

Brown Bears on the Alaska Peninsula

By Lt Col Rick Steiner

9.5 feet of Alaskan brown bear stone dead in the Alders.

I tend to judge hunts by three criteria; the quality of the trophy that one might obtain (either in relative size, impressiveness, or by rarity), by the romance and adventure associated with the destination, and by the difficulty of the hunt (my SF buddies would call this last criteria the “Suck Factor”).

These are all subjective criteria. What is exotic to one hunter might be pedestrian to another. The locales where we live and hunt most often form our frame of reference. Texas and Colorado are many Shikar-Safari Club members’ “back yards”, and so what might be a great adventure for someone from Germany is slightly boring for us.

The difficulty of the hunt is also relative. What is merely a long day in the woods for one hunter might be far more challenging than they can handle for another hunter. High altitude, extreme temperatures, and rough terrain might add to the hunt for a 21 year old and make it impossible for an 71 year old, or even a 51 year old. In short, a high “Suck Factor” might be appealing for one of us, and a deal killer for another.

I’ve also decided my youngest brother was right when he said that when you have hit a certain point in your life, and if you can afford it, you go out and do all the things that captured your imagination when you were a kid. When I was

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in high school, I saw a Special Forces recruiting poster with two Green Berets parachuting in to a clearing in the jungle at night and decided on the spot that I was going to do that – no matter what it took. When I was even younger, “American Sportsman” was on TV on Saturdays, and I watched the stars of that era – athletes, movie stars, and politicians – hunt big game in Africa, catch billfish in Panama, and shoot birds in South Dakota. By God I was going to do those things some day! And Kodiak Island was in its heyday of producing 10 foot bears. A big “Kodiak Bear” was one of the great trophies my buddies and I wanted above all else! In Africa it was lion, buffalo, and elephant. In North America it was elk, moose, the sheep, and ultimately the great bears. Ursus Arctos and Ursus Horribilis - Polar bears and grizzly bears. Or better still, the great coastal version of the grizzly - the brown bear, and the biggest of those were those residing in the alders on Kodiak Island.

Fast forward 40 years and times had changed a bit. Hunting on Kodiak was much more limited, extremely expensive, and the results were not nearly as good as what they were in the golden age of Kodiak. After diligent research, I discovered an outfitter who delivered consistent success (above 75%) on really big bears (nothing under nine feet, and plenty of 10 footers). His hunting area is on the Alaska Peninsula west of Kodiak Island near the tiny fishing village of Perryville (named after the Admiral). Preston Cavner (Cavner and Julian) offered an auction hunt for coastal brown bear at the SCI Auction in 2014 and I bought it. I scheduled for May of 2016 at the show.

I had hunted brown bear unsuccessfully once before. The hunt was a disaster (you generally get what you pay for). In the Spring of 2007 I hunted with an outfitter who eventually ended up in jail. He dropped me and another hunter off with a so-called guide on a snow field using his ski-equipped Super Cub. We stayed in pup tents in the snow that night, and the next morning snow shoed across a huge valley and set up to glass a ridgeline for bears emerging from their dens. I

had to repair the guide’s snowshoe for him on the way across. Strike one. It was a warm spring day, so when the warm weather of the day had melted our back trail (which the “guide” had planned to follow back to camp), I had to take us all back to camp with my wrist compass. Strike two. Then the outfitter was flying me around later in the hunt and the engine quit on his Super Cub and we basically made an unpowered landing on a frozen lake. Strike three. We only saw one bear in 10 days, and it was so small we had to study it to decide if it was a brown bear or a black bear. Pathetic. But I had the highest of hopes for Cavner and Julian and I was not to be disappointed.

As the hunt approached, I noted that the packing list included chest waders and wading boots. Querying Preston Cavner was interesting. No, they weren’t for fishing or when using boats on the ocean or in the rivers. I would be hunting in them. Turns out there is so much ground water, and so many rivers to cross, and swamps in the hunting area that all the guides hunted in waders. I was trying to imagine spending 12 days in my chest waders while climbing mountains and walking for miles. I hung up the phone and realized the Suck Factor for this hunt was going to be higher than I anticipated – and I had no illusions about any type of hunting in Alaska. Alaska is generally a miserable (though beautiful) place. Oh well. I consider the polar bear and coastal brown bear the North Country’s greatest trophies. I would do whatever was necessary to get a big one.

I arrived in Anchorage on 16 May and spent the night at the excellent Captain Cook Hotel. The next day I took off from Merrill Field on a Lake Clark Air Beechcraft 100 turboprop for

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With Cecil in Perryville, Alaska.

Perryville on the Peninsula. I got to sit in the co-pilot seat and so had an excellent view. Once in Perryville, I waited with my bags for Preston Cavner to pick me up in his Piper Super Cub and take me to camp. I entertained myself chatting with Cecil, a local Aleut, about the best way to prepare and eat salmon (With bear fat of course – spread it on like butter. Yum! I could feel my arteries clogging just imagining it.), and what might have caused him to miss a seal with his trusty (and very rusty) Remington 700 in .308. I noticed that since he hauled it around unprotected in an old trailer and the front sight was bent, that might have had something to do with it. Cecil was genuinely shocked that the rifle couldn't take a little bouncing around when I pointed out the bent front sight. Go figure.

Preston picked me up after an hour or so and my happy association with Cecil came to an end. 30 minutes after take off, we landed in the bush next to base camp. Base camp was a wooden, H-shaped building with sleeping accommodations on each side, and a combination eating and lounging area, with the kitchen in

the middle. It was plenty comfortable, with real mattresses on wood bunks and a wood burning stove for warmth. No showers. That would make the 12 days a bit long, but no worries. Food was great and the company was fine too. There were three other hunters in camp, one who had been successful and just left, one who had been successful and was waiting to leave, two others still working for a bear, and myself. I unpacked a bit, got my .338 Winchester Magnum out and checked its zero, which was fine as usual. This rifle is a Winchester Model 70 Stainless Classic that I bought from a favorite gun store slightly used for a song. The original owner had shot it twice and realized he was a .270 man, not a .338 shooter. I took it out and discovered it was a half-inch rifle with Federal Premium High Energy ammunition shooting 250 grain bullets at 2,800 feet per second (chronographed, yes, 2,800). I sent it to Winchester and had the barrel cut from 26 inches to 24, had iron sights added, and a trigger job executed so it had a three pound let off. I then put the barreled action in a H-S Precision stock. It's killed an enormous variety of North American game for me. The rifle is simply deadly.

I actually started hunting on the 18th. My guide Luke and I took ATV's and Argos (a six wheeled, tracked amphibious utility vehicle capable of a top speed of about 10 mph) inland and glassed from various hill tops and ridge lines. We were of course wearing chest waders and wading boots, and carrying packs when sufficient survival gear for spending the night if anything happened. That day we saw a sow and her cubs, some caribou, and got rained on quite a bit. The wind was snappy, so it was pretty cold out. The next day, we took a 16 foot Lund boat along the coast for several miles east of the base camp. We saw some wolf seals chasing herring along the coast, and some bear tracks on the beach very close to camp (a good sign), but we did not see any bears. That evening, we took the boat west from base camp to Herring Bay, beached the boat, and hunted inland in a mostly flooded valley. After wading most of

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Glassing for bears not too far from our spike camp.

the length of the valley and seeing a sow and her cub napping half way up the east ridgeline, we returned to the boat. We drove back to base camp in the growing dark in a moderate chop with a solid wind in our faces the whole way. We were all a bit tense as a mishap with the boat would likely be fatal. I have a very healthy respect for the ocean (bordering on dread fear).

The next morning I traded guides and hunting areas. My new guide, Joe Billings, took me north

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from camp that afternoon in an Argo. We were headed pretty far inland – about 12 miles – to a spike camp he had on a small hill in a giant valley north of the base camp. We forded innumerable creeks and swam the Argo across two big rivers. The fording

procedure became a bit of a battle drill for Joe and me. I would drive the Argo in to the river until it floated, then he would jump out in to water almost to the top of his waders (he only got wet once) and pull the Argo across until it started to touch, then I would drive it straight in to the current until the machine was solidly on the bottom, then Joe would jump back in. We must have done it 20 times. After three hours we arrived at the spike camp – a wall tent with cots

pitched in the saddle of a small hill in the center of the valley. It was out of the nearly incessant wind, so that was a plus. We unloaded the Argo, got situated a bit, and then took our optics and started glassing.

We were in the middle of a vast and unspoiled land of marsh, tundra, rivers, mountains, alder thickets, black sand beaches, and volcanoes. There was an active volcano that we could see from camp that was steaming quietly on a ridge well to the north of the base camp. Now it was close, and it lent a primordial quality to the already wild setting. Later in the trip, after the bear was in the salt, I would fly right over it on the way out.

We saw no bears that evening, and started out again in the morning taking the Argo still further north up the valley. We had left everything at the spike camp except enough stuff to make a fly camp at the very north end of the valley. We had a small teepee tent, our sleeping bags and sleeping mats, and some food. We planned to stay out three days, and climb the high ridgeline on the east side of the valley and look for bears along the snow line in all the little side valleys and canyons.

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After an hour of driving, we parked the Argo near some cliffs where the river we'd been following came out and we rucked up, took our rifles, and set off wading up river in to the canyon. We walked about two miles upstream through the canyon, sometimes in the river, often crossing, and then re-crossing the river to walk on the favorable bank. It was a beautiful little piece of wilderness, and when we topped out of the canyon we were standing at the bottom of an immense glacial valley. Jagged, snow-capped peaks rose to the east and north, with a gentler, green ridge on the west side of the valley. We walked several miles further, arriving at the back of the valley where a small stream flowed through the crack formed by ridgelines coming down from both the right and the left to form a neck at the head of the valley. We set up our teepee tent about 50 yards from the creek on the driest ground we could find.

We had taken our time moving up the valley, glassing for bears on both ridgelines. There were lots of bear tracks in the snow, but we didn't see any bears out feeding or moving. We climbed up the creek, scrambling over rocks and climbing up next to several small waterfalls until we topped out at the back of the valley. Now another valley fell away in front of us for a mile, ending in a large river at the base of an enormous ridgeline that ran east-west, perpendicular to our path. There were numerous finger ridges running off the ridgeline and down to the river started with snow on them and quickly turned in alder choked tangles. We glassed the entire area and found a sow and her cub on the ridgeline to the west of our location, but no boars. We glassed until 1130 PM, then walked back to our tent. We had a couple of freeze dried meals and planned to climb the east ridgeline in the morning.

We woke up to clouds, low hanging fog, and rain. Lots of rain. It was the 22nd of May. We couldn't even see the tops of the low ridges near the tent. The tent was soggy from the damp ground. Despite some small holes, the teepee wasn't leaking from the rain. My air mattress had

a slow leak, so I had to blow it up again every couple of hours, but it was a treat to be out of my waders and dry for a change so no big deal. Hunting in the waders was not as miserable as I expected. You're wet all the time from walking in the water and the neoprene absorbing water, plus you're sweating most of the time, but the rubber and neoprene are very insulative so you aren't cold. Climbing the ridges is tiring, but the wading boots give good protection from the rocks and are excellent for traction on the slippery surfaces. Much to my surprise, I wasn't getting blisters.

Alaska makes you suffer. But the huge moose, white sheep, and giant bears, plus the spectacular scenery make it worth it. Barely worth it sometimes, but worth it. Trophies in the north country are hard won – and the pain and suffering makes the trophies you do take that much more satisfying. You've wrested a magnificent animal – and in the case of the big bears one of the toughest, most formidable creatures on the planet – from one of the most demanding environments on earth. Besides, suffering is good for the soul.

At 2 PM the rain quit and we got out of the tent. I stretched for 10 minutes in the 48 degree chill, then dressed. The clouds had moved up to the treeline, so we had about two thirds of the valley that we could glass. We climbed to the top of a small chain of hills in the middle of the valley and began to glass, Joe in one direction, me in another. At 8:15 PM I was on the northwest knob of the four hilltops in the chain. I looked to the east and 600 yards away in a small clearing not more than 100 feet above the valley floor were two bears. I hissed at Joe, who was 80 yards to my south, "Bears!" and he came over at a jog. The mist had descended again. When Joe first saw the bears through the fog, he said, "Sow and a big cub." After a few more seconds he said, "No! Big, big boar and a really big sow!" We were finally looking at a shootable boar, I had found it, and it was close.

The sow was chocolate colored with white ears. The boar looked to be about nine and a half feet

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and had a beautiful blond head and shoulders, dark brown everywhere else. We immediately started planning a stalk. We'd move behind the crest of the hills to an alley through the alders that would put us 300 yards from the bears and shoot from there. We were just getting ready to move when the bears casually walked in to an alder choked ravine. Just like that, they were gone! They hadn't been out of the alders more than 10 minutes! Every bear we'd seen to this point had hung around for hours. We calmed down and started watching for them to come back out – it was only 8:30 PM and there was three hours of daylight left... At 11:45 PM it was nearly full dark and we quietly left for the tent, using the hill to screen our movement. I was down, but thought surely the bears would be out in the morning.

The tent was filled with thousands of mosquitos when we got back to it. They must have hatched from the ground in the warm, moist air of the tent. We ate our Mountain House and spent a miserable night hiding from the damn bugs in our sleeping bags.

We woke to more rain on the tent. Happily, it quit by 10 AM and we got out and put our waders on. We weren't out of the tent five minutes when Joe spotted the bears from yesterday. They were in a clearing on a ridge line half way down the valley and about mid-mountain. We immediately set off for the finger ridge immediately north of the bears. Within 15 minutes we were at the base of the ridge and climbing. By climbing this ridge we'd keep the wind blowing from the bears toward us, and could get to a shooting position 300 yards across the canyon from the bears. We could see the bears sleeping as we climbed. I was hopeful that this might be fairly easy...

When we got to a workable shooting position, I set up in the prone resting my rifle over Joe's expedition pack. I dialed my Nightforce scope to 10X. I could see the sow sleeping in the open, but I could only see the ears of the boar sleeping behind a small clump of alder. Finally, the boar sat up, tested the wind, stood up, and took a couple of

steps to the right. I could see him perfectly in the scope, but he was still screened by the alders. I just needed him to take two more steps forward. Joe said, "Wait..." After several minutes the boar turned to his left toward the alder thicket. Joe said, "No! Don't do it!", The boar walked in to the alders, the sow following. I let out a string of curse words directed at Alaska in general and the bears in particular. I stayed on my rifle, willing the bears to come back. It was noon.

Joe worked his way higher up the ridge looking for a better vantage point and shooting position, and trying to spot the bears in the alders. He came back in half an hour and reported that he could just barely see the bears napping about five yards in to the bushes, and that he'd found an excellent shooting position. I rucked up, picked up my rifle and we moved up the ridge. From 1 PM to 5 PM we watched the bears (I finally spotted them when the boar moved his ears), ate a few snacks, and waited. At 5:15 Joe said, "Please come out before 7:15!" We didn't have that long to wait. At 5:30 the bears got up and moved in to an open area just uphill from where they'd been sleeping. I had the boar, stationary and facing down hill and slightly toward me in the scope at 295 yards. I was rock solid. I told Joe I was taking the shot, flicked the safety of the Winchester Model 70 to Fire, and squeezed. The .338 boomed and the 250 grain Woodleigh Weldcore slammed in to the bear's right shoulder, knocking him to a sitting position when the big slug hit his pelvis. The bear swatted savagely at the sow. I was working the bolt to shoot again as both bears disappeared in to the alders. Joe said, "That bear was hit perfectly and hard."

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I was never so happy to see blood! 90 minutes after the second shot, we started finding lots of lung blood.

We were watching the alders for any sign of the bears. After about 15 seconds, the sow came out in an open area at 325 yards and turned to watch her back trail. I was hoping the boar was hit too hard to go further. No such luck. He came out in the opening 90 seconds later and stood broadside to me facing up hill. My second bullet hit him right behind the left shoulder – a double lung shot. The sound of the bullet striking was very audible and I knew the shot was good. Shockingly, the bear turned south and ran at incredible speed directly away from us in to the alders again. I could not believe how fast that animal could run – it was sobering to think he'd taken two deadly hits from my .338 and could still move like that. I reloaded.

Joe and I agreed that the bear had taken two very solid hits, either of which should be fatal. Still, I was worried. We waited 30 incredibly long minutes, then began to climb down the canyon. An hour after my first shot and a tough climb down and back up, we were standing where the bears were when I pulled the trigger. No blood.

None. Not one drop. How could it be?? We waited a bit longer, then moved to the second clearing. Still no blood! Now I was very concerned. We took off our rucksacks and sat down to wait some more. At 7 PM we got up to follow the bear and as soon as we stepped in to the alders on the south side of the clearing we found blood – lots of it. Seeing that blood was one of my happiest moments of my hunting career. And it was lung blood – bright red with bits of tissue in it. My relief was physical.

The blood made me feel much better, but I hated the alders. They were incredibly thick. I remembered a hunting article from the 70's about how the worst thing you could have was a wounded brown bear in the alders – exactly what we had. I hoped we'd given it plenty of time and it had bled out somewhere.

Joe was to my left front with a Ruger Guide Gun in .416 Ruger (I was wishing for mine at that moment), and we were moving in “prepared for an ambush” style – the instinctive crouch, head swiveling from side to side looking for a bear hiding in the alders, weapons at the ready, taking one measured step at a time. I was covering from 12 o'clock (directly ahead) through three o'clock to our six. Joe was watching from 12 to nine. One step at a time. Look for the bear. See the latest splash of blood. Repeat. I rechecked my chamber to be sure I had a live round in the pipe. Safety on half. Scope dialed down to 2X. Step, look, listen.

After a mere 80 yards, that seemed like took

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A formidable weapon indeed!

hours to walk, Joe suddenly relaxed and smiled at me. The bear was bedded just below us and directly in front of me stone dead. I burst out with a bit of nervous laughter – stress lifting like a shadow disappearing with the light.

After waiting several long minutes to make sure the bear didn't have any life left in it, we went to the animal. The size of its head was incredible. The size of his paws was sobering. I had the same sensation I had when I approached the first African lion that I ever shot. Here was an incredible killing machine. Shockingly fast, enormous size, crushing jaws, prodigious strength, indescribable toughness and stamina. Even in death, this was a frightening creature – something a puny human, unless armed with a rifle, had almost no chance against.

We spent two hours skinning the bear, and taking the paws and head. Joe had the largest expedition pack on the market – it all just fit when he took everything else out of it. I put the contents of his pack in to mine and we picked our way down the mountain. I went back to our fly camp and packed the tent, our sleeping bags and air mattresses, while Joe struck out down river for the fly camp. By the time I was headed down river myself, it was about 9:30 PM. I had two hours of



Flying back to Anchorage on the Beech 100.

daylight to make the spike camp. I was moving as fast as I could and still be careful of my footing and keep a bit of a lookout for bears or other wildlife. At the top of the canyon, I caught up with Joe who was resting and waiting for me. His pack had to weight over 100 pounds. Mine I estimated at 75.

We waded down the canyon, which was substantially easier than going up canyon, and got to the Argo about 11 PM. It was growing dark, but we were almost euphoric to be able to dump our rucks in the back and drive back to the wall tent. We got there at almost midnight, and spent an hour getting out of wet clothes, and preparing and eating hot food. The next morning we packed up the entire spike camp and drove the Argo back to base camp, arriving about noon. After congratulations and photos, we hunting locally for wolves. Preston took me back to Perryville the next morning in the bush plane.

The Beech 100 picked me up about an hour after the bush plane dropped me off and I was checked in to the Captain Cook by 3 PM. I got to sit right seat in the Beech 100 and snapped some interesting photos as we flew over the volcano northwest of the hunting area on the way home. A great end to a great hunt.