

The Great Alaskan Brown Bear Hunt

Randy Wagner has hunted big game all over the world, but he says that this Alaska Bear hunt will always be memorable. Let's listen as Randy tells his story of his quest for the "Great Alaskan Brown Bear."

"It was one of the most exciting things I've done in my life...it was pretty intense." Randy Wagner



As shared with the Prairie Poet:

Hunting in Alaska has to be the ultimate of all the places I've hunted. My first Alaskan quest was for moose. I flew into Swift River. I initially went on a moose hunt where I killed a 64 inch bull moose. I then discussed a grizzly bear hunt with my outfitter. I flew to Anchorage, Alaska, from there to Unalakleet, and on to the hunt of the Alaskan grizzly bear. I was able to kill a 6 ½ foot "Griz," not a huge bear but a beautiful blond bear, on the last day of the hunt. I then began my sheep hunt that was up by Fairbanks, Alaska. It was one of the most enjoyable hunts I've been on. Lots of sheep. Ended up killing a nice 37 inch ram. My quest continued for The Alaskan Brown Bear.

The Initial Hunt

My first hunt was on the Peninsula. I wound up getting a very bad outfitter, the weather was terrible, and so things just didn't come together. Seen some bear but most of them were sows with cubs. The hunt didn't pan out. The same year I flew back to Alaska and I hunted with a guy by the name of Buck with Alaska Outfitters. I had a fall hunt with him and we flew to his cabin, which was northwest of Anchorage. We were 3-400 miles into the bush. He had a nice set up. From there we took ATV's, as far as we could, to the river and from there we hiked up river and stayed at a tiny shack that kept us dry and out of the weather. We had a good hunt but, as it panned out, the bears were not on the mountain tops where they normally were. They were down in the alders and brush where we couldn't see them. If we could see them, they would be across on another mountain. So we hiked up to the top of the mountains at 4 o'clock in the morning hoping to find them on the move but, no bear. So Buck indicated there were other hunters in camp that had seen bears, while bow hunting, but they didn't go after them because of the terrain. He finally said, if I would come back the next year, he would bring me back at cost. We would do a spring hunt and fly the area first. So, once a bear was spotted, he would drop me off. It sounded like I could cover a lot more area that way. I had been up there 2 years in a row with no bear so I thought I would give it one more shot.

The Return

I returned in the spring. We flew into Anchorage in May of 2010, met Buck and we went to Willow, Alaska. We took the Cub plane, from Willow and flew back to his Lodge. When we got there, Buck said there was one other hunter in camp that had hunted all week and seen one bear. He went after it and wound up shooting it in the rear end. They tracked the bear but didn't find it. So this guy wanted to

stay a couple of extra days and hunt longer. They had another bear that was spotted on a moose kill that looked like a big bear, so this was going to be my bear. I was keyed up; *we were going out to get my bear on the first day*. Now this wasn't very likely for me because that isn't the way my luck runs. So we flew back over where the bear had been on the kill, found the kill and then set up camp, in the snow, about 1 ½ miles away. Then we waited. This is a pretty intense thing because you want to get out there and get going. I woke up about 4:30 in the next morning. We had a little breakfast and decided to take off. We started walking. The snow would start melting during the day and would freeze at night. So this was really noisy with the snowshoes on. The bear could probably hear us from a ½ mile away. We decided that wasn't going to work. We took the snowshoes off and tried walking with just our boots and we'd sink in the snow every 3 or 4 feet. So...we decided to go back to camp and wait for the sun to come up. We waited for 3 hours and tried again. It was still pretty noisy but we decided to press on anyway. We walk in to where the bear had been. We got in position where we could see the kill. The bear was not on the kill so we thought he might be lying back in the trees, so we sat there for about 3 hours with no sign of the bear. We decided to get a little closer to get a better view. We then saw where the bear had snapped off a 6 inch diameter tree about 5 feet off the ground. This was a big bear. The moose kill had been partially buried and the bear was gone. We figured he must have smelt us or heard us so we started heading back to our tent. The snow had turned soft so we were still punching through with our snow shoes. We were in an alder patch, probably 20 feet deep with snow that nearly covered them, so we would punch through and we were hooking our snow shoes on the alder branches. It took us about 3 hours to go 1 ½ miles. It was an intense day of getting wore out by the conditions. I was about 75 pounds heavier than my guide. A little guy of about 130 pounds. He did pretty good but I was falling through, all the time and was worn out. The next day was a beautiful, sunshiny day so we decided to take the snowmobiles out and just glass the mountains. We would drive about ½ mile, glass the mountains, drive again, glass the mountains. No luck! We got about 15 miles from camp when we saw a bear den, where a bear had just punched out. We could see his head, with a spotting scope. So we watch. Normally, they will stay by the den for a couple of days but this bear came out, walked about 30 yards to the left of the den, sniffed around and went over the mountain. He didn't stick around the den long enough for us to go after him. Ended up going back to camp. Another day, no bear. The following day we again took the snowmobiles out and went back to the den. The bear had walked over, from his den to the spot where now there was another hole where another bear had come out of hibernation. It must have been a boar and a sow that were denned up close together. The camp pilot told me that there was another den of a bear that had moved but the pilot had seen the tracks. It appeared that this bear was still in the area. So he asked if we wanted to go after it.

The Bear but Not the Prize

We decided that we would fly in, set up camp that afternoon and begin early the next morning. The following morning we snow shoed about 2 miles to a ravine where we saw the den. We decided to walk over the ridge where we saw tracks. We followed the tracks to another ridge then glassed the valley below. It looked like the bear had hung around the top of the ridge. Then we found that the tracks actually doubled back and went back down to where we started. So the bear had come up behind us and crossed right over our snow shoe tracks. Sure enough, he was up in the rocks. We saw him moving around behind the rocks and would see his head looking at us off and on. He was maybe 50-60 yards from us. The guide asked if I wanted to take him and I said, "He isn't that big, may 6 ½ to 7 feet, let's pass." I wanted something 8 foot or bigger. The bear then came out of the rocks and walked up the ridge. We went back up the ridge and stumbled on another bear of similar size, probably 4 to 5 years old. He was about 100 yards out but I decided not to take him. So it was back to camp again, get picked up by the plane that took us back to the outfitters lodge. This was about the 7th day of a 10 day hunt. Got up the following day, the forecast was for snow and sure enough, it was all fogged and snowing

hard. You couldn't see the mountains so it was basically a "do nothin' day." The following day, woke up to more of the same. Now we had 2 days left to hunt. So I was starting to feel like I'd made a mistake by not taking a bear, when the opportunity was there. I sure don't want to go home again with no bear. So we sat around camp 'til 3 or 4 o'clock when there was a break in the weather. We could see the bottoms of the mountains. The pilot said we could fly but probably wouldn't be able to see much. He said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I've got a day and ½ left to hunt, let's fly." We flew maybe 25-30 miles down the range, couldn't pick up tracks, so we flew back without being able to fly over to the next valley. I was thinking, "I really screwed up!"

First Sign of the Big Bad Moose Killer

We rounded the range and were going to fly up the next valley, when we saw a moose on the ground. Blood all around but no bear. So we went in low to pick up his tracks. We followed the tracks for 5-600 yards and here was another dead moose. This was a fresh kill. We followed the tracks to another fresh moose kill. There was a calf standing by the dead mother. The tracks led to another dead moose, the 4th one killed, that was right along the river bank. The bear was lying on top of the kill. We circled a couple of times and the pilot said, "This looks like a decent bear, do you want to take him?" I said, "Let's go after him." We landed about 1 ½ miles from where the bear was. The pilot dropped me off with the gear and flew back to the lodge to pick up the guide. So I set up the tent and waited. They returned but the weather started to turn bad again. The pilot said he wasn't sure when he could get back to us. We finished setting up camp and I then tried to talk the guide into going back that night. He finally convinced me we'd best wait 'til morning. After a long night in the tent, we woke up to 2 feet of new snow. The positive was that we had a nice quiet walk back to the river. We were hoping to shot the bear from the top of the river bank and not have any problems. It appeared from the air that it was a short way from the top of the bank to the bottom. It actually was more like ½ mile from the top of the bluff to the bottom of the river. We hike the whole area and couldn't find that bear. Things didn't look the same, from the ground. We must have hiked 3 miles up the river and thought that we must have gone past him. We decided we'd go back and hike the river bottom. This took about 3 hours and it was snowing like crazy. Couldn't see nothing. We got about a mile and ½ up the river bottom when we saw some ravens flying. We found that last moose that the bear had been on top of. It was partially buried. We uncovered it and saw that he had only eaten a small part of the stomach of this moose. There were no tracks because of the snow. I thought, "Here we go again and it's the last day of my hunt."

Things Get Interesting

So we decided we'll keep on going down the river bottom. We hiked another ¼ to ½ mile when I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. I could see the bear. He was only about 35 yards from us so I got the guides attention, who hadn't seen him yet. The bear is right there! He's right in that tree lot. Every once in while we would see movement. The snow was about 8 feet deep in the lot. We could now hear a commotion and the bear had another moose in that tree well, that he was killing. The moose was bellowing and the bear was making these, "God awful growls." I couldn't get a shot. I could see his arm come up over the moose but it was all happening down in this depression. Then we see another moose that was standing maybe 10 yards from where this bear was killing the other moose. This one was covered in blood, where the bear had mauled him and was just standing there. My scope would keep snowing over and I said to the guide, "I can't get a shot so I'm going to circle around." "Don't get any closer, we can't get any closer. If he comes out of there, you're dead." I said, "I won't get any closer, I just want a different angle. If the bear comes out, shoot it!" I moved about 10-15 yards. Now I'm about 30 yards from the bear. I would see his back come up every now and then. After about 20 minutes of watching and hearing "this stuff," I told the guide, "The next time his back comes up, I'm going to take a shot. As soon as I shoot, make sure you're ready because he'll probably come

boiling out of there.” He said, “Alright.” In about 3 minutes, the bear’s back comes up again and I shot...and everything disappeared.

The Wait...The Kill

No bear, no sound. Everything’s dead quiet. The guide said, “I’ll climb the ridge and see if I can see down in the dip that he’s in. “You stay here, if he comes out, shoot him.” It took him about ½ hour to get to the ridge, than he comes back down. He says, “I saw movement but I don’t know whether it was the bear or the moose. All I could see was brown moving.” “Let’s give him another 20 minutes then we’ll move closer.” Nothing! So I started walking closer. The guide stayed back and kept an angle so, if the bear charged, he could shot too. I finally saw the bear. He was using his big arm to try and climb a tree. My shot had spined him so apparently he was paralyzed in his hind quarters. I shot 2 more times to kill him. After I killed him, we found that he actually had killed two moose in the hole. The other moose was still standing to the right of us. It was a big bull. All full of blood like a red blanket around him. We pulled the bear out of the hole and took pictures and skinned him out. The moose just watched us the whole time. He was only about 8 yards from us. The guide was concerned that the moose might charge but he never moved. So we skinned the bear out, got the hide on the sled we brought. The moose actually followed us out to the river bottom. Once he got to the river bottom he headed down river. We wound up pulling that sled up that river bank to the bluff. The guide was in the front and me in back. We were trying to climb a steep ridge in snow shoes. It was nearly straight up. I’d push, he’d pull for 2 steps, then we’d stop. It took us about 1 ½ hours to get up that ridge. That was maybe ¼ mile up. We got back to camp. Called the plane in and it was still snowing hard. When the plane landed, he sunk so far down that when we tried to take off, we couldn’t make it. So he had to taxi back in the same tracks and try again. The second time he finally got enough lift-off to clear the trees. We flew back to camp.

The Quest Achieved

The next day we flew into Anchorage and had the bear measure. It wound up being 8 foot 6 inches. Brought it back to Colorado and am having my taxidermist mount it life size. There is a set of moose antlers at his feet showing the he was a “Big, bad, moose killing bear.” “That’s pretty much the story of how it went.” “It was one of the most exciting things I’ve done in my life...it was pretty intense.”

Is the great hunter home from the hill? Only the Alaskan wind knows.

Marv Hass

“The Prairie Poet”