

Don't Shoot the First Bear

By Robert J. Beaulieu – B&C Associate

Hunting brown bear was a trip I've dreamed about for years, but never thought I'd have the opportunity. I was reading an article about brown bear with my wife one day, and out of the blue she said, "Why don't you go bear hunting?" As opportunity knocks only once, I answered.

My wife and I took advantage of a cancellation with guide Jim Bailey and arrived on Kodiak Island in mid-April. From there we drove to a small coastal village where Jim had his boat ready for the trip to camp on the east side of Kizhuyak Bay. Despite the overcast weather, the visibility was good enough to appreciate the raw beauty of Kodiak Island.

The next day we climbed a knoll positioned in the middle of the valley, giving us a commanding view of the valley and adjacent mountainsides. We glassed for hours with no results. Back at camp we compared notes. Because it was early in the season for bear activity we would most likely find them up near the snow line, which had retreated to about 1,000 feet in elevation. It was also possible that many of the bears might still be holed up. Always positive, I noted from my homework the first bears out were generally larger.

Except for experiencing a frog-strangling rain and poor visibility due to low clouds covering the mountaintops, the next two days were also unremarkable. We had two weeks of hunting scheduled, but I was beginning to wonder when

we were going to see active bear sign. Everything I have read or heard advised, "Do not shoot the first bear you see!" So far, that was no problem!

The fourth evening, my guide, Jake, spotted what looked like a fresh bear trail in the snow about four miles away. Our plan was to check it out the next day. He didn't think we would need snowshoes because the bear tracks

he spotted the night before were fairly close to the snow line. When we arrived at the bear trail, it had been obscured by new snow the night before and there was no other sign. Jake decided to move to a rock outcropping about 300 yards higher that would give us a better view. As we climbed higher, the snow came up to our knees. The last 100 yards the snow was waist deep, and we grabbed anything we could to drag ourselves the rest of the way. Upon reaching the outcropping I was totally exhausted and even 22-year-old Jake was breathing hard.

We had lunch and began glassing the far mountain-side. Within minutes Jake, in what I thought to be a very calm voice (particularly after three days of seeing zip), said, "I see

a bear." Sure enough, directly across the valley about two miles away was a big boar slowly moving along the snow line.

We watched the bear for about 20 minutes as it moved southward. A mile ahead of the bear was a narrow gorge that made a cut through the mountain. If it kept on the present course and came down alongside the edge of the gorge toward the valley or crossed the gorge, we might get a shot. We couldn't go straight for the boar because of a 10 to 15 mph crosswind that could ruin a perfectly good stalk.

From our position we would have to go down the mountain, cross the valley, and get ahead of and downwind of the bear; then work our way up the other mountainside, staying on the opposite side of the gorge to block the bear if he crossed. Jake estimated we had four miles to cover and we couldn't drag our feet. Gravity has its advantages when you're going downhill, however. We slid our way down through the snow line and then moved as fast as we could, holding on to alders or whatever to break our descent.

The bear had been out of sight for about 40 minutes when we spotted him headed for the gorge! We were ahead of the bear now and continued to move across the valley, being careful because the bear was in sight much of the time. The boar stopped at the gorge and headed toward the valley alongside the edge of the gorge just as we had hoped.

When the bear was within 150 yards I was ready with my Winchester Model 70 in .375 H&H magnum. Jake whispered, "Wait!" He wanted to be in position to back me up with his .416 Rigby. With Jake in position the bear was still broadside, a good uphill shot. Jake repeated, "Wait!" I about spit! He whispered, "I'll yell at the bear and get him to stand up." His yelling echoed through the gorge. Well, the bear heard him all right, but instead of standing up he moved towards the edge of the gorge and stared right at us. No shot now.

Finally, after an hour-long minute, the bear decided there was no threat and turned broadside. I flipped up the snow-covered scope cap, held behind the bear's shoulder, adjusted slightly high for the range, and squeezed the three-pound trigger. After the recoil, I looked out from behind the rifle and the bear was gone! Jake said, "He went down like a rock." I confirmed the kill with two more shots anyway. We were taking no chances.

I told my wife I had wanted a brown bear that squared at least eight feet. My trophy squares 9 feet 8 inches with a skull measurement of 26-4/16 inches, which qualifies it for the records book. So much for not shooting the first bear you see! ■

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Robert J. Beaulieu with his Alaska brown bear scoring 26-4/16 points.

Rock Creek Bighorn

By Shannon Taylor – B&C Associate

The problem with sheep hunting is that you never get to practice. The chance to shoot a bighorn ram is, for 99 percent of us, a once-in-a-lifetime kind of deal. Sheep hunters have a lot more practice mailing in their license application and re-depositing their refund checks than they do planning for their fall hunt. I moved to Montana in 1979 and began applying for bighorn permits that year; my oldest daughter was born in 1979 and she graduated from college two years ago. I finally drew a Montana sheep permit in 2003.

The hunt began in September when my wife, Diane, and I joined Larry Clark, an outfitter, at his ranch in Upper Rock Creek. The first evening, we watched 11 rams on the mountain behind his ranch until dark, followed by an excellent meal. Larry told us that the recent forest fires in upper Rock Creek would certainly be a factor in our hunt; the area in which we would



Shannon Taylor with his bighorn sheep scoring 181-1/8 points.

be hunting had been kept off limits to almost everyone and the bighorn had probably not been subjected to human activity for a number of weeks prior to the opening of the season.

Early the next morning we met our guide Neil (Larry's son) and drove Forest Service roads all day to glass over the surrounding mountainsides. It was great to be three westerners recreating in the mountains. The philosophical and political conversations took up almost as much time as the talk of the hunt.

But with tears rolling down our cheeks because of more than three hours of looking through binoculars and spotting scopes and solving the West's numerous problems, we managed to stay on task enough to spot a band of rams upstream and across the creek. They were a couple of miles away, but the horns on one looked very large.

It took nearly two hours to climb the mountain to the area where we saw the rams. We slowly made our way up the steep incline until we could clearly see into the shallow, grassy bowl where the rams had been a few hours before. They were now gone. As we huddled together discussing our next move, we heard a noise unlike anything we had ever heard before — a solid “thunk”

but with a hint of hollowness, like smacking two pieces of firewood together.

It was two rams butting horns, and they were close to us. We approached the thumping sound at the bottom of a pine-filled ravine with extreme caution. We were soon down on our hands and knees, rising out of our crawl every few yards to glass the terrain ahead. I turned and told Neil and Diane the hunt was great even if we didn't actually see the rams up close.

Soon, Neil spotted three rams at the edge of the timber and whispered that they were under a hundred yards away. My nervous system went into complete overdrive. One was very large, but Neil wasn't sure if it was the largest of the group we had seen earlier that morning. I told Neil that if he thought the ram was big enough, I would try a shot. “I'm not going to make that call for you,” Neil replied, “Take my binoculars, stand up, and look for yourself.” When I finally saw the rams through the binoculars, I stared in amazement. The big ram was magnificent. I decided that even if this ram was not the biggest of the bunch, I didn't care; it was big enough for me. Fortunately, the ram appeared to be unaware of us and I began to crawl on my belly to get into shooting position.

At first I thought I missed him because he took off at a dead (literally) run, but caved over within a few hundred yards. Neil and Diane also thought that I had missed, but were being very diplomatic and supportive while I was having a near breakdown. Neil ran to the area where the ram had been standing to look for blood. I repositioned myself to take a 350-yard shot just in case the sheep ran out of the trees. I was dreading the prospects. But to our collective relief, Neil saw the bighorn lying in the trees. I had put the bullet through the ram's heart at 77 yards. We held a massive, three-person celebration. It was life at it's best.

The ram officially scores 181-1/8 points. Needless to say, I'm very, very happy and satisfied with the hunt. I had an excellent guide and my Ambrose Thomas custom rifle performed perfectly. I will never forget how that ram filled my scope right before I pulled the trigger. It is an image that will stay with me for years to come. For Diane and me, it was a hunting experience beyond our wildest dreams. ■

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Alaska Peninsula Bull

By Mark S. Rose – B&C Associate

“Mark, you need to take your hunting to the next level,” urged my big brother, Gary. I knew I should listen to him. I have hunted whitetails in my home state of Texas all my life and have shot a pronghorn in New Mexico; my brother, however, had hunted all over the world. I finally agreed, and Gary made all the arrangements for my moose hunt on the Alaska Peninsula. Even after all the preparations had been made, I had a difficult time being comfortable with the trip, which would be a big deal for me, and also being away from my business for two weeks.

I arrived at Wildman Lake Lodge with several other hunters in early September, the day before moose season opened. The following day, my guide, Bill Burwell, and I waited our turn for the bush plane to take us to a spike camp. We were the last group to go. By afternoon, the weather had turned for the worse, and we had to stay at the lodge another day. This seemed to be a bad break. I had really wanted to be in the field for opening day.



Mark Rose and his Alaska-Yukon moose scoring 247-7/8 points. The moose rack has a spread of 80-3/8 inches, making it the third largest spread ever.

The next day we flew out and set up spike camp at the base of a frozen volcano. We had several hours of daylight left after setting up camp, so we decided to glass the area. We made our way through thick alders to a spot overlooking Rapid Creek Valley. I learned at this point the terrain was terribly rough and the hunt was going to be very physically demanding—much more so than anything I had faced on previous hunts—but I was ready for the challenge.

From our vantage point we could see two miles in either direction. As we began glassing the valley, we

saw the flash of an antlered palm belonging to a moose that was lying on the edge of the alders. We continued to watch the bull from about 800 yards. When the moose stood up, we almost died. Bill said it was the biggest bull he had ever seen (and he had seen plenty of moose in his long career of guiding) and guessed that the bull's rack had an 80-inch spread. I knew the moose was a monster, but I did not know the accuracy of Bill's long-range judging. I couldn't legally shoot the moose on the same day that we arrived in spike camp, so we returned to camp and waited for morning.

The next morning, we went back to the same overlook and were shocked to find the monster moose in the same spot as before. With the help of a spotting scope, we counted 34 points. Bill insisted the moose was 80 inches wide with a bell about 30 inches long. We proceeded down the mountain across the raging stream and battled our way through the woven alders to the grassy area where we had located the bull . . . but he had vanished. He had probably heard us thrashing through the alders. We found a twenty-foot circle where the moose had been bedding down, and waited for him to return. We never saw the moose again that day.

The next morning we returned to our overlook and saw a smaller bull with a cow. “He’s about 70 inches,” Bill said, “You might consider going for it. He’s definitely a shooter.” I told Bill that I had six more days in the field, and we were going for the big one! The next day we saw the huge bull back in the exact spot where we had first spotted him. Bill and I discussed what went wrong with our previous stalk and came up with a plan so the moose would not hear our approach. We hiked about three hundred yards downwind before cutting into the alders to work our way back toward the animal along an old game trail.

I was ready! We walked up the trail until the giant moose stood up in front of us. He was looking straight at us from about 100 yards. I shot him twice behind the front shoulder. Bill yelled to keep shooting. He was afraid that the moose would run into the alders, making the task of skinning and quartering much more difficult. I took two more shots and then saw the moose falling down in the grass.

Bill field-measured the antlers with a string and told me the rack was close to 81 inches wide. We spent the rest of the day taking photos, skinning, and quartering the huge moose. It got late in the day and since we were three hours from spike camp, we pitched a tent right next to the carcass. I will always remember Bill telling me to make sure I had a bullet in the chamber and to turn the scope all the way down. “If we have some action tonight it’s going to be really close,” he warned me. It rained all night long, but fortunately, the bears stayed away.

My bull is the largest Alaska-Yukon moose entered in the Boone and Crockett Club’s 25th Awards Program. With a score of 247-7/8 B&C points, it places fourteenth in the all-time records book. The rack has a spread of 80-3/8 inches, making it the third largest spread ever recorded. ■