

Sneaking up on the Sleeping Grizzly...



Was the Easy Part

By Ron Spomer, Field Editor

Look out! She's getting up!" my guide hissed. Alarmed, I bumped my rifle off the shooting sticks. The grizzly heard the clank, turned and stood erect, long claws glistening against black paws wide as shovels. Her little pig eyes began glowing with comprehension.

And I sat holding a video camera.

The end of a stalk, with a grizzly in your sights and the safety off, is not the time to exchange your rifle for a camera. I did it anyway. And all hell broke loose. Well, a sizable chunk of it, anyway.

The blond bear had been sleeping on a snowy bed in a blanket of willows when we'd spotted her for the fifth time in three days. The wind was steady, 12 mph, left-to-right. The sun was behind us in a clear sky (that's correct: a clear sky on an Alaska spring grizzly hunt!) and my guide and I had duck-walked and crawled within an estimated 150 yards of her. The setup was so perfect I elected to record it on video, capturing the line of bear tracks in the snow that had guided my eye to a fuzzy form curled in the willows. Twenty-nine-year-old Shane Reynolds figured this classic, Toklat-patterned bear for a female, even though no cubs followed her dark brown legs as she roamed her endless tundra empire. Her blond rump and hump looked pretty beefy. "It's got the width and swagger to be a young boar," the red-bearded Reynolds admitted when first observing her through my 20x-60x Swarovski spotting scope.

The persistent scout had located the bear our first evening on the tundra, despite glassing into



Photo: Daniel Cox/WireImage.com

the glaring, low sun from our high-ridge campsite. "See how its rump and shoulders ripple when it walks?" Shane asked. "Big bear. But it's not wandering enough. Boars are cruising, looking for sows. And her nose is too much like a dog's, not square like a boar's."

"How do you mean?"

"See how her chin seems to sort of just taper down to her neck?" He leaned away from the eyepiece to give me another look. "A boar's nose is more square, straight down in front, then straight back under the chin. Her nose sweeps down too much." That was the first evening in camp, the bear was a good 2 miles away, maybe more, and I was in no hurry to punch my tag, even though I'd failed in four previous grizzly hunts. We had eight days to search and the long-term forecast was high pressure and clear skies for at least the next three of them. Of course, this was Alaska and the winds were coming off the Bering Sea fewer than 30 miles away. Anything could happen.



Two days after we'd first sighted that bear, she lay within two long bow shots, sound asleep. Shane had found her again while glassing from atop a small peak a half-mile from the BombShelter

tent where I lay nursing my nemesis, a migraine. "You really missed it," Shane said when he strolled in shortly after noon. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed up a picture. "That's the bear." It was blond-and-brown. And it was close.

"Good Lord, you got this picture with a cell phone? How close were you?"

"Fifty, maybe 75 yards."

"What happened?"

"Remember where we saw her going over that far ridge last night?"

"I thought she was leaving the country."

"Well, she came back. By the time I got up that hill, she was already coming around it, which was good because the wind was in my favor. That's why she got so close."

"You didn't stalk her?"

"Nope. Look here." He punched up another photo. The grizzly was crunching a shed caribou antler. "She laid there and gnawed on that for 15 minutes!"

And there I'd lain at the same time, oblivious, head throbbing, staring at the walls of the BombShelter vibrating slightly in the wind, my Canon cameras beside me, useless as bricks.

"I think you should shoot her."

"Shouldn't we hold out for a boar?"

"The weather could go belly-up anytime and they don't seem to be moving. I mean, we can hike 10 or 20 miles a day looking, but we usually do better just watching as they wander by. I'm afraid they're mostly done breeding already. Otherwise this sow would have lured something in."

My young guide had some good points there. Our bear had no cubs with her, had wandered across several square miles, yet had pulled in no sharp-nosed suitors. She had probably already bred or might have been infertile or too old to reproduce; either way, she was legal. Severe depredation on area moose and caribou had prompted the Alaska Fish & Game Department to liberalize the bear harvest.

"Think we can find her again?" I'd asked then. And now, at the tent with my headache fading, I asked again.

"I think we can. She was moving down to the creek. Shouldn't be more than 2 miles away."

It proved closer to a half-mile. Shane was leading the way across the tundra when I asked about tracks winding down a snow patch. "That's where she was walking when I came to get you," Shane explained. "We'll stay on this ridge and watch this drainage, but I'm guessing she's reached the main creek already." We resumed hiking, but second thoughts stopped me. The area appeared empty, yet the grizzly's tracks disappeared. Why? I focused my little 8x32 binocular on the spoor, following it into the willows where it ended in a small clump of yellow grass that wafted in the breeze like fur. Blond grizzly fur. Sleeping.

I hissed to stop Shane. Pointed. Crouched. The wind blew steadily from the southwest, fast enough to cover the crunch of dead vegetation. Tundra habitat may not be tall, but it is surprisingly dense: mounds of sedges, tufts of grass, mats of moss and lichens, dozens of flowering forbs and a maze of roots, all stitched together with sinuous dwarf birch and willow limbs. After a winter of freezing snow and drying winds, it lay exposed and brittle as old bird bones—*snap, crackle, pop*. If the wind in the bear's ears was anything like the roar in ours, she wouldn't hear us. We crawled 20 yards closer to a little hump with a clear view all around.



I nestled the rifle in the shooting sticks, chambered a round and turned the



As the tundra snow receded with spring and the author ate freeze-dried food, incredibly, the bears fed on the previous fall's thawing berries.

scope to 8x for precise shot placement. "I could take her in the neck," I whispered. Shane didn't respond, but I knew what he was thinking. "Don't worry," I reassured him. "I'm gonna make her get up first and play it safe. Got the camera ready?" The Canon was clamped atop a tripod, ready to roll. Shane had instructions to record the scene wide to establish the setup and my position in relation to the bear, then zoom tight on her. That accomplished, I would bawl like a moose calf, the bear would stand, and I'd drop her with a high shoulder shot.

"You ready?"

"Ready."

"Camera is on?"

"On."

"Recording? Not on pause is it?"

"No. I'm getting it."

That's the point at which the nascent movie director within me tumbled to the idea of recording those tracks, panning over them until they resolved into the bear. Hey, the griz was sleeping. What could happen?

Plenty.

As I grabbed the tripod, a long-tailed jaeger flew over, dived on the bear and woke it. One second the griz is napping, the next it's sitting up. In my excitement to get the camera rolling, I knocked over the rifle and Ms. Griz had us pegged. Now what?

The bear turned and started walking away. "Here, take the camera." I passed it back and picked up the rifle. The grizzly threw a few glances over its shoulder and sped up, the way a stray dog does when you shoo it from your yard. I wanted to shoot, but not before I knew my guide was recording.

"Are you on her? Should I shoot?" She wasn't in a panic, but wasn't ambling either. A few more seconds and she'd be out of mid-range, bordering on long. And I didn't want to take a long shot at a moving grizzly, although my .300 Caribou cartridge was certainly powerful enough.

"I'm ready," I thought I heard over the wind in my ears.

"I should shoot?"

"Shoot!"

I retained the presence of mind to bawl in rough approximation of a frightened moose. The sow swung broadside, looked back and stopped right behind a leaning willow that covered her high shoulder ... but not her heart.

I leveled the reticle behind her

Hardware for Grizzlies



Rifles and Calibers

Interior grizzlies, not the salmon-eating browns living large on the coast, aren't the behemoths of legend. Deep in the mountains, a big boar might stretch 8.5 feet, but 7-footers are more common. Smaller body size for inland grizzlies means big-bore rifles favored by brown bear hunters aren't essential so long as you employ a tough bullet that will stay in one piece for deep, if not complete, penetration. The Barnes Triple Shock is that bullet, famous for opening reliably and punching through the meanest collection of bone, muscle and sinew ever assembled. I used the 180-grain TSX pushed to 3140 fps.

I used a Borden Rimrock Model LSR, which has a stainless steel, barreled action pillar-bedded to a hand-laid, fiberglass Rimrock stock. The .300 Borden Caribou cartridge is a .300 Weatherby slightly reshaped and given a 35-degree shoulder for improved accuracy. It apparently works. This rifle grouped those TSXs a hair over a half-inch and consistently clustered 180-grain Combined Technology Ballistic Silvertips under a half inch at 100 yards. That's amazing accuracy in a sporter-weight .30-caliber magnum. (Borden Rifles: 570-965-2505; bordenrifles.com)

Optics

Tundra bear hunting is almost exclusively a glass-and-stalk affair. We were well armed with Swarovski 8x32 EL and 15x56 SLC binoculars plus a 20x-60x-65mm spotting scope. The latter was critical for judging pelt condition and trophy quality at the vast distances one can see across open tundra.

Clothing Options

In the far north clothes don't make you, they save you. The wrong garments can literally get you killed. Despite having considerable experience hunting Alaska, I stopped in at Barney's Sports Chalet in Anchorage for the latest in wet- and cold-weather togs. Owner and veteran wilderness hunter Bob Hodson showed me how advanced mountain wear had become since my last purchases, outfitting me in the latest hydrophobic, super-light, synthetic insulations from Merino wool base layers to luxurious PrimaLoft parkas weighing less than most light wool jackets. "In addition to layers, Alaska gear needs to retain insulating ability when wet, stretch without binding so you can hike without fatigue, and not weigh a ton," Hodson explained. "Wool is a great material, but bush planes limit the weight you can fly in. A few wool garments can put you over the limit. I'm afraid the mountain climbers have it right. Super-light, super-efficient, water-hating synthetics are the way to go." For examples of the kind of outerwear Hodson means, check his website at barneysports.com.



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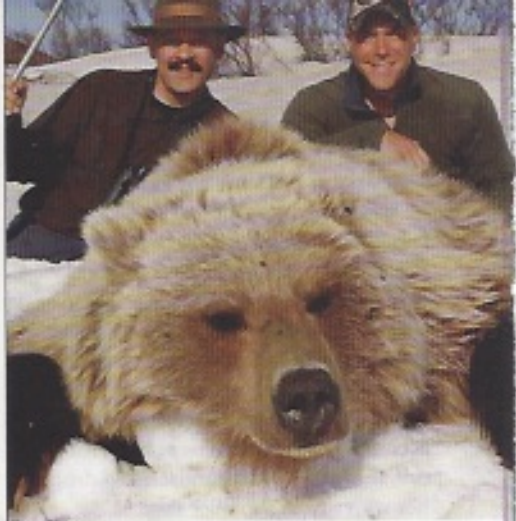


Photo: Author

shoulder, remembered the crisp, light trigger on the Borden rifle and gently squeezed. The grizzly's leg collapsed and her chest hit the snow. I thought it was all over, but as I racked in another cartridge she bounced up and took off. Now she was really covering ground. When the crosshair swept past her shoulder, I fired. She collapsed, slid down up against willows and didn't twitch.

We counted two hundred steps to reach her. The first 180-grain Triple Shock had taken out a rib and the top of the heart. The second passed from left ham to just behind the off-shoulder, clipping the spine. The bear measured slightly over 7 feet, as promised, but most impressive was the pelt—incredibly dense underfur and guard hairs 6 inches long. Shane spent hours carefully skinning and fleshing, taking obvious pride in his work.

It was a wonderfully short, easy hike back to our camp on the windy ridge. Whimbrels whistled in the distance, short-eared owls engaged in nuptial dance, chestnut-collared longspurs collected beak-loads of grass for their nests. The tundra was coming alive, on the edge of bursting into full-fledged summer. The first flowers, lush purple anemones, were exposing their shiny faces on the gravel eskers, risking decapitation by hungry parka squirrels. Now and then a vole or lemming would squirt through the vegetation, reminding us how all the owls, harriers, rough-legged hawks and jaegers were surviving in this harsh, but beautiful land.

My Outfitter

Shane Reynolds was guiding for Freelance Outdoor Adventures (freelanceoa@hotmail.com, 907-864-0630; freelanceoutdooradventures.com).

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