

AK Style Grizzly or Brown Bear- Take your Choice

By: Brandt H. Williams
hook-n-hunt



Forward: After our black bear boat hunt in Prince William Sound in May of 2003, one of my best friends, Mike and I had a burning desire to return to AK to hunt brown (grizzly) bears. In September of 03 we booked with an outfitter. For the next twenty three months I communicated on a semi-regular basis with the outfitter, developing a customized gear list, staying in touch with him on the hunts he conducted and even meeting with him for dinner in January of 05 when we drove thru WVA on business. It seemed like it took forever for August 30th to arrive, but it finally did and what follows is a snapshot of our trip.

August 31, 2005: After having traveled the entire day before and arriving at our place of lodging around midnight, we were awakened at 7:00 AM as there appeared to be a window of opportunity to fly us in that morning instead of the afternoon as originally scheduled to our base camp some 65 miles inland from the Prince William Sound in GMU 16B. Mike and I were going to stay and hunt out of base camp while the other two hunters were going to be based out of spike camps up the river. Alaska hunting regulations forbid hunting on the day you fly in so we had to be content with waiting until the next day to get our hunting underway.

September 1, 2005: For me morning came at 7:00 AM. I emerged from the tent to a light frost and clear skies with the sun just starting to peak over the horizon behind camp through the trees. I was the first one up and was standing outside of the tent admiring the beauty of the morning with out my glasses or a gun when I saw our first bear of the hunt. A good size “shooter” was meandering across the runway about 300 yards down from camp. I was caught by surprise at the sight of this bear and wondered if this was a good indication of things to come. I roused the guys from the tent telling them I had just seen our first bear. Hunting bear we were told would be only in the evenings from about 7:00 PM until dark at around 9:30 PM or so as this is when the bears moved. After being in camp all day 6:00 PM came and we headed out. We set up out on the river bed of the Skwentna glassing the shoreline to give us at least a mile maybe two of shoreline to look for bears after having to traverse numerous slews and tributaries, some nearly waste deep and some with rapidly moving water. Sure enough at about 8:00 PM we spotted a very large sow with 3 very large cubs working the shoreline looking for fish. We moved in on the bears without them ever seeing or winding us. The cubs were huge, certainly second year cubs that would not be going back into the den this year. The sow was the largest bear we saw during the hunt. We judged her to be an eight footer, a very large sow. We watched as the bears worked the shoreline for a couple of hundred yards and finally disappeared into the brush at a bend in the shoreline. As we returned to camp having not seen any other bears that evening we were encouraged and looked forward to day two of the hunt.

September 2, 2005: I awoke about 6:30 AM to a very heavy frost and decided to go down on the edge of the runway about 100 yards and see if I could catch anything crossing. I sat quietly in my

chair at the edge of the runway for a couple of hours without ever seeing anything that resembled a bear. After breakfast, we hiked about two miles upstream to a spot where some decent bear had been spotted the year before. Getting to the spot the outfitter wanted was more difficult than anticipated and required some jungle maneuvers through the alders to work our way around a slew that was too deep to cross. We finally got close to where the outfitter was looking to go and pulled up at the edge of the Skwentna to glass the surrounding areas. After glassing for a number of hours and seeing nothing we headed back to base camp. We took a different route and altogether avoided those nasty alders. By the time we got back and downed lunch it was close to the time we needed to head out for the evening hunt. I told Mike to go ahead as I was too beat to venture out on another 2 to 3 mile excursion. The three of them set off to go back where we had hunted the night before. I moseyed on down to my chair on the edge of the runway and sat there until shortly after hearing 4 or 5 shots at 9:30 PM. I felt very confident that Mike had scored on his bear and was most anxious to have him return to camp to hear about it. It had been a beautiful night for hunting, but as dark approached the wind shifted and left me wondering what kind of weather tomorrow would bring. The three of them returned by flashlight around 10:00 PM. Throughout dinner and after we talked trying to recant all the details of the hunt that evening. We retired shortly after 11:30 PM to the anticipation of seeing his bear the next morning and concern with a possible turn for the worse in weather with the wind now having shifted 180⁰.

September 3, 2005: The morning broke overcast with an extremely low ceiling, dampness and an intermittent light rain. As it turned out it rained intermittently for the next four days. We made our way out to where the bear had been shot to retrieve its hide and skull. After returning, the outfitter set out to get one group from a spike camp as he had a satellite phone message that one of the other hunters had taken a small bear the first night. At 7:30 PM the assistant guide and I set out in the rain in for that evening's hunt. I was completely convinced that we should concentrate our efforts on the immediate area where the carcass of Mike's bear lay. We pulled up short of where we believed the carcass to be and glassed the timberline along the slew as had been done the preceding nights. We hunted until about 9:00 PM with no sign of bear, cold and wet we called it a day. That evening I retired early, around 10:30 PM and left the guys all huddled under the tarp talking.

September 4, 2005: Morning arrived to the pitter patter of rain falling everywhere. The entire day was pretty much confined to moving between the tent and the tarp as it rained lightly but steady for a good portion of the day. The assistant guide and I took off for hunting that evening about 6:00 PM. We went back to the area where we had initially set up the night before confirming that we were pretty close to where we wanted to be and certainly within viewing and striking distance of the carcass. By 7:00 PM a small bear had showed up about twenty yards from where we believed the carcass to be. This bear was small and was not a shooter. We now had made our first move in, closing to 200 yards, but not close enough for a shot at a "shooter" given the adverse weather conditions. As we were watching the bear, it all of a sudden got up and bolted off running away from the carcass. We knew it hadn't seen or heard us and we didn't think it had winded us, so the only logical conclusion left was the presence of a bigger bear. At 8:30 PM another much larger bear made his presence known at the timberline and bank's edge overlooking the carcass. He stood broad side for 15 seconds or so and then decided to lay down under a low hanging limb next to where he had just stood. He was laying such that he would have been looking directly at us had he lifted his head. However, he seemed quite intent on

concentrating on the carcass below. As it grew darker we finally made our way up to where we wanted to be. By that time it was close to 9:30 PM and the bear had not gotten up since about 8:30 PM. We felt he was content to lay there under the drooping tree limb until darkness. At 9:40 PM the assistant guide told me to take a shot as light had almost completely waned. As luck would have it I completely missed, shooting under the bear's outstretched head. I knew instantly I had completely missed as if I had hit the bear, I felt certain the bear would have tumbled over the edge and into the slew. We checked briefly to be sure we didn't see any blood and retreated making our way back to camp to tell of our encounter. Still raining and somewhat dejected at the events of the day I retired around 11:00 PM.

September 5, 2005: It was Labor Day and yes it was still raining. The routine today was pretty much the same as the previous day with the exception that all of us had smattered the area with our scent where I had shot at the bear the night before. Not finding any sign of blood, the outfitter finally conceded that I had in fact missed the bear and we returned to camp. That afternoon we set out about 5:00 PM in a light rain deciding to start closer tonight which somewhat prompted the earlier departure. We needed to get set up closer to where we wanted to shoot from and allow things to calm back down before the bear would show. Tonight we started about 250-300 yards out, with a final destination of about 150 yards from where we thought the bear would show. We felt we had patterned the bear and sure enough the bear showed up walking the timberline along the bank's edge just as we suspected he would do, walking into the wind. We saw him and had plenty of time to move up as he moved into the brush about 100 yards from the carcass. Sometime later the assistant guide asked if I heard a noise. Having less than great hearing I told him I had not heard anything. He said it definitely sounded like two bears having a difference of opinion. Finally, the bear we saw earlier emerged directly under the drooping limb where he had been shot at the night before and stared at the carcass for maybe a minute. He then backed out of sight probably 5-10 feet off of the timberline at the bank's edge. We moved into our final position and waited. We didn't see the bear again. At 9:15 PM we decided our best bet was to back out and come back tomorrow, setting up early in the final spot we wanted to be so as to be ready to shoot when he arrived. I really felt we had patterned the bear and now would take it the next night. Upon returning to camp I proceeded to tell the guys what had transpired and how enthusiastic I was about the prospects for tomorrow evening.

September 6, 2005: It continued to rain most of the day, but it passed quickly and I hurried the assistant guide up to get ready as I really wanted to get back out for the evening hunt. We headed out a little later than I wanted to which was around 6 PM. We managed to get set up in our final place and settled in by 7 PM. The wind tonight was still okay, but not as favorable as the night before and it seemed to be changing direction on us. About 8 PM it finally stopped raining, the clouds started to break up to where you could even see blue sky. The wind was now fairly consistent and light from the direction opposite which it had been the night before. While this was not ideal, it was blowing out slightly from the timberline to us which would preclude we felt being sniffed out by a bear coming from either direction. 8:30 PM came and the guide in training said, bear, bear, shoot that bear. I quickly positioned the rifle steadying it on the log we were using for cover. I put the cross hairs on his chest under his chin as he was quartering to us and squeezed the trigger. He jumped up and snatched at where I had hit him with his jaws. I hadn't broken him down by hitting him in the front shoulder, but he was dead on his feet the instant I shot. The assistant guide and I both emptied our rifles. The bear jumped up on the top of

the bank 15' from where I had initially shot him, collapsed and expired. The first shot from 160 yards had gone in just over his front shoulder taking out his heart and lungs before exiting out the other side behind the other shoulder. We took some pictures as dark was beginning to set in before starting back for camp. Here is where it gets real interesting. We hadn't gotten 150 yards down the timberline walking the gravel river bed when another bear very intently was making its way to the carcass. It saw us and paid little attention to us. I expressed a serious concern about needing to run that bear off. Both the assistant guide and the guide in training were reluctant to fire a warning shot at it. We noticed a fresh wound on the backside of the right rear leg of the bear and quickly concluded that my bear and this bear were the two that had gotten into it the night before with what the assistant guide had heard. We stood there in amazement as the bear proceeded directly to the carcass grabbing it and dragging it around the general area. We decided to leave as we were no match for an aggressive meat loving bear that evening. We talked all the way back about the events that just occurred, especially the presence of the second bear. We felt we had just seen something that was highly unusual. We returned to camp to questions about hearing eight shots and what had happened. The rest of my evening was consumed in talk of the events of the past few hours.

September 7, 2005: The morning broke clear and crisp just at it had the first two days in camp. The pilot was pretty backed up on his flights and it was going to be tough getting everyone out of camp today. He was going to fly in snatch the other two hunters and the outfitter. If he could get back that day he was going to get three more. Those who were not headed out on the first flight went to get my bear mid morning. The pilot came in and picked up the first three while we approached the kill site. When we were about 200 yards from the place where it had gone down the night before I could clearly see my bear was not where we had left it. In fact I couldn't see my bear. We found my bear had been dragged down into the slew and had a chunk taken out of its back right leg. After a morning photo shoot, the assistant guides proceeded to skin the bear out. With the bear skinned we made it back to camp in about 2 ½ hours start to finish. We stayed close to camp the rest of the day in the unlikely event the pilot would make it back. After dinner and a few hours at the fire we all retired knowing tomorrow was our last day in camp.

September 8, 2005: We awoke for the last time in what we had called home for nearly 10 days. I was looking forward to a hot shower and real food, as we would be venturing back to civilization. We had not heard a word from the outside world on the news, sports, weather, etc. for well over a week. It felt like we had been in a time warp. Camp was broken down and gear was separated into what was going back into storage and what was going to sheep camp the following week. The pilot made it in around 9:30 AM and took three of us, our bears and gear out. The two assistant guides and the other guide in training were left behind. After landing we made our way to Anchorage where we went directly to the tannery and then onto the hotel. Mike's sow squared at 7'-4" while my boar squared at 7'-0". After a hot shower and clean clothes we hit the town for real food and some shopping. We returned around 9:30 PM and changed our flight reservations, for an early morning Saturday departure.

September 9, 2005: More shopping, including a visit to a local custom gunsmith in Anchorage, AK and more real food was the order of the day as we waited for Saturday morning to arrive.

September 10, 2005: Up at 5:45 AM it was the last day of our Alaska trip. We boarded the plane on time and as we were being pushed away from the gate I turned to Mike and said “you know this isn’t the end of the hunt.” Mike looked at me with an inquisitive look on his face not saying anything. I then said “it’s just another chapter in the book.”