears, bringing you to your highest state of alert. You're intensely tuned to every noise, and you sit as quietly as you ever have before, even ignoring the mosquitoes that torment you. And then, when the bear shows just a couple dozen yards away, you realize that you're both in the same little world, and then your heart pounds so wildly you're sure the bear can hear it. You are now the predator...

Manitoba many times, and I've seen only one bear that wasn't near a bait. While sitting on baits, however, I've seen more than a dozen different bears in one afternoon.

I can't remember when Montana allowed baiting; it's one of the few western states that steadfastly denounced the practice. In much of western Montana, bears are so numerous in open or logged country that spot and stalking is a viable option. I recall many hunts where I've seen a half dozen or more bears a day from my pickup truck, though many were unreachable due to cliffs or rivers that had to be navigated to get to them. As I like to say, you can see Venus from your pickup too – getting there is a bit of a problem.

Hunters often try to defend baiting by saying it's a profound challenge in that one must sit very quietly, and hope an incoming bear doesn't see or smell the hunter. Having done everything right, maybe a bear will approach. I'm guilty of saying that early on, when I hadn't hunted over baits much.

That is, to me, an amusing defense, because I've sat in many stands where I actually threw pine cones, branches, and other items at bears that were intent on joining me in my stand. I have pictures showing curious bears within inches of my boots. On the other hand, I've sat in stands where I heard bears around me but never saw them because they were either alarmed at something or too wary to come in during shooting hours. Most of the time those bears show up at night, and most of them are older animals. The point I'm making is that baiting is not physically difficult (if you're hunting with an outfitter) unless you have a long hike in, which is usually not the case, nor do you need to be particularly skillful at hunting. The biggest challenges are tolerating the horrid clouds of mosquitoes, and being able to judge a bear's size when it offers a shot. The shot itself is typically very close, usually less than 40 yards. Of course, your success at seeing a bear or bears over a bait depends on the country you're hunting. Some outfitters have very poor success, others have outstanding success. I've sat in stands and saw zero bears for days, and in others I had to almost beat them off with a stick.

Each type hunt has its exclusive form of anticipation and excitement. There's a world of difference in stalking a distant bear in a clear-cut as compared to sitting over an active bait that was "hit" the day before, with good odds of the bruin returning.

When you stalk a bear to get within range, I can assure you that your heart

will beat mightily and that your adrenalin will be surging. There's a powerful sense of excitement as you close the distance for the shot that you dearly hope will present itself.

Sitting over a bait, however, offers a different kind of anticipation. This is a silent game, where every sound in the woods is magnified to your ears, bringing you to your highest state of alert. You're intensely tuned to every noise, and you sit as quietly as you ever have before, even ignoring the mosquitoes that torment you. And then, when the bear shows just a couple dozen yards away, you realize that you're both in the same little world, and then your heart pounds so wildly you're sure the bear can hear it. You are now the predator, and only you will determine the outcome of the day, unless the bear suddenly spooks and disappears.

It's impossible to convey the excitement of sitting over a baited stand to someone who hasn't done it before. Very few critics have tried it, and trying to describe what it felt like to watch a pine squirrel, marten, or raven when you're blended into their world is hopeless. How do you describe the thrill of hearing a bull elk on a frosty September morning or the sound of a gobbling tom turkey on its roost in the pre-dawn minutes of a spring morning? You don't; you can't. You must be there to understand. You also can't describe what it's like to be in that stand, waiting for the quarry to show, when you're by yourself in the woods with the bear.

The inability to describe the joy of hunting over bait is one of the reasons that Colorado voters went to the ballot boxes several years ago and outlawed spring hunting, and hunting over baits or with hounds. Most of those voters were treated by negative graphic TV ads concocted by animal rights groups to show hunting over bait at its very worst. Those ads appealed to the emotions of the viewers – and were successful in forming opinion. Many of those ads were shrewdly constructed, built with lies, innuendo, and hype.

Let me describe a couple hunts I've had over baits. The most recent was with outfitter Wally Mack, who owns W&L Guide Service out of High Level, Alberta (phone: 780/635-2230). Accommodations are comfortable tent camps, and all the other amenities were outstanding, including food, guides, and care of the bear pelts.

Wally's first hunt for me was what he described as an adventure, because the bait was two miles in the boonies, and accessed by ATVs over a nasty two-track. I



quickly realized just how nasty it was when the ATV was hopelessly mired in almost bottomless muck and the machine had to be winched out. While the guide winched, I walked, or tried to walk, in the black ooze.

When we reached the bait, we had barely turned off the ATV when a good-sized bear walked out of the woods and meandered with five yards of us. I was almost up in the stand, when my guide whistled to point out the bear. The guide was in the process of depositing bait in the barrel, but thought it a better idea to back off and climb up to my stand while we and the bear figured out what each of us was going to do.

We threw branches at the bear, and the bruin finally trudged off. The guide hastily finished his baiting chore, which amounted to hanging a beaver carcass high in a tree, and putting several pounds of cookies in the barrel. As soon as he drove away, the bear came back, and was quickly joined by two others, all of the same size.

For the rest of the afternoon I watched the bears, and through my binoculars I could see they were all boars, and large ones at that. I'm not great at judging bears, but an advantage of hunting over bait is being able to compare the bear with the barrel. If the top of the bear's back is higher than the second or highest ring on the barrel, it's a six foot three bear or thereabouts. If the bear is higher than the barrel, it's time to quit watching—you're gazing at a seven-footer and it's time to snick off the safety and shoot.

Presently a smaller bear came into view, and the boars suddenly lost interest in the bait. To my surprise, there was no aggression displayed among the boars. They just sauntered along behind the small bear, which I assumed was a sow. I was so enthralled with the bear antics that I didn't shoot, though each of the three boars were easily better than six feet. Later on I watched a boar mount and breed the sow.

When shooting light was over, I climbed down out of the stand and began walking down the trail where I'd meet up with my returning guide. I can tell you that when your feet hit the ground and you lose the safety buffer of being detached from the bears when you're in a tree—the world suddenly seems hostile. Yes, you're carrying a rifle, but the unknown is a touch unnerving, especially as you walk the same trails that the bears traveled on a half hour ago. This is one of the thrills of hunting in densely forested bear country where animals are highly active. You never know what's around the next corner.



ABOVE: Art Wheaton (left), Outfitter Ron Alexander and Jim Zumbo with two big bears taken over bait. **RIGHT:** John Fink of Remington with a good bear taken with a Remington 1100 and solid copper sabot slugs.

Another thrill when you hunt heavy timber is following up on the shot. The guide will likely do that, but it's nonetheless a sobering experience to know that somewhere in the brush is a bear you've shot at. You hope it's expired, but you don't know until it's located. If you're a bowhunter, the "thrill" is manifested many times over.

I saw plenty of other bears at Wally's, most of them from stands which were easier to get to. As it turned out, I still had an unfilled tag the last afternoon, and took the next bear I saw, which wasn't the jumbo I wanted, but nevertheless a nice Canadian bear. Each of the other six hunters in camp also took bears. As a bonus, Wally has a bait or two that is enjoyed by wolves practically every day. A number of hunters sit in those stands when they've taken their bear.

Ron Alexander (phone: 204/345-2820) is one of my all-time favorite outfitters. He runs a bear camp about an hour north of Winnipeg, Manitoba, and has a personality that takes some adjusting to, at least when you first get to know him. He comes on as a gruff guy, but soon mellows. Formerly a government hunter, Alexander took some 700 bears with the agency, and has seen several hundred more shot by clients.

He is a stickler for detail, and requires that you wear rubber boots to the



stand to eliminate odor, and to wear clothes that aren't noisy when you move. And if he catches you with insect repellent, he may scold you like a marine sergeant.

I've hunted with Ron four times, and only two of the 30 or so hunters I've met in camp did not get bears. Many times I saw a half dozen or more different bears at a bait in a single afternoon. Like Wally's stands, Ron's are sturdy and safe, easily accessible even by someone who has difficulty climbing.

Ron's accommodations are plush. You live in a large log lodge located next to the Bird River. Food is excellent, the music is great, and if you like to fish, the river is loaded with northerns and walleyes.

That brings to mind another reason why I like hunting bears over baits. It's usually a late afternoon hunt, which means you can sleep late, fish to your heart's content, and sit still the rest of the day. Hey, can it get any better than that? ■