STALKING THE WORLD'S BIGGEST BLACK BEARS

MONSTER ISLAND

BY JOHN B. SNOW

They say that good things come to those who wait. How then to explain the black bear I was looking at through my spotting scope? Less than 15 minutes into the first day of a weeklong hunt, what looked like the bear of my dreams emerged from a strip of thick Alaskan rain forest about a third of a mile from where my two hunting partners and I had set up to glass. So much for patience. A great thing, it seemed, had landed in my lap.

We had just unloaded our gear from our small skiff at the mouth of a tidal river when the bear showed. He was feeding on newly greened-up plants at the far end of a broad, natural amphitheater where the river emptied into the cold salt water. Unaware of the three hunters who were watching him, the bear would walk a few steps searching for tender shoots of sedge and, when he found some to his liking, would lower his massive head to feed. The bear's image waved and jittered in the spotting scope from the thermals rising off the ground that separated us, yet these distortions couldn't obscure his size. He was huge.

Bears are among the most difficult big-game animals to size correctly. But I could tell from his heavy head, thick neck and squat profile that this mature boar was much larger than any other black bear I had ever seen. My guide, Jimmie Rosenbruch, with more than 40 years of bear hunting under his belt, was a bit more precise. "He'll go eight and a half feet," he whispered after observing the bear for a minute. "What do you think?"

He was asking, of course, if I wanted to start stalking to get within shooting range. Even though I didn't want the hunt to end so quickly, I agreed we should get closer for a better look. Gazing through the spotting scope one last time before we started, I marveled at the bear's size. Seven is the magic number most hunters hope for when going after a trophy. At eight-foot-plus, this bear was as big as, or bigger than, most inland grizzlies. For a black bear he was practically off the charts.

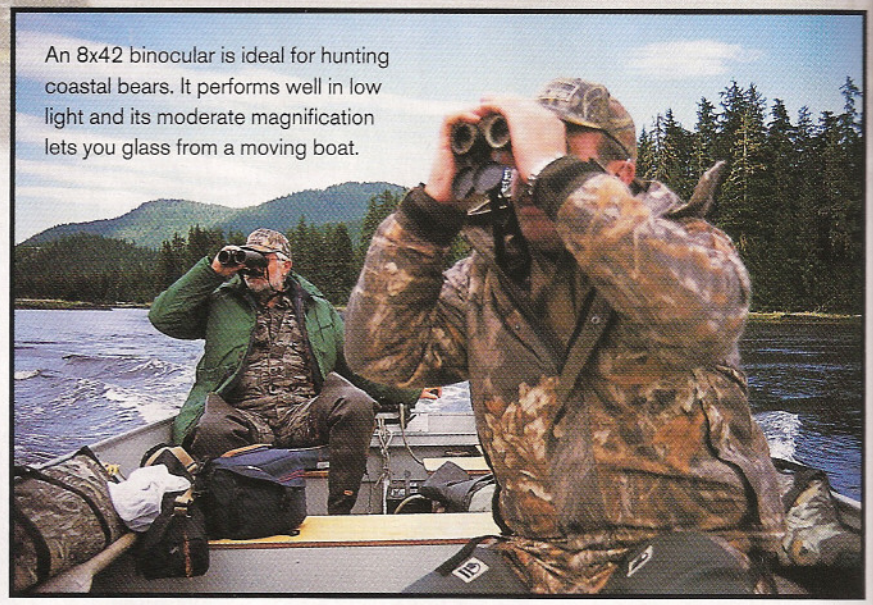
LAND OF GIANTS

Encountering this gargantuan bear did not happen by chance, however. Over the course of decades of guiding, Rosenbruch has explored thousands of miles of Alaska's coast and has hunted countless inlets, bogs and alpine heights. Like most guides, he has

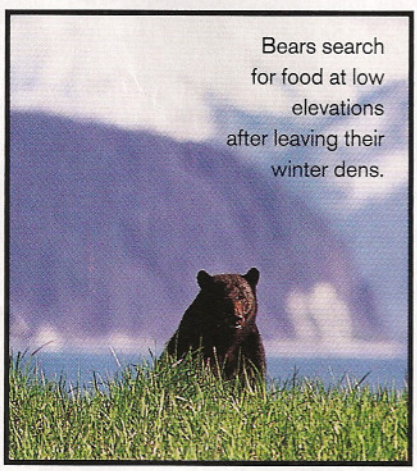
his favorite areas and go-to spots. But during the accumulation of his years of hard-won experience, he has uncovered in Alaska's mist-shrouded waters one hunting ground that outshines all others—an island of giants.

Alaska has always been renowned for its size. Everything there is famously large—halibut that need to be hauled out of boats with a forklift, salmon that outweigh supermodels and cabbages the size of small pickups. And, of course, it is known for big, big bears. But in Alaska's tendency for the supersized there is a curious contradiction. Along the coastal reaches in the southeastern part of the state, where mountains thrust suddenly skyward, seemingly straight from the sea, Alaska's famously prolific wildlife is concentrated in the narrow strip that runs from the water's edge to the low-lying tree line, which seldom extends above 3,000 feet or so. It's in this thin band of green, just a small portion of the total landmass, that the ravens, wolves, deer, moose, bears and other animals compete to stay alive and hunters chase most of their game.

Our island was much like this, isolated and almost untouched by humans. The only neighbor to these bears is a lonely homesteader who staked his claim on a nearby island. He chose to live at this quiet outpost beyond the edge of the modern world after enduring repeated depth-charge attacks from the Japanese while serving on a submarine during World War II. A faded picture in his house shows him with one of the wolves from the island of the giants. He is holding the dead wolf high overhead, his arms stretched to their full length, gripping it by the base of its tail. Its front paws, as big as his hands, easily touch the ground.



An 8x42 binocular is ideal for hunting coastal bears. It performs well in low light and its moderate magnification lets you glass from a moving boat.



Bears search for food at low elevations after leaving their winter dens.

STALKING MONSTERS

My hunting partner, Greg Jones, and I followed Rosenbruch across the soggy broken ground toward the big bear. We walked in single file to keep our group's profile to a minimum and angled for a small stand of fir trees about 50 yards from the animal. Moving quietly, we got within range and were able to give the bear a better look. Through our binoculars he was every bit as big as we had thought but his hide was rubbed bare over much of his body. With several days still to hunt, I decided to pass.

Our plan at this point was to return to our skiff and move it to deeper water before the outgoing tide stranded it in the mud—a sensible goal since we had no other way to get back to the large boat that served as our base camp. But just as we started to retrace our path toward the launch, another bear appeared, this one about 300 yards to our left. Like the first bear, it was very large—another eight-footer. It was late May and these bears had been out of their dens for some weeks but the mountains that surrounded our hunting area were still draped in deep snow, forcing the hungry animals to search for food at sea level.

Jones waited behind while Rosenbruch and I moved in on the second bear, but the stalk unraveled when I stepped on a stick. The large flat where we were hunting was absolutely silent except for the sporadic honking of a group of Canada geese who were feeding nearby. The pop of that twig probably rang like a rifle shot in the bear's sensitive ears even though we were at least 75 yards away. He wheeled around and trotted for the safety of the dense growth in the rain forest.

Figuring the water was rapidly disappearing from under our boat, we moved quickly toward our skiff. We had again made scant progress when we saw a third bear cruising on the opposite side of the tidal flat from us—yet another brute. At this point we had to either abandon this big bear or abandon our ride back to camp. We looked at the animal and looked at one another and then agreed that if a group of bear hunters is going to be stuck on an island it might as well be on an island teeming with huge bears.

We used trees and brush to screen our approach, but by the time we got close the bear had moved on and didn't show again during the hour we waited.

MURPHY'S VISIT

The light of the long Alaskan day was finally starting to dim when we noticed a fourth bear picking its way along a stream bed, well away from the edge of

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the woods. It was back across the flat, near where I had stepped on the twig an hour and a half earlier. Except for the top of its head, the bear was hidden from view, but Rosenbruch was nearly certain it was a large male. It is unusual for bears to wander very far from the safety of the woods, he said, for fear of encountering another bear that may kill it. And the boy we were looking at was confident enough to venture far from an easy escape route. We had just seen for ourselves evidence of this danger when we had stumbled across the skull and partial skeleton of a recently killed bear during the first stalk. Considering the skull's size and the condition of the teeth, Rosenbruch estimated the bear was about six years old—an adult that fell prey to a bigger, badder inhabitant of the island. Our suspicion about this fourth bear's size was confirmed when another bruin meandered out of the bush, heading in its direction. This latest bear was no slouch, about a $7\frac{1}{2}$-footer, but when it caught sight of our big boar it bolted like it had been hit with a cattle prod.

Half crouching, half crawling across the flat, we inched our way into the same stream bed occupied by the bear. A small oxbow separated us. He was just 35 yards away and the only thing left to do was slither up the bank to expose enough of his body for a shot. At this point, Murphy invoked his law. A large timber wolf loped out onto the flat and very quickly spotted Rosenbruch and me. From its vantage point it also saw the bear and, interest aroused, it darted toward us, trotted away and approached once again. The bear quickly decided he had had enough and ran. He galloped right by us, his rich black fur flowing up and down with each stride, his huge feet silent as he sped across the bog. He checked his gait as he neared the woods a couple hundred yards away and, walking slowly like an animal with little to fear, vanished among the mossy trees.

"That's the one we were looking for," Rosenbruch said. "He was way above eight feet and there wasn't a mark on his hide!"

LOADED FOR BEAR

Black bears this big call for big-bore rifles

Among popular calibers for black bear hunting, the .375 H&H is unlikely to come in at the top of many hunters' lists. In fact, it isn't likely to make many black bear enthusiasts' top 10 lists, period. So when a guide tells you that it is the minimum caliber he allows clients to carry in the field, you know that either you're dealing with someone who is too fond of recoil or you'll be hunting some unusual black bears.

Certainly the black bears that Jimmie Rosenbruch targets are notable for their size–they rival and even exceed grizzlies in stature. And who would say a .375 H&H for silvertips is overkill? Also, the preferred habitat of these bears–Alaska's coastal rain forests–can be unforgiving to the hunter who arrives undergunned. If you don't drop your bear right away and it gets into the thick undergrowth, your chances of losing him go way up.

The right optics can also influence your hunt's success. A variable 1.5–6X scope will cover the gamut of hunting situations you're likely to encounter. I used a Kahles Helia Compact in this power range that had the added benefit of an illuminated reticle. While there are few hunting conditions where a lighted reticle is truly useful, one of them is while shooting a dark-skinned animal standing against a dark background in low light. This is pretty much as good a description as you'll get of shooting a black bear feeding in front of an old-growth forest at dusk.

This hunt also isn't the time to get persnickety about making a one-shot kill. Once that first bullet exits the muzzle, keep shooting until the animal drops. While you shouldn't pull the trigger without knowing you're going to clean the animal's clock, there's a reason most rifles hold more than one cartridge.

My rifle, a Sauer 202, was an ideal tool by these standards. The bolt is just about the smoothest you'll find–it brings to mind the description about being as slick as two snakes acting on their deep mutual affection. Pulled all the way rearward, the bolt exhibits no wiggle or looseness. This translates into a smooth, efficient motion when you're rapidly cycling the magnum-length action of the .375 H&H. Another nice feature of the 202 is the plunger-type safety, which isn't just quiet, it's absolutely silent. Decked out in a tough synthetic stock, this rifle was nicely suited to the salty, wet conditions of the hunt.

A Sauer 202 in .375 H&H topped with a 1.5–6X Kahles scope can handle Alaska's big bears from point-blank range to beyond 200 yards.

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In the gathering twilight we went back for Jones, collected our spotting scope and walked to the boat. To our surprise, we had anchored it directly above the river bed. It was surrounded by hundreds of feet of mud on either side but there was enough water under it to pole our way into the narrow bay. During the ride in the dark back to our floating base camp, I asked Rosenbruch about the odds of seeing four bears like that in one day. He explained it like this: "I've hunted for browns, grizzlies and black bears all over—in Canada, Alaska, the Lower 48 and Russia. And as far as I'm concerned, where we were today is simply the best spot for bears in the entire world."

HUNT'S END

I returned the following day with Rosenbruch's daughter Alisha, who also guides in his family-run outfit. Our luck held because soon after we landed we saw a tremendous bear that was standing not far from where we spotted the first one the day before.

We stalked to within about 125 yards, but it didn't seem we could get any closer without spooking him. I found a slightly elevated patch of grass and, using my binocular set upright as a rest for my rifle, settled into a prone position. After several slow-motion minutes looking at him through my scope, the feeding bear turned broadside. I worried that my shot would be deflected by some unseen bit of vegetation between us, so I held the crosshairs of my .375 H&H slightly high.

The first shot connected and he dropped. His head swung up and I fired and hit him again. He disappeared below my line of sight and I jumped up, quickly shooting twice more at him off-hand. Heart pounding, I reloaded as Alisha and I trotted up to him, but he was down for good. The first 270-grain Winchester Fail Safe broke his back and the second took him right through the neck. I knew my third shot was high, but the final bullet smashed through his rib cage.

We spent many minutes admiring his size and beauty, everything from his battle-scarred snout to his thick fur and massive paws. His hide squared 8 feet, 4 inches and, barring an undeserved stroke of great fortune, he will be my finest black bear. Even as we skinned him and prepared to pack out his quarters, more of his kin started to appear on the edges of this great natural bowl, the best bear-hunting spot on the face of the earth. We watched as two black bears, several hundred yards distant, slowly approached each other. They mated briefly and wandered apart, creating the next generation of island giants.

For more information, contact Jimmie Rosenbruch at Glacier Guides, Inc. (907-697-2252).

The hide of this battle-scarred boar measured 8 feet, 4 inches–an exceptionally large black bear. His paws (above) are bigger than those you'll find on most grizzlies.

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