



THE ALL-AMERICAN BLACK BEAR

ELUSIVE, UNPREDICTABLE, ADAPTABLE,
AND AVAILABLE, THE BLACK BEAR IS ONE OF THE
UNsung HEROES OF AMERICAN BIG GAME HUNTING.

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It seems to me there's a relatively small cadre of truly serious black bear hunters, while most North American hunters either take the black bear for granted or ignore him altogether. Make no mistake, the serious bear hunters are indeed serious. Many of them are houndsmen, while many others happen to live in particularly good bear country, but they have in common a fascination for the American bear, old

Ursus americanus. I can understand this, for there is much to be fascinated about—and much to recommend the hunting of this elusive creature.

One aspect is quite simply his availability. I am personally fascinated by all bears; they're beautiful, exciting—and sometimes frightening—creatures. But due to the scarcity, difficulty of logistics, and just plain cost, few of us will hunt grizzly or Alaska brown bear more than once or twice in our lifetimes, if at all. Ditto and double for polar bears; as crazy as I am about bear hunting, I have long since accepted that I will probably never hunt a great white bear. The black bear is every man's bear.

He actually occupies the widest range of any North American big game animal. You can find him from Florida to Newfoundland and from Mexico to Alaska, and with the exception of the Great Plains you

can find him almost anywhere in between. Mind you, the black bear is not as plentiful as our deer, elk, and moose; he requires space and some measure of solitude. Given those, however, he is an amazingly adaptable creature. You'll find him in the swamps of the Deep South, in the desert mountains of Arizona and old Mexico, in the forests of the Upper Midwest, literally throughout the western mountains, and on north all the way to treeline.

The black bear is of course not huntable throughout his present range, but in general his population is increasing and there is black bear hunting in every region of the United States and all across Canada. At least partly due to this huge distribution and widely differing habitats, bear hunting techniques are surprisingly regional.

Hound hunting is probably the oldest technique, certainly the one steeped in the most tradition. Daniel Boone was a houndsman; so was Congressman David Crockett of Tennessee. Hound hunting is a technique best-suited to forested mountains—the forest because in unbroken forest the unaided man would almost never see a creature so shy and elusive as the black bear; and the mountains because the ridges and hollows make it possible to follow the hounds' music for great distances, while in level forest bears and dogs will outdistance the hunters all too quickly.

In forested country, and especially in the fairly flat forests of the Great Lakes region and much of central and eastern Canada, the option to

hound hunting is baiting. The black bear's eyes probably aren't quite as weak as legend would have it, but he relies primarily on his ears and nose in avoiding danger. These last two senses are keen enough that, in thick country without open vistas, a human has very little chance of encountering a bear on purpose. However, one of any bear's few weaknesses is his greedy stomach. As we shall see, baiting is no more of a sure thing than use of hounds—but it is an effective black bear hunting technique.

The last of the three primary methods is spot-and-stalk hunting. This simply means spotting or glassing up a bear at some distance, then planning an approach. It's an enjoyable and effective technique, but it has one major requirement: country open enough and with enough relief so that bears can be seen.

In addition to these three primary techniques, there are two more worth mentioning: calling and tracking. We will dispense with these two methods right now, then talk about the three primary techniques of hound hunting, baiting, and spot-and-stalk in greater detail.

For reasons unknown to me, calling for black bears was pretty much confined to the mountains of southern Arizona for many years. Today, as both hound hunting and baiting are becoming outlawed in more and more regions, I look for calling to become a more popular method. Black bears will respond to a varmint call.

A common dying rabbit call will

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work, and a fawn bleat is better. Like all calling, it won't work all the time, but it does work based on two primary criteria.

First, a bear must hear the

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call and be fooled by it. Based on scouting, you must choose your stand sites where bears are likely to be; and you must work the wind so that you will see the bear before it smells you. Second, the bear must be in a mood to respond—hungry and not otherwise occupied. This last is beyond your control, but it's a primary reason why no calling of any wildlife is effective all the time.

To call bears, you must choose your ground with care and be persistent; you can expect to call from many more stands per bear than, for instance, for each coyote you might call in. However, you must also choose your calling site with caution in mind. When bears come to a call it's often an aggressive male that responds, and charging the call is not uncommon! It's best to call in pairs, with two hunters watching each other's back.

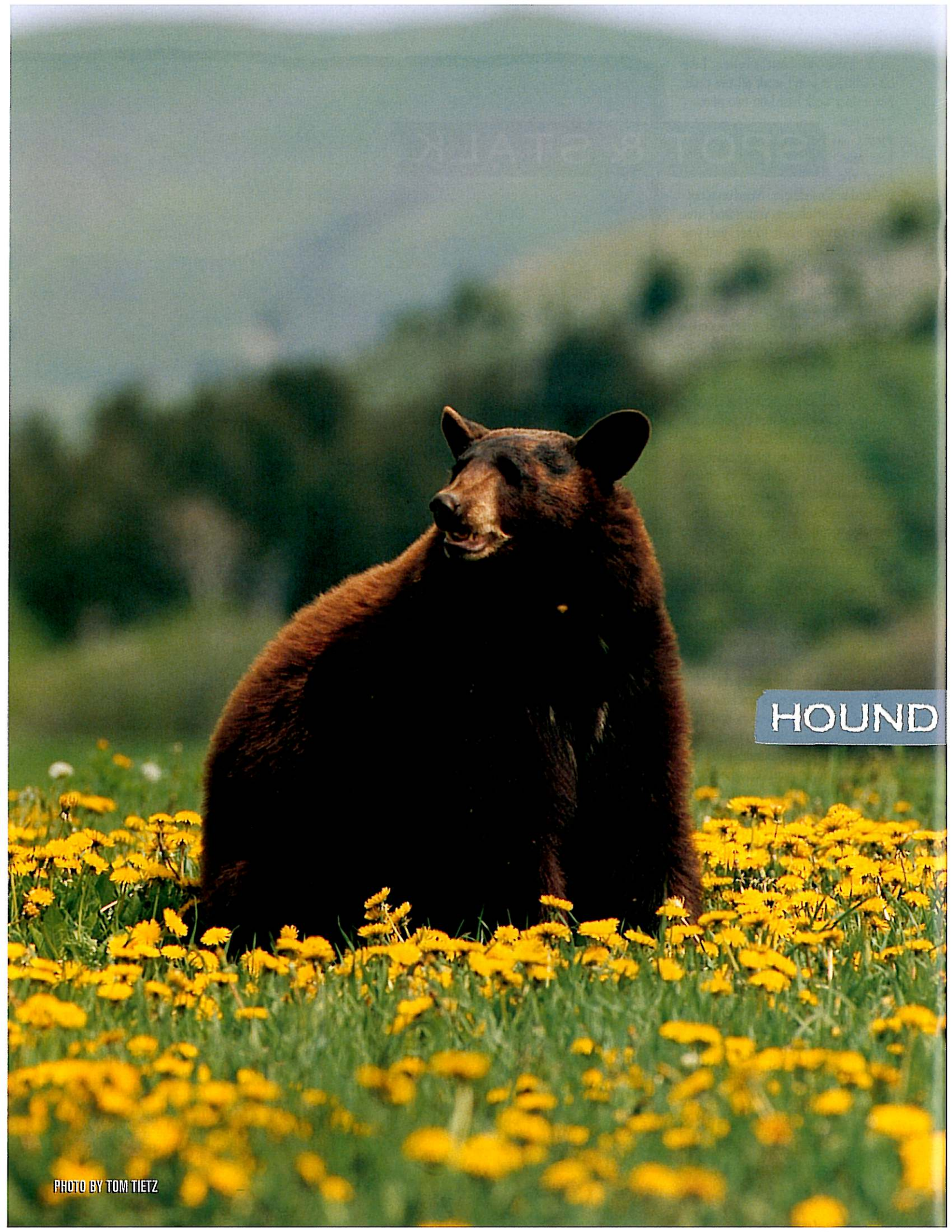
Tracking is problematical simply because the conditions—soft enough ground or snow—are relatively rare. However, should you encounter the fortuitous circumstances of tracking snow or mud, an open bear season, and fresh tracks, it is quite possible to track a bear to a shot. I'm given to understand that some of the huge bears Pennsylvania has produced recently have been tracked in the snow during that state's very short—and fairly late—fall season. Let's turn back now to the three primary black bear hunting methods, starting with hound hunting.

These days it's popular—even among hunters who should know better—to revile the houndsmen and consider pursuit in such fashion as somehow less than fair chase. This irks me immensely. It's no different than the many other controversies among the diverse groups of hunters: bowhunters looking down on gun



IDEAL SPOT-AND-STALK BEAR COUNTRY IN SOUTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA, WHERE CLEARCUTS OFFER PLENTY OF OPEN COUNTRY IN WHICH TO SPOT MOVING AND FEEDING BEARS.

INSET: A NICE BLACK BEAR TAKEN IN ALBERTA, WHERE AGRICULTURE ENDED AND FOREST BEGAN.



HOUND

hunters; traditional archers feeling superior to the compound crowd; buckskinners versus the in-line muzzleloader crowd; even meat hunters versus trophy hunters. We as hunters have enough trouble from the outside without picking each other apart.

Hound hunting is different from most other hunting techniques, but it is neither easy nor simple. The thing about it that must be understood is it's the houndsman who has the primary input. If you or I, who are not houndsmen, go on a hound hunt for bear we can have very little direct input on the conduct of the hunt. The houndsman, however, has trained his hounds from puppies. His primary pleasure is in listening to his hounds and watching them perform. In hound hunting the shot is actually nothing—a simple and quick end to the chase at very short range. The pursuit is everything... and most houndsmen do most of their bear hunting on a pursuit-only basis, with no intention of killing the bear at the end of the chase.

Following the hounds on a pursuit-only basis is about as close to catch-and-release fishing as there is in the hunting world. However, in terms of taking a bear hound hunting has a

couple of unique and attractive aspects. First, it is probably the single most physical—and most physically challenging—way to hunt bears. When you start a hound chase you have absolutely no idea where the chase may lead you, or what might happen. It is hardly a sure thing. The odds are very good that the bear will outdistance the hounds... and even better that the chase will outdistance the human hunter. When that happens you can count on many hours, perhaps days, in recovering the pack before the hunt can continue.

To prevent this it's essential that the human hunters keep up with the chase, which means running, crawling, and scrambling through whatever horrible real estate the bear has led the hounds. Sometimes horses or road networks allow shortcuts. And, admittedly, on average a hunt with a good pack of hounds is probably the most successful of all bear hunting techniques. But only for hunters in good shape who are willing to hunt very hard. It usually isn't easy.

The other unique aspect about hound hunting is that it is far and away the most selective of all bear hunting techniques. I'll admit something right here and now. Despite a lot of experience with black bears, I still have a lot of trouble properly judging them. There is never an excuse for a hunter to make a mistake and take a sow with cubs. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a truly huge bear will always look huge, and that's a hard mistake to make. But there's a vast middle ground between smallish bears and mature trophy bears. Most

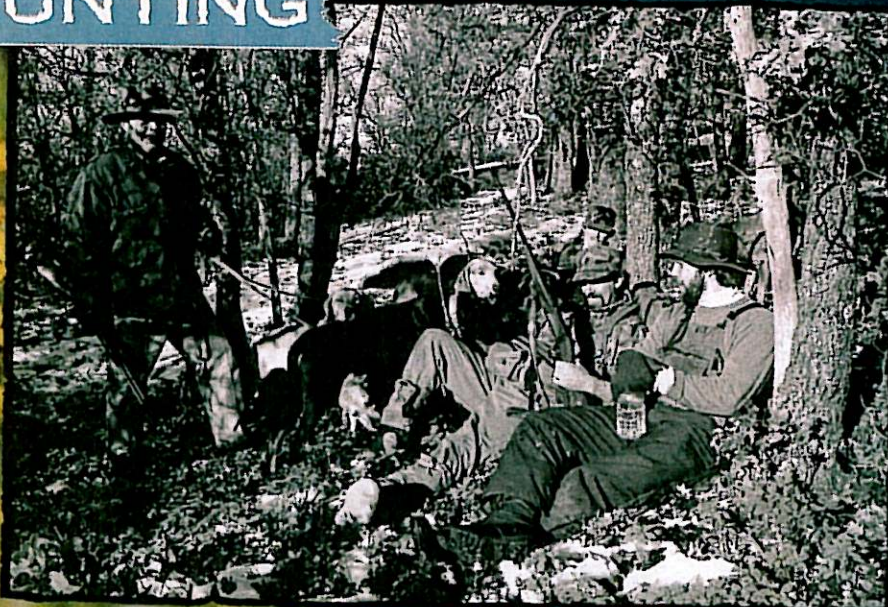
hunters, whether over bait or through binoculars, have trouble being certain what they're looking at.

With hound hunting there is never an excuse, and there are usually



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TAKING A BREAK AFTER A TOUGH HOUND CHASE AFTER BLACK BEAR. HOUND HUNTING, PERHAPS SURPRISINGLY, IS THE MOST PHYSICALLY DEMANDING OF ALL METHODS OF HUNTING BLACK BEAR.

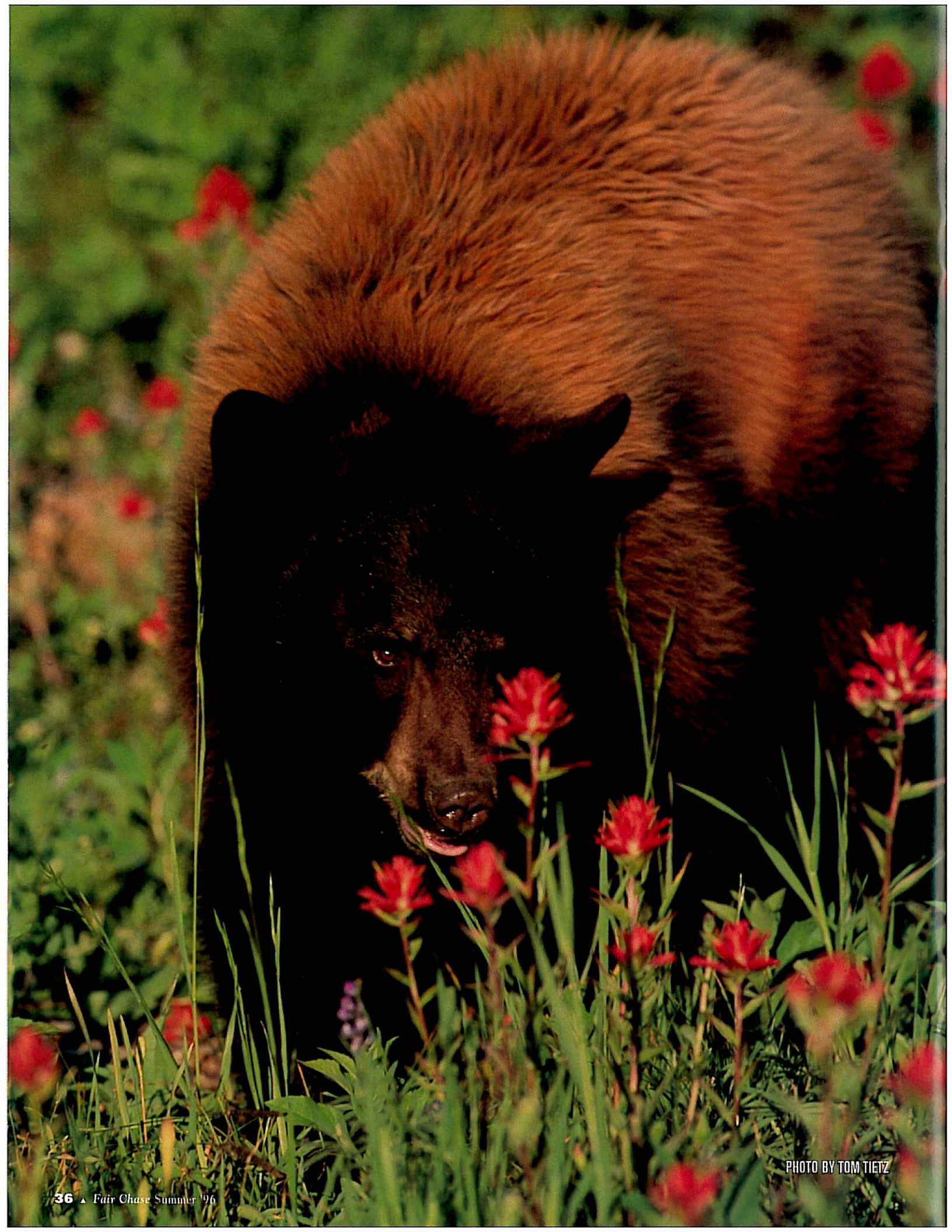


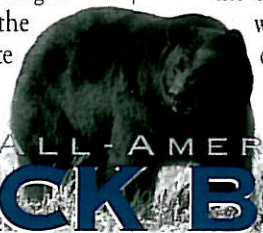
PHOTO BY TOM TIETZ

two chances to be sure and either take the bear or walk away. The first chance comes when a track is spotted. This is not 100 percent, simply because on dry ground the dogs may work from scent with the hunter never actually seeing the track. There's also the chance that the dogs will start one track but cross a fresher spoor and wind up on a different bear. However, with most hound chases, either in the bare ground of a trail or forest road or in patches of snow, the houndsman will see the track and know the general size of the bear being pursued.

The second chance is 100 percent. When the bear is bayed or, much more likely, treed, the hunters have a close-range opportunity to properly judge the bear and either take him or walk away. No other technique is as selective as hound hunting.

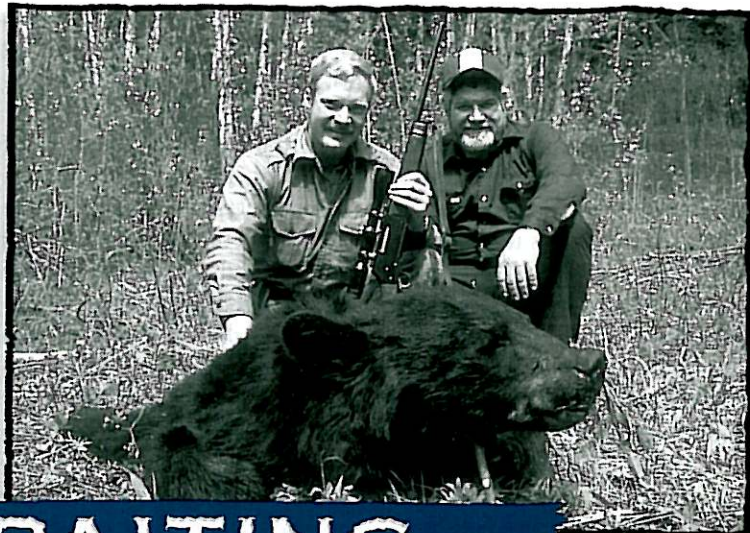
As stated, I am not a houndsman, so this is the technique that I have the least experience with. Some years ago I hunted up in Oregon, and did not shoot a bear. We treed a couple of small ones and walked away, and never found a big track. Just a year ago I shot my first bear over hounds, hunting with Randy Penland out of Big Bend, California. The California season runs late, and elevations are high enough that snow is fairly reliable. In that regard it was a classic situation; following the hounds was very difficult on the Sierra Nevada's huge, steep ridges. However, we knew what we were following, and in just a couple of days both my partner, Lad Shunneson, and I took nice bears.

Again, hound hunting is different. It is not for the shootist, for the shot is quite



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easy, an anticlimax. It's ideal for handgunners and blackpowder enthusiasts but, perhaps surprisingly, it is not ideal for bowhunters. When the shot comes the bear will often be obscured by brush or limbs—and if bayed he will be moving in a melee of dogs. Because of the danger to the dogs, there is also



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the requirement for that shot to be perfect and quickly effective. The houndsman himself undoubtedly gets the most out of a hound hunt, but it's a good option for hunters who like lots of action and hard work.

Hunting over bait is nearly the opposite. This is a game for patient hunters who enjoy sitting on stand in quiet woods. Obviously, hunters who typically stand-hunt for whitetails will feel right at home. There is a parallel with hound hunting in that, as the houndsman himself gets the most satisfaction out of hound hunting, the person who sets the baits and builds the stands gets the most out of bait hunting. It is not as easy as it sounds.

The bait must be set in an area where a bear will find it, and where he can approach in cover thick enough so that he will have the confidence to approach in daylight. Siting of the stand requires sound tactical decisions so that the bear can approach without winding the hunter... and offer a clear shot.

Baiting is the method of choice in the unbroken forests of Canada from central Saskatchewan eastward, and is practiced in Alberta and a few U.S. states as well. Hunting over bait is not quite as controversial as hound hunting, but it too is under fire and has been outlawed in several areas. Those who

look askance at baiting need to look at the local conditions before they judge. In Oregon, for instance, both hounds and baiting are now illegal. Oregon has a very high bear population, but in the dense forests of the western part of the state, sans hound and sans bait, there is darn near no other way to hunt bear effectively. Those among us who cast stones at baiting for bears should also keep in mind that

more than a dozen U.S. states allow baiting for deer. Local hunting techniques are usually the result of traditions dictated by local conditions, and outsiders shouldn't be quick to judge.

I will admit that I get stir-crazy in any stand, whether I'm waiting for deer, bear, leopard, or whatever. However, sitting over a bear bait is a very exciting experience. When the bear comes he comes silently and suddenly, appearing on the edge of the clearing almost like a ghost. The light is usually poor and the shot must be very sure, for there will almost certainly be near-impenetrable cover just a few steps away. Nobody wants to go into that gloom after a wounded bear!

Baiting is probably the second most selective bear hunting technique. The light may not be good, but the dis-

LEFT: THE AUTHOR AND TRAPPER DON MCRAE WITH A NICE MANITOBA BLACK BEAR TAKEN OVER BAIT.

BELOW: A BEAR COMES TO BAIT IN NORTHERN MANITOBA. THIS IS A TYPICAL SITUATION; THE BEAR IS CLEAR, BUT THERE'S THICK BRUSH ALL AROUND. THE SHOT MUST BE GOOD...AND JUDGING THE BEAR ISN'T ALWAYS EASY.



tance is usually short—50 to 100 yards. Also, in setting up the bait and blind you can establish known size references such as the bait itself or marks on trees just in case a small bear tries to fool you.

Every bait hunter has his favorite "formula" for surefire bear bait. A favorite among trappers is beaver carcasses, while others prefer stale pastries, winter-killed carcasses, fish offal, and a wide variety of other noxious treats. I'm not sure it makes a lot of difference, but the bait must be set so the bear has to come into an opening—as small a clearing as possible, for confidence—and it must be anchored so he cannot drag it away. I've sat in bear stands from Newfoundland to Alberta, and the circumstances are quite similar throughout. The method is very successful, but the degree of success depends largely on the density of the local bear population and how undisturbed they are. On a hunt with Trapper Don McRae in Manitoba, for instance, I saw more than

a dozen different bears come to bait in a week's time—and when you're seeing that many bears bait hunting is wonderfully exciting.

Spot-and-stalk hunting, or glassing, is the purists' method of choice. I suppose they would have us believe that it's the only genuinely fair chase method, and thus is the only method that should be legal. Problem is it simply won't work in all areas. You must have enough openings so that, sooner or later, bears simply have to cross or feed where they can be seen. Then there must be enough relief so you can see those openings. Finally, the bear population must be dense enough and undisturbed enough so that they aren't totally nocturnal and can be seen in daylight. Colorado, for instance, where both hound hunting and baiting are now illegal, easily meets the first two criteria. But lots of people use the Colorado mountains and the bears, though numerous, are quite nocturnal. Excepting some wilderness areas, I wouldn't choose that state for spot-and-stalk hunting. Western Oregon has plenty of relief and lots of undisturbed bears—but openings are few and far between.

However, where conditions are right spot-and-stalk hunting is quite practical, and it is indeed one of the most enjoyable ways to hunt black bear. This is the traditional technique in British Columbia, Alberta, Alaska, and Montana . . . and in areas like these with lots of bears it is particularly successful.

Just a month ago as I write this I hunted black bears in southeast Alaska, way south out of Wrangell. That part of Alaska holds the heaviest forest I've ever seen, and on the surface glassing for anything would be impossible. However, in the springtime the bears cruise the beaches searching for offal and munching the green grass that sprouts at the high tide mark. It was basically an unguided hunt that Lad Shunneson organized; we were four hunters on a fishing boat, and we could fish for halibut and salmon then cruise the inlets in

small boats in the evening looking for bears. In five days we had four bears on our boat, which is about as good as unguided bear hunting can be.

Over the years I have done more spot-and-stalk bear hunting than by any other technique. This is largely through chance, but also undoubtedly because glassing is my own favorite hunting technique. Probably because I've done more of it the best black bears I've taken have all been spot-and-stalk. Twenty-five years ago I shot a monster in southern B.C., big enough that the taxidermist felt it worthwhile to steal the skull. A few years later some burglars completed the loss by taking the rug along with everything else.

The only black bear I've ever seen close to that one was a fine bear I shot with outfitter Jim Keeline near Yakutat, Alaska in 1994. That bear was a fairly classic situation in that we glassed him up one day and shot him the next about two miles farther down a big, open face. It was a half-day stalk in very steep, rugged country, truly a great experience.

However, spot-and-stalk hunting has its drawbacks. It is absolutely the least selective method, and I don't care who you are or how experienced—you can make mistakes. A case in point was the black bear hunt I made in southeast Alaska just a month ago. Shunneson and I were hunting with Randy Brooks of Barnes Bullets and Fred Gonzales of Northern Outfitters clothing, a good, experienced crew—except neither Fred nor Randy had ever shot a black bear. Fairly early one afternoon, from the big boat, we spotted a bear along the beach by a big log. He had all the marks of a good-sized bear; his head seemed small, his body was round, and he seemed to have a broad behind.

Randy, Fred, and I jumped in a skiff and headed in, with Fred as the designated shooter. The way the wind was blowing we needed to approach from behind the downed log—which permitted only occasional glimpses of pieces of bear as we closed. Finally, at 40 yards, Fred thought he could clear the log enough for a shot. Not quite; he didn't allow for the difference between scope and barrel, and his bullet dug a deep furrow in the log and sailed out into the bay. The bear turned and

BELOW: GUIDE, JACK RINGUS, WITH THE AUTHOR'S UNUSUALLY LARGE GLACIER BEAR WHICH WAS PROBABLY AT THE END OF THE COLOR PHASE. THE BLUE TINT WAS CAUSED BY AN UNDERLAYER OF FINE WHITE HAIRS. BOTTOM: A SPRING BEAR CAMP IN NORTHERN ALBERTA. SPRING BEAR CAMPS CAN TAKE ALMOST ANY FORM, BUT A TENT CAMP IS ALWAYS ENJOYABLE.



sauntered into the jungle—and he still looked pretty good. We went back to the big boat for supper, then Lad and Fred went one direction in one skiff while Randy and I went the other.

Later that evening, while cruising the shore, Randy and I spotted the same bear. I know it was the same bear because, later, I checked the tracks. We stalked him from the other direction and Randy flattened him with a lovely shot at about 150 yards. Except it just wasn't a big bear. Reasonable, maybe even respectable, and with a lovely hide . . . but a long ways from the bear I thought he was. Since I have shot a lot of black bears and Randy has not, it was my fault altogether—but on black bears you must be very careful to avoid "ground shrinkage." Look for small ears spread wide apart, and avoid Mickey Mouse ears. Try to look for a ponderous, swinging walk. As Jack O'Connor said, the big ones look big . . . but with black bears, the small ones sometimes do!

I'm not sure there is any real limit to how big black bears get. I have shot three that squared, without stretching, over seven feet. That's rare, but I have seen legitimate eight-foot black bears and heard of at least one nine-footer. This, of course, is well beyond average grizzly size and well into Alaska brown bear size. Such bears are very rare, but they exist. The obvious problem, of course, is that body size doesn't always translate exactly into the skull size that's all-important for record book measurements. I do agree with skull measurements, since no measurement can be "stretched" more than the hides of bears and cats—but no one can judge a skull on a live bear except to say "that bear has a big head."

I believe most areas can produce giant black bears, given good feed and the opportunity for bears to fully mature. Surprisingly, Pennsylvania produces shockingly huge bears, despite heavy hunting pressure. Another oddball hotspot is coastal North Carolina, and perhaps even more odd—unless you've been there and seen the country—is California, both the northern and southern mountains. Then there are the more traditional big bear hotspots: central Arizona's mountain ranges, Newfoundland, Vancouver Island, the Queen Charlotte Islands,

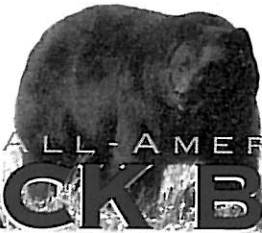
southeast Alaska. And one shouldn't overlook Manitoba, northern Alberta, and southern British Columbia. In fact, there are just a lot of places that produce good bears!

We all dream of huge bears, but what most of us really want is a well-furred rug. With black bears that can mean a rug in a wide variety of colors, but most of the color phases of black bears are somewhat regional. "Basic black" often includes a white star at the throat, and in many areas black is darn near the only color. This is generally true in the East, likewise in most of southeast Alaska, while throughout much of central and western Canada and the western United States at least some percentage of the black bears are some shade of brown. Occasionally, as is the case in northern California, brown is actually predominant.

A "brown black bear" may run in a variety of shades, from blonde through the gingery "cinnamon bear" to various shades of reddish and chocolate brown. It is my experience that the lighter shades, especially the prized blonde and cinnamon colors, are usually smaller bears. Radiotelemetric research has proven that bears do sometimes change color in their lifetimes—from brown to black, even—and it is likely that very light bears will darken with age. For darn sure, if you take a big blonde or cinnamon bear you have a great prize.

The two most rare color phases of black bear are very localized. The Kermode bear, confined to the Queen Charlotte Islands and protected for many years, is a white black bear. Not an albino, he has black eyes and claws with a very white or yellowish-white coat. My uncle and longtime Boone and Crockett Club member, Art Popham, took one on a museum permit some thirty years ago. It's mounted in the Kansas City Museum of Natural History in a diorama with a black black bear, and is a most dramatic creature.

The other localized color phase is the so-called glacier bear or blue bear. Like the Kermode bear, this is caused by a recessive gene, meaning that where the gene pool exists a black mother can have a blue or white cub; or vice versa. The glacier bear is found basically within 100 miles north or south of



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Yakutat, Alaska, and is huntable on a black bear tag . . . but (again quoting O'Connor) even where there are lots of 'em there aren't many of them.

On a second hunt in that area in 1995, again with Jim Keeline and guide Jack Ringus, I actually saw three glacier bears, a massive herd of such things. They vary immensely, as do all color phases. One, a small bear, was very gray with black head and stockings. Another, a big sow with a pure-black cub, had silver streaks all down her side. The bear I shot was a very big, very old boar. Perhaps, as a cub and younger bear, he had looked like that gray bear that I saw. As he was, in dim light he looked very black . . . but in sunlight he turned powder-puff blue. We watched him and stalked him for three days before getting a shot, and when we finally got him I found the blue tint to be caused by an underlayer of very fine, white hair.

With any of the unusual colorations, you really can't hunt for size. If I could have gotten a shot, you bet I would have taken that gray glacier bear I saw. Over the years I've taken two beautiful cinnamon bears, neither large, and I didn't hesitate. Someday perhaps I'll see a blonde black bear, but I never have. On the other hand, if you prefer size over color, you can hunt for that instead.

The wonderful thing about black bears is that there are plenty of them and the hunting is economical. You never need to feel like a black bear that you pass up is the only one you'll ever see. And yet, like all bears, there's that special element of caution when you're hunting them. No, they aren't really dangerous . . . but they can sure turn the tables if you make a mistake. I don't know anyone who has been mauled by the unquestionably more dangerous grizzly bear, but I know fully three good black bear guides who have been serious mauled by black bears. No, I don't want to get mauled and I don't want to get charged . . . but the possibilities make life more interesting.