

How To

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A career spent killing dangerous bears leads to this surefire advice on how to drop bruins on the spot.

By Ian McMurchy

Kill Bears

The huge, old sow came at me in a blur, low to the ground, hissing pure fury. No jaw-popping warnings. No growling. Black bears make an unforgettable sound when they are really furious. It sounds like a hiss roaring from the bottom of their deep chests.

Just to make things really interesting, the light was about gone; all I could see was a large black shape barreling down the trail right at me. Meanwhile, somewhere behind me, my partners yelled, "Here she comes!" And then they ran for the truck.

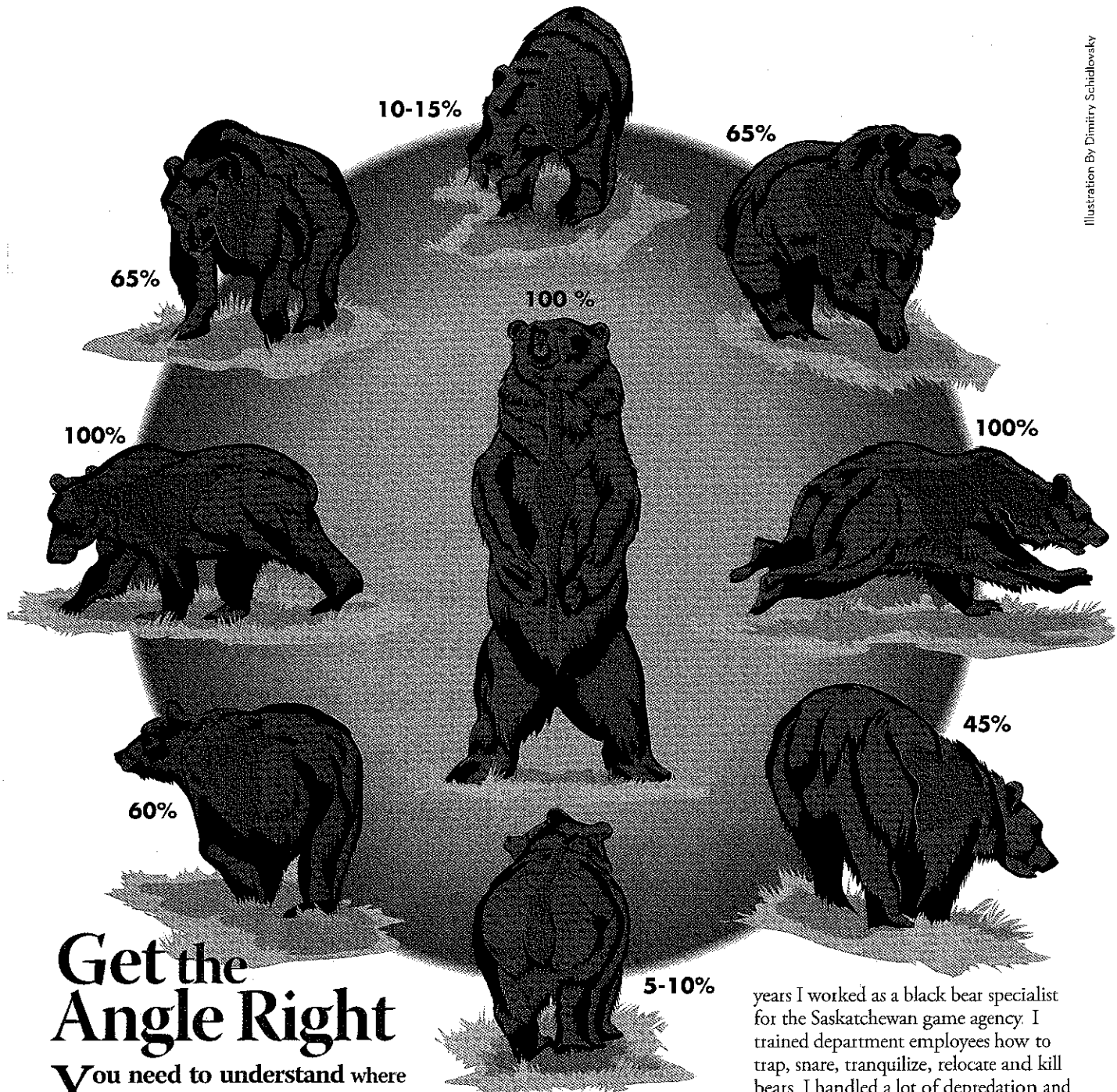
In an idiotic spat of bravery I stood in the middle of the trail with my shotgun aimed at the black mass. When

she got to about 10 steps I put the barrel just under her chin and pulled the trigger. The shotgun jumped against my shoulder. Then silence. Dead silence. I shucked another slug into the chamber and heard my "back-up" shooters shouting, "Ian, you okay? What's going on?"

After my knees quit trembling, I slowly backed away. We returned to the site with flashlights and found the sow

The impact of the slug had knocked her off the trail. A 1-ounce slug is devastating at 10 paces. She died on impact. This particular bear had to be killed because she was acting aggressively toward campers. Immobilization and relocation wasn't an option; if we did so, we'd have merely moved the problem.

There are really just two reasons to kill a bear: because you want to and because you have to. The "have-to-kill" situation with bears involves stopping an act of aggression toward yourself or another person. In have-to-kill situations there is only one acceptable result: the bear dies, and you walk away.



Get the Angle Right

You need to understand where your bullet must travel to ensure lethal results regardless of angles, body positions or the type of bear. The percentages listed above indicate the amount of the vital area that's exposed. There are two primary shot locations: heart/lungs and shoulders. Both work, but shoulder shots work much better than lung shots. You have to break a bear down with the first shot to avoid any possibly dangerous situation.

Statistically, the likelihood of anyone having to kill a bear is very small. Most bears are timid and prefer to avoid contact with humans. But the truth is you never know when you're going to encounter the "wrong bear." Predation is a nasty word when humans are the prey, but it happens. An encounter with the wrong bear often involves an animal

whose temperament at that particular moment is in the "fight" stage rather than the more common "flight" stage. The reason might be territorial, simple dominance behavior or the animal might be wounded.

I have experienced the have-to-kill situation four times during the killing of hundreds of bears. For many

years I worked as a black bear specialist for the Saskatchewan game agency. I trained department employees how to trap, snare, tranquilize, relocate and kill bears. I handled a lot of depredation and nuisance bear problems over the years. I also worked with a lot of outfitters and guides, so naturally many bear-killing stories were exchanged. I heard my share of dandies ranging from "bears are easy to kill, I use .22 shorts" to "the 375 H&H is not enough gun for a big black bear!" Unfortunately, most of the hunting stories involved tracking wounded bears. I found that stories of well-hit bears that ran off into the forest were more common than "bang-flops."

I came to hate tracking bears, particularly in heavy cover. It occurred to me that if I'm tracking, I made a bad shot. Shooting bears is different than shooting non-dangerous critters. We

must strive to maintain control over the entire situation. We do not have control when we are wading in alders so thick we cannot see our boots. We do have control when the critter is down. The best way to ensure complete control is to shoot the bear in the scapula (shoulder blade). When done correctly, the bear's nervous and skeletal systems are destroyed.

Before we get into the technicalities of killing bears, I would like to make the point that bears are bears, whether they have a hump on their back or live on ice-floes. Their internal and skeletal anatomy is pretty much the same. I'm not suggesting that an irate black bear can exhibit the rage and determination of a charging Alaskan brownie or polar bear—there is a difference! What I'm saying is that internally bears are similar, so shot placement is pretty much the same. Now, because a bear that is dropped in its tracks is easier on the nerves and more ethical, I've outlined here how to kill bears from four different angles.

1 The Broadside Shot

The scapula shot is the best shot for killing bears if the front portion of the animal can be seen. The scapula or shoulder blade is a fairly large target. The trick is to understand exactly where it is located. This is best learned by examining dead bears as they are being gutted and skinned. You can see the scapula move if you look closely at live bears as they walk and sit. The scapula appears as a lump situated just below the backline and a little forward of the leg line. The spinal cord lies between the scapulas, so if you hit a bear high in the shoulders the cord will be hit or damaged by the shot; as a result, the bear will lose the use of his back legs and probably his front legs. He will drop on the spot because his brain will receive a tremendous shock and his legs will no longer be working. If you are fortunate, his respiratory system will also be damaged by bullet or bone fragments.

2 The Head Shot

I should mention that most hunters avoid shooting a bear in the head because the skull is used for Boone and Crockett Club scoring. I never worried about that when destroying problem bears and can attest that head shots are the fastest killers. "Bang-flop" is the best way to describe a properly placed head shot.

From the side, place the shot just

below the ear. From the front, your target is just above a line that would join the top of its eyes. If possible, wait until its head is facing downward or at 90 degrees to the path of the bullet.

Another deadly head-on shot is to place the bullet into the throat and then the chest, just below the chin. You need the proper angle to pull off this shot. I don't recommend neck shots from the side because the neck is constantly moving and it is a small target. If you have to do a side-profile neck shot, aim slightly above its center to ensure you hit the bear's spine.

3 Going-Away Shots

Going-away shots are sometimes necessary with a wounded bear. They should be placed at the top of the tail, not below. You want to split the pelvis and to take out its back legs so a finishing shot can be taken. The nervous and skeletal systems are your targets. If a heavy bullet is used, the respiratory and circulatory systems can be taken out. If you have enough gun, these shots are deadly.

4 The Head-On Charge

The last position I will mention is the head-on charge. I have stopped charges with both shoulder and throat shots with equal effectiveness. You may not have time to pick a spot, so just keep shooting as long as there is movement. If the bear's head is up you don't have much to shoot at. I suggest one of two shots. First would be the shot I did on the big black bear sow. I hit it just under its jaw. The bullet went into the base of its neck and kept going into its chest. The second option is to break a shoulder. This will turn or roll the bear. You will have to shoot again, so keep going for the spine and/or the nervous system.

After reading this article many bear hunters will disagree with the lethality of the scapula shot. So be it. They can continue tracking lung-shot bears. I will walk up to mine and deliver a final shot under a controlled situation. My buddy Brian Hoffart, who runs Bait Masters Hunting Camp in Green Lake, Saskatchewan, sums it up this way: "Every client who hunts with a rifle in my camp watches a video on shot placement for hitting the bear's scapula before they go out to their stand. Then I show them an actual scapula and position it on a large, full-mounted black bear in my lodge. When I started doing this, I stopped tracking bears!" 🐾



Bear Guns & Loads

We cannot discuss killing bears without a brief mention of suitable firearms. Use the largest caliber you can shoot well and use heavy, well-constructed bullets. In my opinion the .270 is the smallest caliber you should use for black bears. For small (200 pounds or less) black bears I suggest fairly fast-opening bullets such as the Nosler Accubond, Hornady Interbond or Swift Scirocco. For black bears that may weigh up to 600 pounds, use calibers such as a .300 or .338 magnum, and use a heavy bullet such as Winchester's Failsafe, Barnes' Triple Shock, Swift's A-Frame or Federal's Trophy Bonded.

For the really big bears, the ones with the long toenails and humps on their backs or the ones with snow-white pelage, I would be uncomfortable with less than a .338 magnum; in fact, I would prefer a .375 or a 400-caliber rifle. Use big bullets for big bears; it's as simple as that! Swift A-Frame bullets, Speer's Trophy Bonded Bear Claw, Nosler's Fail Safe, Barnes' Triple Shock and the Nosler Partition do the job well. The .416 Rigby I carried completely overwhelmed a 10-foot brownie a couple of years ago. The first 350-grain Swift A-Frame pounded the bear to the ground and probably did the job, but I hit him again with a follow-up shot to make sure he was dead.

I've found that 12-gauge shotguns are excellent bear killers if you use slugs. I would not recommend lighter gauges since they lack the energy and penetration required for consistent kills. I would choose one of the sabot slugs for small black bears, and the heaviest slug I could find for Alaskan bears. Forget about buckshot or an ssg; they are not reliable unless you are within waltzing distance.

Photo by William H. Mullins