

Brown Bears, Boats, Bullets and Tapeworms

By: Lloyd L. Smrkovski

As every Alaskan hunter knows, every adventure has a beginning that originates long before the float plane lands in a far-distant shore; in this case in Tenakee Springs, Alaska.

As I roll back through my long-term memory cells, I found myself attending one of the 2010 SCI-New Hampshire Chapter gatherings of fellow conservation-minded Americans, like myself. At that meeting I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Thomas Sullivan, Vice-President of Ruger's Newport Operations, Newport, NH. I shared with him that I was having difficulty finding a new .416 Ruger Alaskan rifle. He asked me what I would be hunting for and I replied that I was planning to book an Alaskan brown bear hunt. He smiled and asked me to call his office the following Monday. I did, and thanks to Tom and his gracious staff, it wasn't more than a couple of weeks and I had my new .416 Ruger Alaskan. After topping it off with a new Swarovski scope, and sighting it in, I sent it off to Michigan to have a muzzle-break installed, as the recoil was more than I cared to deal with at my tender age of 69. Soon thereafter I booked my Alaskan brown bear hunt through Bob Wodzisz of Hunting Consultants Unlimited. Due to the popular hunting area I'd be going to (Unit 4: Admiralty-Baranof-Chichagof Islands), the first available opening for a fall hunt was for mid September of 2012, a wait that would seem longer than eternity.

September 15, 2012 came at last. I had flown from Hartford, CT to Seattle, WA via Chicago on United Airlines (no problems with transporting firearms/ammo), and then boarded Alaska Airlines for a flight to Juneau. The following morning I caught a float-plane (Alaska Seaplanes) to Tenakee Springs, which was only a 30-45 minute flight west of Juneau. Upon landing there I was met by my guide, Chris Erickson, owner of Tok River Outfitters. I was then ferried via a skiff to our floating hunting camp, the 45' Icy Lady. Once my gear was stowed and my hunting and fishing licenses were purchased, we were off for my "once in a life time Alaskan 10-day adventure".

It was mid to late afternoon when we arrived at our hunt-site off of one of the many bays of Chichagof Island. With my new .416 Ruger slung over my shoulder, along with two years of anticipation building in my arteries and veins, we boarded one of the vessel's skiffs and motored into the nearest bay. The tide was coming in as we entered a fairly wide tidal flat that was fed by water draining that area of the Chichagof Island water-shed. An hour later we found ourselves several miles deep into the island's wilderness area that was lush with pine trees and bushes that gave an appearance of a thick and twisting jungle, where we knew there existed a bruin with my name on his tag. Bald eagles and seagulls swarmed the area picking up the dead and dying Coho salmon that had returned there to spawn and die. The ground was strewn with the skeletons of hundreds of salmon, most of which had been cleaned to the bone by *Ursus arctos*, the Alaskan brown bear. The deciduous trees were all in a colorful rainbow-display. I was in what had to be "heaven".

An hour or so before dark we beached the boat, as the water-depth was too shallow to continue. Chris and I continued up stream, walking sometime in the water and other times on the sandy/rocky shoreline. Huge bear-foot impressions were seen everywhere, many measuring at least 9" in width, indicating that the bear that had passed there would most likely square at around 9', or more. Within that first hour of hunting we saw no fewer than half a dozen brown bears, most of which were sows with cubs or young males. With Autumn's light quickly fading we decided to proceed on for another 15 minutes or so and then plan to return the following morning. It wasn't more than a minute or so later that we noted a set of fresh foot-prints on the sandy shore-line, which had to have been left by a huge bruin. Chris smiled

and quietly indicated to me that this was the track of a huge boar, just what we both were looking for. I slowly removed my rifle from my shoulder, opened the bolt slightly to double check that I had in fact chambered a round, noted that I had, and then quietly closed the bolt and double checked the safety to make sure it was on the half-safe position. I also double-checked the magnification-setting on the Swarovski scope.....it was on 3x, the lowest setting possible. I was ready.

After no more than 5 minutes of tracking we spotted the huge boar about 50 yards ahead of us, ambling slowly along the river's edge. Within seconds he spotted us and immediately moved into the thick underbrush. Chris and I quickly crossed the stream via a shallow gravel-bar, so that we would be on the opposite side of the river from the bear. We moved quickly and quietly to our right so as to get behind a huge fallen tree that had been blown down along the river's edge. The tree would give us adequate cover and hopefully the boar would return. No more than a couple of minutes had passed when Chris lightly tapped me on the shoulder and whispered that he could hear the bear growling and snapping his teeth. As he said that, his eyes went wide and he quickly pointed to the far bank of the river. There, coming directly at us was this huge bruin. Chris immediately said, "shoot". Without thinking, I dropped to one knee and instinctively threw the rifle to my shoulder, disengaged the safety and placed the cross-hairs of the scope on the bear's right shoulder. With the squeeze of the trigger, the 400 grain Hornady soft-nose DGX bullet caught the bear exactly where I had aimed, just as it was jumping from the bank into the water. The bear tumbled forward into the stream and immediately got up on 3 legs and indicated that he was by no means "down for the count". A second later both Chris, with his Marlin .50 Alaskan, and I fired simultaneously so as to repel any further aggression. The bear dropped immediately and the darkness of the night quickly enveloped the quiet softness of the early evening drama.

As it was quite impractical, and really not very safe for us to be skinning a bear in near or total darkness, we decided to tie the bruin to a nearby pine tree with parachute cord, so that the incoming tide would not float it away. We would then return the following morning to skin it and retrieve the hide/skull. I tagged the bear and then sadly noted that it was not the huge boar that we'd seen and hoped for, but a very old sow, and a very huge one at that. Even though disappointed that we'd taken a sow, we took solace in the fact that under the circumstances, we had no other choice. The bear was a really nice specimen, and to me personally, the **trophy aspect** of the hunt was the **experience** and not the whole-body mount of my Alaskan brown bear that would soon adorn my trophy room.

Interestingly, upon necropsy we found that my first bullet had broken her right shoulder, penetrated completely through her pleural and abdominal cavities and then lodged in the calf-muscle of her off-side rear leg.....a total bullet path of over 6 feet. The guide's 500 grain bullet penetrated the bear only about 2-3 feet and my second shot went completely through the bear. Finally, it was noted that the bear's large intestine was filled with tapeworms, no doubt acquired from the many worm-infested salmon that she had been eating over the years. The ole sow squared just under 8 feet.

The remaining days of my 10-day Alaskan adventure was spent bear-watching, photographing breaching whales and fur seals, fishing for salmon, checking crab/shrimp pots and being witness to my Tennessee hunting partner's harvest of a nice boar that squared a good 9 feet, taken with his .460 S&W pistola. Now, that is another story for a fire-side chat.

I can only come away from this experience with the resolve that an Alaskan brown bear hunt should be on everyone's "**bucket list**". Regardless, may your next adventure be one to savor and remember with kind regards.