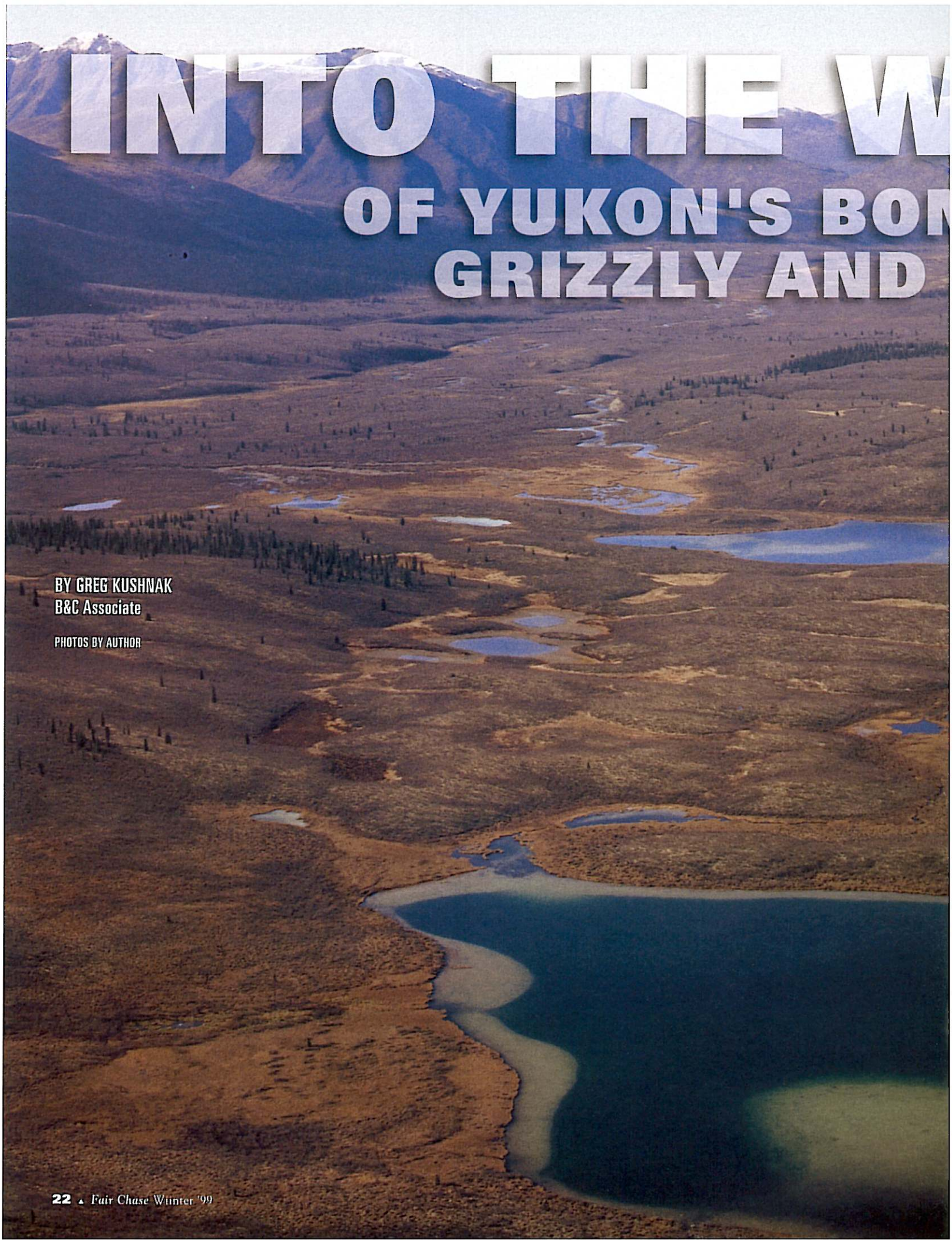

INTO THE W

OF YUKON'S BO
GRIZZLY AND

BY GREG KUSHNAK
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PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

ILDERNESS

INET PLUME FOR GIANT MOOSE

In 1947, Jim Bond discovered a bonanza for giant moose on his biological survey expedition in the Yukon. Bond was exploring a blank spot on the map that wasn't covered by the wildlife surveys of Sheldon and Selous. Accounts of Bond's hunt were published in the book From Out of the Yukon, and his description of the scenery and awesome giant moose enthralled me ever since I read the book as a young boy.

When I researched this area many years later, I found that the country had changed very little since 1947, and thanks to modern wildlife management practices, the giant moose were apparently still gigantic. In fact, a 71-inch, 244-point moose was taken out of this area a year or two before I had arrived in 1998. Clearly, the management regulations and individual strategies used by outfitters in this area were assuring sustainable high-quality trophies: hunting areas were not used more than once per season, and usually not more than once every two or three years; aerial surveys were conducted in the off-season to make sure that trophy-quality animals were not being over-harvested.

INTO THE WILDERNESS

OF YUKON'S BONNET PLUME FOR GRIZZLY AND GIANT MOOSE

After a lifetime of dreaming about this hunt, I was finally heading towards the Bonnet Plume for giant moose and grizzly. The floatplane flight from Whitehorse to base camp took nearly three hours over the vast and wild Yukon Territory – a long flight by today's standards. But if I had traveled to the same camp in 1947, the trip would have taken perhaps 12 days by horse from the nearest road, 180 miles away at Mayo. Yukon hunts in those days were typically 50 days or more. It must have been wonderful to experience an expedition of such length and magnitude, to be able to observe the seasonal changes in the foliage colors, and the behavioral changes of moose through the various phases of the rut.

Each of us had a backpack tent, and a lean-to was constructed from willows, rope, and a tarp for cooking and to keep the tack dry. Not a whole lot different than Charles Sheldon's camps during his hunting trips through the Yukon in the early 1900s.

Base camp was located at Bonnet Plume Lake amidst the awesome September scenery of the Wernecke Mountains. Base camp consisted of a few cabins for bunkhouses, storage and cooking, a wolverine-damaged cache elevated on poles, and a resident hawk-owl. I was introduced to Rick Mortimer, my guide. From here, we would embark on a classic horseback hunt using remote wilderness spike camps. This was going to be hunting like it was 50 years ago, with long rides over trails rarely traveled, and sleeping on the ground in tents. In our fast-paced technological world, this type of hunting was mentally and physically refreshing.

The next day my guide and I headed south with three pack horses to the head of the south fork of the Bonnet Plume. It was a beautiful, broad valley with wall-to-wall willow and buck brush (dwarf birch). Spires of spruce trees dotted the landscape sporadically in stunning contrast to the brush-covered landscape. Spruce also occurred as narrow thickets along the hillsides. It was a classic view of Yukon scenery, with the country looking crisp and fresh, as if it were just created yesterday. We continued toward the pass into the Nadaleen River. The pass was huge and we climbed so gradually that it was hard to know when we had reached the top. Fescue and caribou lichen formed a soft, spongy and moist ground cover. This was big willow country.

The moose we were looking for were tundra moose, commonly known as Alaska-Yukon moose. They have some ecological, behavioral, and mating-strategy differences from the taiga moose of farther south. Consequently, there are some differences in hunting methods; in the case of tundra moose, the "spot-and-stalk" method seems to be more common.

We finally reached the divide just before dark and made a willow camp a short distance beyond in the Nadaleen drainage. We were camped on the continental divide, where the Bonnet Plume flows to the Arctic Ocean via the Peel and Mackenzie Rivers, and the Nadaleen flows to the Bering Sea via the Stewart and Yukon Rivers. A small lake was perched on the divide, where the outfitter would be able to land his Super Cub floatplane, if necessary, to transport meat back to base camp.

It was still sunny and warm, but the tops of the mountains were white, as is typical for the third week of September. The lower slopes and valleys were brown, and the leaves were all gone except on a few willows. The horses relish willow leaves, and apparently can stay in condition on them earlier in the season before they turn brown. As we set up camp, a bull moose was grunting on the hill above us. Spike camp was primitive, but comfortable and adequate, considering the remoteness of this expedition. Each of us had a backpack tent, and a lean-to was constructed from willows, rope, and a tarp for cooking and to keep the tack dry. Not a whole lot different than Charles Sheldon's camps during his hunting trips through the Yukon in the early 1900s. Saddle pads were used for bedding. We ran a cold camp for a few days to avoid spooking all the game out of the country with smoke. Besides, we were willow-camping with no trees for firewood. The most warmth you get from a willow fire is going after the wood.

For the next two days, we rode in the rain into a nearby valley and glassed from a vantage point for several hours. Using the spotting scopes, we picked every bush apart, branch by branch, looking for anything off-color or an antler tine. With the scopes, we could cover a lot more country than with our legs, and besides, it was not good to tramp all over the place leaving our scent trail to spook game. Back at camp, I kept vigilance for moose, caribou, and grizzly that might pass through. In this country, you're hunting as soon as your eyes are open in the morning. An arctic ground squirrel took up residence in our camp, cleaning up on left-over oats from the horses. In the six days we were camped here, the squirrel must have gained several pounds! Everywhere I looked, there were white "clouds" of willow ptarmigans flying in flocks of a hundred or more birds, bunching up for winter. One flock on the hill above camp had about 150 birds,

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and when they all "chuckled" at once, it sounded outrageously funny.

After two days of glassing this area and seeing no moose, we decided to leave the camp where it was and take a day trip about five miles down the Nadaleen River, where we would be at timberline. If there was a good bull in the vicinity, he could be hunted without camp activity spooking him out of the valley. This ride down the Nadaleen had the most beautiful scenery I'd ever seen. We were in a big willow valley with spruce thickets on the side hills, and beautiful side drainages and mountain peaks. Even though the frost-painted leaves were gone, the country had a variety of rich colors across its landscape.

Along the way, we spotted a young 48-inch bull with a long bell that was blond all the way along his back. We also spotted a cow and calf of the same color a little further on. Not finding a bull with her, we continued down toward the forks of the Nadaleen. The river here was small, about the size of a large creek. Two very nice moose antler sheds lay along the river's edge, indicating that moose wintered here. My guide told me that moose migrated to lower areas when winter first begins, but move back up here for the rest of the winter to avoid the colder air that settles in the lower valleys. At one point along the way, we traveled a tall willow trail and came upon a monstrous beaver lodge. These are willow beavers up here, and their hides are prime in September, unlike the aspen beaver of lower elevations. Willow beavers are smaller, as there is only willow for food, and they have a shorter summer feeding season. But they are less wary than lowland beavers and easier to trap.

As we rode, there was an increasing abundance of little draws or coulees of willow with spruce fringing their sides. These draws were ideal spots for bulls to corral and protect their harems. As we arrived at the forks, one such coulee looked like a good spot for our next campsite. We dismounted for a moment to look the place over. Just as we were leaving the thicket, straight in front of us 40 yards away, was a huge bull looking at us. Rick was busy looking at the ground trying to find a trail and didn't see the moose. I hollered, "There's a moose, and he's a shooter!"

The bull looked awesome standing there, and he had it all – front palms, lots of wicked points, wide palms, and lots of spread. Rick said, "Get off your horse," and that's when the confusion began. Once off the horse, I couldn't see above the willows. Rick said, "Shoot him," but I couldn't see anything but willows. Then a couple of the cows bolted and took off down the valley. Next, the bull and another cow ran up into a patch of spruce.

I slowly walked out into the willows and searched for a hummock to stand on to get my view above the canopy. I could see glimpses of the moose in the trees. Then I moved to a slender lone spruce that would serve as a good shooting rest. There was no sense in being absolutely quiet, as the moose already knew of our presence. So the tactic was to make him think we were other moose – by looking and sounding like moose. As I moved to a shooting position in the willows, I held my rifle horizontal above my head to mimic a rival bull.

Rick held the horses out in

The antlers on the top pack were awesome from behind as we rode back to camp.

the open for bait as he grunt-called. He tied them up before any shooting started, as we were a long and remote distance from base camp and didn't want to lose our transportation. I waited in position 30 agonizing minutes without spotting the animal, thinking that moose slipped away from me on the opposite side of the spruce thicket. Rick started blade-calling and breaking sticks. Blade-calling is the ultimate challenge, and can really get a bull cranked up for a charge. Then all of a sudden, I heard the awesome sound of the bull's antlers resonating as he beat the heck out of some unfortunate spruce tree. Rick hollered, "Here he comes!"

I readied my rifle just as a cow bolted straight across the opening in front of me with the bull in pursuit. The moose were moving quite fast, and I knew I would never see this bull again if I didn't act quickly. The first shot was a good hit, and it turned the bull downhill, giving me a chance for a broadside shot. It was another tough shot – the moose was moving fast and about to disappear, and only the upper half of him was visible above the willows. The bullet connected, and all I could see was the huge antlers tipping over. This was followed by a tremendous c-r-r-ash as the giant beast fell to the ground.

This was the ultimate moment of all of my hunting experiences. The giant Alaska-Yukon moose is the true symbol of the wilderness, and I couldn't believe that I had finally collected this wonderful animal.

It took four steady hours of labor to care for the animal. Taking photos, skinning, and quartering a lot of animal is a lot of work. The hide was incredibly tough to cut and very thick on the back (nearly 1/2 inch). After removing a shoulder, I could barely drag the quarter away from the carcass, and then for only a few feet. I could not budge a hindquarter. The bones of the animal were massive beyond belief, and I couldn't get over the size of the shoulder blades. His stomach was empty, as bulls don't feed during the rut.

This moose also had blond hairs on its back, producing a gorgeous color. But it is just as common to see moose in this country that are all dark in color. The antlers were very nice looking with front palms and wicked points. They had points along the full length of the outer margins with no knobs or smooth areas. We taped the antler spread at about 63 inches, with one palm measuring nearly 17 inches. I pondered the structure of these antlers as it related to ecological fitness and trophy score. The left antler had an exceptionally long dagger-point behind the bay. I wondered how many adversaries were killed or intimidated by this point. Obviously, it was an effective offensive structure that contributed to the animal's fitness and breeding success; and yet, the point would only add one inch of credit to the score. The well-developed, shield-like brow palms appeared to be effective defensive structures that could deflect blows to the eyes and face. Many tremendous bulls with huge rear palms have only a fork on the brow of the antlers. I wondered if such bulls would be defensively disadvantaged. It seemed to me that the width of the brow palms would be a good thing to add to the trophy score.

I had been spending quite a bit of time admiring the animal – his color and hair texture, his size and form, when Rick reminded me to get to work or we wouldn't reach camp before dark. Riding horses through this country in the dark during the moose rut is best avoided if possible. We left the cape, horns and meat there, deciding to return the next day with the pack horses. We made it back to camp at a fast pace (the horses knew where the oats were), arriving about dark. After supper, Rick recited from memory Robert Service's "Cremation of Sam McGee" in its entirety. In the morning, we had bacon, eggs, and moose steak, and packed a lunch of peanut butter and blueberry jam sandwiches. I could easily live on moose meat and not tire of it. This moose was killed September 22nd in full rut, and was well "perfumed," yet the meat was delicious and reasonably tender. I had read that rutting moose are not edible. Rick had eaten over two dozen moose and they were always good, rut or no rut. So much for that theory.

The grizzly had a beautiful silver-tipped brown hide with various shades of red and blond, but with dark legs.

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OF YUKON'S BONNET PLUME FOR GRIZZLY AND GIANT MOOSE

Late September in the Yukon is only for the adventuresome. But that's what Yukon moose and grizzly hunting is all about – adventure in wild and remote places.

We reached the area where we had left the bull in the early afternoon, we tied the horses some distance away, took our loaded rifles, and cautiously approached the kill site. There were no grizzlies, only ravens and jays. We had the moose boned and loaded in a couple of hours. The antlers on the top pack were awesome to view from behind as we rode back to camp. The rack was packed just like a moose would carry it when his nose is up – front palms and tines upward. They flowed through the brush and trees without snagging, like a boat hull. On the way back, we had to chase off a young bull attempting to romance our horses. We arrived at camp after dark, and the northern lights descended upon us like curtains, streaks, and sheets of light folded together in an awesome display directly over our heads.

The next day, it snowed in the morning, cleared in the afternoon, then rained in the evening. Weather changes here incredibly fast, and without warning. We spent the day butchering, caping, packing, and fleshing the moose. It takes an incredible amount of time to take care of the animals once you shoot 'em, and a three-species hunt would be a real busy project. As Rick worked on the animal, a weasel packed off the scraps from skinning the moose nose. Weasels don't put on fat for the winter, so they must either cache food or hunt constantly. This one would winter quite well. By the end of the day, we had hauled three horse-loads of meat, cape and antlers to the little lake for Chris, my outfitter, to pick up with the floatplane. That would be the last I saw of my moose until returning to base camp a week later.

We broke camp early the following day and moved to higher country to look for grizzly and caribou. Now that the berries are gone, the bears were likely to have moved to the high country to ambush caribou and to seek denning sites. We left the Nadaleen and headed for the upper reach of the south fork of the Bonnet Plume. We found a suitable campsite among the willows about halfway up the valley. This is high country, all willows and rocks with no spruce, and alpine at the upper end of the valleys. From there, we would look for caribou above the brush line, crossing valleys, and heading to the tops of mountains for the rut beginning October 1st.

It had snowed during the night, which whitened things up a bit. While Rick was cooking breakfast, I climbed up the hill to do some glassing. In the first tributary valley above camp, about a mile or two away, I spotted a grizzly walking down the drainage. Then it turned at the brush line and side-hilled its way effortlessly up the main valley. The bear stopped at the next tributary for half an hour, digging for squirrels, roots, or something similar. The wind was from the north, right toward the bear, and we were on opposite sides of the main valley with two miles of seven-foot tall buck brush between us. There was no possible way to approach the bear at this time. The bear continued up the main valley and disappeared in the brush. I was fairly certain that the bear's intentions were to travel up the valley, so I would have a good chance of getting a crack at him later when we went up there looking for caribou.

After breakfast, the weather cleared, and we rode up the valley toward a pass that leads to the Stewart River. We spotted one caribou cow low in the bottom, and a bull and two cows way on the top of a rough, pointed mountain ridge where you would expect goats to be. These caribou belong to the Redstone herd, and are behaviorally, physically, and ecologically identical to mountain caribou. But since we are north of the Stewart River, the animals are entered as barren ground caribou for records book purposes. The ridge was too steep to get up to the caribou, and besides, I was in no mood for hunting caribou. All I could think about was that grizzly. I glassed further down the mountain to about willow line and found the bear again, about a half-mile up the valley. Fortunately, by this time, the wind had changed, coming from the bear and toward us. The bear was moving downhill and then disappeared in the brush.

We were getting fairly close to the Stewart River pass, so the valley was becoming narrower and funneling us and the grizzly closer together. As we arrived at the pass, I saw what I thought was a dark wolf running across the stream about 300 yards below us. A few moments later, it reappeared and was running up the draw right toward us. Only this time, it wasn't a wolf, it was a wolverine. Torn between shooting the wolverine and looking for the bear, I reluctantly handed my horse to Rick and walked down to a knob for an ambush. As I waited, the wolverine didn't show. I either spooked him or he had already slipped by. I looked up the slope for the wolverine, but instead spotted the bear coming down. I didn't spook the wolverine – it had been the bear!

I belly-crawled a short distance for a shot. The bear disappeared in the brush for a moment, and when it reappeared, I shouldered my .300 Weatherby, chambered with a 180-grain Barnes-X cartridge, and readied myself for a

150 to 200 yard shot. My shot flipped the bear over backwards. Since I didn't hear any response or commotion from the bear, I walked back up the hill and approached the presumably "dead" bear from above. The bear had slid 20 feet down the slope from where it was hit, with no sign of a struggle. The bullet went into the front left shoulder, and out the other side behind the opposite shoulder. He must have died instantly.

The bear had a beautiful silver-tipped brown hide with various shades of red and blond, but with dark legs. The teeth had a fair amount of wear and tooth analysis determined it to be seven years of age. The color of a grizzly is fascinating and more important to me than size. These sub-arctic bears have a seven-month denning season (compared to five months for Montana grizzlies), and therefore don't get as large as southern or coastal versions. But their heads are large in proportion to their bodies, and the color and quality of their hides are superior.

It took a couple of hours to skin the bear. I stuffed the skull in my daypack, and Rick tried to tie the hide on behind the saddle, but the horse wouldn't have anything to do with the project. So we left the hide, planning to return the following day with a pack horse.

Spotting and following this grizzly bear had given me a wilderness sensation that was very thrilling, and altogether different than what I experienced with the moose. Both animals were wonderful symbols of the wilderness, and collecting both of them on this hunt provided a more complete Yukon experience.

The next morning we rode two hours back up the pass with a pack horse to get the bear hide. As we approached, a huge golden eagle flew off the carcass, spooking my horse sideways so that we almost landed right in the middle of the bear hide. Luckily, the hide was covered with four inches of snow, so the horse didn't detect it. Otherwise, things would have fallen apart in a real hurry. This kind of expedition hunting is dangerous. One minute you're on top of the world, and the next finds you underneath three horses. I could not believe the immensity of the eagle and his wings. Ptarmigans were all over the valley. I saw tracks of a marten, which was most likely hunting the birds. Since we hadn't sighted any caribou, we decided to return to base camp the next day and work on the bear hide.

Two bull moose were at spike camp when we returned. Rick pulled out his .30-30 in case he had to shoot a charging bull, a gored horse, or both. The bulls were probably courting the other two pack horses that we had left in camp for the day. It was the last two weeks of September and the bulls are "in love." They are much easier to hunt during this time as they are out in the open more, moving around, vocal, and easily called. Just breaking branches for a fire brings 'em in. I was able to see why a moose is called twice; the first call would bring his head up to attention, and the second call allowed him to pinpoint our location.

We packed up the next morning and headed for base camp, arriving just as a snowstorm hit and dumped three inches, turning the country white. Base camp was quite a comfort after spiking out for 10 days. Late September in the Yukon is only for the adventuresome. But that's what Alaska-Yukon moose and grizzly hunting is all about – adventure in wild and remote places.

The moon was half full that night, and produced a beautiful reflection on the lake. One of the hunters caught a bunch of lake trout earlier in the day, and our base camp cook used a delicious recipe to cook them for supper. The next day, I cleaned the bear skull while Rick fleshed and salted the hide. Chris and the other guides were pulling horseshoes and getting ready for the eight day, 180 mile ride out to Elsa (near Mayo). It's too rough of a trip (mostly brush, ice, and bogs) to trot the horses, so they walk 'em. The guides invited me to ride along, but I figured I was gone from family and work long enough. It would have been a neat adventure though.

As the Otter arrived to take me out, I looked down the Bonnet Plume for the last time, and realized how much the Yukon had been a part of my soul for most of my life. I was thankful to have finally connected with it. ▲▲▲

B&C Associate, Greg Kushnak with his Alaska-Yukon moose taken during his Yukon adventure.