

# Destina

## Big Black Bears

By **Wayne van Zwoll**  
B&C Professional Member

He'd seen 14 bears. "And that's in two days!" Bob Shuttleworth told his cousin Victor. "We can't afford to waste time on blacktails."

So the third weekend of California's 1994 deer season, Shuttleworth went bear hunting instead, setting up a tent camp Friday afternoon on a Mendocino County ranch near the Yollo Bolly Wilderness. Shuttleworth belonged to a hunting club that had leased this property; it lay just four hours drive from his home. The 26-year-old archer had already taken one bear with his 70-pound compound.

Predictably, September had delivered warm days that suppressed animal movements. Shuttleworth knew he'd have to make good use of sunrise and sunset. So before light the next morning, he and Victor (who was not hunting) drove 45 minutes from their camp on ranch roads to reach the base of a rugged hill. They hiked up a fire trail winding through thick manzanita as dawn brightened the sky.



**Top 5 Black Bear Locations  
From 2004-2007**

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# Destination:

## Big Black Bears

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## WISCONSIN'S TOP 5 COUNTIES

Bayfield County has produced more trophies over the long-term, but has been replaced by Marinette County in the past three years as the top trophy producing county.

Suddenly, a bear appeared on the trail, not 30 yards in front of them. Shuttleworth was taken by surprise, and before he could nock an arrow, the animal slipped off into the brush. The two men resumed their climb, ascending into a bowl of scattered oaks and pines. Clothed in full camo, Shuttleworth and Victor chose natural east-facing hides and pebbles' toss apart. In front of them, a long shallow draw fissured the hill. After listening for a time after settling in, Shuttleworth put his predator call into action, squalling like an injured jackrabbit.

"We hadn't waited five minutes before a big, dark-brown bear showed up across the draw, maybe a quarter mile down-slope. As I watched it through my 10x50 binocular, another bear popped into view above us. The two were on a collision course."

But the fight Shuttleworth and Victor expected didn't happen.

At 120 yards, both bears were still well beyond arrow range. So Shuttleworth decided to call again. As he put the reed to his lips, a third bear crashed off through the manzanita directly behind the hunters. "Victor was a little shaken by that," Shuttleworth remembered. "I guess I was too!"

The wind that had compromised their chance at that bear held steady as the first bruin responded now to Shuttleworth's call. "I squealed again, gently, shielding the call by turning away from the bear so the sound would seem farther off. Then I focused on the bear as he made a beeline for us from across the draw. No telling where the second animal went—but it was just as big!"

The bear stopped just shy of the hidden archer, as if to listen for that rabbit. "He was quartering slightly away—a perfect angle," recalled Shuttleworth. "I put the 20-yard pin behind his shoulder, then released." The young carpenter saw his XX75 shaft bury almost to the fletching. "That bear came unglued, spinning to snap at the arrow. Then he charged downhill and was gone."

Shaking, Shuttleworth and Victor forced themselves to wait a full hour before taking the trail. They found plenty of blood and the broken rear of the shaft. The spoor led them to a patch of manzanita. "We stopped then, hesitant to follow

in that jungle. But after awhile, I circled and picked up the trail beyond the brush." The men encountered more brush before finding the bear dead. Shuttleworth's 125-grain Thunderhead was lodged in the off shoulder. Finding blood beyond the bear, Shuttleworth surmised that it had hooked, then died watching its back-trail. He and Victor skinned the bear, then headed down to fetch packs from the pickup.

Bob estimated the live weight of his bear at "about 450 pounds." That's big for a California black bear. "All its canines were broken off or severely worn," he said. "We later found out this boar was 18 years old." But the biggest surprise was the animal's skull. It measured 23-3/16 inches, the third largest black bear on record! Number One in the Boone and Crockett Club's records list was picked up, and the skull of the runner-up is owned by the Pennsylvania Game Commission. "We had no idea the bear would rank that high until my taxidermist scored it," Shuttleworth insisted. "We ate all the meat—though the sausage turned out better than the steaks."

The lease on that Mendocino County ranch was terminated soon after Bob Shuttleworth took his trophy. "Other hunters have called extensively in that area," he reported not long ago, "and the bears have become call shy." Shuttleworth has bowhunted a lot since then, but never again for bear.

Finding a big black bear is not an easy route to a place in B&C records lists. For one thing, a big bear skull is hard to identify as such until the bear gives it up. As with other bears and the big cats, body size and weight are no sure predictors of skull size. The heaviest Alaska brown bears have not hailed from Kodiak Island. Nor have Kodiak's bears topped the charts in squared hide measure (tip-to-tip across front legs, plus nose-to-tail, divided by two). But the Island has produced many brown bears with records-book skulls. Genetic tendencies often trump age and diet in determining skull score.

## GUNS FOR BLACK BEARS

When I was a lad, deer rifles were also black bear rifles. The .30-30 ruled eastern woodlots where rifles were legal, though it was often whispered that the .35 had an edge for bears. I shot my first bruin with a .303 British, an iron-sighted rifle for which I paid \$30. Now most hunters carry more potent rifles. Scopes have replaced open sights. It's not much of a stretch to say any common deer rifle will dispatch black bears. Ditto for shot-guns hurling 20- or 12-gauge slugs.



**ABOVE: You don't need a new rifle or a potent one for black bears. This old M99 in .303 Savage suffices. RIGHT: Black bears like thick cover, and can slip through brush that effectively stops hunters.**



The notion that bears are tougher than whitetails has some basis in fact; however, bears that run off "lung-shot" are seldom shot in the lungs. A bear's vitals don't lie in the same place as a deer's, and that long dark hair effectively hides a bear's body profile. It also absorbs blood, keeping it from marking the animal's trail. Fat can plug bullet holes in bears shot after fattening in the fall. And the soft pad of a bear's foot barely disturbs forest litter. Simply put, you can't follow a hit bear as easily as you can a deer. In thick cover, you can lose a bear that travels only a few yards after a fatal hit.

More important than powerful rifles or bows (a fellow I knew in my youth routinely killed bears with a 38-pound recurve) are deep-driving bullets and sharp broadheads. Trumping both is perfect shot placement.

## PENNSYLVANIA'S TOP 5 COUNTIES

When you narrow the search down to the last three years, only Tioga and Lycoming remain in the top 5.



On the other hand, a bear that looks to have a disproportionately big head is almost surely a small bear with an unremarkable skull. When you spot a black bear, look at the legs and the ears. Both should appear short. Long-legged bears are usually juveniles who, like high school boys, have yet to grow into their limbs. The ears

of young bears typically show prominently and, in my experience, seem located more to the top of the skull than to its sides. The ears of old bears often show signs of battle; almost always they appear small in relation to the head, and commonly low on the skull.

A broad head with a relatively short nose deserves a closer look. So does a bear whose head seems small in relation to its torso. Body size can be hard to judge without an environmental yardstick. If you spot a bear in a uniform stand of lodgepoles, tree diameter and branch location can help you. Grass height in a meadow works too. A bear on a skid trail can be compared quickly with the span of cleat or tire tracks.

Still-hunting for bears in the fall can bring results, especially where bears find berries, carrion.

# Destination: Big Black Bears

# Destination

Outfitters who use cut-out oil drums as bait stations often paint the three rings different colors to help clients judge the size of visiting bears. For example, a bruin whose withers barely reach the top of the yellow middle band of an upright drum might qualify as average, while any bear whose back obscures part of the top red band is trophy-class.

Old bears move with a rocking, rolling gait. A quick, springy step tells you the bear is young. As with many animals, male black bears are, on average, bigger than the females. The shoulders of a male are heavier and appear more prominent than those of a female. The difference is easiest to see in side-by-side comparisons. But movement

can also help. A bear turning over logs or scratching about for mast or insects flexes its shoulder muscles. A noticeable hump, and, from the front, a broad or bow-legged profile indicate a mature boar.

Body weight fluctuates seasonally. A bear of average size fattened on fall acorns will look bigger than a bear with a bigger frame just out of hibernation. The long hair of bears ready for winter can make them appear bigger than they'd seem in late spring, with rubbed coats.

One thing you can always use to advantage in a quest for a big bear skull

is the Boone and Crockett records books. Another is the Club's web site—specifically, the Trophy Search® option. For \$50 (\$40 for Associates), the price of an All-time records book, you have on-line, up-to-the-minute access to all of the Club's trophy data. It tells you where the biggest bears (and deer, elk, etc.) have been shot, so you can hunt where your odds of seeing big bears are highest.

What you can see by reviewing the comparison for all-time entries and 2004-2007 data is that, while many areas are consistent producers, numbers of big



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# HUNTING BLACK BEARS

Few animals can be hunted in as many ways as the black bear. With a range as broad and tall as the United States, it inhabits mountains and swamps, forests and farm fringes—even tundra.



**LEFT:** Try to stay hidden during an approach. Bears are more alert and see better than you might think!

**BELOW LEFT:** Many black bears have been shot by deer hunters from tree stands in Eastern hardwoods. **BELOW:** In the Mountain West, black bears can be hunted like elk during fall seasons.



TOP 10 BLACK BEAR STATES ALL TIME	
LOCATION	NUMBER OF ENTRIES
Wisconsin	301
Pennsylvania	188
Alaska	168
Saskatchewan	159
Arizona*	107
Manitoba	106
California*	105
Minnesota	100
Alberta	92
Colorado*	82

\*Drop of the current Top Ten List

Baiting is a common ploy, though not everywhere legal. It is probably your best bet for seeing lots of bears, and for identifying truly big bears before you shoot. Still-hunters and organized drives account for black bears in whitetail seasons, as do hunters posted in tree-stands. In the South, hunters run bears with hounds. I once tracked down a black bear in snow. You can even bring these animals to predator calls. Spring hunts let you focus on bears without other hunting traffic disrupting your efforts.

Whatever the method or season, mind the wind, as bears have keen noses. They hear exceedingly well too. And while their eyesight is probably sub-par compared to other big game, it's sharp enough to spot careless movement. Bears can be active at all times in the day, though I've seen most at dawn and dusk. One fed on an elk whose trail I had to abandon at dark. The elk had succumbed to my shot, and the bear found it before I did. As luck would have it, I spotted the bear on the kill the next morning, and approached cautiously with an

arrow at the ready. Alas, I muffed the shot and the bear scampered off. At the carcass, I found the din caused by a swarm of yellow-jackets so deafening that I could have walked right up to the bear from behind!

Black bears inhabit country that can be daunting to hunters, such as the Alaskan swamp shown in the background.

TOP 10 BLACK BEAR STATES 2004-2007	
LOCATION	NUMBER OF ENTRIES
Wisconsin	72
Pennsylvania	47
Alaska	37
Saskatchewan	27
Manitoba	19
Michigan*	17
Alberta	15
Minnesota	14
North Carolina*	14
Ontario*	13

\* New to the Top Ten List

bears can change with changes in habitat and hunting. Arizona, traditionally a top bear state, doesn't appear at all on the latest roster. Michigan, which always had plenty of bears, has suddenly jumped up the bear-state list of trophy-class animals. Ontario and North Carolina have also figured more prominently, while Colorado has dropped off the top 10 list.

If you're focused on getting not only a "book bear" but one near the top of the ladder, you'll want to draw other data from the on-line Trophy Search, such as how many entries each of the top states have contributed to the top 30 – Pennsylvania (13), Wisconsin (6), Arizona (2), Alaska (2), Saskatchewan (2), and California (2).

Limit that search to the last three years, and you'll find eight entries from Pennsylvania, including the top three taken from 2004 to 2007. Wisconsin produced five records-book bears during that period, and North Carolina two. It's pretty clear that Wisconsin and Pennsylvania remain as top bets for big bears—but that North Carolina might be your best option. The latter is not only putting more bears on records lists than before, but bigger bears. It may also have fewer hunters killing bears than does either Pennsylvania or Wisconsin. Hunting for big bears—like seeking outsize deer or elk—you're sometimes better off looking where animal numbers and hunting pressure are modest.

Want to narrow the search even more? Trophy Search helps you determine the most productive counties for book-class black bears. Following are those counties, and all-time entries, from the top two states (see maps): Wisconsin Counties – Bayfield (27), Price (26), Sawyer (20), Rusk (19), and Marinette (18); Pennsylvania Counties – Lycoming (15), Pike (13), Clinton (11), McKean, (11), and Tioga (11).

To update the numbers (at the cost of sample size) you might again limit the data to 2004-2007.

You'll find Wisconsin's Marinette County has replaced Bayfield at the top spot, with 10 entries. Bayfield and Price show seven apiece. In Pennsylvania, Tioga County yielded eight book bears during the last three years. Indiana, Jefferson, Lycoming, Monroe and Sullivan delivered three entries each.

My biggest black bear came from the Alaskan coast one evening, when the seas had lain down for the skiff. Mark and I motored into the ocean, then arced around the reefs toward a stream outlet. We idled into the forest until the stream got shallow, then tied up with a long line to a rock. Alaska's

# Destination

coastal waters can rise and fall 20 feet in six-hour tidal swings, so a careless mooring can leave your boat beached or adrift!

Donning packs, we followed bear trails through tidal grass, then sat beneath a giant Sitka spruce at the edge of a meadow. Minutes later a shadow brushed an alder branch just 30 yards away. I thumbed the Marlin's hammer, but an errant breeze warned the bear before it stepped clear.

The sun sank low. Then Mark tugged my sleeve. Across the creek, 200 yards off, a couple of bears had slipped from the timber.

"Male and female," he whispered. The boar loafed through the grass with that rolling gait of heavy animals grown old. His belly swung; his head, broad and short, bore tiny ears. We got across the stream without a splash. I led through the meadow on hands and knees.

Suddenly, the wind swung to the south, to our backs. "It's over," hissed Mark.

The sow had already melted into the trees. The boar paused to look our way. Rising to clear the long grass, I centered his elbow in the 2 1/2x Leupold and fired. The 170-grain bullet struck audibly, and the bear plunged into the forest, swinging his near shoulder wide.

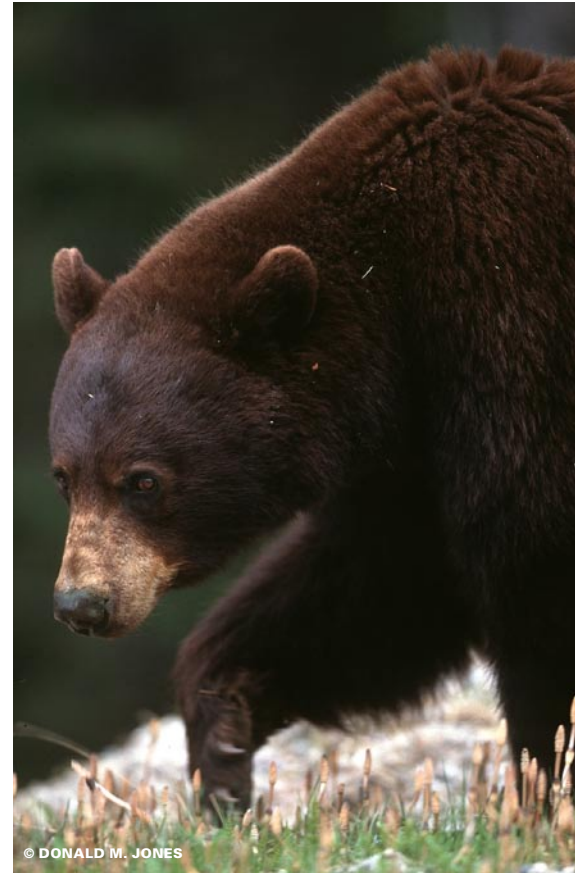
We found no blood for 30 long steps; then it painted a clear trail. We padded through thick, dark-green foliage and gray deadfalls with rusted leaves. Sundown had brought shadows as black as any bear, and I found myself clutching the Marlin. Suddenly, almost close enough to touch, the bear moved. I fired.

"A seven-footer!" Mark said, grinning. And, he admitted with my prompting, a credit to the .30-30.

We would find the skull short of Boone and Crockett minimums. But a big skull is only one measure of a hunt.

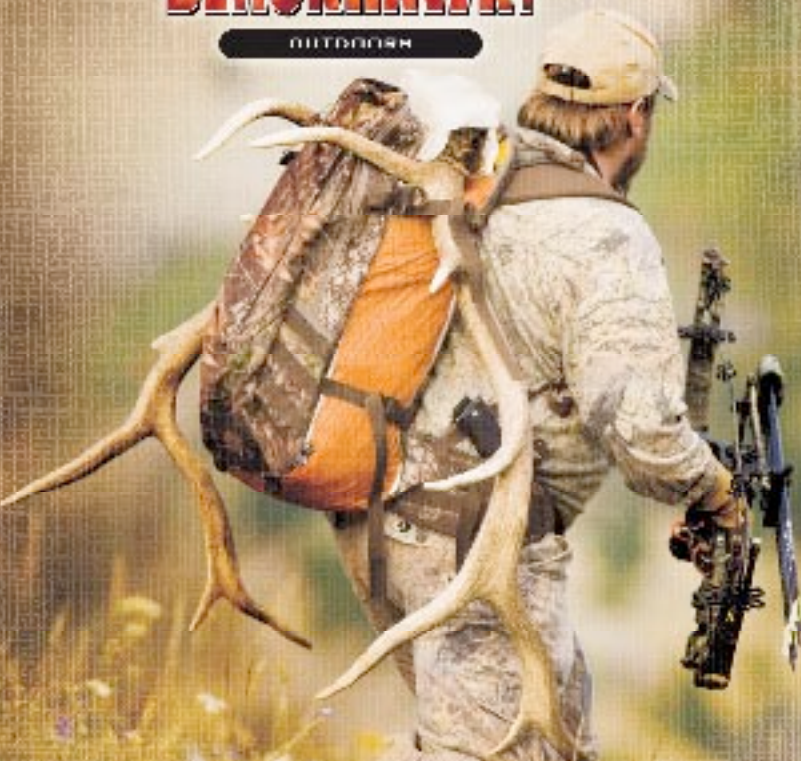
Putting a black bear in the B&C records book remains a tough assignment, despite healthy bear populations in most of the animal's range. Unlike antlered game, bears wear their scorable bone where you can't see it until after the shot. Maybe that's why weight and squared hide measure have remained popular in rankings. Of course, neither can be re-verified. So the quest for a book-class black bear remains a hunt for something you cannot see. ■

**Unlike antlered game, bears wear their scorable bone where you can't see it until after the shot**



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