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Three Times Is For Quitters

BY THE HUNT DOCTORS

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We tried to quietly but quickly pick our way through the deadfall-strewn, steep mountainside that had been logged some 10 to 15 years ago. It had been replanted with what looked now to be perfect Christmas trees. We strained our eyes to pick out the correct black shape that represented Paul's quarry – a large, very smart and ancient bear. The problem was that all the remaining tree stumps were also black from the post-clearcutting controlled burn. And, to make matters worse, the wind (which had been in our favor from the beginning of the stalk) started to swirl

yet again. From our previous experiences, we knew we were in trouble. Suddenly, we spotted a black blob under one of those Christmas trees. It was "Big Al."

Off to Bear Camp

We had organized this seven-day, two-on-one hunt in 2004 with Dave Fyfe, owner and operator of North Island Guide Outfitters, and confirmed it at the 2005 SCI Convention in Reno. His reputation for consistently taking big, mature coastal black bears preceded him, as did his dedication to ensuring that all

aspects of the trip would be first-class. Craig Field and Dr. Greg Bonham were also to join us on this expedition.

After two years of expectation and anticipation, we finally walked off the twin-prop plane onto Vancouver Island. Immediately after we retrieved our bags, Dave was there. He took us straight to his house to freshen up and get all the required licenses, tags and paperwork filled out.

The ride up to "bear camp" took a little over an hour. The camp happened to be a very nice, fully equipped house, filled with facts and information about coastal black bears,

offered by his crew of expert guides. Soon, the requisite checking zeros on our Weatherby Mark V rifles was done, and we sat down to a wonderfully prepared meal.

After a good night's sleep and a delightful breakfast, we headed out. It had been decided that Steve was to hunt first until he got a bear. Paul would then take over. We drove up logging roads into the majestic scenery where, despite more than 100 years of logging, the sometimes-near-vertical landscape was filled with massive, old timber of various ages. The mountain-tops were still covered in snow, even though the temperature was in the 60s.

The mild overcast was perfect for bear hunting. We concentrated on glassing old logging areas in which the roads were overgrown with fresh grass. Our Leica Geovids were just outstanding and allowed crisp, detailed examination of the surroundings.

Big Al Outsmarts Us – Twice

After viewing multiple bears that morning (a total of 12 that first day), we arrived at a strategic lookout point. There, Dave quickly spotted a large, lone bear on a steep, replanted mountainside. The bear had picked a home that was going to be very difficult to

stalk because of the steep terrain, proximity of surrounding impenetrable overgrowth, swirling winds secondary to the confluence of the mountains, and the mounds of dead-falls left behind from the loggers to stop the topsoil runoff after the trees were killed. Nonetheless, we drove to the most accessible starting point and began our sneak into the bear's home.

We headed up an overgrown logging path after making note of the bruin's whereabouts in relation to a vertical rock bluff. Our hopes were that he wouldn't move far in the hour it would take us to get there and that the wind wouldn't give us away.

We made it about halfway up the steepest part, but the bear picked up our scent because of the constantly swirling wind currents. As if he had done it 100 times before, he simply turned, walked out of sight and up the mountain before entering into the forest, some 500 yards away. He glanced over his massive shoulder in our direction as if to sneer and laugh at our impotent attempt.

We left, disappointed, but decided to look for him again that afternoon. By the amount of bear scat piles around, we surmised he had been there for a while and was very comfortable staying there.

Off we went, our tails between our

legs, in search of another bear. We had been beaten – and badly. The bear, which we named "Big Al," seemed to know it, too.

We spotted more bears but none of the caliber we were after. However, while we slowly drove down a thick, overgrown road, a large bear suddenly materialized in front of us. We all scrambled out of the vehicle and pursued the bruin on foot. He made his way down the narrow, winding path, allowing us to close the distance. Unfortunately, we couldn't capitalize on this opportunity, so we returned to the vehicle for more glassing from different vantage points.

That afternoon, we returned to the lookout point that allowed us to glass for Big Al. Immediately upon putting his binocular up, Dave spotted him, back in the same general area as that morning. We decided to try again.

We wanted to ascertain whether any other approach was possible, but the terrain dictated the same approach. Back we went to the jumping-off point to begin our climb. The wind was better but not good. We crossed over our previous point of maximal progress and proceeded to close the distance.

We spotted Big Al through a picket fence of debris and Christmas trees. He was 40 yards away and heading





slowly toward us. Then, just as before, the wind shifted, blowing right toward our quarry. We backed up quickly and climbed higher to avoid the wind. We thought we had him, because we saw him making his way through the trees and heading for an open area directly below us.

Steve got into position for the shot, but just before he stepped out, Big Al stopped behind some trees and backed up. He picked up our scent from the trail, turned and bolted down into the thick cover. Gone again! We had been outsmarted by the same bear twice in one day. We headed back to the truck and made our way back to camp as darkness set in. Dinner and bed were in order and badly needed.

Three Sevens

The next day found us hunting with one of Dave's guides, Doug. He has lived on Vancouver Island his entire life and is an excellent hunter and superior fishing boat guide. We traveled and glassed all morning but saw very few bears. After lunch and a nap, we headed back out. We traveled down a winding road that overlooked the edge of a large, pristine mountain lake.

After crossing a bridge, Doug pulled over. With no expression in his voice, he announced that there were two bears in the ravine a few hundred yards back. We thought he was joking because of his lack of excitement, so we played along and ran up the road, catching up to Doug at the edge that

overlooked the deep ravine.

Indeed, there were two bears at the bottom, slowly walking away. While Steve got into a prone shooting position, Paul ranged the bear at 85 yards. It rapidly became apparent we were watching a much larger bear following a sow. Doug was busy blowing his wounded rabbit call to halt their progress toward a jungle of bush while Steve awaited the command to shoot.

Finally, Doug stopped blowing the call and issued the order to take the bruin, which immediately bolted at the shot. He collapsed into the creek 10 yards later – stone-dead from the devastating damage caused by the Barnes Triple Shock bullet.

We made our way down the embankment to the creek to find a massive coastal black bear that weighed more than 500 pounds. The photo session had to take place in the creek because there was no way to get him out of there. This was followed by the normal skinning, quartering and packing the beast back up the embankment.

The rug was a legitimate 7 feet, 6 inches, and the skull was 20 12/16 inches when measured back in camp. We will both swear in court that Doug was at least as excited as (and perhaps even more than) we were.

We continued to hunt the rest of that day but, despite a lot of bear sign, we didn't see any sizable candidates. However, what occurred right before dark was truly amazing. On our way

home, we passed the same bridge where Steve had taken his bear a few hours earlier. Craig and his guide, Travis, were behind us by five minutes, also returning to camp. As they drove by that same bridge, another massive bruin walked out onto the road, and Craig easily killed him. Another 500-plus-pound bear that squared a true 7 feet, 3 inches had been taken within 100 yards and four hours of Steve's bear. As it turned out, a third seven-footer was taken that same day by one of the other hunters in camp.

Drawing the Line in the Sand

The next day turned on us weather-wise. It was colder, spitting rain and windy – not exactly ideal bear weather. Nevertheless, we were able to spot a few bears that day but nothing to be excited about. Still, the scenery was fantastic and the day very enjoyable.

The following afternoon found us back on the point that overlooked Big Al's territory. The weather was the same as the day before. Again, true to form, Dave immediately spotted Big Al. This time, we really sat and analyzed the situation. No bear was going to outsmart us a third time!

We were more than 1,200 yards away and, despite many different possible approaches, we found ourselves climbing the same trail we had used before. Clearly, after two failed attempts using this same tactic,

continued on page 121

Three Times is for Quitters

continued from page 24

we were not feeling too confident. This time, though, we planned a quick and direct assault. Again, however, Big Al winded us as the currents swirled in the bowl-shaped depression in the side of the mountain.

Big Al walked out of sight and up the mountain, entering the forest at the same, old place – but not without stopping and giving us the same disgusting look. We were crushed, and Paul had had it. He announced that he was going to get Big Al.

Dave cautioned Paul about focusing on a single bear for the remaining three days. But the line in the sand had been drawn, and the game was on. The ribbing and jokes flew around us that night. We had struck out three times with the same animal. He had made fools of us. The whole camp echoed with "Three strikes, and you're out!" We, of course, thought otherwise.

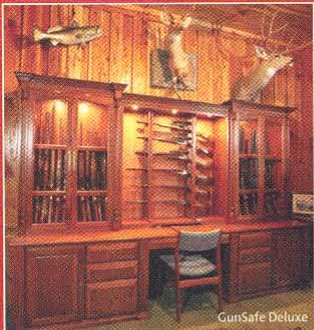
The fifth morning of the hunt found us going directly back up to the same lookout to see if Big Al had come out for breakfast. This time, as we were about to move on, he appeared at the bottom of the semi-open grassy slope. There was no discussion and no planning needed because we knew the only approach was the same as the last three failed attempts.

Off we went to the now-too-familiar trail that led up to Big Al's home area. We quickly climbed up the path through the timber and out into the slash cutover, all of us simultaneously spotting Big Al.

Paul quietly made his way to the first stump that gave a clear view. Big Al was very close to the edge of the dense timber, so, after quickly putting the crosshairs in the right location, Paul fired. He followed it with two more before the bruin made it 15 feet and disappeared into the dense underbrush. Big Al was no longer a challenge – he was a trophy.

After a rainy photo session, skinning and quartering, we packed him out and drove back to camp. Big Al turned out to be 6 feet, 5 inches but was on his last year. He had no fat reserves, gray hair on his muzzle and back, and his teeth were worn down to the jawline.


We spent the last few days (which happened to be beautiful, weather-wise) relaxing and spotting bears. The last thing we did was rebook a future hunt for our kids. What an experience they will have! 🐾



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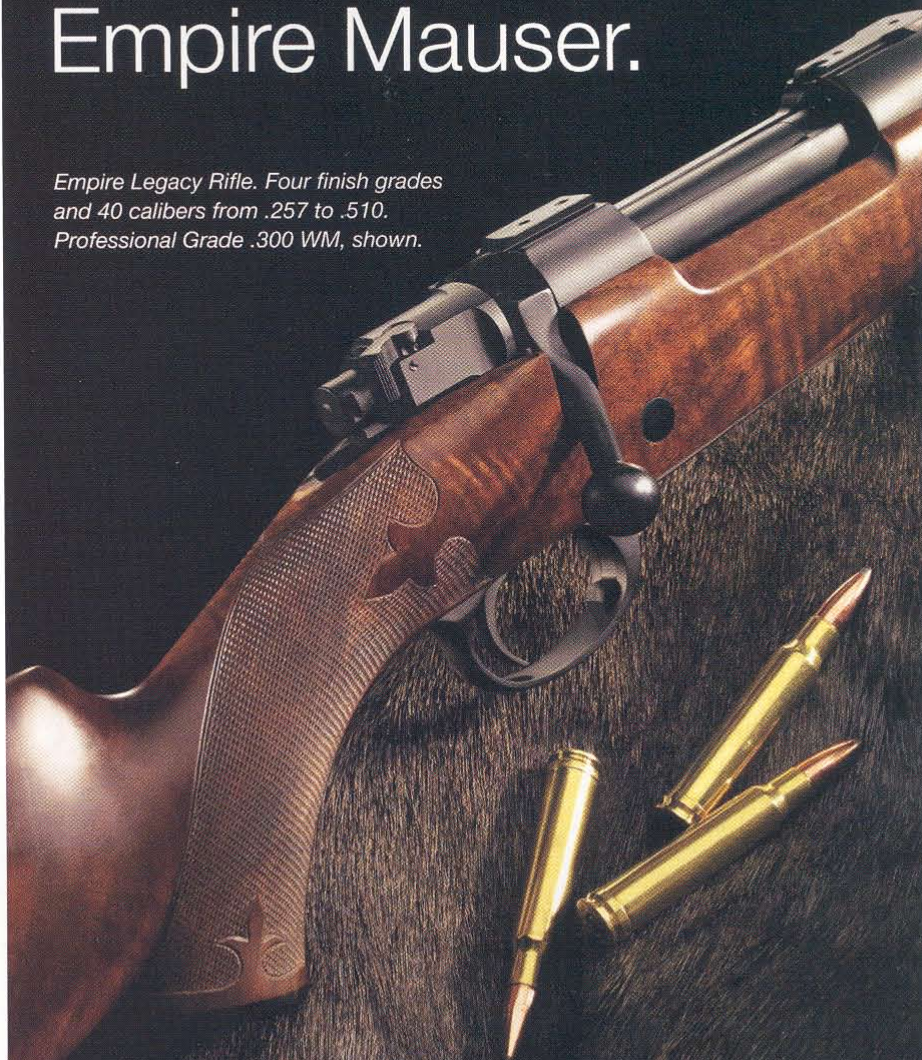
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