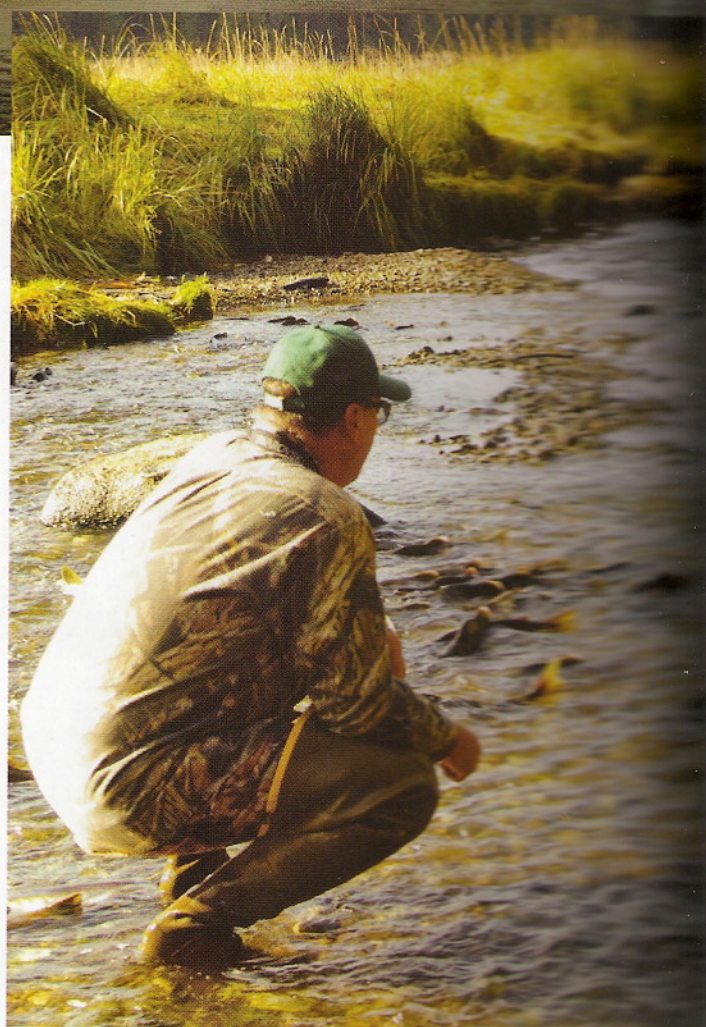
All hunting for both [illegible] and brown bears with Jimmy Rosenbruch's Glacier Guides, Inc. is done with the Alaskan Grandeur as base camp.

An Almost Nice Bear

BY JON R. SUNDRA



In the usual planning and research that go into booking a guided hunt, talking and corresponding with various outfitters are all parts of the decision-making process. It's not uncommon for an outfitter to claim that the biggest and best critters are found in his area. In fact, it's the norm. But if it's black bear you're after and you hear such a claim from Alaskan Master Guide Jimmie Rosenbruch, you can take it as gospel. Why? Because virtually 50 percent of all current SCI *Record Book* entries from Alaska were guided by Jimmie's company, Glacier Guides, Inc. Not only that, but SCI and the Alaska Professional Hunters Association has awarded Jimmie nearly every first-, second-, and third-place Black Bear Award since 1988.

Jimmie has been guiding up there in the 49th state for 40 years, and his entire family is involved in the business. His wife, Mary Ann; daughter, Alisha; and son, Bud; are all

registered Alaska guides. Each has the hunting rights to three guiding areas, all 12 of which are contiguous and total more than 10,000 square miles in the area known as the Inside Passage, encompassing the coastal and island area due west of Petersburg in the Alaska panhandle. Much of that 10,000 square miles is water, but there are many large islands with freshwater streams that are home to the largest black bears on the continent.

What made Jimmie's operation so interesting to me is that his bear hunts (he guides for both Alaskan brown and black) are conducted from the *Alaskan Grandeur,* his $3.5 million, 78-foot yacht. I've been on many a bear hunt, but never from a yacht, so this was something I just had to experience. Of course you don't actually hunt from the boat, which was anchored for the entire duration of my hunt. As a base camp, it was like none I've ever experienced. It was more like a floating palace!

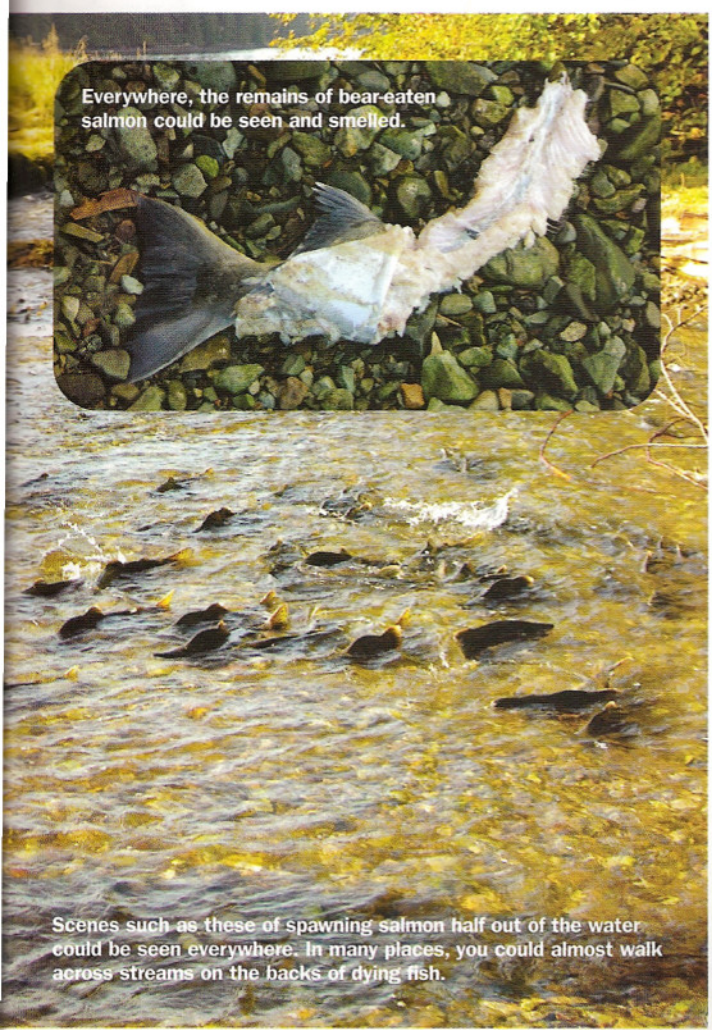
Author's bear squared more than eight feet, and the skull measured 19-7/8 inches.

Upon arriving in Petersburg via Alaska Airlines, a chartered float plane took me and two other hunters out to where the *Grandeur* was anchored in a bay off a large island. The typical *modus operandi* consists of using one of three 16-foot Lund aluminum skiffs, each with a 25-horse Mercury aboard, to get to any one of many estuaries that were within 20 to 30 minutes of the *Grandeur*.

When I was there this past September, the freshwater streams that emptied into the Gulf of Alaska were almost dry and literally choked with spawning salmon that had barely enough water to keep them upright. You could almost walk across the smaller streams on their exposed backs. The bears prowling the banks couldn't have asked for easier pickings. They had only to reach down with mouth or paw any time they wanted a meal. There were dead and dying salmon everywhere, in the water and on the banks. The stench was awful.

Exploring upstream from the estuaries was a bit tricky as there is a 12-foot tide. From the time we started hunting – about 3 p.m. to dark at around 8 p.m., the water level dropped nearly 10 feet. That's when I learned why the skiff's anchor rope was long enough to go halfway to the moon.

Anyway, the first day we explored an estuary not more than 1,000 yards from where the *Grandeur* was anchored. When I say "we," I drew Jimmie's 24-year-old daughter, Alisha, as my guide. Alisha has been hunting bear since she was eight years old, qualified for her guide license at the earliest allowable age of 18 and is, according to her dad, the best bear guide in Alaska. Parental pride notwithstanding, that's quite a testimonial coming from a Master Guide of 40 years of experience.



Everywhere, the remains of bear-eaten salmon could be seen and smelled.

Scenes such as these of spawning salmon half out of the water could be seen everywhere. In many places, you could almost walk across streams on the backs of dying fish.

This particular coastal area in the southernmost portion of Alaska is officially described as temperate rain forest. I'm not sure about the "temperate," but I can vouch for the "rain" and the "forest" parts. After a summer of unusually light rain, Mother Nature was starting to make up for it when I got there. As for the forest, the canopy overhead is so dense that sunlight reaches the floor only by cheating, and then only fleetingly.

That first afternoon, Alisha and I made our way about 3/4 of a mile upstream, walking along the bank when we could, and in the water when we couldn't. We saw nine bears – that's an average of one bear every 200 yards. In this part of the world, black bear commonly square eight feet, and have skulls that measure 20 inches or more (it takes 18 inches to make the SCI *Record Book*). On that first day, I wasn't about to shoot anything that Alisha didn't think was really good. Besides, just four months earlier I had the good fortune to take an 18-7/8-inch bear on Vancouver Island (See "The Eleventh Bear," Sept.-Oct. 2004 issue of *SAFARI*), so I could afford to be selective.

On that Vancouver Island hunt, I had used a Remington Model 673 Guide Rifle in .350 Remington Magnum and the factory 200-grain CoreLokt load. Both had performed so well on that bear that I again chose the same combination for this hunt. As for optics, Jimmie's pre-hunt check list advised that shooting in very poor light is often required, so I chose a Swarovski 3-10x42 in the AV-series, the one based on one-inch body tubes. These scopes are light, compact and, with Swarovski optics, you just can't go wrong.

The same reasoning went into my choice of binocular. I've heard so many rave reviews of Swarovski's EL-series binoculars but had yet to use one in the field, so when I heard they had recently introduced an 8x32 in the series, I wanted to try it. The 8x32 has long been my favorite spec for an all-

Hunters arrive at the anchored *Alaskan Grandeur* via chartered float plane from Petersburg, which is jet-serviced by Alaskan Airlines.

around hunting binocular. When hunting from a stand, I'll go with the larger, heavier 8x42. In some cases, I'll choose a 10x42 if I'm going to be in a stand overlooking open country. ELs are available in those specs as well.

For our second day's effort, Alisha chose to explore an estuary at the other end of the island, which took us about 20 minutes to reach in the skiff. We hadn't gone more than 250 yards upstream when Alisha spotted a bear – the top of its back, actually – below the opposite bank not more than 75 yards away. Separating and providing cover for us was a small, grassy island that another 50 yards ahead forced the stream to fork. We were on the left fork, with the bear on the right.

Using the ground that separated us for cover, we quickly waded across the shallow stream and reached the left bank of the little island. Now we were no more than 50 yards from the bear.

"It's a male... and he'll go 7 1/2 for sure, maybe 8 feet," whispered Alisha as she studied it with her binocular. A lot of inland grizzlies don't square eight feet, so we're talking a really good black here.

I decided to give it a go. Crawling several feet forward got me a little higher on the bank. From there, I'd have a clear shot from prone once the bear reached the point just beyond where the stream forked. Providing our cover was a thin strip of grass, 12 inches tall and growing some 10 feet or so in front of us.

Rather than continuing upstream, however, the bruin made a sharp left upon reaching the point where the stream diverged. Instead of moving away, he was now quartering toward us. Fortunately, he chose to move along the opposite bank. Had he chosen our side of the stream, I wouldn't have been able to see him until he was on top of us.

I began tracking him through the scope, but now the grass in front of me began interfering with my sight picture. The grass was sparse enough that I could see fairly well through it, though not well enough to want to risk a shot. As I continued tracking him through my scope, suddenly everything came together. The bear stopped to pick up a salmon just at a point where the grass thinned and I had a clear view of him. He had also turned slightly and was now broadside, less than 25 yards away. Everything was perfect. I placed the reticle about a third of the way up the shoulder and fired.

The concussion of my shot was still ringing when, to my utter

Base camp was the luxurious 78-foot yacht Alaskan Grandeur, featuring a dining room, bar and private suites with satellite phones.

amazement, a second shot rang out from behind me. I was stunned, so much so that I never even bothered to reload. In 40 years of hunting I've never had a guide do that. I rolled over in disbelief, asking Alisha, "Why did you shoot?"

"When I saw your bullet impact," she replied, "I thought it the prudent thing to do."

I couldn't imagine what it was she saw, for I was sure I had made a perfect shot. I was disappointed, but I let it go.

Upon reaching my prize, which had fallen where he stood, there was a bullet hole exactly where I expected it, and after skinning the creature, the bullet was recovered under the skin on the opposite shoulder. There were also two ragged holes in the hide farther back on the left side of the bear's stomach, which I figured was Alisha's shot that caught him as he turned from the impact of my bullet. The hide squared 8 feet, 1 inch and the skull measured 19-7/8 inches.

Nothing more was said of the incident, and I like to think I left the Rosenbruchs on the best of terms. However, it was not until I returned home that I learned what really happened that day. When I weighed the recovered bullet, I found it weighed 255 grains and measured .375 inches. At the time it was recovered, I never questioned that the bullet wasn't a .358. After all, there is only .016-inch difference between the two calibers, and I was under the impression that Alisha was shooting a .416 Remington, as did the rest of her family. I never bothered to ask her, which is unusual for me, but like I said, I thought I knew what she was shooting.

As I contemplated all this, it suddenly all became clear. As the bear was quartering toward me and closing, he was also descending slightly. At the moment I pulled the trigger, the sight picture was perfect, but line-of-sight is 1.5 inches above the bore line. What I couldn't see through the scope was that the muzzle was no longer clearing the grassy bank a few feet in front of me. My bullet must have glanced off, expanding in the process, but with the bear being so close, it still hit him with two fragments. That's what Alisha saw through her scope and why she fired, not wanting to lose the bear in the nearby thick forest.

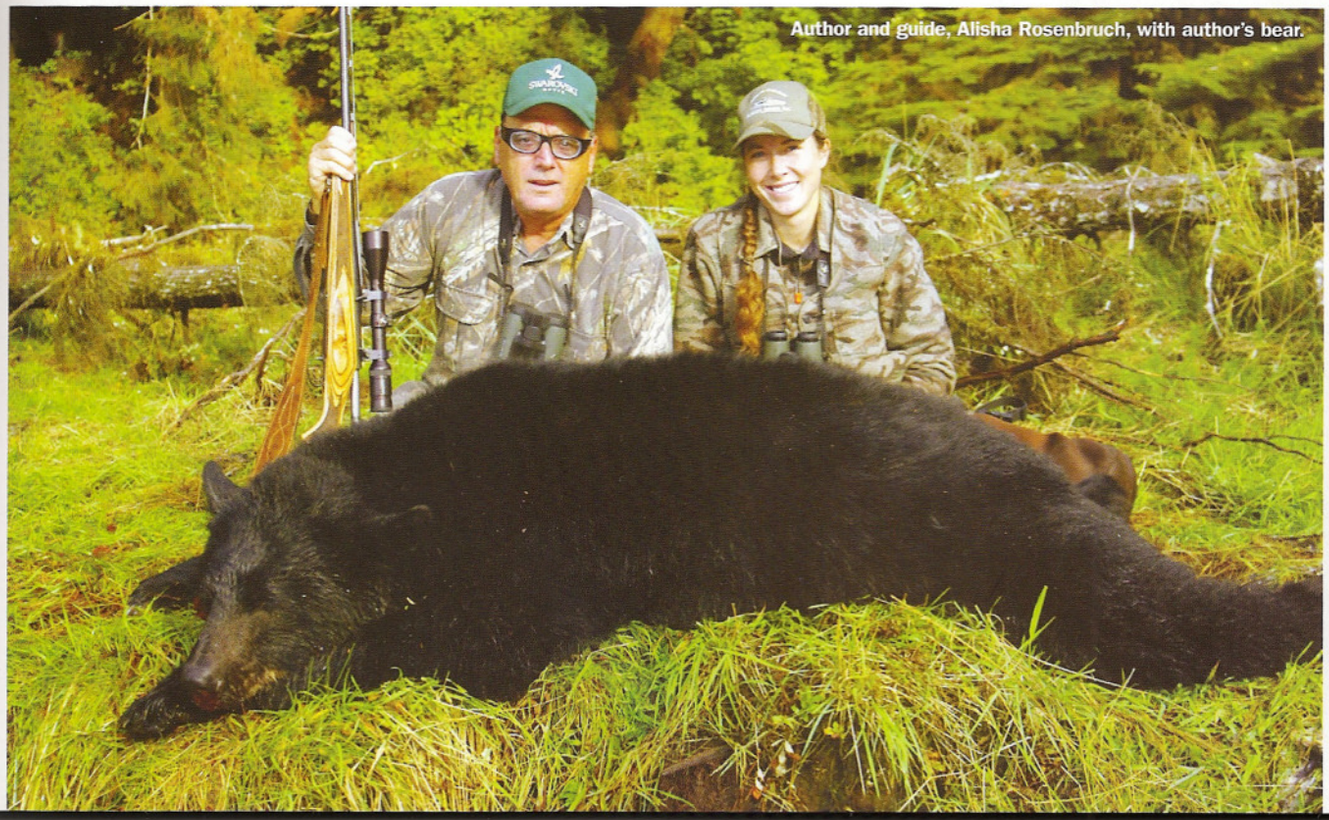
Could I have gotten that bear had she not fired? I'll never know. I like to think that, had she not shot, I would have quickly reloaded, as I normally do in case a follow-up shot is needed. I had three more in the magazine and the bear was less than 25 yards away.

That wasn't the first time I've screwed up. Once before, on an antelope hunt, a similar thing happened. On that occasion, though, my guide saw my bullet raise a puff of dust from a small rise about 25 feet in front of me. The buck was not hit, but ran only 50 yards before stopping, which in itself is unusual. Being farther away and at a slightly higher elevation than when I first shot, I made the second one count.

I guess all's well that ends well. A big black bear is a big black bear, after all.

For more information on the spectacular bear hunts offered by Glacier Guides, Inc., check out the website at www.glacierguides.com.

Author chose to use the same Remington Model 673 Guide Rifle in .350 Remington Magnum that he used four months earlier on a spring black bear hunt on Vancouver Island.



Author and guide, Alisha Rosenbruch, with author's bear.