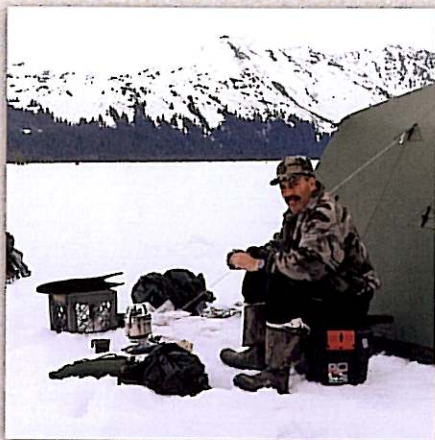


An Alaska Brown Bear Hunt I'll Never Forget

By Thomas M. Baker
B&C Lifetime Associate

After receiving word that a fresh moose kill had been spotted, the group decided to move. Here, the author enjoys a lunch break at their second camp.



The auctioneer said "SOLD!" and I could not believe I bought this hunt. The Southern Kentucky Chapter of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation was having their annual fund-raising banquet in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and as usual, my friends and I were there buying things our wives probably thought we didn't need. However, we were having a great time and it was for a great cause.

One of our RMEF committee members, Joe Seagle, had hunted several times with Sam Fejes of Fejes Guide Service, Limited from Anchorage, Alaska, and on two different trips had taken magnificent brown bears with Sam. He had called Sam several weeks before our banquet and asked him to donate a black bear hunt to our chapter for a fund-raising auction, and Sam agreed. I had already hunted

black bears for several years in Canada and was more interested in a big brown bear. Joe assured me that I could upgrade my hunt from a black bear hunt to a combination hunt, and all it would take was a lot more money!

Sam hunts both on Kodiak Island and south of Cordova on Alaska's southeastern coast in his Tsiu River Camp. I called Sam the day after the banquet and told him I had bought the hunt and he quickly agreed that I could upgrade to a brown bear/black bear combination. We agreed that I would hunt from his Tsiu River base camp the following spring season and we set the dates for May 1 through May 10, 1999. Waiting in anticipation for all those months was about all I could stand.

The year slowly rolled around to the following spring. The middle of April finally arrived, but it looked like Mother Nature was not going to be very kind to us. The southeast coast of Alaska had received record snows that winter and spring, and there were still tre-

SPECIES: Alaska brown bear
HUNT DATE: May 1 through May 10, 1999
OUTFITTER: Sam Fejes, Fejes Guide Service, Limited
PO Box 111394
Anchorage, AK 99511-1394
(907) 349-4040

LOCATION: Cordova, Alaska – Tsiu River Camp

GUIDE: Doug Powers

PACKER: Chris Pacurari

WEAPON: .375 H&H Magnum
Winchester Model 70 Left-handed
Custom made by Rifles, Inc.
Cedar City, Utah

AMMUNITION: Federal Premium Safari
300 Grain Trophy Bonded Bear Claw

TROPHY DETAILS: Alaska brown bear
Squared – 9 feet 7 inches
Skull – 26 inches (unofficial)

The wind had blown the top of the ridge in to a snow cornice, and we were standing on the very edge of it!

mendous amounts of snow on the ground when the first of May arrived. Conditions were terrible everywhere, and the week before I was scheduled to arrive several people were killed in an avalanche just outside of Anchorage.

I arrived in Cordova, and there was snow everywhere! The bush pilot picked me up at the airstrip and said the conditions were no better in base camp. Well, it was too late to quit now, so we headed to camp. The flight to the base camp was awesome! I had hunted Alaska several times before, but the vastness and beauty of this great country never ceases to amaze me. As we flew over the glaciers and frozen streams and rivers, I began to wonder if I had worked hard enough to get into shape for this trip.

Before I knew it, we were in base camp. The guides quickly met us at the plane, and all introductions were made. We decided the best thing to do was check our rifles and make sure nothing had happened to my scope adjustments during the flight. I was shooting a custom made .375 H&H Magnum built on a Winchester Model 70 action from Lex Webernich at Rifles, Inc., Cedar City,

Utah. Lex had built the gun to shoot Federal Premium Safari 300 grain Trophy Bonded Bear Claws, and the gun was still shooting perfectly.

After sighting in, we had some lunch, and it was time for hunters and guides to go to their spike camps. I was hunting with Doug Powers, who had been working with Sam for the last nine years. Doug and I quickly hit it off. He found my southern Kentucky country accent quite amusing, and I knew his quick wit would keep the hunting interesting all week. The Super Cub took us back into the bush one at a time, and after I arrived, I could still not believe the tremendous amounts of snow! When I had left Kentucky a friend told me that "he would live vicariously through me as I stalked big brown bears on those sandy gravel bars." If there was a gravel bar out there somewhere, I sure couldn't see it because it was under ten feet of snow! Even though I had hunted Alaska several times before, it had always been in the fall season and never had I seen conditions like this. Doug quickly got me in some snowshoes and we built spike camp.

Doug had hunted this same area several times in previous years and said we had a good chance for both black bears and brown bears. We were camped in a big valley located between two mountain ranges, and it sure looked like a great spot to me. We hunted hard for the next several days but did not have much luck. The weather was clear, but because of the extreme snow conditions, there just didn't seem to be anything moving.

Sam flew in a couple of days later and checked on us. We decided to move spike camp that afternoon to a different area where a fresh moose kill had been spotted. The next morning we walked a couple of miles over very rugged terrain from the spike camp to the moose kill.

We had been gone for several hours when we came upon a fast moving glacier stream. It was starting to get warmer and some of this snow

was beginning to melt. I looked at Doug and casually asked him if he was going to

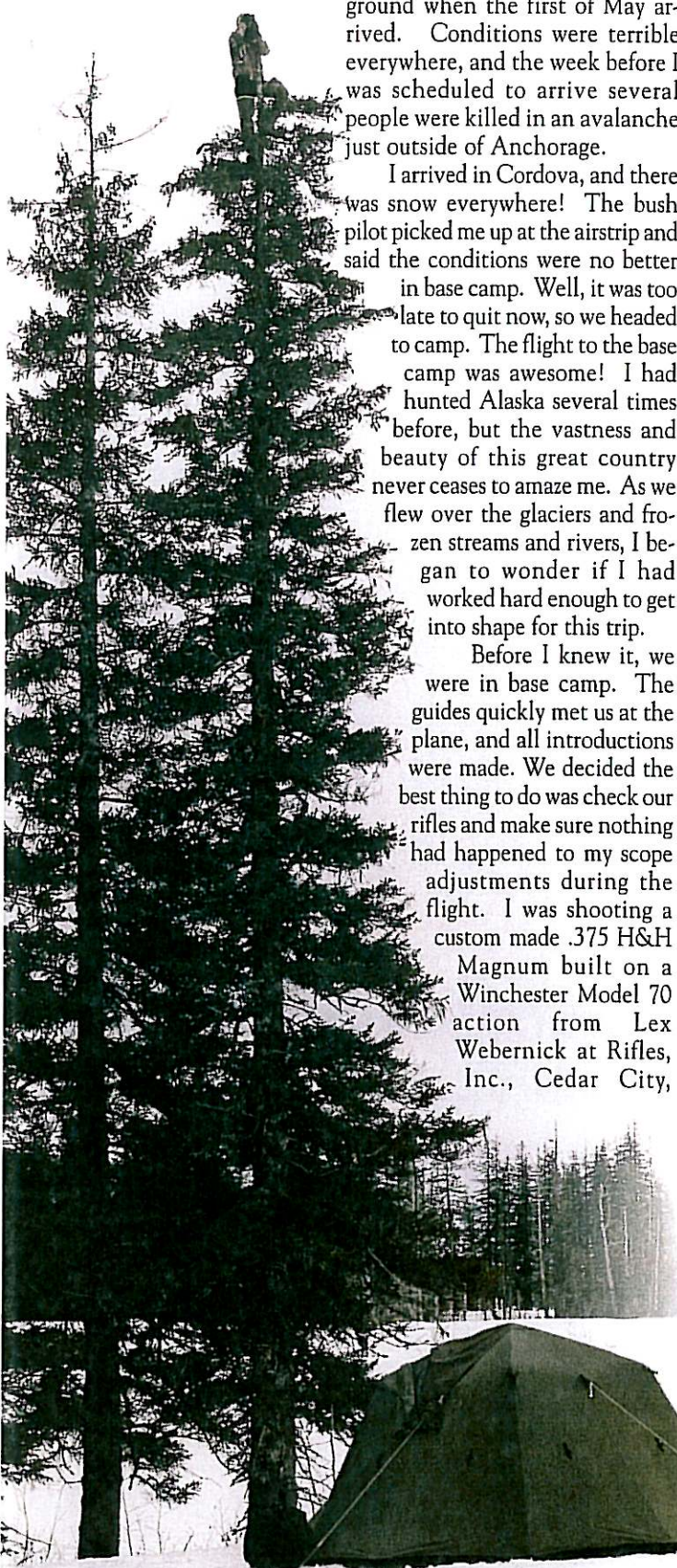
sprout wings and fly over this minor obstacle. As usual, he smiled and led on. We went for several hundred yards and found a "snow bridge" we thought we could cross. Doug went first and had just about made it across, when suddenly the snow caved in and he was in water up to his chest! Fortunately, he was near the stream bank on the far side, and managed to grab hold and pull himself out of the water.

Now things were getting interesting. He was on one side of the stream, soaking wet, and I was on the other side with no good way to get across. I went upstream until I found a section that appeared to be narrower (but it sure looked deeper!). There was no snow bridge, but it had an ice floe under the water about six inches. I decided it was as good as it was going to get, and I crossed the stream on the ice floe at that point. After getting back down to where Doug was trying to get himself dried out, I was trying to decide who was wetter — Doug from falling in the water or me from the nervous sweat!

Luckily, Doug had a change of clothes in his day pack, and except for his boots, he was in pretty good shape. We made it to where the moose kill had been spotted, but it was not as fresh as thought. We sat there most of the day and used our field glasses to watch the rest of the valley. Our luck was the same. Nothing was moving.

The next day we stayed a little closer to camp, and glassed most of the morning. Then Doug amazed me again. There were some very tall trees close to spike camp, and he proceeded to climb to the very top of the tallest tree. As he stood on the top branches, the upper part of his body was about three feet past the top of the tree, and he was holding on to the crown with his knees! After over an hour of glassing, he finally came down. Even after all that, Doug spotted no bears.

By now, we had spent six complete days in the field, and had not seen a bear. Sam flew into spike camp that evening and told us that another bush pilot had seen a huge brown bear on a kill about 25 miles from where we were camped. We decided to return to base camp that night, get something other than



My guide, Doug Powers, completely amazed me. He actually climbed to the very top of this tree, held the crown of the tree between his knees and stood on the very top branches!

freeze-dried food to eat, and make a plan for the last few remaining days of the hunt. At base camp, I called home on the satellite phone and found out that my 11 year-old son had broken his leg in three places playing baseball the week before, just after we first went into spike camp. My wife convinced me that I should stay and finish the hunt, as there was nothing that I could do by coming home early. My son was already in a cast, and he just needed time to heal.

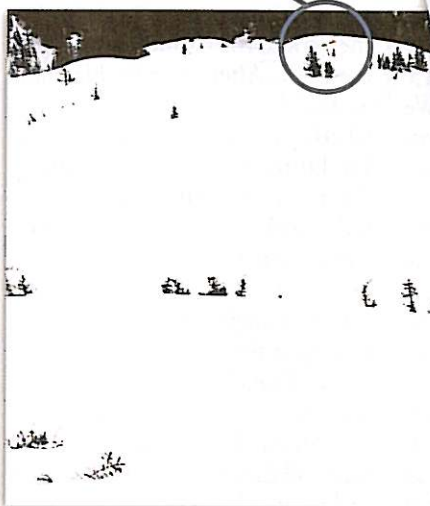
Sam, Doug, and I sat down and decided we would chart a course to the place the huge brown bear had been spotted. After several hours of discussion and looking at topographical maps, we made a plan. This time we were going into the mountains instead of the valleys. The next morning, Sam dropped us off about three miles away from the Ragged Mountain range. We climbed for several hours that afternoon and decided that evening to stop and set up a spike camp. We were still several thousand feet from the top, but the snow was pretty soft, and even in snowshoes, we were sinking pretty deeply in the snow. Using an avalanche shovel, we dug out a flat spot in the snow on the side of a very steep hill and made camp there that night. This time Chris Pacurari, another of Sam's camp helpers, was with us to help lighten our load. I was really glad he was there as he was 20 years younger than I was, and used to climbing around in this stuff. I wasn't!

The next morning we broke spike camp very early and, thankfully, the temperature had dropped during the night. The snow on top had frozen into a hard crust and even though we were still in snowshoes, at least it was easier to walk on top of the snow. Several hours later we were on top of the first ridge of mountains. We headed in the direction the bear had been seen several days earlier, and found a high spot where we could see into a large bowl-shaped valley. By the time we reached the top, we realized the precariousness of our position. The wind had blown the top of the ridge into a snow cornice, sort of like the leading edge of a huge crest of a frozen wave and we were standing on the very edge of

it! Using our binoculars we spotted a brown spot in the snow quite a ways off, underneath an overhanging snow cornice. We headed in that direction to get a better look.

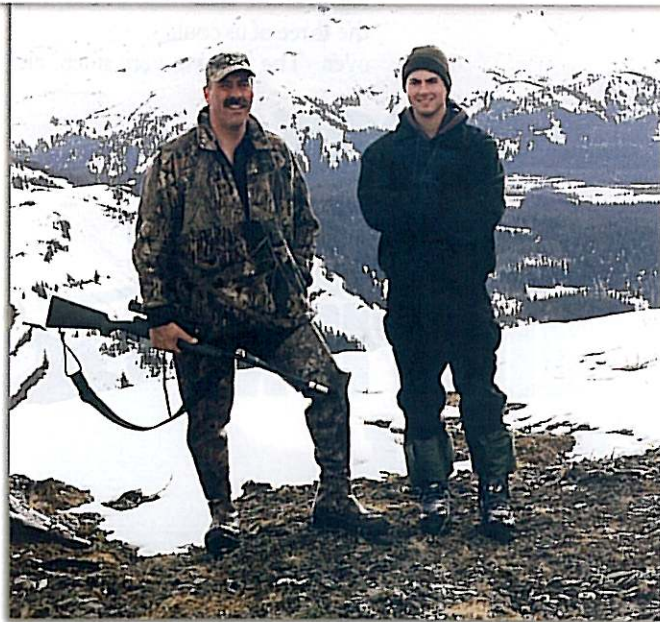
After hiking a half-hour or so, Doug and I decided to crawl to the edge for a closer look. The biggest brown bear I had ever seen was lying about 500 yards up the slope. We went a little further to where we thought the bear would be

THE TENTS AT CAMP 3



and crawled again to the edge. Doug asked me if I could see the bear, and I could not find him! He whispered to me, "Get right out on the edge and you will be almost straight above him!" I followed his instructions. Right below me, less than 100 yards away, was a huge brown bear! He was lying on top of another 9' brown bear he had killed, and was feasting on the carcass! Now all I had to do was shoot almost straight down while lying on top of this frozen snow that we both knew was going to collapse at any moment. Doug and I were convinced that the muzzle blast from that .375 was going to start an avalanche, and even if the falling snow didn't kill us, we would end up in the lap of this huge, hungry brown bear!

I did not adjust well for the steep angle and missed the bear with my first shot. The second shot was true and he was hit hard. The bear started to get up to run but the snowy slope was so steep he just started rolling. He did not appear to be moving under his own power;



TOP: We found the bear we had been stalking lying on top of this 9 foot brown bear that he had killed and was eating!

MIDDLE: The author climbing far above the third camp. Fortunately, the snow had frozen into a hard crust making it easier to walk.

BOTTOM: Both, the packer, Chris Pacurari, and the author, knew they had accomplished a great adventure that few would ever experience.

he was just sliding downhill. I gave him a few more shots just for insurance. Finally, he appeared down for good. When we crawled back from the edge, I was amazed that the cornice had not collapsed from the force of the shots from that big .375!

In order to reach the bear, we followed the top of the ridge. After going only a short distance, we found the tracks that one of the bears had made earlier that week. From the tracks we determined that a bear had come over the top of the mountain, walked out and stood on the edge of the cornice. When he did, the snow collapsed under his weight and the bear fell. The snow cornice broke off, leaving a sheer, 15' that the bear could not climb. We went over the cornice, kicking footholds in the snow to make a "ladder" to get down.

By this time, it was well into the morning and the sun was shining brightly. The hard crust was beginning to melt and we now were on the steep slope where we had shot the bear. Doug was extremely worried that the overhanging snow was going to fall, and we would be directly in its path. The bear was so big, and the snow was so soft, that the three of us could not even roll it over. The hill was very steep, and

we were afraid the bear might start sliding downhill again if we moved him too much. We finally decided to take our avalanche shovel and dig a huge pit in the snow. The digging was easy because of all the snow, and we quickly had a large area excavated. We removed the snow from underneath the bear and were finally able to roll him back into the pit. Once we finally got him in the pit, we felt assured that this great trophy was not going to slide off the side of that hill.

We shot several rolls of film of my bear and even took some pictures of the remains of the other bear. We then got to the business of skinning the bear. After considerable effort we had the hide off and stuffed into Chris's pack. It took both Doug and I to lift the pack onto Chris's back. We both knew that the wet bear hide weighed more than Chris did! Chris started back up the ridge toward camp. What a struggle! With the great weight on his back, he was sinking in the snow with every step. He was literally crawling to get over the ridge.

Meanwhile, Doug and I had taken all the gear out of Chris's pack and put it in Doug's, along with both of the bear skulls. It is amazing how

much gear you can get on a pack frame when you have to. At this point, instead of being loaded *for* bear, I guess you could say we were loaded *with* bear. As we headed back down the ridge, we knew we had experienced a great adventure that few would ever know. In camp that night, Doug told me that in his nine years of being a brown bear guide, he had never been on a more dangerous hunt. "We were never that close to the bear," he said, "but hanging over that snow cornice and to live to tell about it is about the hairiest thing I have ever done." I knew one thing for sure, I was really glad we didn't have to try it again tomorrow!

The next morning Sam flew in bright and early. The weather had been getting warmer all week, and we were worried the snow was too soft, and the plane might sink past its skis in the snow. Luck was with us, and we made it back to base camp that last day.

Today the bear is a standing life-size mount in my trophy room, and it is a constant reminder of the greatest adventure I have ever experienced. My friends and family truly enjoy seeing this magnificent creature. If they only knew the ordeal we experienced, they would appreciate it even more! ▲▲▲

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