

NIGHT OF THE HUNTER...

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By Mark W. John
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During the winter of 1994-95, my hunting partner and I discussed the possibility of a spring bear hunt in Canada. We both had read numerous articles and were excited about hunting black bear in Canada. Although I had never been on a bear hunt before, my partner had taken a bear in Pennsylvania with a handgun in 1982. To this date, as he tells it, it was the hunt of a lifetime.

His enthusiasm ignited my interest and soon I was busy sending out letters to outfitters all over northern Canada. After much research and many phone calls, I chose an outfitter in Northern Alberta—mainly because you have the opportunity to harvest two bears. We finalized the arrangements and scheduled our trip for early May 1995.

Months passed and soon we were leaving the hot humid weather of Texas on our way to northern Alberta. After a long flight to Edmonton, via Toronto, we were finally within four hours of our destination. We spent the night in Edmonton enjoying the local culture and swapping hunting tales with other sports enthusiasts. The next morning found us ready to continue our

trip to Falher and meet with the outfitter. Falher is located near Peace River in northern Alberta. The terrain is mostly large grain fields surrounded by thick timber. The Canadians refer to this as "bush," and I soon came to respect this term—as the area is indeed very thick with foliage and difficult to maneuver.

The last leg of our journey seemed interminable but we finally arrived in Falher late that afternoon. After stowing our gear, we enjoyed a hearty meal and hours of discussion regarding the finer points of bear hunting in the Canadian wilds. The outfitter informed us that we would be hunting in a very remote area, known for its large bears. As an experienced hunter, I found it rather unusual to be sleeping in on a hunting trip.

However, as we soon learned, bear hunts over bait take place late in the afternoon. Since the sun does not set in this region until 10:30 p.m., it was 2:00 p.m. before we loaded our gear and headed out in the bush. Our guides placed us in tree stands about 25 feet off the ground. Tree-stand hunting was a new experience for me as I grew up hunting mule deer, antelope, and elk in the western

U.S. As we settled in our stands and began the long wait, I started to think this was a big mistake. I personally did not see a bear that first day, but my partner had a young female come into his area. He had no interest in harvesting such a small animal, but at least had company and entertainment while we waited out the hours before the guides came for us.

That night, actually 1:00 a.m. by my clock, we were treated to a big dinner and a spectacular view of the Northern Lights. Although I was disappointed about the previous day's activities, this light show of nature was well worth the trip. Next morning, with renewed enthusiasm, we were again taken out to the bush. Unfortunately, I drew the stand called the "deep dark hole," which soon lived up to its billing. After five long hours with nothing more to do than watch birds and ground squirrels, I heard a twig snap. The outfitter had told us the night before to listen for any unusual sounds and to be extremely quiet. I stayed so still I could hear my own heart beating.

With just over an hour of daylight left, I heard a loud "woof" and knew a bear was working its way towards the bait. After another 30 agonizing minutes, I finally caught a glimpse of black in the bush and remained frozen in position with my hands locked on the rifle. The bear finally moved into position for a clean shot a half hour later, barely 15 minutes before nightfall. As the outfitter had instructed us, I shot the bear through the front shoulders and it dropped immediately. I was

MORNING OF THE HUNTED

using a Remington 700 chambered in .375 H&H Magnum with 300 grain Barnes "X" bullets. Admittedly, this is probably too much gun for black bear. (Like most hunters, however, I had spent many months trying to convince my spouse that I needed to purchase an "African" gun and more importantly, I would need it for this trip in particular. Therefore, I was obligated to bring it with me.)

The bear lay motionless and I remained in the tree stand waiting for the guide. To my amazement the bear started to move as the first sounds of the guide's vehicle could be heard in the distance.

At first I was not concerned since I believed my shot was well placed. As the guide got closer to the area, however, I was astounded to see the bear regain its feet and struggle into the bush. It was too dark to attempt another shot so I waited in disbelief for the guide to find me.

After explaining the situation, we found the blood trail and followed it into the bush. Before long, we realized that it would be foolhardy and dangerous to pursue the animal in complete darkness.

At camp that evening, I went over the story time and again trying to determine what had happened and where I went wrong. The outfitter inquired about the size of the bear. All I could tell him is that it looked huge. He then explained that my shot may have been too far for-

ward and had not entered any vitals. There was nothing we could do until daybreak. I spent a sleepless night worrying about a wounded bear in the wild. My idea of hunting is not to torture any animal, but rather to meet them on their terrain as equals. The thought of leaving a wounded animal to die a slow death went against everything I was taught and believe in. That night lasted forever for me; at first light, we once again headed for the bush.

My partner and I, accompanied by an experienced guide, at

another 200 yards when all hell broke loose. I rounded a blowdown and came face to face with a very large, very enraged black bear. He was only 20 yards away and coming at me fast. I instinctively went down on one knee and snapped off a shot. It hit the bear square in the chest—he went down. I bowed my head in relief and in that split second, he was back on his feet and coming at me again. I got off a second round and this time he stayed down. All this happened in a 30 second time span; I didn't have time to think, only react! My partner and the guide came running when they heard the shots and found me sitting on a log, shaken and speechless.

The bear was massive with its live weight estimated at 800 pounds. When we began skinning the carcass, we realized that my shot had indeed gone through the front shoulders, missing vital areas. The guide believed that the powerful beast had enough left

for one last charge.

It left me with a whole new respect for this noble creature.

Hunting is a sport I have grown up with and I do not hunt with the "record book" in mind. I am extremely proud, however, that this animal met the Boone and Crockett standard, scoring 20-3/16 points. Every time I look at the 8 foot square hide on my wall or my B&C certificate, it reminds me how lucky I was to encounter such a regal animal... and live to tell about it.



MARK W. JOHN WITH HIS BLACK BEAR SCORING 20-3/16 POINTS. MARK, AN EXPERIENCED HUNTER AND SPORTSMAN, IS THE FATHER OF FOUR AND LIVES WITH HIS WIFE, LAURIE, AND CHILDREN IN THE WOODLANDS, TEXAS. HIS LOVE OF THE SPORT COMES FROM HIS DAD, AND HE HOPES TO PASS IT ALONG TO HIS THREE YEAR OLD SON, WHEN ZACK IS OLD ENOUGH TO ACCOMPANY HIM ON SUCH ADVENTURES.