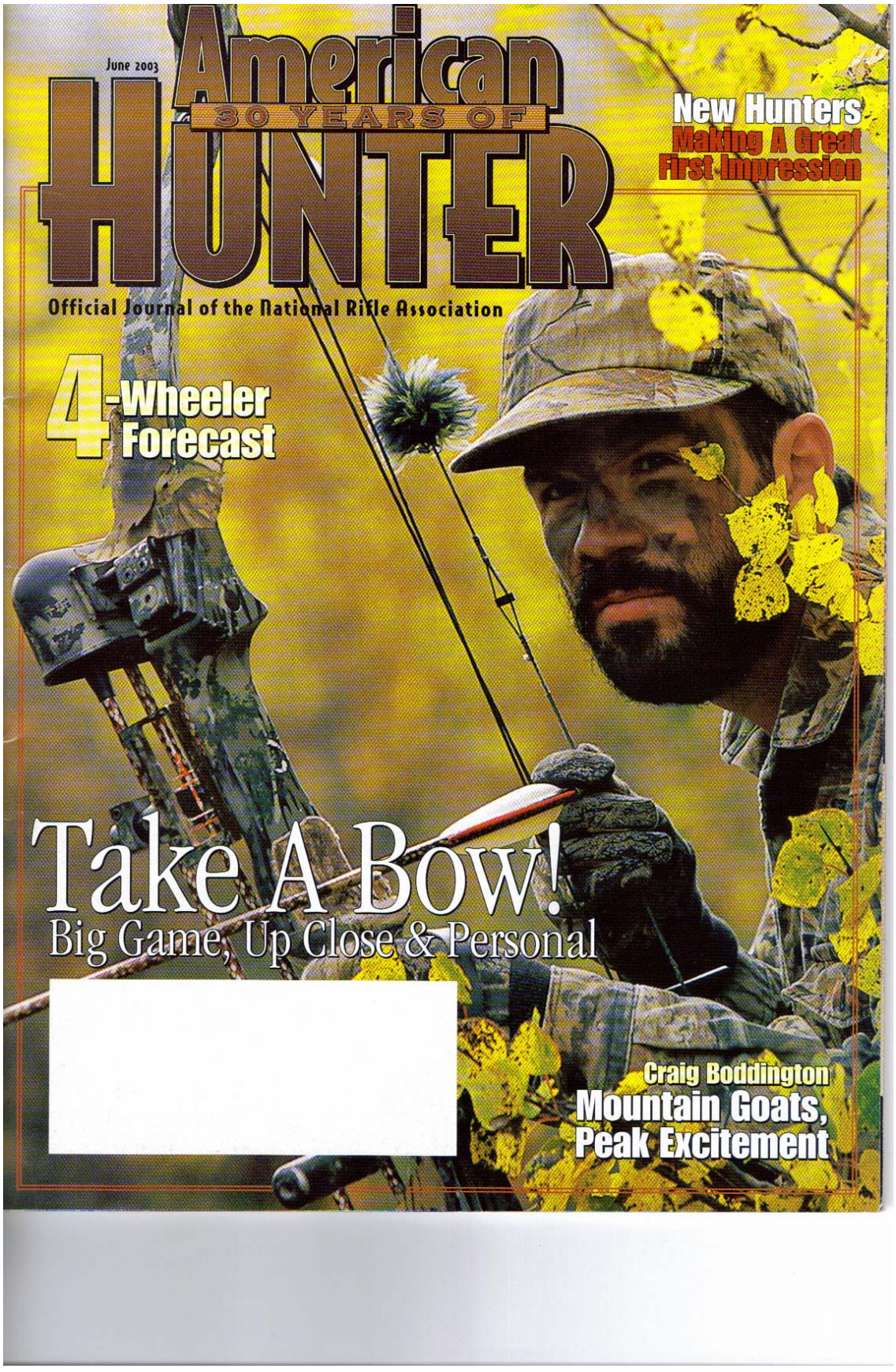

June 2003
American
30 YEARS OF
HUNTER
Official Journal of the National Rifle Association
New Hunters
Making A Great
First Impression
4-Wheeler
Forecast
Take A Bow!
Big Game, Up Close & Personal
Craig Boddington
Mountain Goats,
Peak Excitement

With studied expectations you plan to end your bear-hunting days with a bang. And then—*BANG*—it isn't what you expected.

THE LAST BEAR

By Thomas McIntyre

When Captain Charley Madsen, one of the earliest outfitters on Kodiak—in all of Alaska, for that matter—hunted bears in the days before exclusive guide territories (now come and gone themselves), license applications, drawings, permits, and quotas, he coasted the island and explored its bays in his 92-foot yacht, the *Kodiak Bear*. When a bear was spotted, Captain Charley or one of his assistant guides and a hunter would head for shore in a jollyboat, land, and make a stalk. At the end of the day, hunters and guides returned to berths on the *Bear*, and the vessel cruised to another bay. Nobody much worried about restricting this kind of hunting because there were just so many bears and so few hunters.

It is for the better that bear hunting is carefully managed now, though it is a baleful thought to think that the classic mixture of seawater and bears found in Captain Charley's wake might be gone from Alaska. As it turns out, it isn't. An hour's flight in a Beaver floatplane can carry you to another boat—nearly the equal of the *Bear*—*The Alaskan Grandeur*, a 78-foot, transoceanic yacht launched in 2001. It has a 22-foot beam, and its 6-foot prop, turned at 200 rpm by a geared-down Caterpillar 3407 diesel engine, lets it make a steady 10 knots. It has four full passenger suites, private baths and heads, a salon, and galley. Which is all well and good, but what matters is what it was built for.

Master Guide Jimmie Rosenbruch, *Grandeur's* captain, built the boat to hunt bears. Jimmie came to Alaska almost 40 years ago from Nevada, where he was a civil engineer building tunnels for the Interstate. He came as a hunter and stayed on as a licensed

guide, his whole family following him: Wife Mary Ann, son Jimmie, and 22-year-old newlywed daughter, Alisha (who for some reason known only to herself and her family is nicknamed "Mutts") are all licensed guides. Together they guide for Sitka blacktail and mountain goat, but it is bears, both brown and black, that have been at the heart of their operation, especially preternaturally big, salmon-fed coastal black bears.

A Bear, A Moment, A Place To Savor

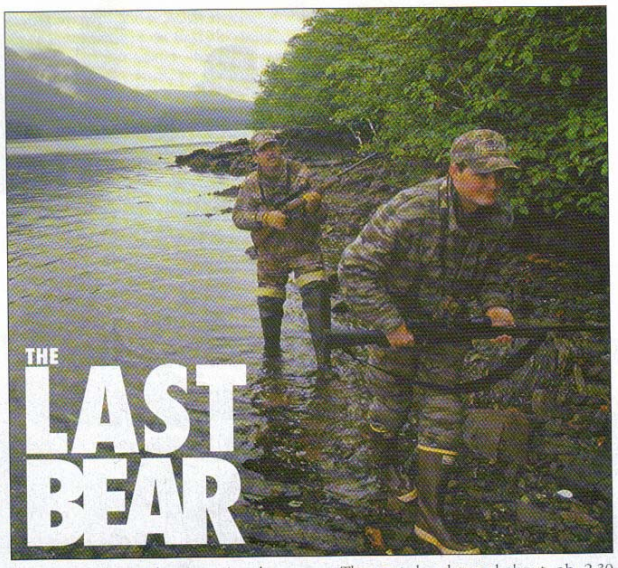
Big black bears were what I was thinking about as I stood on the wide swim-step at the stern of the *Grandeur* one evening last spring. I had made the hour's flight in the Beaver and was now smoking a post-prandial cigar in the perma-twilight that domed the calm bay, watching Q-Tip-headed bald eagles perched in the tops of the spruces, hearing Canadas honking north, and seeing snow pushed back to the tops of

The author's big coastal bruin–measuring nearly 8 feet in length–did not come as expected. But it's the unexpected that will take him back to Alaska for another "last bear hunt."

Photo By Author

"In Search of Spring". © 2003 Lindsey Foggett/The Hadley Group, Bloomington, MN. 800-927-0800

Photos By Author



THE LAST BEAR

the surrounding peaks—meaning the dens on the slopes had been uncovered and their occupants were out, looking for food and mates.

I had made a small pact with myself about black bears: I had killed eight, and nine would be my last. No real reason, except that nine was a definite, square number and probably as many black bears as anyone needs in a lifetime. If I were to take my last bear here, though, it would have to be the biggest black bear of my life, pure black, and one I would not hesitate to preserve in a full-body mount.

It was greed, pure and simple, with a splash of hubris. I wanted a bear as spectacular as this land and ocean where I was hunting, and equal to the grand style of the hunt. If this was the last time for me, I wanted to go out with a bang, everything happening the way I had always thought it would. I finished the cigar and went to my cabin to sleep and wait for the next day, not appreciating the folly of expecting the expected.

The next day dawned about, oh, 2:30 a.m., but I didn't know that, asleep in my cabin. In fact, I didn't bother getting out of bed until almost 9 a.m. A hunter on the *Grandeur*, in the spring, who wants to be looking for bear during the entire duration of shooting light should budget at least 21 to 22 hours per day. And while he may be out there 24/7, the black bears won't. Nearly nocturnal, the bears can wait till almost dusk before stepping out of the impenetrable jungle that is the forest. They will come out onto the flats, then, to feed on the sedge at the water's margin, preferring the salad to the meat course in the first weeks after hibernation. The only things that keep the big boars out in the open this time of year are the tender grasses and tender … well, the urge to breed. And the only thing that lets Jimmie and his guides and hunters reach those flats, even in the small aluminum boats they hunt from off the *Grandeur*, is the tide. Waterborne hunters must time their trips into the bays and estuaries so they won't be stranded by low tide when it is time to come out and head back. Today, this meant we wouldn't begin hunting before 3 p.m.

Geared Up And Glassing

It was past 3 o'clock, and any misconception about bear guides being burly and macho had been dispelled when I found myself on the bay in an aluminum boat with pigtailed Mutts and her husband, Zach Decker, a former rodeo bullrider. I sat in the boat with my Blaser R 93 chambered for .338 Win. Mag. This was my first time using a Blaser. I liked the fact that it could be easily taken down and fit into a case that could then be put *inside* a duffel bag during travel. Once I had gotten used to the not-exactly-tang safety and straight-pull bolt, the Blaser proved to be one of the fastest, smoothest hunting rifles I have ever used. Reassembled on the *Grandeur*—with its Kahles Helia CB 30mm 1.5X-6X scope with the 7A duplex reticle (heavy posts surrounding fine crosshairs for low-light targeting) mounted on the detachable barrel—we had carried it earlier in the afternoon over to a secluded cove and sighted-in, the bullets hitting right where they had at home from the bench. Now we glassed for black bears as Mutts ran the outboard with one hand and binoculars with the other. Within half an hour, she had spotted a bear some impossible distance away on a hilltop; then a little later, we saw our first bear on the beach.

He was a boar Mutts estimated at 7 feet. From a distance he was at once a glossy, obsidian sheen and the absence of light, like some ursine black hole. He was also the biggest black bear I'd ever seen in my life. And he was with a sow. And I immediately turned him down. This wasn't the right way, yet.

We went on up the bay, running into a tidal inlet and landing on a grassy spot where we could glass the surrounding shore for almost 360 degrees around. It was past 5 o'clock when we saw the first bear, across the inlet. Through my Kahles 8x42 camo rubber-armored binocular, I could see he was

Quality hip boots recommended, large-bore rifle a must: Hunter and guide discuss strategy in the low-visibility fog of coastal Alaska. A bright, fog-proof scope atop a .338 Magnum or bigger is essential.

a touch smaller than the boar with the sow (though bigger, again, than most any other bear I'd ever seen) and badly rubbed. We watched him on and off for 30 minutes, mostly out of the general human fascination with bears. Then the bear I wanted stepped out.

Mutts, with eyes that had been judging bears since age 7, called him at near to 8 feet; we needed to take a close look. She used the boat's electric trolling motor to take us silently across the inlet where we got out as quietly as we could in the ankle-deep water, even though the boar was more than 400 yards upwind and now hidden by a creek bank and a stand of spruce. Mutts and I loaded our rifles, set the safeties, and began to stalk.

It seemed to take hours to close the distance across a mud flat and up the bank, the soles of my waders soundlessly filling Mutts' tracks before they could fill with water. Finally we were on hands and knees in tall grass, crawling around the edge of the spruce. The boar was across the creek, about 110 yards away, grazing. He was also starting to jerk his head around, seeming to sense something he could not yet smell. Mutts whispered, *"Yeah, right at 8, with some slight rubs on the face and shoulder. What do you want to do?"*

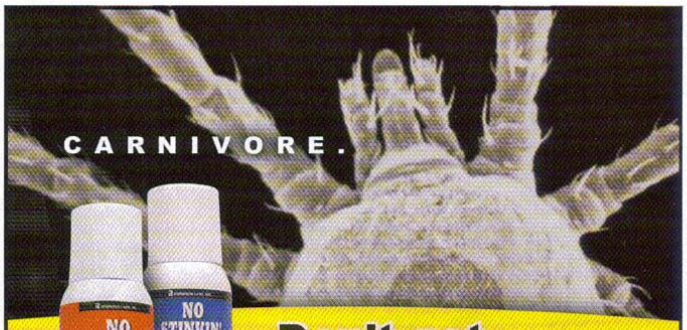
It was not even four hours into the hunt, but there he was, a bear as big as the Ritz.

I looked around for a place to prone out and get a solid rest and clear shot at the bear's heart and lungs, knowing that "dead" bears—whose slow metabolisms take a long time to register death—can run a long way and that the rainforest was just yards from him. If he could get there, even mortally wounded, he could be lost. My last bear shouldn't be a lost bear.

Twenty Long Seconds

I crawled flat to a spot out from the spruce and got the scope on the increasingly jittery bear, waiting until he stepped out broadside and I had a shot without any grass in the way before making the final decision. I let off the safety, held just behind his left shoulder, above the point of the elbow. I was expecting one shot, clean and quick, but that's not the way it always is with bears.

The truth is, "anchoring" a bear with one shot can be like expecting to anchor the *Grandeur* with a cinder



Don't get eaten alive.

Now more than ever, protection from **West Nile Virus** and **Lyme Disease** is serious business. No Stinkin' Bugs and No Stinkin' Ticks sets the standard in protection made just for hunters. Our Fall Blend™ scent lets you hunt where you want. Without being hunted yourself.

No Stinkin' Bugs contains Deet for the ultimate skin applied bug repellent. No Stinkin' Ticks contains Permethrin for clothing applications.

Robinson Outdoors Inc.
110 North Park Drive · P.O. Box 18 · Cannon Falls, MN 55009
www.robinsonoutdoors.com

Try our DR® FIELD and BRUSH MOWER for

6 MONTHS RISK-FREE!

We're so confident you'll love it, we're willing to make this RISK-FREE offer!

If the DR® is not the hardest-working, most durable, easiest-to-use machine for clearing fields and brush that you've ever used, we'll take it back and you won't be out a penny. We'll even pay for shipping it both ways!

Test this amazing, self-propelled, walk-behind brush cutter on your property to—

- **CLEAR & MAINTAIN** meadows, pastures, roadsides, fencelines, walking paths with ease!
- **CUT** tall grass, weeds, brush, brambles — even saplings up to 2-1/2" thick!
- **CHOP/MULCH** most everything you cut!

FREE SHIPPING now in effect for a limited time! Call or write soon.

CALL TOLL FREE 1-800-354-2800

www.drfieldbrush.com

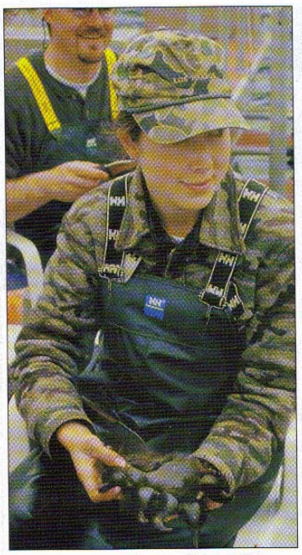
YES! Please send me your FREE Catalog and Video about the new **DR® FIELD and BRUSH MOWER,** including models, powered attachments, and factory direct savings now in effect.

Name _____
Address _____ AMH
City _____ State _____ ZIP _____
E-mail _____

COUNTRY HOME PRODUCTS®, Dept. 45879X
Meigs Road, P.O. Box 25, Vergennes, VT 05491

© 2003 CHP, Inc.

Photo By Author



Despite her coy looks, the savvy guide known as "Mutts" has eyes like a hawk and the heart of a lion. Alisha Decker's passion is putting clients on big bears.

block. Bears will drop with the first shot, but will be up and running in seconds, too, unless a hunter actually (and accidentally) broke the spine. (Tell me, please, where you intentionally aim to spine a broadside bear?) Hoping to "break down" a bear by aiming for the shoulder won't do much to stop one from getting away, either. The way to kill bears, blacks as much as browns, is to use a big-enough gun, shoot for the heart and lungs, and then be prepared to keep shooting with every bullet in your rifle until the bear stops moving where you can see him. Anyone who says this is not so is simply suffering from a severe deficiency of experience in hunting bears—or is the beneficiary of a phenomenal string of lucky shots.

Still, what happened next should have been better.

Broadside, his head lowered nervously to feed, the bear had come to a momentary stop when I pulled the trigger. The 215-grain bullet went through, shattering his right shoulder on the off side. Then he was running.

A wall of trees was only a few yards to his right, but he ran in a wide, left-handed semi-circle across the grassy flat, heading for us. I worked the Blaser bolt and fired again. And again. I hit him, and he went down. Then got up. I missed, then shot again and hit again, but he barely stumbled. That was four, and the bear was now 50 yards from us and closing ground.

"I'm out," I said, as clear and calmly as I could, getting to my feet.

Mutts was already up, off to my right. Maybe I was just hearing things, but I'm almost certain this rather beautiful, modest, sunny young woman said, quite distinctly, "Damn!" though maybe it was only "Darn!"

I pulled a cartridge from the pouch on my belt, pushed it down into the magazine, pulled another, dropped it, pulled a third, and got it fed into the chamber. Mutts had her .375 raised and was firing, trying to find her lead on the bear.

The bear came off the opposite bank and splashed into the water, a plume of blood trailing in the current. His face remained that wary, stoic mask that doesn't change until the instant a bear decides to bite or maul something. I don't know whether he was coming for us or just trying to come through us, but if he got to us the results would be the same, whatever his intention. I set the crosshairs behind his injured right shoulder and fired. He went down in the middle of the shallow creek in a shower of water and tried to stand once more. I fired again, and he was done, 20 yards from us.

From the first shot to the last had taken 20 seconds. Instead of going out with a bang, it had been *bang, bang, bang* … .

And One More For The Road

After we had recovered from a stunned, and just slightly awed, silence, it took the three of us to roll him out of the creek and back onto the bank. His hide would square out at 7 feet, 10 inches, and his skull would measure 19½ inches. (Within the next week, Mutts would guide other hunters to black bears squaring out at 8 feet 1 inch, 8 feet 4 inches, and one at 8 feet 7 inches with a 23-inch skull.) He was big enough and black enough to fulfill my last-bear expectations; but did I want him to be that after all? This was not how I'd expected it to be, and I didn't know whether that made it easier or harder to call time on my black bear hunting.

We tagged the bear, and Mutts skinned and quartered so we could pack out all the meat (for sausages and hams and loin roasts) and the hide and skull. I thought about Captain Charley Madsen and how it used to be in the good old days, and how the *Alaskan Grandeur* and bears such as this made these days pretty good ones, too. In my head I furiously recalculated all the black bears—then recalculated again—and realized I'd been in error. This was only the eighth. I could take one more one day without breaking my pact.

In the overcast light of 9 p.m., no-see-ums pocking my flesh, I felt relieved and indebted—relieved that I could honorably hunt black bears again after this, and indebted to this black bear for showing me the foolishness of wanting life to be as one expected it to be. It was the unexpected life that was worth living … and if you thought you could really declare which bear hunt would be your last, you had another think coming.

Hunt Info

Based on having hunted, by spotting-and-stalking, a geometrically larger number of black bears than almost anybody else in North America, Jimmie offers the following advice to hunters:

Rifles—"A .375 or .416 is ideal." He does not recommend .300 or 7mm Mags. or .30-06s. Bullets should be soft, round-nosed, and heavy; Remington Core-Lokts would be a good choice.

Optics—Be sure your rifle scope will function in low light, and use heavy European-style reticles, like the Kahles 7A.

Clothing—Wool or fleece for the weather and silence. Camouflage is vital. Have ankle-fit, non-insulated hip boots and try them out before your hunt to make sure they don't squeak when you walk. Rain gear should be a dark, rubberized, knee-length hooded coat, like those made by Helly Hansen. Rain pants will then be unnecessary.

• • •

Rosenbruch Wildlife Museum—Jimmie Rosenbruch believes in putting his money back into hunting, so in 2001 he opened the 40,000-square-foot Rosenbruch Wildlife Museum in St. George, Utah (435-656-0033). With Swarovski Optik as its major sponsor, the museum houses over 300 wildlife specimens and through exhibits and self-guided tours explains the essential role hunting plays in the preservation of both game and non-game species. The museum attracts 100,000 visitors per year, 35,000 of those, most significantly, school children.

Jimmie Rosenbruch can be contacted at Glacier Guides (Dept. AH), P. O. Box 460, Gustavus, AK 99826; 906-697-2252; winter address—P.O. Box 460, Santa Clara, UT 84765; 435-628-0973; **www.glacierguidesinc.com**.