



BEAR SENSE MADE EASY

May 2007

Introduction

Bear hunting requires some knowledge of bears. You must remember there are old boars, young boars, sows, sows with cubs. Shoot boars; **do not shoot sows with cubs**. Boars are bigger than sows; young boars may be smaller than sows. For even the experienced bear hunter, most bears look big, but there are some methods of judging size and noting a bigger bear. Size compared to the bait barrel, size of feet, smaller looking ears, shorter looking nose, and crease in the forehead. **The quality of fur is much more important than size. A big bear with terrible fur does not make a good mount, but a smaller bear with perfect fur and perhaps color phase makes a tremendous mount.**

Sizing up a bear using your bait station

The average male black bear will weigh anywhere from 200-400 pounds and are between 5 1/2 feet to 6 feet from nose to tail. Judging the size of a black bear can be tricky. Bait stations where a 55 gallon drum is used for the bait provide a great measuring stick to use when sizing up your bear. If a bear's back, walking on all fours is as tall as the second ring on the 55 gallon drum it is an average bear. If the bears back is as tall as or taller than the barrel the bear is 7 feet long plus, and definitely a shooter, size wise.

Speaking of bait stations

If you hunt the same bait station for a number of days, know it is getting hit consistently, but just can't get the bear to show up before shooting light gives way to darkness the bear is either on to you, may be the only bear hitting the bait or he is likely the dominant bear and has little need to visit the bait before dark. However, there are a few things you can try to bring the bear in during daylight. First, take a buddy with you in to the stand and have him leave (in a usual manner) an hour or so before dark. Second, move your stand if you can to a different location usually 180° to where it previously was, unless the wind then becomes a problem. Third, if this appears to be a single bear bait sight and you have determined that the bear visiting this is a shooter, try bringing in some bear scat from a different site and putting it out around the bait station. Few things will bring a bear in earlier than the suspected presence of another bear eating his food before he gets there.

Size and Appearance

Black bears are one of the hardest game animals to judge the size of. They may range from 130 lbs. as a two-year-old, to 600+ lbs. as an adult. Some exceptional bears have weighed in at more than 800 lbs.! Because of their thick coats, and anatomical structure, the judging of size can be a difficult task. Some of the best indicators of size are the ears and legs. **Ears stop growing at a young age, while the skull continues to grow. Thus, a bear with ears that appear small (and far apart) compared to the size of the head are**



generally larger bears. The larger the ears (& closer together) generally the smaller the bear. Bears with noses that appear small (short) in relation to the size of their head is another indicator of a large bear. Conversely, if the nose is relatively large (long) the bear is likely average in size. The front legs also can give a good indication of a bear's size. The bigger boars have not only larger front legs, but also have a larger chest and all around front end than the smaller bears and sows. Sows are normally either equal front to rear, or the back half is larger than the front. Contrary to popular understanding, the distance from the ground to the belly and the height are not always the best indicator of size. Bears are like people, there are tall bears, short bears, fat bears and lean bears.

As a rule of thumb when hunting bear over bait and you first see the bear; carefully, quietly and slowly pick up your binoculars not your weapon and look the bear over good before deciding whether it is a shooter or not.

Is it Big Foot? Tough to judge the size of a bear you can't see? Not really. Sometimes you may not see the bear you are hunting, but can get a good idea of how big this mystery bear is by the size of his front paw print. A blackbear with a front paw width of 4½" or more is a definite shooter. 6" or more inches and you will likely have a B&C candidate. Add 1" to the width of the front paw pad and that is what the bear will likely square. Male or female paw prints? Usually over 5" you are on a mature bruin. Under 4½" you are on a sow or juvenile boar. When you measure, measure straight across the widest portion of the pad on the front paw of the bear.

Spring or Fall Bear Hunt

When is the best time? Depends on your schedule & what you want in a bear. There is no size difference between a spring bear skull and a fall bear skull. However, there are major seasonal differences in weight and fur conditions. A bear can emerge in the spring from its winter den weighing 30% less than it did in the fall. While a bear dens, he is living off his fat reserve. It is essential that during the fall prior to denning a bear must gorge himself to put on all this extra weight. Therefore, that fall bear can be huge due to this massive weight gain. Fur conditions also vary from season to season. Most hunters believe a bear's fur is finest soon after den emergence in the spring. That is when the guard hairs are the longest & the under fur the thickest. **It is during the spring that hunters must look at the condition of the fur carefully before shooting. Bears will scratch & rub themselves to help shed this heavy coat of fur leaving rubbed marks. A hunter may see a bear that has bare patches on their hind quarters or behind their front shoulders.** A fall bear fur will be sleek, dense, & shiny with no rubs. The benefit of being able to "look a bear over" while on a bait is that you can observe for the quality of the fur. Most hunters are hunting bears for the "mount", so good quality fur is the most important factor. Because a bear emerges from the den very hungry he is immediately attracted to bait which makes spring baits very active. The food source is plentiful in the fall so baits may have fewer bears, but they tend to be much larger.

Bear Senses



In the forest, bears rely on their acute hearing and super sense of smell. Their noses perceive smells much fainter than humans can detect. With this super sense of smell, they can detect other animals that are near by, and they can find fruit, insect larvae, and the other foods.

Bears are instinctive by nature, not smart even though we often refer to that big elusive bruin as being a “smart old bear.” They survive on instinct just as the majority of game animals do. It sometimes is hard to draw that line between what is perceived as intelligence and that what is instinct. A bear’s instinct will tell him that the scent at the bait pile is different than yesterday, he doesn’t rationalize that difference. With that in mind it is imperative that when hunting in close proximity to your bait that the scent be the same each day. There are two schools of thought on this. One being, scent control to mask your scent. The other is at the very beginning of the hunt, maybe even prior to you hunting that particular bait stand, leave an article of clothing or such that will leave a scent. Scent consistency is often more important than totally masking scent (or attempting to mask) than one might believe. Both schools of thoughts have merit, pick one and stick with it.

Bears can probably see as well as humans can. They can recognize shapes, but not details at a distance and they observe moving objects better than stationary objects. When you’ve got to find lots of food on the ground, sharp eyes that see color can come in handy. And that’s exactly what the black bear has. Although their night vision is also excellent, bears forage for fruit during the day when they can perceive colors. It is believed that western black bears have better eye sight than eastern black bears. This may be due in part of the fact that western bears operate in bigger and more open country generally than those bears in the east. None the less realize that while a bear’s eyesight is not his strength, it is also not his Achilles heel.

Weather

Weather as is the case in most hunting situations will be a factor in whether or not you see your bear. If the acute senses (instincts) a bear uses have been negated by the current weather conditions (gusting big wind, heavy rain, etc.) the bear is less likely to move in on a bait station. The bear will more likely lie up and wait until the weather changes. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t hunt, it just means the odds have diminished somewhat for seeing a bear.

It can’t be stressed enough that your scent will more often than not get you busted by the bear or any game animal you are hunting. It all goes back to what is the instinctive norm for the animal you are hunting. You always want to be downwind from your quarry (and bait when hunting) if possible. Unfortunately this is not always possible as Mother Nature doesn’t cooperate as often as we would like when hunting.

Playing the thermals

When hunting from elevated positions on hillsides the thermal currents must be considered prior to “going in”. Your scent will drift along the hillside in the direction the thermal current is moving. As the ground warms up during the afternoon thermal currents tend to move up the hillside. Conversely when the ground is cool (or cooling down) thermal currents will tend



to fall down the hillside. Playing the thermal currents correctly can be the difference between seeing and not seeing your bear.

Behavior

Bears are generally at the top of the food chain. This makes them confident, but cautious. Generally black bears do not attack humans. We are more of a curiosity than a threat or a food source. However, there is a level of danger involved in hunting these powerful creatures.

Bears can be active all day long, with the most active times being in the afternoon and evening. Some bears feed at night as they feel pressured by over hunting any one area. An order of dominance is established among bears. This order is often easy to determine by the many vocalizations and noises that bears use to inform other bears of their social status. One of the most common tools that a black bear uses to inform other bears of its size is the popping of its jaws. Bears do this by clapping their teeth together as hard as they can. The louder and deeper the popping, the larger the bear. Larger bears easily drive smaller bears away with nothing more than a good, whole hearted popping of its jaws, or a deep grunt. This action prevents face-to-face confrontations.

At times, hunters can have bears popping at them, as well as other bears. They want to let you know who the boss at that bait site is. Watch when multiple bears are in view, and you will see that just by using their body language, each bear knows its place in the pecking order. North American black bears can climb trees with ease and are able to move in almost perfect silence through the bush. Their soft feet and soft ground make branches and logs the only source of noise. Most bears are seen before they are heard. Hunters must stay alert!

A bear that approaches the bait, appears wary, cautious and looks around a lot when at the bait usually is a sign that a larger bear is in the area.

If the bear gets to the bait it is a good bet that it hasn't seen, heard or recognized a difference in smell from a previous visit that would be cause for alarm (instincts kicking in here). Whatever you have been doing has apparently worked up to that point so minimize making noise and movement (when moving move slowly and avoid sudden changes in motion). With any amount of luck the wind will not give you away.

Many times a bear will circle the bait at 30, 40, 50 yards maybe even farther using the wind to check the scent (for a difference from a previous visit) in the area before moving in.

Shot Placement

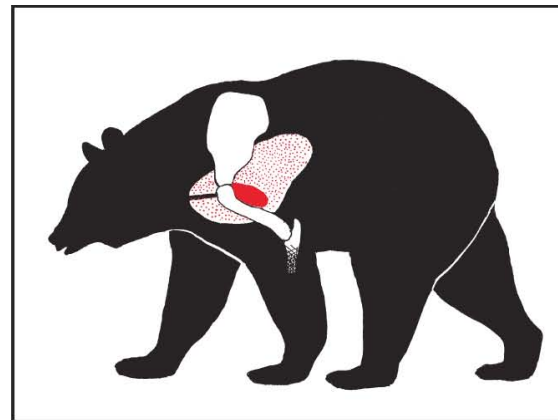
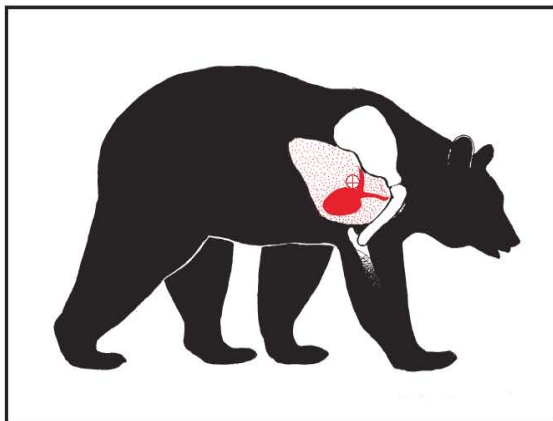
Broadside: The broadside position offers several excellent shots for a firearm hunter. The best target is the shoulder and chest area. A bullet of the correct weight, design and fired from an adequate firearm caliber will break the shoulder and enter the heart or lungs. A neck shot will drop an animal instantly. However, the neck of a bear appears relatively short (especially on large bears). Also, the skull of bear is constructed of heavy bone and is sloped at sharp angles. This makes correct bullet placement for penetration of the skull



difficult. Therefore, head and neck shots should be used only if you are proficient with your firearm and use of a proper firearm caliber and type bullet.

Head On: This is an acceptable shot with an adequate centerfire rifle. The neck and center of the chest are vital areas that the hunter can use as aiming points.

Rear-end Shots: The rear-end shot is a poor shot with a firearm. A shot to the body at this angle may not bring down a bear quickly and could ruin the best cuts of meat. A neck shot is possible if the animal has its head up. Waiting for a better shot opportunity is recommended.



Quartering towards you: The spot behind the shoulder will result in the bullet missing most of the vital organs and angling back into the stomach and intestines. This shot is absolutely inadvisable under any hunting circumstance. From this angle, heavy shoulder bones shield the majority of the vital organs that a high powered centerfire rifle bullet can penetrate when properly placed. The other choice is to try and place the bullet between the front shoulders, slightly favoring the leading shoulder. This is a very difficult and risky shot. An error of only a few inches can result in a non-fatal hit. Another disadvantage of this angle is the possibility that the bear will see the hunter raising his/her rifle as the bear will be looking towards you. Wait for the broadside or quartering-away shot.

Quartering away from you: A quartering away animal offers a good shot for these larger big game animals. It helps one avoid the heavy bones of the shoulder area in bears, but the size of the bear and ability to gain bullet penetration through the intestines and stomach into the vital organs of the chest should not be a problem if using the proper caliber rifle and bullet type. When picking a spot on a quartering away animal, think 3-D dimensionally. Imagine where the lungs are and determine where to aim so that the bullet will miss heavy bones and angle forward into the vital area. The exact aiming spot will vary with the degree to which the animal is quartering away. Remember that this angle is very important. The more the animal angles away, the closer you are to making a wounding rear-end shot. The less the animal angles away, the closer you are to having a broadside shot and the better the opportunity of penetrating both lungs.

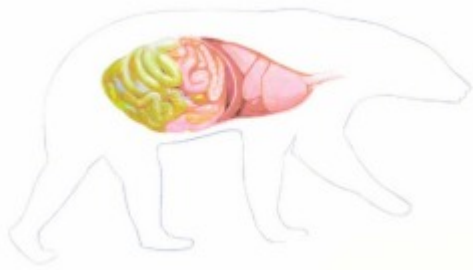
Elevated Stands: Many bear hunters use elevated tree/box type stands, mountainous terrain also present similar shot angles. The change in shot angle makes little difference to a hunter using the proper firearm. The position of bones in relation to the vital organs



changes more and more as the angle increases. The backbone and shoulder blade shield more and more of the chest cavity as the angle gets steeper. This decreases the available vital organ area for good shot placement. Complete penetration will result in a good blood trail. Elevated tree stands also make it more difficult to hit both lungs. Consider the angle of the shot when deciding how high your stand should be. Shooting down at narrower targets is very different than shooting horizontally at targets on the ground.

Whenever hunting (& practicing) in a tree stand (climber, ladder, lock on limb, etc) from an elevated position above the ground, always wear a fall restraint harness. This will allow you to concentrate on making a good shot without the fear of falling when that time arrives.

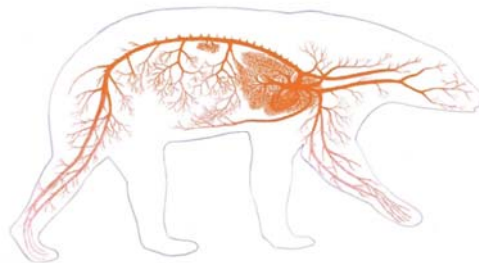
Bear Anatomy



Organs



Skeletal



Circulatory

Rifle, caliber and bullet selection

It is said that you can kill an elephant with a 22 caliber bullet. Maybe so, but would you want to attempt this? The less the ability to inflict widespread trauma the less room there is for error, which translates to more exacting shot placement. It is also said big is better. In this case, big is better, sort of. While the caliber of the rifle is important equally so is the choice of bullets. What we are looking for here is a happy medium of caliber and bullet that will provide the ability to inflict lethal trauma on the bear so he doesn't do the same to us when we approach it. A wounded bear under any circumstances is not what we want have to deal with. By example a 30-06 caliber rifle using a deep penetrating high weight retention bullet (IE: Nosler Partition, Barnes TSX, etc.) will inflict significantly more trauma to the bear than a 300 Winchester Magnum using a rapidly expanding fragmenting type bullet (IE: Nosler Ballistic Tip). Bears are tough and proper selection of the rifle caliber and type bullet is essential for optimizing trauma impact. 270 caliber rifles are a very popular choice among



deer hunters, but in my opinion tend to be a tad too light even with a good bullet, unless you are an extremely good shot. You don't need an elephant gun (375 H&H caliber and up) for black bears, remember the higher the fire power the greater the recoil and therefore the harder the rifle is to control. An excellent choice for black bears is a 7 MM Remington Magnum with a deep penetrating high weight retention type bullet. In general for hunting bear over bait your shot will be relatively short (less than 60 yards). Thus the trajectory (bullet drop) will be less critical (factor) at this distance so check your ballistics and consider using one of the heavier bullets offered in your caliber to provide more energy at impact that will be transferred to the bear in the form of trauma. The use of a low powered scope or maybe even open sights is recommended. Using a scope that has a "big" low end magnification (2x or larger) may present problems at close range in target acquisition and shot placement.

Bottom line; shoot the biggest caliber you accurately shoot on a regular basis and don't "overscope" your rifle.

After the shot

It is extremely important to remember that a bear even if mortally wounded with a lethal shot can travel significant distances before it expires. However, a bear that has been broken down with a shoulder shot can not run. Bears run on all fours and broken front shoulders will preclude a bear from running off on you.

Do not under any circumstances ever approach a downed and presumed dead bear if its eyes are closed. When the down bear expires, its eyes will open. If unsure, put another bullet in the bear. The rule of thumb is to keep shooting until the bear quits moving and its eyes are open. An extra bullet hole or two properly placed on a downed bear will not be noticeable when your taxidermist is through, not to mention that the added insurance of any extra shot may be priceless.

Black bears are said to emit a death moan prior to it expiring. After the shot while watching the bear and determining where it went if it ran off and out of sight, listen closely for the death moan. You will not in all cases have the bear emit a death moan; it depends where the shot hit the bear. Like when hunting a deer, do not get down from your stand or out of your blind and immediately start tracking the bear. It needs time to expire before you set off looking for it. If you have put a lethal shot on the bear, it isn't going anywhere; if you haven't do you really want to get on and up close with that bear? A bear can lay die and die from less than a mortal shot if given the opportunity. Pushing a bear is dangerous and usually will result in the bear not being harvested.

In closing

The above information is a compilation of material from various websites that I have compiled and edited as well as some of my personal experience that have all been put together as a guide for black bear hunting over bait. Most of the information provided can be used for brown/grizzly bear hunting also as the anatomy of the brown/grizzly bear is similar to that of the black bear, although the rifle caliber and bullet weight must be increased. I hope this guide proves useful in helping you enjoy your bear hunting



experiences. This guide is not intended to be all inclusive as every hunting situation has differences and nuances that make for a unique hunting experience. Keeping a journal of each hunt with what you consider to be the critical factors of that particular hunt can be an invaluable tool for future hunting experiences.

Hunt often, hunt safely, enjoy the outdoors and be respectful of what nature has provided us with for an adult outdoor recreational area.

Brandt H. Williams