

# BACK IN BLACK: OKLAHOMA BRUINS

BEYOND THE SCORE

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By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rock cavities and dug-out root-ball dens of black bears were void of their once-numerous occupants. The subtle feeding chuckle of the infantile, hairless cubs would no longer reverberate from these secret places in the mountains of eastern Oklahoma. It was the first time they hadn't been heard since the end of the last ice age. The black bears, once kings of this unique geographic region, were gone. What had changed? Whatever caused it must have rushed in like a flash flood. Within a few short generations, stories of black bears were only re-told tales heard by the young ears of those that were now old. The icon of American wilderness had disappeared.

When one thinks of Oklahoma, you typically don't think about it being black bear habitat. Pre-European settlement, however, the Ouachita and Ozark mountains were probably as good of bear habitat as there was on the planet. The oak, hickory, and pine climax forests of these mountains lie in eastern Oklahoma and western Arkansas, with the highest peak just above 2,700 feet. The Ouachitas are the only east-west running mountain range between the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains. They are an extremely old range of mountains, formed by tectonic uplift, that geologists believe were once as tall as the Rockies, but eroded over a time period that is incomprehensible by the human mind. Eastern Oklahoma marks the western edge of the massive Eastern deciduous forest which is a virtual sea of hardwoods that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean over 1,000 miles inland before it transitions into the great prairies.

*These were edge bears. And they were special.*

Unregulated market hunting, landscape-level logging, and habitat fragmentation dealt a blow to the bears that would extirpate them from the region. By 1915, there were no black bears left in Oklahoma. By the 1940s, it's estimated that in the whole state of Arkansas only 50 bears remained from a population once estimated at over 50,000. However, in the 1950s and 60s the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission traded bass and wild turkey with Minnesota and Manitoba in exchange for 254 black bears transported back to Arkansas in wire cages

Most people don't think about Oklahoma being mountainous, but eastern Oklahoma shares the Ouachita and Ozark Mountains with western border of Arkansas, prime bear habitat.

This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt strongly believed that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.

in pickup trucks. These bears would be relocated into strategic locations in western Arkansas. After 30 years, the relocation would be considered the most successful reintroduction of large carnivores in the world. From this core population, bears would repopulate much of their original range in Oklahoma, and also spread into Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, and northeast Texas.

Today biologists estimate that 2,000 black bears reside in Oklahoma. By conservative figures, another 5,000 reside in Arkansas. In 1980, Arkansas reopened the black bear hunting season, and in 2009 Oklahoma reopened theirs. Black bears are thriving, and it's a massive win for conservation and hunting—the icon of American wilderness is *back in black*.

### OKLAHOMA BLACK BEAR HUNTING

In 2009, the Oklahoma Department of Game and Fish opened its first black bear hunting season in modern times. It started out with an October 1 archery opener and a 20-bear quota in a four-county area. Baiting was allowed on private land. In all, 32 bears were killed on that first day of hunting before they could stop the hunt. They continued with a quota system until 2012 when they dropped it, hoping to entice hunters to wait for older, male bears. Over the last seven years, the highest harvest for one year has been 71, and a total of 284 bears have been legally harvested from 2009 to 2015.

Having had bears for decades before the hunting season opened, the Oklahoma bear population holds an

older age class of bears. In other words, the Sooner State has some big bears. Many people don't realize it, but Bergman's Rule (body size of a species is larger in colder climates) doesn't strictly apply to bruins. Canada has some giant bears, but the largest black bears on the planet are in the eastern United States (Pennsylvania and North Carolina). Bears opt out of winter stress by going into a state of torpor (not hibernation), effectively side-stepping the biological law that governs ungulates and most other mammals. Bears in the lower latitudes den in response to food availability, not cold weather. The only obligate "denners" are pregnant females who give birth in the den in January. This means that on years with good fall mast (acorns, hickory nuts,

beechnuts), bears may feed through a good portion of the winter. What does this translate into? Big bears.

As I write this, the bear season is open in four counties: Latimer, LeFlore, Pushmataha, and McCurtain. These are Ouachita Mountain counties known for their rugged terrain and are locally called the Kiamichi Range. The fall hunt over bait is truly a challenge because the white oak acorns begin falling during this time. Mature bears will pound the baits all through September, but disappear like black ghosts the weeks leading to the season opener. A bait site that has five or six bears coming to it may only have one by the time October 1 arrives. Often the target bears are the first to leave. Additionally, bears in this part of the world are usually very spooky of humans. Bears in the Canadian wilderness typically offer more tolerance of humans in hunting situations. You have to do a lot of things right to kill a big bear in Oklahoma.

An Oklahoma sow stands in the rugged Kiamachi Range of the Ouachita Mountains in eastern Oklahoma. The reintroduction of bears into this region is considered the most successful reintroduction of larger carnivores in the world.



## MY BIG OKLAHOMA BEAR

In 2015, I had one major hunting goal—to kill a Boone and Crockett bear in Oklahoma. I didn't proclaim it to many, but I believed it was possible. I'd never killed a Boone and Crockett animal, so the lofty goal wasn't within the normal parameter of my *modus operandi*. As the publisher of *Bear Hunting Magazine*, I've had the opportunity to hunt bears in some of the best places in North America. I knew that there were some un hunted giants in the region, and I was committed to do everything I knew to get one. However, enthusiasm and desire usually isn't enough. With any Boone and Crockett animal there is a third, less tangible, yet oddly paradoxical, variable at play: destiny.

Having hunted brown bear in Alaska just the year before, I can honestly say that I was more excited to hunt Oklahoma. I love the beauty and the challenge of local hunting. To kill a Boone and Crockett bear in Oklahoma with my bow would be hard to top by any far-off, exotic bowhunting destination. My father had a good way of keeping my feet on the ground when I was an impressionable young hunter. He never straight up said it, but he eluded that the guys that had to travel far off to hunt may not have had the skills to be successful close to home (the region we lived in was tough hunting). Now I know that the assumption isn't always true, however, from this hegemon I've built my hunting career. The

principle was that I needed to be as good a hunter as I could be in my home region.

The rugged Ouachita Mountains of Arkansas were tough bowhunting for any species, and they became the backdrop of my hunting paradigm. Success forged out of difficulty produced an appreciation for hunting that neither blood nor money can buy. Western Arkansas/eastern Oklahoma isn't a trophy destination for any big-game animal, but I've found the guys who can consistently kill mature animals here are, by my standards, the real deal. Which, I guess in a sense, that's what I've always ascribed to be.

I started baiting on a secluded piece of private land on August 28, 2015. I opened

up the bait with a mix of donuts, white bread, grease, frosting and candy. This time of year our bears can't get enough carbohydrates, and they'll literally eat as much as you can put out. After the first card pull around September 5, I knew I was in the game as I had two bears coming in that would qualify as shooters. Both the male bears I estimated to be over 450 pounds; by the time October 1 rolled around, I was confident they were both over 500.

I've learned over the years of monitoring bears in Arkansas that a 500-pound bear isn't always a 20-inch bear, which would be the assumption. The B&C state record Arkansas bear scored 21-9/16 inches and weighed in the high 400s. A good friend



The No Name bear the first day he showed up at the barrel on September 30. He was the lesser of three mature boars coming to the bait site.

killed a bear that weighed 508 pounds that scored 19-11/16 inches and later killed a 448-pound bruin that scored 20-5/16 inches. I didn't know for sure that either of these bruins coming to my bait would make the 20-inch B&C Awards minimum, but I was willing to take a chance. However, getting a picture of big bear is light-years away from actually putting your hands on one. To be honest, I knew it would be a miracle if I could hold bears of this caliber for a full month. Turns out I was right.

I estimated that I made 10 trips, two hours one way, to Oklahoma between late August and October 1. I'd also traveled to Wisconsin to get a load of high-quality bait in August. Over the course of the month of baiting, I had eight

adult bears come to the bait. At each baiting session I would stuff two 55-gallon drums, and sometimes three, chock-full of bait. The strategy that I've found works best in our region is to give the bears as much as they'll eat, allotting them no reason to leave for acorns. The second tactic that I employ is adding meat the last five days before the season opener. I primarily use beef scraps and pork fat. I've found that bears gradually lose interest in the carbs and sugar, but a new item on the menu will often hold them for a few more days. The key is to not give it to them until the end.

Around September 25, I employed my late-is-great meat tactic and the big bears responded until September 29. However, as if they'd read the regulations book, both

bears disappeared two days before the season opener. They'd been there every single day since September 5, but it didn't matter. They were gone now.

What I couldn't have predicted was that a new bear would show up the very day the two giants left. Some might think it was territorial, but I don't think it was more than unique coincidence. I've often seen multiple alpha males feeding at the same site. The first time I saw him on the card was on September 30, the day before the Oklahoma season opener; I called him No Name. The bear was mature, but he was clearly smaller than the other two bears. I knew he'd be hard to pass up.

#### THE HUNT

On October 1, I arrived

Many people don't realize it, but Bergman's Rule (body size of a species is larger in colder climates) doesn't strictly apply to bruins. Canada has some giant bears, but the largest black bears on the planet are in the eastern United States.



LEFT: Clay and Jeff Ford with the Boone and Crockett Awards skull. At the time of printing Clay's bear is the number two Boone and Crockett bear from Oklahoma. RIGHT: Oklahoma biologist and B&C Official Measurer, Jeff Ford scores the author's bear in Hodgen, Oklahoma.

# BACK IN BLACK

at the bait site at 11:00 A.M. You can't hunt these baits in the morning, or you'll spook off bears that have spent the night eating. As I crept towards my stand location, I was pleased that no bears were at the bait. However, no sooner than I climbed the tree, a sow appeared and began to feed, but only after staring intently at me in the stand. Almost without warning, she came to the base of my tree and proceeded to bluff-charge up the tree. With bark flying and my heart pounding, I watched her get within about two feet of my platform. She stopped just short of getting in the stand, and for the next 45 minutes proceeded to harass

me—woofing, shaking trees and glaring at me in the stand. I wouldn't have wanted to be on the ground with that sow.

I saw multiple bears throughout the afternoon, but the action started to heat up after 5 P.M. when a large male came to the bait. He was a nice bear by anyone's standards, and likely weighed close to 300 pounds. As he approached, I mumbled out loud, "Should I shoot this bear?" After some soul searching, I opted to pass him in hopes that one of the big bears would show up. This time of year, passing any nice bear is a gamble. Rarely can you even hold mature bears through the season opener, and when you do, its usually just for a few days. The baits are usually dead by the third or fourth of October.

At 6 P.M., I had three bears at the bait, including the nice male. However, on cue all the bears dispersed from the bait and within minutes I saw a large black head coming

down the trail behind me. One glance to my right, and I knew this bear would qualify as a shooter. His head was huge and blocky, but his belly was tight around his mid-section. I knew it was the No Name bear. Part of me felt like shooting him would be a compromise, but I knew I couldn't pass on him in Oklahoma. It was on. Surprisingly, No Name paid no attention to me in the stand. All the other bears had looked up and noticed me. He sauntered into the bait without hesitation, dropping his head just 12 yards in front of my tree stand. Quartering slightly away, I drew my Mathews No Cam HTR. The bear was so big and close, that I had difficulty picking a spot because my peep sight was filled with black fur. After a slight hesitation, I centered the pin and released the arrow. *Thaw-wack!* The arrow hit the giant bruin right behind the shoulder and he crashed out of sight

down the mountain. The big Oklahoma bear was mine.

We recovered the bear the next morning after we couldn't find a single drop of blood anywhere. A high entry and no exit wound left me guessing through the night, but we found him within minutes the next morning. The bear was beautiful. He had a huge head and neck, huge feet, but the body size wasn't as big as the other two bears. He weighed 360 pounds. I didn't think the bear would make the 20-inch Boone and Crockett minimum. However, after a 60-day drying period, Oklahoma Game and Fish biologist and B&C Official Measurer, Jeff Ford measured the bear at 20-8/16 inches. The bear was also tooth-aged at 6 years old. I accomplished my goal and had an extremely rewarding hunt in the Sooner State. Black bears are a tremendous wildlife resource, and I'm proud that we've got bears to hunt in Oklahoma. ■



Clay Newcomb with his 2015 Oklahoma black bear. The bear scored 20-8/16 inches and weighed 360 pounds.