

FIELD

Misjudging a brown bear is like getting skunked fishing — the only way it hasn't happened to you is if you haven't done it very much.

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JUDGING

By Brian Peterson

ALASKA BROWN BEARS THE NINTH IN A SERIES

Brown bears are notoriously difficult to judge. There are no points to count, tine lengths to consider, or bases to estimate. There is only a large, fat, hairy creature that can annually alter its body weight by up to 30 percent.

We've all heard the basics: long legs mean a small bear; short legs mean a big bear. If a bear walks with an easy gait, it's a small bear; if it waddles, it's a big bear. Big bears have big heads, while small bears have small heads. Small bears have short necks, while big bears have long necks. Small bears have big ears, while big bears have small ears. Add an inch to the width of a front pad and you have what the bear will square in feet.

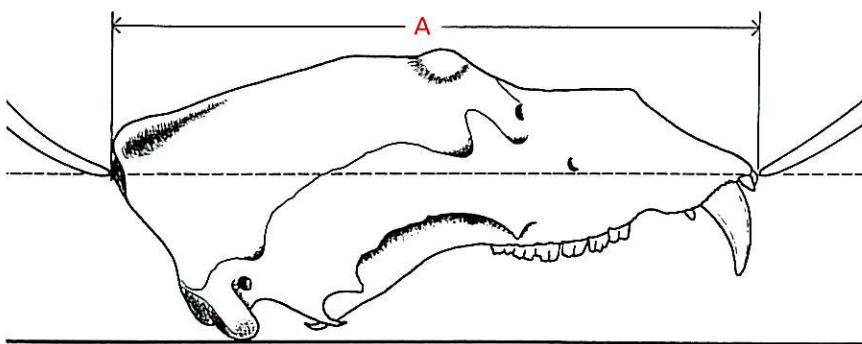
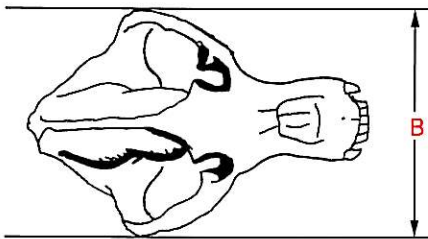
These generalizations work well as just that — generalizations. There are exceptions to all of them, and understanding what you're looking at is what's needed to get an accurate estimation of sex and age class of the animal you are viewing.

The long leg, short leg theory is one I've found to be the least accurate. At a recent sportsmen's banquet, there were two exceptional examples of very large bears. They were built completely different from each other. One was at least 55-inches tall with long legs and a relatively narrow body, while the other was closer to 42-inches tall with short legs and an extremely wide body. Both bears were fantastic trophies, yet one was built like a horse while the other was

built like a Volkswagen. So, I never trust the leg theory.

The way a bear walks can give you some insight into its size. Bears of all sizes can have an easy gait upon occasion, and all bears waddle, especially in the fall when they're so fat. Only mature male bears have square shoulders that you can distinguish while they're walking. Females have sloping shoulders, as do younger males. The pigeon-toed lumber of a big bear is almost serpentine and once seen is never forgotten.

The size of a bear's head is one of the consistent factors you can depend on, though not the way I usually hear it described. The fact is, big bears have small heads, and small bears have big heads. Not when compared with each other, but when compared to their body size. From a mile away, bear heads are about the same size. A



UNDERSTANDING A BEAR SKULL

- A – Greatest Length
- B – Greatest Width



Large male bears have wide set eyes and a broad base of the muzzle. Imaginary lines from the eye to the center of the nose will be at a significant angle.

FIELD JUDGING



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If you are referencing a bear's track for size, keep in mind that tracks made in mud or soft snow are usually much larger than those made in hard sand or gravel.

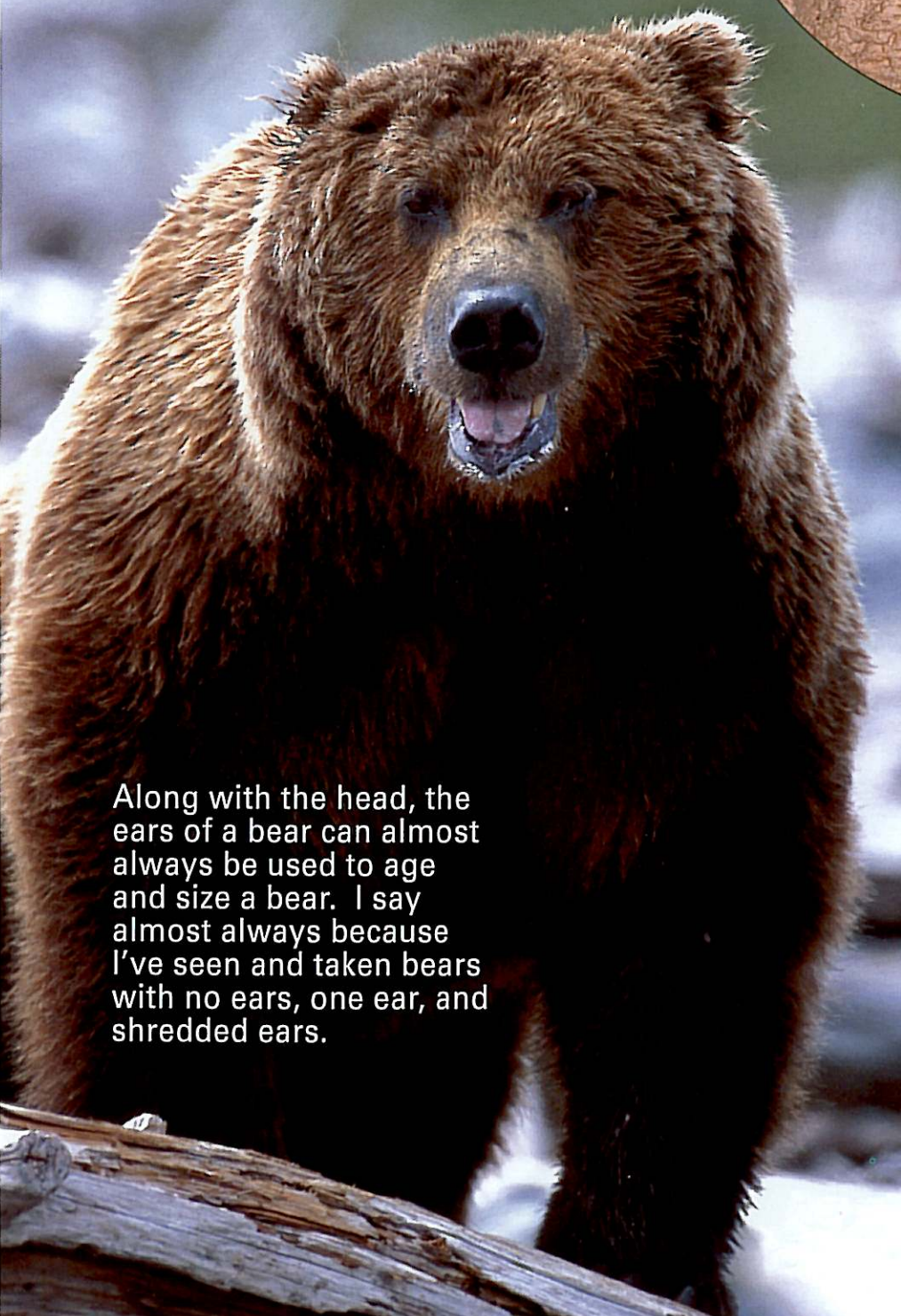
couple inches here and there is the difference between a 23" skull and a 29" skull while the body of the bear with the 29" skull can be three times the mass of the smaller bear. This makes a big bear's head small relative to its body size and a small bear's head big relative to its body size. A long neck and a pin head have always meant a very big bear in my experience. Also, big bears can feed well in front of their feet. Small bears can't.

Along with the head, the ears of a bear can almost always be used to age and size a bear. I say almost always because I've seen and taken bears with no ears, one ear, and shredded ears. Exceptions, yes, but it does occur.

A bear's ears start out on the top of its head and stay the same size throughout its life. As the bear ages, the skull widens and the ears work their way to the sides of the head. The head's increased size makes the ears appear smaller and smaller relative to the head, as the bear ages. Small ears low on the head indicates a very old bear.

One caution on determining ear size is that well furred bears in the spring can have long enough hair on their head to make their ears all but disappear. Be sure to note the location on the head.

In some situations, you may be lucky enough to find the tracks of the bear you are after. This takes all the guesswork out of sizing the bear. One way to determine an accurate estimate of the size a bear will square is to add an inch to the width of its front pad to give you the meas-



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urement in feet. For example, an 8 1/2-inch track will be made from a 9 1/2-foot bear.

An even more accurate measurement that I've used the last few years is the length of the back pad. The length of the back pad in inches will give you the square in feet. Example: A track with a 9 3/4-inch back pad was made by a 9-foot 9-inch bear.

Be sure the tracks you measure to estimate size are from a quality medium. Tracks in mud or soft snow are usually much larger than those made in hard sand or gravel.

When looking for a trophy bear, the most distinguishing feature I use is the face. A bear's face will accurately tell you if you're looking at an exceptional trophy every time. Large male bears have wide set eyes and a broad base of the muzzle. Imaginary lines from the eye to the center of the nose will be at a significant angle. Younger bears' and sows' eyes will be narrower, and the angle of the line from the eye to the nose will be small.

An excellent comparison that most people can relate to is a Labrador Retriever. Big male labs have broad heads and wide set eyes. Female labs and younger males have narrower muzzles. Bears are very much the same. Large old males are easy to distinguish this way.

The difficulty is in determining medium sized and aged boars from old sows. These are, in my opinion, the two most difficult types of bears to tell apart, and I don't know of anyone who can do it consistently. Characteristics are very similar, and the boars are not a lot bigger than the sows. A 3" difference in height with a 3" difference in width will make a 9" change in the paw to paw measurement.

Unfortunately, bear trophies are recorded by skull size. I realize there is no choice, but I also realize skull size and a bear's age and size do not always correlate well. I've seen 9-foot 2-inch bears with 28 2/8-inch skulls and 8 1/2-year-old 8-foot 11-inch bears with 23 6/8-inch skulls. The two biggest bodied bears I've seen had 26 4/8-inch and 27 4/8-inch skulls. Be aware when harvesting a large male bear, there are no guarantees on its skull size. Anyone who says they can judge a bear's skull size is either drunk or having delusions of grandeur.

Alaska presently has more brown bears than ever in recorded history. The Kodiak Island brown bear population alone has increased from 1,200 in 1972 to around 3,100 and growing today. Right now are the "good ol' days" of brown bear hunting in Alaska. Your odds of finding a long-necked, white clawed, lumbering ol' wedge-head are better than ever. ■

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