

Brown/Grizzly Bear Hunting in Alaska

by Richard A. Sellers

Perhaps more than any other big game species in North America brown/grizzly bears represent the ultimate trophy and a once in a lifetime quarry for many hunters. Over the past eight years I've seen a lot of bear hunters come and go through the Alaska Peninsula (Game Management Unit 9) and had plenty of opportunity through casual conversation and formal questionnaires to weigh factors that contribute to a satisfying brown bear hunt, whether successful or not.

In 1983 and 1984 Wildlife Conservation sent questionnaires to every successful Unit 9 bear hunter to gain better insights into how we could manage this tremendous resource to ensure that the quality of hunting and the characteristics of the harvest continued to meet hunter expectations. Of 423 questionnaires sent out, an astounding 83 percent were returned, and 90 percent of those hunters were satisfied with the bears they took. Most of the unhappy hunters were disappointed in the size of the bear and a few had taken badly rubbed spring bears. Unlike some other trophy animals with antlers or horns that are fairly easy to appraise in an instant, it usually takes prolonged observation of a brown/grizzly bear to verify that it is a legal bear (that is, not accompanied by cubs or yearlings), to insure that there are not large rubbed areas, and to make a good judgment about its size. Next to the quality of the bear taken, the number of bears observed during the hunt contributed most to a rewarding experience, followed by the overall wilderness experience and the relative scarcity of other hunters.

A QUESTION OF TROPHIES

But before discussing where these brown/grizzly bear hunting meccas are in Alaska, let's look at some other decisions that need to be considered in preparing for a brown/grizzly bear hunt. Is there a particular type of trophy desired (such as a large coastal "brown bear" versus a beautifully pelted blond Interior "grizzly")? Is a spring or fall hunt preferable? What is the best way to select a guide-outfitter? In Alaska, nonresidents hunting for brown/grizzly bears must hunt with a registered guide or an Alaskan relative within the second degree of kinship. And remember that most prime bear hunting areas have a bag limit of one bear every four regulatory years.

A BROWN OR A GRIZZLY?

There tends to be confusion over the terms "brown" and "grizzly." There are only three species of bears present in North



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America—the polar bear *Ursus maritimus*; the black bear *Ursus americanus* (which comes in several color phases— just as Labrador retrievers come in different colors); and the brown/grizzly bear *Ursus arctos*. The number of subspecies of *Ursus arctos* has been debated over the years, but modern genetic testing points to only two subspecies: *Ursus arctos middendorffi*, which is the brown bear of the Kodiak Archipelago, and *Ursus arctos horribilis*, which includes all other brown and grizzly bears on this continent. The continuing confusion between brown and grizzly bears is partially due to the way bears are registered within the Boone and Crockett record book, which has arbitrarily drawn a line to separate the larger coastal bears from generally smaller interior bears. This distinction between brown and grizzly bears is totally arbitrary. Unfortunately even the scientific community has not settled on one name or the other, so I will use the title “brown/grizzly” for all of them, including the Kodiak subspecies.

Biologists estimate that between 52,000 and 63,000 brown/grizzly bears remain in North America, with about two-thirds of them living in Alaska. Most of the rest are found in Canada, with just remnant populations, totaling about 1,000, left in the U.S. Rockies. Brown/grizzly bears are found throughout Alaska except on the islands south of Frederick Sound in southwestern Alaska, the Aleutian Islands west of Unimak Island, and the islands of the Bering Sea. Populations have remained robust in most areas of the state despite increasing harvest and expanding human developments. A note of caution is warranted: few biologists believe that recent record harvests can continue to increase without some impact on the population of bears.

Brown/grizzly bears are not an easy species to manage because they don’t lend themselves to accurate trend surveys,

and a recently developed census method is expensive. Bears are found in a wide variety of habitats within Alaska, resulting in drastically different levels of abundance. In addition, bears have a very low reproductive rate, which means that an overharvest takes longer to correct in these species than it does for highly productive species like deer. Consequently, brown/grizzly bear hunting seasons take on a complexity that some hunters liken to the income tax regulations. Types of seasons vary from wide open to drawing permits and last anywhere from nine months to only two weeks per year. Basically, these diverse seasons reflect hunting pressure, means of access, hunter success, and characteristics of the bear population.



Len Rue, Jr.

WHEN TO HUNT

One of the first considerations is whether you want to hunt in the spring or fall. Among nonresident bear hunters, the success rate is roughly the same for either season—about 60-65 percent; but resident hunters report a lower success rate for fall hunts (5 percent) than for spring hunts (10 percent). This difference isn't as striking as it appears because many residents buy a bear tag just in case they run into a brown/grizzly bear while out hunting some other big game species. So basically, for the serious bear hunter, the chances of success aren't much different, but the characteristics of bears taken do vary slightly between seasons.

Spring seasons, especially early portions of them, produce the highest percentage of adult males, which generally are the first bears out of dens. Several factors make males more vulnerable in the spring. Food is much less available so bears are active more hours per day and cover larger areas. In addition, by mid-May males are beginning to look for mates, again causing them to be more active than they are in the fall. Compared to October, day length and weather conditions are more favorable in spring. Spring hides are more variable, ranging from the very best in terms of hair length and thickness to some that may be badly rubbed. Fall hides are more uniform and it is rare to get one that is really poor. One significant advantage of a fall hunt is the possibility of combining it with other hunting opportunities.

WHERE TO HUNT

After deciding when you want to hunt, you need to choose which general region of the state you are interested in. About 50 percent of the annual harvest comes from just three coastal Game Management Units. Coastal areas generally produce larger bears and consequently attract the most hunting pressure. All three of these popular areas have special regulations: hunts in most of Unit 8 (Kodiak Archipelago) are conducted under a drawing permit; Unit 4 (Southeast) hunts now require a registration permit; and seasons in Unit 9 (the Alaska Peninsula) are staggered, with a fall hunt in odd numbered years (1989, 1991, etc.) and spring hunts in even years (1990, 1992, etc.).

Recently the State Supreme Court ruled that the exclusive guide area system is unconstitutional, potentially meaning that some popular hunting areas which don't have drawing permits systems, such as Southeast, Alaska Peninsula, Bristol Bay, and the west side of Cook Inlet, may see an influx of new guides and an overall increase in hunting pressure. All these areas have already experienced significant increases in harvests and the results of the fall 1989 season will need to be evaluated carefully. While Kodiak Island and the Alaska Peninsula lead the state in average size of bears, the other coastal units are not far behind and certainly have regularly produced brown bears in the 9-10 foot range. For the interior areas, there really isn't any significant trend in size of bears taken. Bears from the Brooks Range grow a bit slower, but because of lower hunting pressure the average age of bears harvested is usually higher.

CHOOSING A GUIDE—OUTFITTER

Perhaps the single most important decision you will make is selecting the guide-outfitter you'll use, assuming you are required to have one. Do your homework. Inquire about how long they have operated in a particular area, and ask for pictures or descriptions of base camps and typical spike camps. Ask about normal hunting techniques, and ask about the qualifications of assistant guides employed by the registered guide-outfitter. In most cases, you will not be hunting directly with the registered guide. Ask the registered guide who his assistants are and how long they have been working for him. Get lots of references to contact and try to include some unsuccessful hunters—all guides have unsuccessful clients, regardless of how good the guide and area are. Prices may vary widely, ranging from \$4,000 to \$10,000. Most hunts are booked for a week to 10 days, and those hunters who are very selective about the bear they want should consider an even longer hunt.

EQUIPMENT

When hunters ask me about specialized equipment, I think of one word first—optics. Get the best binoculars and rifle scope you can afford. You will be doing lots of spotting because this is usually the most effective way of finding bears. I don't profess to be a ballistics expert, so I won't go recommending specific calibers of gun, other than to say I personally like .338 and larger calibers. Once you've decided on the gun and load, you should practice a lot before going to the field. Bring enough ammunition so that you can check the accuracy once in the field and again should the gun get banged while hunting.

My final piece of advice is to get yourself into shape before the hunt. After all the preparation and expense of getting into good bear country, you wouldn't want to blow an opportunity for a great bear just because you gave out on the final approach.

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Average Brown/Grizzly Bear Skull Sizes
for Selected Game Management Units, 1983-88

Game Management Unit	Total Skull Size (inches)	
	Male	Female
4 ABC Islands	22.0	20.0
5 Northern Panhandle	22.5	20.6
6 Prince William Sound	23.2	21.3
8 Kodiak	24.6	21.9
9 Alaska Peninsula	24.0	21.7
13 Nelchina-Upper Susitna	21.2	19.7
16 Western Cook Inlet	23.2	19.8
17 Northern Bristol Bay	23.3	20.8
19 Upper Kuskokwim	22.2	20.1
20 North Alaska Range	21.1	19.3
22 Seward Peninsula	22.2	19.8

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BIG GAME
HUNTING