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Last Hour Bear Spirits

By Dick Merrell

It was the fifth and last day of my hunt. Being the only person in camp who had not pulled the trigger on a huge black bear is similar to the feeling of being the last kid not picked for the neighborhood baseball game, dejected with low spirits. What had happened during the five-day hunt was wonderful for the other hunters. My two hunting friends had each shot huge black bears. One had a skull size measuring 20 5/8 inches and the other weighed in at over 550 pounds, the quality of bears I was hoping to shoot. A third hunter had also collected a monster.

However, my spot and stalk hunting had resulted in observing about 30 bears: walking, feeding and even sleeping. My guide, Andrew Ripplingale, even videotaped two average size sows sleeping as I made noise to get their attention.

We had stalked to within 20 yards of a boar but he was facing away from us, head down, feeding and I could not be certain of his size. He was feeding on the lush grasses planted by the lumber company that had timbered the area. He gave us no opportunity to view his size until he lifted his head. It appeared he had suddenly smelled us and immediately lunged forward in high gear. He was a shooter, but it was too late to shoot. As most hunters will agree, the size of a black bear seems to be more difficult to judge than the size of any other animal.

Although a bit dejected, I had been very clear to Dave Fyfe, the owner of North Island Guide Outfitters, that I was perfectly willing to go home without a bear if I could not shoot a large bear. My previous black bears were all in the 150-200 pound range. I wanted a bear over six and a half feet approaching 400 pounds.

We were hunting about 30 miles southwest of our main location in Port McNeill, Vancouver Island, British Columbia. We hunted in the morning, had lunch in the village of Woss and now were parked at the end of a two-mile long logging road. I had taken a nap, which refreshed my spirits, and then glassed the area on both sides of the valley for a half-hour.

Two days earlier, about halfway up this logging road and 150 yards down the slope, we had seen a sow sleeping on a tree stump. We returned hoping to see a large boar that might be interested in breeding the sow. Having observed no cubs, our supposition seemed reasonable.

Sometime after 4:30 p.m. Andrew suggested it was

time we move to new territory. Several hours previously, it was raining and the diesel engine had churned loudly as we progressed uphill. It stopped raining as we started downhill and the diesel was comparatively quiet. The 30-inch high dense undergrowth and small trees also helped absorb the sound of the engine.

British Columbia hunting regulations do not allow a loaded rifle in a vehicle, and the magazine must also be empty. My Browning A-Bolt rested easily on the seat by my left leg and the ammunition clip was in my right hand ready to drop into the floor plate. It works well, but I had not hunted with this type of restriction.

Suddenly, Andrew braked and pointed straight ahead. He had seen two bears cross the road. I apparently missed seeing the first bear, but I did see a large bear run up the steep bank on my side and move up hill quickly. As I bailed out, Andrew was already up the left bank using his binoculars to view the moving bear. As I came around the back of the truck, I asked in a loud whisper if the bear was a shooter. After perhaps five seconds (it seemed forever) he said, "Shoot, shoot" and put his backpack over a log and pointed to it.

I scrambled quickly to the log, cupped my left hand to hold my .338 Winchester Magnum and placed it on the pack. It was a steady picture as the cross hairs centered on the bruin's front shoulder. He stopped broadside to look our way. At the sound of the 225-grain Trophy Bonded Bear Claw leaving the barrel, the bear lunged up the slope. A second shot at the running target and the bear disappeared. I ran down the road looking uphill and could see only green foliage and stumps. After running a hundred yards I stopped and started to glass where I had last seen the bear. I had slung the rifle over my shoulder and the bino straps flexed as I held the binoculars steady with both hands. Surely, I had hit the bear but no black heap of fur could be seen. Was the undergrowth too high?

I was quickly jolted to look towards Andrew, who had stayed at the log, shouting "There he is, there, there." He was pointing to a spot directly uphill from me. The binoculars hit my chest. The black bear was moving in an erratic manner, but slowly making his way across the mountain to my right and past me. He had traveled perhaps 75 yards parallel to the road and I had been scanning the wrong area. I found his shoulder in the cross hairs of the duplex scope and the last shot in my rifle stopped his

progress. As I watched him slowly tumble downhill perhaps 20 feet, I quickly ejected the empty clip and put in a full one.

Andrew hurried down to me and we watched the black heap for several minutes. It was apparent the bear was dead, so he quickly climbed the slope to the bear. I returned to the original shooting log and used my Leica range finder to measure 164 yards to the site of the first shot.

Next was for me to get to the bear, about 125 yards up the steep slope. I made the slippery trek a slow motion 15 minute climb because: 1) of wet undergrowth, 2) there were many scattered logs, 3) probably most important, three days earlier I quietly celebrated a birthday making me eligible for Medicare.

With about two hours of light remaining, we called Dave on the radio and told him my hunt was over. He arrived in a half hour with the other hunters.

As we skinned the boar, we guessed the first shot shattered his right front elbow joint and hit the lungs. The second shot struck just below his tail doing no damage (apparently I did not lead him far enough). The last shot had anchored him by hitting three inches above the first shot.

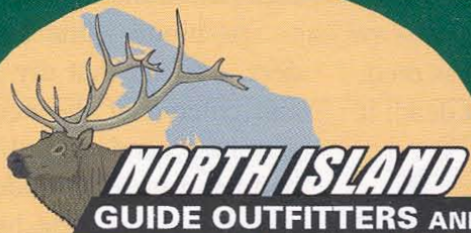
As the superb black hide lay on a blue tarp, it squared at six feet, eight inches, well above my expectations. The skull measured 18 8/16 inches with an estimated weight of nearly 400 pounds. There was not a mark or blemish on the hide and the small patch of diamond shaped white fur on the chest was a bonus I had not noticed when taking pictures.

My previous feelings turned into elation as I enjoyed the beautiful



The author and his last day British Columbia bruin.

trophy. The last successful hunter was now soaring with the bear spirits. 🐾



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