FIVE-SECOND BLACKTAIL

In Alaska's offshore rainforests, stay alert or you may miss your only shot at a buck.

Story & Photography By Dick Metcalf

Sitka blacktails have the smallest antlers of any American deer species and live in one of the wettest, most impenetrable places on Earth. I was reflecting on this during a soggy third day of inch-by-inch still-hunting through the dripping thickets and moss-spongy terrain of southeast Alaska's tangled Admiralty Island.

"Rain Forest." The words probably conjure images of exotic flowers and birds, lush plant life, steaming high temperatures and even higher humidity. That's certainly true of tropical forests in equatorial Central and South America, but similar climate (not temperature) conditions have also created one of the world's few temperate rain forests along Southeast Alaska's coast. A temperate rain forest is defined as any mid-latitude forest that receives more than fifty inches of annual rainfall.

Rain forests in Southeast Alaska exceed this fourfold. It's a

Admiralty Island's secluded bays make for a perfect anchor and base of operations. The seventy-eight-foot *Alaskan Grandeur* is an inviting camp.

world where the very air is green and wet, where biological time is nearly geologic. Trees grow slowly, but to immense sizes and live incredibly long lives. Most of the temperate rain forest is old-growth evergreen conifer—Western hemlock and Sitka spruce—and dense shrub thickets, deep spongy ground cover spotted with occasional muskeg bogs. Scientists say there is more biomass in a temperate rain forest than in any other biome on Earth—as much as 500 tons of living things per acre, or about 206 pounds (one average adult human) per square yard.

Parts of Admiralty Island average 200 inches of annual precipitation, which evens out to a touch more than a half-inch of rain every day, 365 days a year, year after year after year. Moving through the landscape is an otherworldly experience. The moss-covered and lichen-matted ground is criss-crossed by "nurse logs"—usually fallen Sitka spruce—upon which seedlings of other trees grow. This results in colonnades—natural, even-spaced rows of trees as a result of getting their start on nurse logs. There are "stilt trees," engendered by seedlings sprouting from stumps that later decay away leaving the tree standing more than man-high aloft on its own roots. Mixed with the predominant spruce and hemlock are bigleaf maples with clubmoss draperies. Except for the muskeg clearings, visibility is mostly measured in feet.

The author was continually reminded that Southeast Alaska is unlike any other place on Earth. To make the most of your adventure, be sure to hunt with experienced guides.

All of this translates into one of the world's perfect, near-impenetrable wildlife habitats. Among other things, Admiralty is home to more than 2,500 bald eagles; the highest density in North America. It also has the largest localized population of brown bears anywhere. Experts estimate the density at one bear per square mile, about 1,700 bears total—which is more grizzlies than in the Lower 48 states combined. Bear sign was everywhere.

There were supposed to be a lot of blacktails on the island, too. Their sign was likewise everywhere; sometimes on top of the bear sign. But in three soggy days I'd only seen one—maybe—for a flickering second through the undergrowth. Of course, I hadn't actually seen a bear, either. Which was fine by me.

The Sitka deer (*Odocoileus hemionus sitkensis*) is smaller, stockier, and has a shorter face than other blacktails, all of which are considered sub-species to the mule deer family. The Sitka blacktail is the only deer species native to Alaska (yes, yes, I know moose are technically deer, but...). Their average life span is about ten years and a few are known to have reached at least fifteen. Average October live weight is about eighty pounds for adult does and 120 pounds for adult bucks, although bucks dressing more than 200 pounds have been reported. Their summer coat of reddish-brown is replaced by dark brownish gray in winter.

Sitka antlers are dark brown with typical blacktail/mulie-type branching. Normal adult antler development is three points (including eyeguard) on each side; matching fourth points are unusual. Sitka antlers are relatively small, with very few measuring more than 110 inches. For a typical rack to make the B&C book, it must measure 108 (180 is minimum for a whitetail). The current world record typical Sitka is 133 inches; the world record nontypical is only 134. Interestingly, current records for the smaller-bodied Coues whitetail of the Southwest are higher: 144 1/8 typical and 196 2/8 nontypical. Records for the larger Columbia blacktail subspecies found in Washington, Oregon and Northern California are 182 2/8 typical and 208 1/8 nontypical.

To reach the shoreline from basecamp, the hunters and guides used skiffs and landed on various calm beaches.

During summer, Sitka blacktails primarily live at higher elevations in open alpine country above 2,000 feet. As the weather cools and heavy frosts hit the slopes, they migrate downward into the trees and brush on lower slopes. The rut begins in late October and peaks in mid-November, with snow normally appearing at the same time.

When it snows, the deer move even lower, below 1,000 feet, eventually concentrating in a relatively narrow band adjacent to beaches, where the high broken canopy of old-growth forest intercepts much of the snow but still provides enough light for the growth of forage plants used by deer. During extreme snow accumulation, some deer even move onto actual beach margins. These conditions allow for day- >

Admiralty's cold, damp weather kept the hunting party in rainsuits most of the time.

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<hike still-hunting directly off the beaches from boats during the rut, a hunting technique unique to Southeast Alaska, and much preferred over climbing slippery near-vertical slopes to reach alpine country.

Which is why I was where I was.

I had jumped at an invitation for a late October/early November Sitka blacktail hunt with Glacier Guides, Inc., operated by Jimmy C. Rosenbruch, who, with his family, has been running one of Alaska's most successful bear, mountain goat and blacktail hunting services (as well as sport fishing cruises) for more than forty years.

Rosenbruch is a giant in the hunting world. He started guiding right after Alaska statehood, holds Alaska Master Guide License 61, a 200-ton U.S. Coast Guard operator's license and a seaplane pilot license. In 2001 he received the SCI Professional Hunter Of The Year award, was the recipient of the 2005 SCI International Hunting Award, and in 2006 received the prestigious Weatherby Award. He's also the founder of the Rosenbruch World Wildlife Heritage Museum in St. George, Utah. I'd heard about this legendary outfitter and his family for years, and wasn't about to miss a chance to hunt with them.

We rendezvoused in an October dawn at Rosenbruch's seventy-eight-foot floating camp, *Alaskan Grandeur*, then powered out of Juneau Harbor for an eight-hour cruise down the Stephens Passage and Frederick Sound, looking for a secluded anchorage to base our hunt on the shore of Admiralty.

The only way to describe the *Alaskan Grandeur* is as a "yacht." With the amenities of a first-class hotel or land-based hunting lodge, it takes you literally to the doorstep of your quarry; it also beats the hell out of coming back to a tent and smoky woodfire after a day in the soppy wet forest.

The trip down the passage was itself another reminder that Southeast Alaska is a different world: mountains plunging straight into the sea, alpine glaciers rivering down from high valleys, dolphins racing the bow of the boat and whales spouting in the distance. It was also the first time I'd ever verified my rifle's zero by shooting clamshells on a salt-water beach, which is what we did after dropping anchor and taking skiffs ashore the first evening.

For the hunt I'd selected one of Ruger's 16.5-inch Frontier M77s. With its extra-short barrel, compact stock and fast handling qualities, it would be ideal for moving through the dense foliage, and its 7mm-08 chambering was absolutely perfect for Sitka blacktails. I set it up with a Swarovski rail-mounted AV 3-10x42mm scope. At 3X it would be plenty clear and quick enough for a likely sudden snap-shot, even in the dim woods, with enough magnification on the high end for a less likely longer shot across a large muskeg bog or even the island's open alpine terrain. I was also glad to have at hand a short-barreled Ruger Super Redhawk Alaskan revolver in .480 Ruger, should the adverse bear:human population ratio catch up with me.

For sure, Sitka blacktail hunting techniques aren't anything like hunting big Midwest whitetails or Utah's mule deer. Or Oregon's Columbia blacktails, for that matter. At barely dawn we would leave the *Grandeur* in powered skiffs and cruise along the island shore looking for a likely spot to enter the forest. Depending on the deployment plan, the skiff would either drop off a hunter/guide pair and return to pick them up later, or we would tie the skiff ashore with a *very* long rope and push it far out onto the water with a tug anchor so it would not be stranded by the tide when we came back to it. Admiralty's tides run up to twenty feet, and it's not fun to come plodding back out of the woods to the beach and find your motorboat high and dry 200 yards from the receded shoreline.

Once off the beach into the wall of woods, everything changes. It's dead-quiet. No wind gets down to the forest floor, and the omnipresent heavy, wet vegetation is without the normal dry rustling ordinarily associated with the movement of leaves or branches. Nothing crackles underfoot.

I've never been able to move as quietly through woods as I did on Admiralty; at the same time, any sound you do make carries clearly and far. This makes the correct choice of raingear particularly important. There's a lot of good waterproof "climate gear" on the market that will keep you dry in the most severe conditions. But a lot of it isn't very quiet. Based on past experience, for this trip I chose Cabela's Dry-

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At the end of the hunt the party was shuttled back to Juneau via float plane, which was conveniently loaded from the *Grandeur*'s swimstep.

Plus RainSuede gear. It's very light, totally silent and allows easy underlayering if warmth is required, and, most important, it doesn't "seep" if you kneel or sit on wet ground for extended periods. In one of the wettest places on Earth, I was always dry on the inside.

I've learned over the years that when in strange terrain, let your guide make the tactical decisions. So the first time, after an initial creep of a 100 yards or so, when she motioned we should sit down at the edge of a small open muskeg and watch for a bit, I wasn't surprised. But I about jumped out of my skin when she started bleating into the dead quiet on what sounded like a wounded cottontail call. Okay, I should have known. Using bleat calls is a long-time proven Sitka blacktail tactic. Bucks and does will come to the calls, especially during the rut. Only thing is, bears come, too, and one of the marks of really good Alaska guides is that they can read all sign in a given area well enough to know when it's okay to bleat, and when it's not.

The author's buck appeared on the third morning of his hunt and offered a perfect shot at 15 yards.

The dense rainforest foliage of Southeast Alaska provides a unique hunting challenge—especially after you've filled your tag.

We continued to still-hunt with periodic calling stops for two days, rotating guides with no sightings, except, perhaps for one fleeting glimpse of what I thought was a small buck. I wasn't discouraged. The sign was there, and the environment was wondrous. Besides, two other hunters had already found their bucks. I was confident of one thing: in such close-quarters hunting, when it did happen, it would happen all at once, in a hurry. The one thing I could not afford to do was to be less than instant-alert at every step.

Two hours into the third morning, that's exactly how it happened. My guide and I had been dropped off about a mile from the *Grandeur* and slowly made our way inland about 400 yards, stopping twice to call. Then, encountering a very small clearing about twenty yards across, he signaled for another stop. I settled in against a moss-covered stump that was as comfortable as a wet easy chair, and surveyed my limited field of fire.

Every hunter knows that whenever you set up to watch an area for game, there's always one approach spot that you favor in your mind. You know the animal won't come from there, because if it comes at all, it's always from the worst direction possible. But it's the spot you center on anyway and are most ready to shoot to because it would be just perfect.

I settled in. My guide blew the call. And not twenty seconds later a good 3x4 buck stepped out broadside from exactly *the spot* and looked right at me about fifteen yards away. I needed only to raise my rifle six inches and shoot. The buck spun, stumbled and collapsed. The whole thing took less than five seconds. A half-hour later we had dragged him back down to the beach to await pickup, and were sitting watching a pair of killer whales swim past us down the narrow channel.

Only in Alaska.

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