

BLACK BEAR On Your Own

Self-guided black-bear hunting can be incredibly exciting and very successful, if you know where to go and how to go about it.

By Bob Robb
B&C Professional Member

Black bear hunting is addictive. I happily admit to being one who spends far too much time each year planning and executing bear hunts. The reasons have nothing to do with success. If the truth be known, for every bear I've taken, I've spent at least two or three weeks savoring the chase. That's just the nature of the beast.

I've hunted them about every way you can, too. I shot my first bear back when hound hunting was legal in Oregon. Both ways are fun and challenging in their own way. But truth be known, there is nothing more fun than spot-and-stalk hunting for black bears.

I have hunted bears many places, and as the saying goes, each is "just the same, only different." Most spot-and-stalk hunting occurs in the fall, when the majority of states and Canadian provinces have open seasons. With black bear numbers booming across the animal's range, opportunities abound for the enterprising do-it-yourselfer.

Hunting Fall Bears

No matter how you choose to go about fall black-bear hunting, it is much more challenging than taking a deer. For example, Pennsylvania is a lower-48 state with a reputation as a good place to bear hunt. Yet there are estimated to be fewer than 10,000 bears in the entire state, compared with more than a million deer. Gary Alt, the now-retired Pennsylvania wildlife biologist and nationally-recognized black-bear expert, once said that a survey conducted of his state's hunters showed that 13 percent of successful bear hunters shot the very first black bear they'd ever seen in the wild, and 53 percent had seen fewer than six bears in their entire lifetimes—including trips to places like Yellowstone National Park. Without a game plan and knowledge of local bear habits and haunts, bear hunting can be more frustrating than the search for the proverbial four-leaf clover.

Of course, bear populations are very strong in the more popular hunting areas, which encompasses the western U.S., western Canada, and, of course, Alaska, where bear population estimates run as high as 150,000.

Key On Food Sources

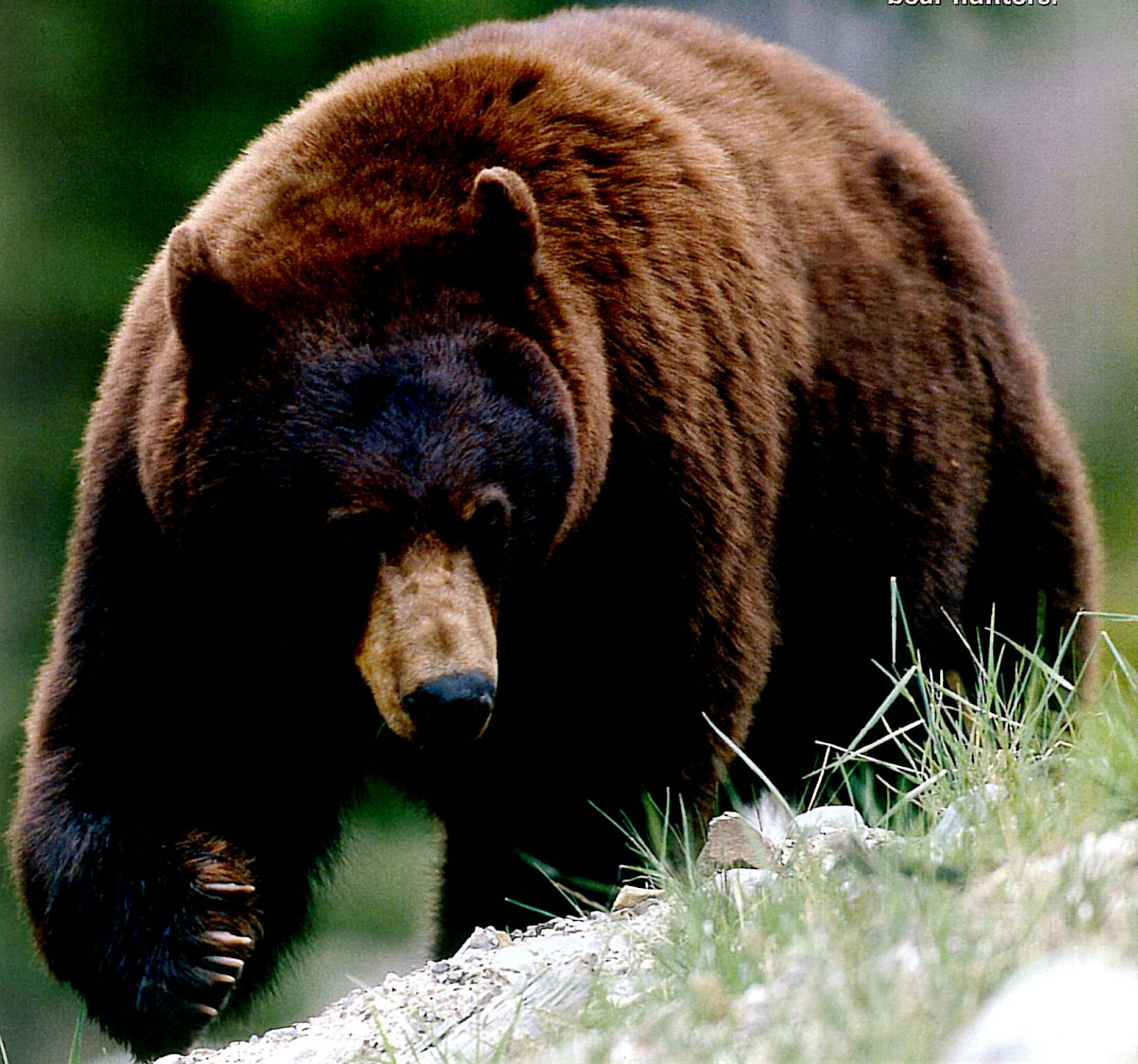
Regardless of where you hunt bears, always remember one thing—a black bear is a large, furred food processor whose movements and habits are largely dictated by a seemingly insatiable appetite. More than any other big-game animal I've ever hunted, black bears tend to concentrate on specific food sources at specific times. Generally speaking, their preferred fall food sources are berries, mast crops, and fruits, though in areas like Alaska and coastal British Columbia you can add migrating salmon to the list. In spring they concentrate on freshly-sprouting green plants and, while most people don't know this,

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FIELD JUDGING BLACK BEARS

How can you tell a big bear from a little one? After all, bears don't have easily-identifiable features like antlers. What does a first-timer do? Judging black bears is an art in and of itself. While there is no substitute for looking at lots of bears, here are seven tips that will help you judge a bear's size, even on your first bear hunt.

EARS: Big bears appear to have small ears, because their heads are so large. Also, a record book-class bear will have ears that are probably at least 8 inches apart between the tips.

FRONT FEET: Measure the track of a front paw pad, add one foot, and you have the approximate size the bear's hide will square. Thus, a 5.5-inch pad will carry a 6.5-foot boar, or male, bear. Females rarely have front paws that exceed 4.5 inches in length.

NOTE THE WIDE-SET EARS ON THIS BIG BOAR

BODY LENGTH: A female rarely exceeds 5.5 feet in length. Mature males are longer than that, with many trophy-class bears measuring more than 6 feet from nose to tail.

SNOUT: Big bears have what appears to be a square, "stovepipe" snout. Younger bears and females have what appears to be a longish, pointed snout.

LONG LEGS: A truly big boar has what appears to be long legs, while small bears and mature sows have what appear to be shorter legs.

HEIGHT: A larger-than-average bear, when

standing on all fours, will have a back-line that reaches to, or above, the waist of an average-sized man.

CUBS: Boars hate cubs. If there are cubs with a larger bear, it's a female. If the cubs scamper up a tree and the female begins to act nervous, get ready—a boar may have moved into the area.

THIS BEAR DEMONSTRATES THE TALL, POINTED EARS AND SNOUT TYPICALLY FOUND ON A YOUNG BEAR

black bears can put the serious hurt on newly-born deer, elk, moose, and caribou calves.

Your first step is to call a state game biologist and ask about the preferred foods in the area you plan to hunt. In many mountainous Western states, huckleberries draw bears like magnets. In California and Oregon, I've watched bears tear up manzanita patches and almost knock down laurel trees to get their berries. In the Southwest, black bears can eat every acorn dropped for miles, and routinely flatten large patches of prickly pear cactus. In the East, acorn crops are a key food source; beechnuts can draw them like a magnet; and chokecherries, hazelnuts, and black cherries are also good bear foods. Fruit orchards, with apples high on the list, can also draw them. Skunk cabbage is bear candy wherever it's found. Where I hunt often in coastal Alaska, bears favor fish, cow parsnip, and sedge grasses in tidal areas, and they devour berries and fresh grasses higher up.

You must remember, though, that bears do not act like deer. That is, when one specific food source has been depleted, they'll move on until they locate another. While deer may use an acorn ridge for a month, bears may be on it a week or less before leaving. Also, bears are very mobile animals. Alt's research showed that some males will use an area of as much as 60 square miles (females 15 square miles) as a home range, moving all the while looking for food.

Scouting Is Critical

Anyone who takes a black bear without scouting should stop off at the convenience store on the way home and buy a lottery ticket. They're that lucky. In addition to food sources, look for scat, tracks, feeding activity like overturned rocks, dug-up anthills, decaying logs that have been torn up, and places where bears have literally ripped branches from trees to get at the nuts. Also, ask lots of questions of locals, including if there have been any recent bear sightings, or any general areas where bears are seen from year to year.

You can also scout in summer. In the Southwest, I often scout deer and bears at the same time. I glass during early morning and late evenings for deer, then during midday, I check out oak groves and cactus patches. If I find trees that bears had torn limbs off of the previous fall, I am reasonably sure that when these same trees produce next fall's nut crop, there will be a bear vacuuming them up.

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Hunting Bears

Bears move primarily at night, though when they're not heavily pressured you can catch them out during the day. I've found that late evening is by far the best time to take a bear. Bears like to move just before dark, feed at night, then retreat to the nastiest, thickest place around to bed for the day. Swamps, cool timbered ridges, overgrown clear-cuts, and the like are the kinds of places they like to bed. Stationing yourself between the bedding area and the food source is a great way to get a shot at a black bear.

In the intermountain west, I find it best to pick a spot where I can see a lot of country, and glass. Forget about looking for bear sign itself. If there's food around—berries, nuts, etc.—and it's a good bear area, sooner or later you'll spot a bear. Look mostly along the edges of timber fingers, thick brush, and so on. In the thicker country of the east and Midwest, scouting and finding sign, then hunting it more like you would a deer is the best way to spot bears.

Making Your Move

Never, ever underestimate a bear's sense of smell. You must get the wind right, or forget it. Always approach the core area of your hunt, and take your spotting station, from

down wind. I've had bears smell me at a half-mile and bolt like they were hit with an electrical shock. Bears also have excellent hearing, so you must wear quiet clothing, not make any strange noises, and take pains to quietly stalk in for your shot. Usually if they hear you, it's *adios*. Their Achilles heel is their eyesight. While I've had bears see me at 100 yards, if you wear drab clothing and don't move when they're looking your way, chances are they won't spook.

Regardless of your weapon, try and take the bear through both lungs. I've not seen a double-lunged black bear go more than 100 yards before expiring. Remember that they have leg bones like steel pipes, so try and slip your bullet or broadhead in behind that front leg. Also, because bears have thick hides and lots of fat, they don't usually leave much of a blood trail to follow.

This 'n That

Skinning black bears is tedious and requires scalpel-sharp knives. In fact, many of my guide buddies use exactly that—a scalpel with replaceable blades. I find small Victorinox steak knives with about a 4-inch blade excellent. Bears have lots of fat, long coarse hair, and thick hides that will take the edge off a knife quickly, so having several knives or a sharpening tool is essential.

Always wear rubber gloves when skinning a bear to avoid possible infection. I got a finger infected once skinning an Alaska brown bear, and when I tell you it was one of the most uncomfortable and frightening experiences of my life, you best believe it!

You need top-notch optics. I prefer a 10x42-class binocular and spotting scope with a top-end power of at least 45X for judging a bear's size and hide quality at distance. If you plan on saving the meat (not a requirement in some states in the fall, but often a requirement in spring) as well as the hide, you'll need a full-sized frame pack large enough to hold your gear and the bear. When hunting by myself, I've found it takes me two trips to pack a boned-out bear carcass, hide and skull, and my gear back to wherever I started.

Clothing, of course, depends totally on where you hunt and the anticipated weather.

Black bear hunting is indeed one of North America's most challenging hunts. Those who become a student of bear habits and haunts are willing to spend lots of days scouting, then hunting while perhaps not seeing much. But they are prepared to make the right moves and fire a good shot when they do see a bear. They are the ones who can truly call themselves bear hunters. ■

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