

The Self-Guided Hunter...

STALKING Spring Black Bears

Sixth in a series...

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My introduction to spring bear hunting came in the early 1970s when a veterinary student at Washington State University named Tony suggested that we buy Idaho bear tags and plan to hunt bears in Idaho's Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Area. He assured me that he had friends who had been successful in this endeavor and that we had a reasonable opportunity to bag a black bear. Tony was the type of individual who exuded an air of confidence and spoke with authority on whatever the subject happened to be. He was also more fixated upon the Boone and Crockett scoring system than anyone I had ever known.

He spoke as if he had spring bear hunting down pat. So, not knowing much about black bears and even less about hunting them in the spring, I went along with his plan for a trek up the Lochsa River the last weekend in April. Tony told me he had determined the last weekend in April was the earliest time that we would likely see black bears as they foraged for food just below the snow line along the Lochsa River. So with a great deal of anticipation and enthusiasm I agreed to make the hunt with him.

Tony was eager to get on with the hunt. He skipped his classes on Friday in order to get up the Lochsa, some 150 miles from the Pullman, Washington campus, in time for the evening hunt. I agreed to join him later on Friday night.

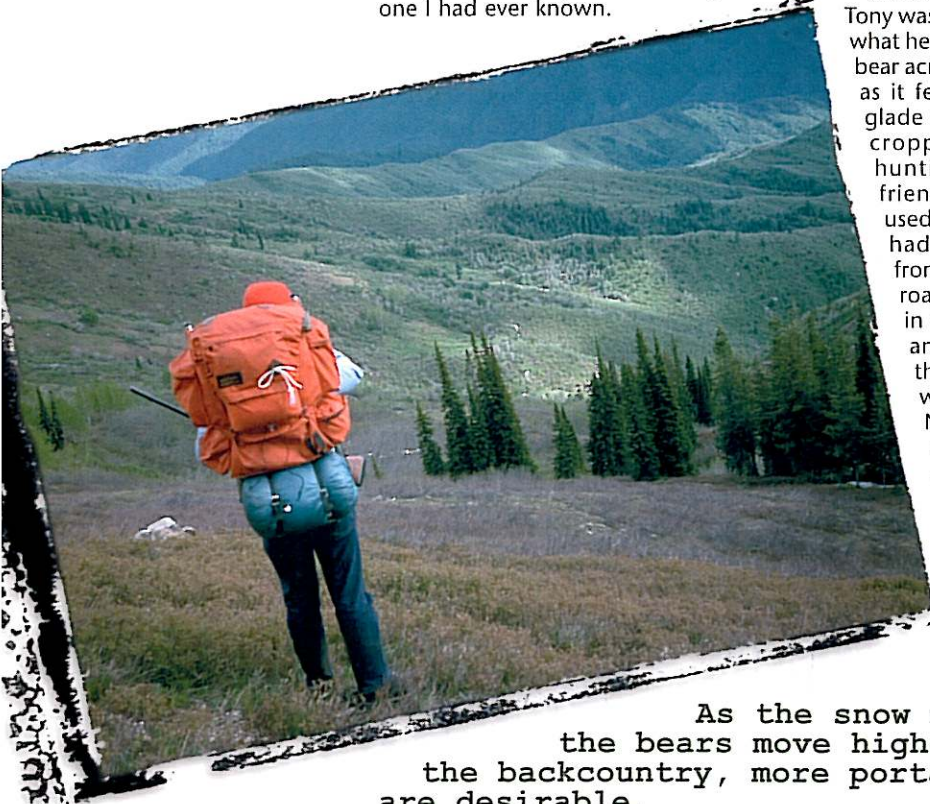
When I arrived at camp Tony was wired! He had shot what he thought was a huge bear across the Lochsa River as it fed in a small green glade atop a basalt outcropping. Using the hunting technique his friends had previously used with success, Tony had spotted the bear from the highway while road hunting. U.S. 12 in this area is narrow and meanders along the river to Lolo Pass where it drops into Montana. Turnouts are scarce and the constant flow of eighteen wheelers hauling wheat from Montana to the Port of Lewiston, Idaho,

makes spotting a bear on the hillside a bit tricky. In Tony's case it involved maneuvering his VW bug up the highway with one eye on his rear view mirror watching for trucks and the other on the hillside watching for bears. I knew right away that this was not the kind of hunt I could get too excited about!

The story became more intense as the evening progressed. Apparently Tony had spotted the bear not far from a turnout. He pulled off the road and hiked back along the river to a spot where he was off the highway far enough to legally shoot across the river. The bear dropped out of sight at the first shot of his .270. Tony thought he had killed the bear with the single shot, but he was not sure. We had to check the next morning but we had no boat to cross the river, which was swollen with the spring runoff. Then came the final complication. . . Tony confessed to me that the bear was so large that he thought it could be a grizzly! In fact he thought he had seen a distinct hump on its back just before he shot. Now, in addition to not having a boat to cross the river, there was the possibility that he had shot an illegal bear.

The more I thought about the situation the more I did not like it. But he needed help and I was obligated to help him retrieve the bear. Although I doubted it was a grizzly, I decided to deal with that issue if, in fact, the bear was indeed a grizzly.

During the evening we agreed to first look for a boat to borrow and then attempt to retrieve the bear. After several hours of searching we located an outfitter who had a 12 foot aluminum boat, which he agreed to loan us. With no trailer or pickup in which to haul the boat, we flipped it upside down and set it atop the VW bug. The only problem was that when the boat was on the VW the doors would not open. Finally, we figured out how to get inside the VW and have the outfitter set the boat on top. Each of us held onto the boat out of our re-



As the snow melts and the bears move higher into the backcountry, more portable camps are desirable.

Backpack hunting near the snow line makes for a great hunt and solitude.

spective car window as we headed up the river to the spot where the bear was thought to be. When we reached the turnout we had quite an audience as Tony had told everyone he had seen about the huge bear he had shot.

The river crossing was an adventure as the oarlocks on the oars were too big to fit into the oarlock brackets on the boat. When we finally made it across the river I was very excited to see the bear so I wasted no time climbing up to the top of the basalt outcropping. I reached the green glade well ahead of Tony and eagerly searched for the bear. Initially, I found nothing as the snow that had fallen in the night covered whatever tracks or blood trail might have been there the night before. After a bit of searching I found the bear. Not the huge grizzly-sized brown bear I had been expecting, but a three-year-old black bear sow that would square about four feet! I can still see the expression of disbelief on Tony's face as he looked at his bear. He had learned the first lesson of bear hunting. . . judging the size of a bear is much more difficult than judging the antlers on a white-tail buck where you have points to count and ears to use as reference points for determining spread, etc. Young sows have all the proportions of mature boars but they are about one-fourth the size.

Techniques

The focus of this article will be on still hunting spring black bear because still hunting is simple and is legal in all states that have spring black bear seasons. Where legal, hunting over bait provides excellent opportunities for archers. Setting baits requires a significant time commitment and a readily available source of bait materials. The logistics and the time required to get bears hitting your baits makes baiting in places far away from home a complicated proposition. In a later article we will cover baiting techniques. The use of hounds for hunting black bear is another viable technique but due

Black bears come in colors ranging from blonde to black, including all shades of brown.



INSET: This bear was taken by the author and Greg Royer. It ranks number 33 in Idaho with a score of 20-4/16 points.



The author, George Bettas, with a blonde color phase Idaho black bear.

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to the requirements for specially trained dogs and the fact that the use of hounds is not legal in many states, my recommendation is if you would like to hunt with hounds you should select a reputable outfitter who has top notch dogs and offers fair chase hunts.

Black bears begin emerging from hibernation throughout their northern and western habitats during April, although the farther south one goes, the earlier the bears emerge. Mature black bears are generally larger in size in states

and will eat almost anything but do have their preferences. Patches of wild onions are excellent if they are found in the area where you are hunting. Later in the spring, huckleberry blossoms are a treat and bears will spend hours in a berry patch eating the sweet flowers. In areas where elk are found, elk calving grounds are outstanding areas to hunt in early June where large boars have learned to find and prey upon elk calves. Once you have determined where you will hunt, I suggest you spend some time talking with the local biologists about what food sources bears prefer in the area you plan to hunt.

Once you are in bear country, be patient, slow your pace, and use your binoculars. When I first began stalking spring black bears I hunted early mornings, late afternoons, and evenings. This technique made for a short night and became quite tiresome after several days if I did not take afternoon naps. Since those days I have revised my techniques based upon a review of field notes taken by biologists who were conducting a black bear depredation study in Idaho's Selway-Bitterroot country. Aerial flights were made during the early morning hours and late afternoon/evening hours monitoring elk calves that were fitted with radio collars. If a calf was alive and moving the collar emitted a certain signal. If a collar was motionless for a period of time, a different, constant signal was transmitted indicating that the calf had likely become a victim of a black bear or another predator. The biologists would land their helicopter in the vicinity of these collars and determine the fate of the calf. While flying their routes monitoring the calves the biologists noted when and where they saw black bears. As I recall about 70 percent of the black bears were sighted between 4:00 p.m. and dark. About 15 percent were spotted before 10:00 a.m. and the remainder were spotted at other times during the day.

Based upon this data and my own field experiences, I like to leave camp around noon and hike to a position from which I can glass a likely area of significant size. Once there, I almost always stay until dark and hike back to the trailhead or camp in the dark. This gets me to bed about midnight since it stays light until nearly 10:00 p.m. in the areas I like to hunt. I essentially do not hunt in the early morning and concentrate my efforts on the time of day when the bears are most active.

A mistake made by many novice spring bear hunters is the failure to recognize the value of the late

afternoon and evening hours. While on my way out for an evening hunt I have often driven past camps where bear hunters had spent from dawn to late afternoon hunting, and were sitting around camp preparing dinner. When I returned to camp late at night these same hunters were asleep, preparing for another early morning and all day jaunt in the woods.

The exception to this rule comes when I am hunting remote elk calving areas. In such cases I plan my hunt so I may camp on a high ridge about mid-day. I set the camp where I have a good vantage point for seeing bears, and glass the area until dark. If I spot a bear I make the stalk from camp. The next morning I get up at daylight and glass for bears over a cup of morning coffee. Then I either stay in this location and catch a nap or move camp to another location from which I can spot for bears. This technique gives me the best of the morning and evening hunts and allows me to move my camp during the time of day when bears are least active.

Once you spot a bear the next step is getting into position for a shot. Careful examination of the terrain and cover before you begin the stalk will pay dividends in the end. All too many hunters in the excitement of spotting a bear forget key landmarks and terrain features during the stalk. Consequently, they often either blow the stalk or cannot find the bear from a spot from which they can make a good shot due to terrain obstacles, brush, timber, or whatever. Take a note pad and draw yourself a diagram before you take off on the stalk. Better yet, have a topographic map of the area with you, locate the bear on the map, and use the map to plan your stalk.

Bears will move a good deal while feeding in the spring. Consequently, the closer the bear is to you when you spot it the better your chances are of bagging the bear. I have often made marathon stalks on trophy bears only to get to a shooting position after the bear has moved out of the area where it was feeding. If this happens, be patient, quiet, and keep the wind in your favor. On many occasions when I have done this the bear has come back out to feed again after an hour or so. On other occasions the bear was long gone and I never saw it again.

I prefer rifles of .270 caliber or larger, shooting premium grade bullets for black bear. If you are hunting in the western states you will often have the opportunity for fairly long shots in open country. Practice with your rifle and be sure it is zeroed for consistent hits out



About 60 percent of the black bears the author has seen while hunting in Idaho are black color phase. The remaining 40 are some shade of brown to blonde.

Dave Zang (left) and Bill Grady with a trophy Idaho black bear in the traditional black color phase.

such as Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and California because they have better and more plentiful food sources and shorter hibernation periods in most habitats. Spring seasons open in mid-April in the northwestern states with sows with cubs and young bears generally emerging earlier than the mature boars. Be sure to consult with the local fish and game biologists in your chosen area in order to determine the timing of your hunt.

Early May is my preferred time to hunt black bears in states such as Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Oregon. In the more southern states one may want to plan an earlier hunt, depending upon the spring green-up and the snow pack. Hunt areas near streams and rivers below the snow line. Hunting is best just below the snow line where bears may be found foraging for tender green grasses and forbs as well as winter killed big game. Often they may be found feeding in avalanche chutes and small creek bottoms. Later, as the snow moves into the high country, bears will be found feeding in small glades fed by a spring or small rivulet of water. Bears are omnivorous

to 300 yards. Quality binoculars of 8x to 10x are essential for spotting bears and a spotting scope of 20x or higher will aid in judging the size of the bear. If you are using a muzzle loader or archery gear, use the same stalking techniques and gear you would use for deer or elk AND wait for broadside shots that will get BOTH lungs. Black bears, especially big black bears, are tough animals. Consider that fact carefully in your choice of weapon.

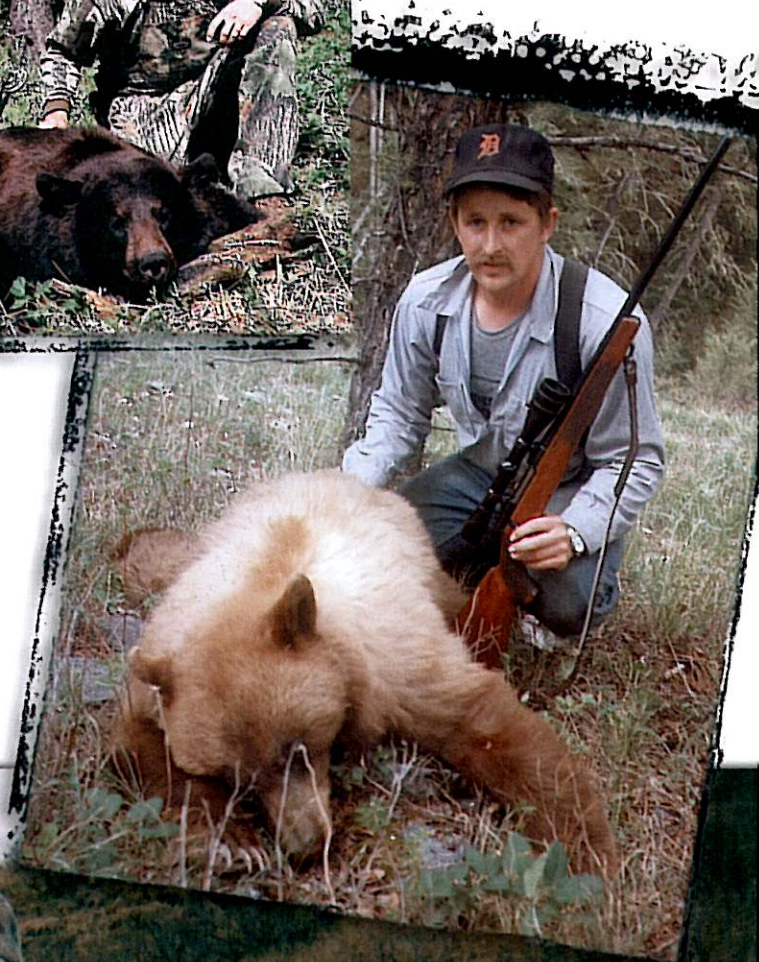
Color Phases

Black bears come in colors ranging from blonde to black and including all shades of brown. Black is often the more common color the farther north you go. Most of the black bears found in Alaska are coal black although a few black bears in Alaska, known as glacier bears, take on a spectacular blue hue with silver highlights. Some black bear hunters consider the color of the bears hide as the criteria for the bear they seek. Blonde is the most sought after color phase while the glacier bears are especially rare. My hunting partner and Boone and Crockett Club Member, Ken Davis, took a spectacular blue color phase glacier bear this spring while hunting in Alaska. The colors of the black bears in the lower 48 states vary with the area with no real trends character-

If you are interested in a bear of a special color, you will want to research specific areas to hunt.

ABOVE: Justin Bliss with his mahogany colored Idaho bear taken in May 1999.
RIGHT: Pat Sinclair took this blonde phase black bear in Montana.

Ken Davis with his blue color phase Alaska "glacier" bear taken in May 2000.



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Elk calves are easy prey for black bears that have learned to hunt them.

High country spring bear camps give access to elk calving areas in June.

izing the different areas of the country. While hunting in northern Idaho, about 60 percent of the black bears I have seen are black and the other 40 percent are some shade of brown to blonde. Bears do change colors as they grow older. Cases have been documented where blonde bears have changed color to dark brown or black as their age increased from about two years to four or five years. Some areas have gene pools where higher proportions of colors other than black may be found. If you are in-

terested in a bear of a special color, you will want to research and hunt these areas.

Logistics

The logistics of a spring bear hunt can be quite simple. Camps may usually be accessed with a four-wheel drive vehicle since most of the higher elevation trails and roads are still snow covered. Because of the easy access to camps, a spring black bear hunt is a great time to test new equipment and fine tune your gear in anticipation of the fall hunt. You will often have space so you can take tried-and-true backup gear in the event your newest and greatest "stuff" does not meet your expectations. Over the years I have used a variety of means to access spring bear hunting areas. The most common is the basic 4x4 pickup. It carries a lot of gear for setting up a comfortable camp and will get you to the snow line in most areas. Be wary of at-

tempting to bust through snow packs in shaded areas on backcountry roads. Chains for all four-wheels are a must. A good quality aluminum grain shovel will get you through the deep spots, if they are short. Take it slow and stop before you get stuck. You can waste a lot of time shoveling snow if you get your outfit stuck.

ATVs of all sorts are becoming very common but more and more forest roads have travel restrictions which preclude ATVs at all times or during selected times of the year. A mountain bicycle is an excellent means for traveling on mountain roads where the snow pack limits access. Bicycles may be used on most gated roads in the West outside of wilderness areas.

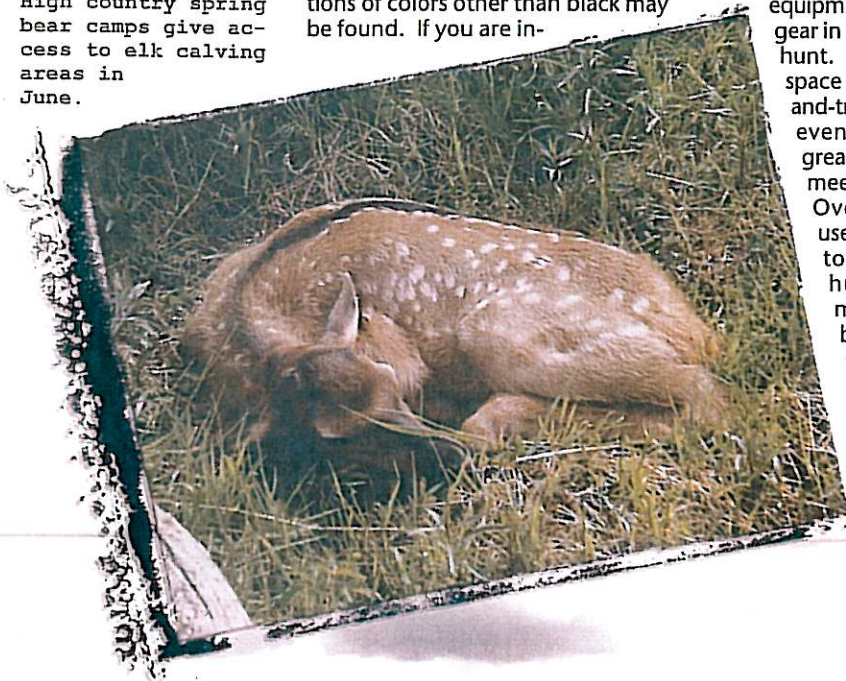
On occasion, I have flown into remote airstrips and hunted spring bear out of a backpack camp. Washington, Idaho, and Oregon have spring bear seasons in Hell's Canyon where access is almost exclusively by jet boat in the spring. Take your backpack gear and have someone drop you off along the river and pick you up at a predetermined time at the end of your hunt.

Horses and mules are excellent for accessing spring bear areas via trails that are located in river bottoms where the snow has melted and into the higher country after the snow has melted on major access trails. Be sure to carry a chain saw (crosscut saw in wilderness areas) and shovel to make minor trail repairs and to clear out trees that have fallen across the trail during the winter. While spot and stalk hunting in the backcountry away from the river bottoms, I almost always camp high on a ridge to facilitate glassing early in the morning and late in the evening. If you are camping high you will most likely need to pack your own horse feed as the grass will not be sufficient for stock outside of the creek bottoms and meadows.

As the snow melts and the bears move higher into the backcountry, more portable camps are desirable. Backpack techniques are optimal for hunting elk-calving areas and avalanche chutes located away from roads. My favorite means of hunting spring bear is to fill my backpack with a week's worth of provisions, find a trail that will take me to an elk calving area, and locate a campsite atop a high point overlooking the calving grounds. From such a location I am poised, ready to spot and stalk bears as they are hunting for calves during the early morning and late evening hours.

Field Judging Black Bear

One of the most frequently asked questions of hunters who are new



to black bear hunting ask is, "How do you judge the size of a bear?" The answer to this question is not easy. Bears always look bigger in your mind than they actually are on the ground, especially if you are an inexperienced bear hunter. As I noted in the story about Tony the veterinary student, a three- or four-year-old sow black bear is often short coupled and has a small head and legs that appear short in comparison to its body. It has the general body proportions of a large boar. On the other hand, many three or four year-old boars coming out of hibernation appear lanky and long-legged, and are much easier to distinguish.

With nothing to compare the bear to on the hillside, one is left without much more than one's own experience to judge the bear. Large boars tend to move with a much more deliberate pace than small bears, which make quick cat-like moves. Large bears turn around more slowly and do not swap ends quickly as do smaller bears. Small bears tend to be much more active. Small bears also have disproportionately larger ears in comparison to their head size and often have pointed "coyote-like" noses. Judging a bear in the field with any degree of consistency requires experience. The closer you can get to the bear, the more accurate your assessment of its size will be.

With the availability of laser range finders you can use the duplex reticule in your scope to determine the height and/or length of a bear, IF you know the proportional measurements of the reticule in your scope. For example, the distance between the horizontal reticule and the tip of the bottom vertical duplex reticule of a 3.5x-10x Leupold scope set at 5x will be 18" at 300 yards, 24" at 400 yards, 30" at 500 yards, and 36" at 600 yards. If you consider the distance between the tip of the top bottom vertical duplex reticule and the tip of the top vertical duplex reticule the distance is 36" at 300 yards and so forth. If you know the bear is standing broadside at 300 yards and the tip of the top vertical reticule is at the point of the bear's shoulder and the tip of the bottom vertical reticule is at the bear's front foot, you likely have a nice bear that will stand 36" at the shoulder.

Regulations

As with any kind of hunting, hunters must familiarize themselves with the

regulations of the state they are hunting. In Idaho, for example, black bear hunting is by permit only in some units. The use of bait or hounds is prohibited in other units. In Idaho, a tag issued for black bear after the black bear season opens may not be used until the second day after the tag is issued. Persons who receive a spring/fall controlled hunt permit may not hunt in any other spring/fall bear hunt, EXCEPT in extra bear tag units. Non-resident hunters who purchase selected elk or deer tags may purchase bear tags at significantly reduced prices in Idaho. Currently under consideration is a regulation that allows the hunter the choice of taking a deer, bear, or cougar on a deer tag. So keep your eye on the hunting regulations. It will keep you out of trouble and may even save you a few bucks!

Sows with cubs at their side are not legal in almost all states. Take your time and observe the bear before you decide to stalk it and attempt a shot. Cubs of the year are about the size of gallon milk jugs. They bounce about under the sow's feet and are often easily seen. Yearling and two year-old cubs will be close to the sow and can be easily seen as well but may not be as obvious as the cubs of the year. There is no substitute for patience in making the decision about whether the bear in your view has cubs or not.

Finally, THERE IS NO OPEN SEASON FOR GRIZZLY BEARS IN THE LOWER 48 STATES. Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming have increasing numbers of grizzlies in black bear areas. Be sure you know the difference. To date this spring a number of grizzlies have been killed by inexperienced black bear hunters who mistook the grizzly for a black! Grizzlies have a dish-face profile, distinctive claws, and a pronounced hump on their shoulders. Black bears have a straight profile, no pronounced hump, and short claws.

Spring is a great time to be



in the field hunting.

It is alive with all kinds of wildlife during this time of the year, especially before the brush and deciduous trees have leafed out. Birds are busily making their nests. Deer, moose, and elk are easily seen enjoying the first green grass of spring, often almost ignoring the hunter in the field. Coyotes, bears, and eagles may be seen feeding on the deer and elk that succumbed to the winter. The cry of the osprey can be heard up and down the river valleys and the ubiquitous raven will lead you to a winter kill if you watch them long enough. This past spring I had the opportunity to see two cougars lying out in a meadow during a rainy morning. On other occasions I have seen badgers, pine martin, and fisher while glassing for bear. The ruffed grouse are drumming and the blue and Franklin grouse are doing their mating dances. It makes one feel great to be out on the mountain again!


If you have not stalked spring black bears, you should try it! ▲▲▲

ATVs are very useful for getting spring bear camp into remote areas.

More and more forest roads have travel restrictions that preclude ATVs at all or selected times of the year. Be sure to check the regulations in the area you plan to hunt.

Hunters must know the difference.

Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming have increasing numbers of grizzlies in black bear areas.

Field Judging Black Bear	
300 yards with a 3.5x-10x Leupold scope.	
	36 INCHES
Set at 5x	

 *BLACK BEAR

GRIZZLY BEAR † 

THIS IS GRIZZLY BEAR HABITAT

Both grizzly and black bear inhabit this area. Please keep this in mind as you enjoy the outdoors. We need your help for management of both species for future generations. Some roads have been closed in this area to provide security for elk, bear & other animals.

Hunters: know your bears!

Campers: keep a clean camp! -- Hikers: be alert on trails!







