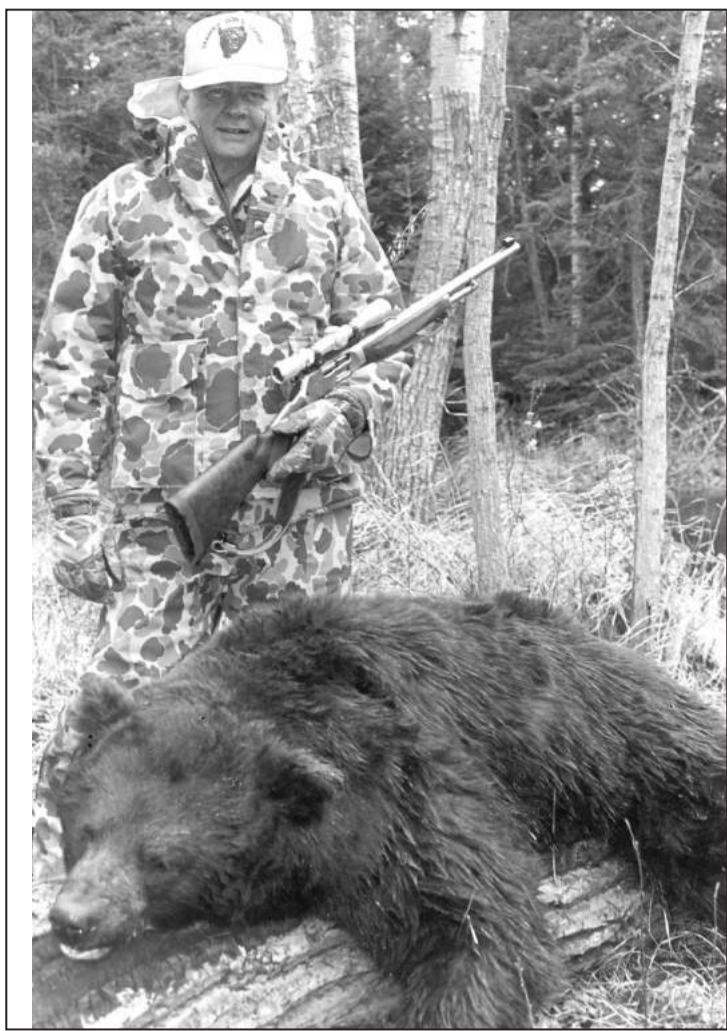
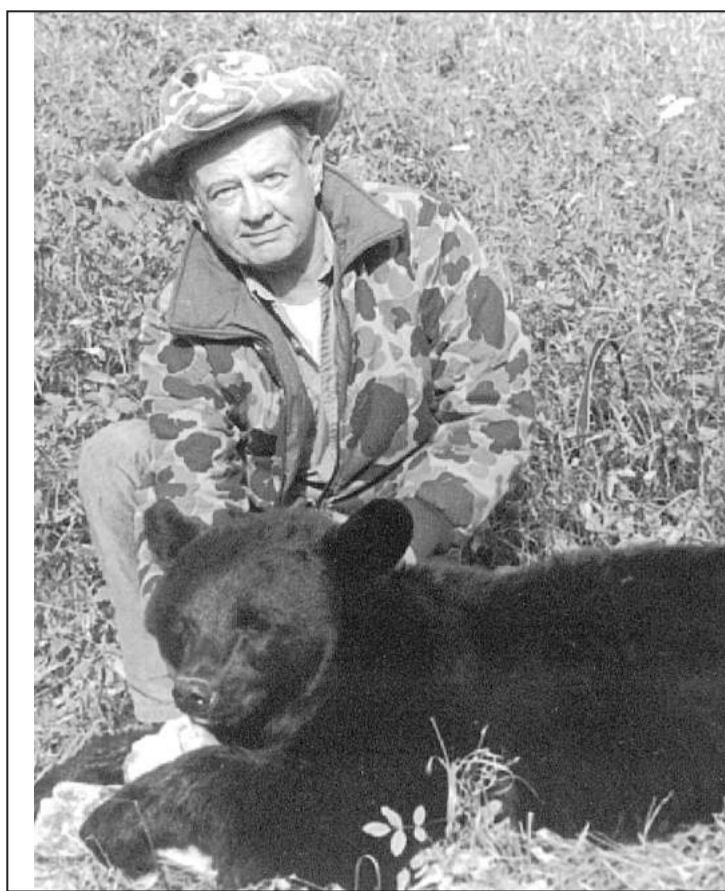


Outdoors



The author poses with his lifetime-best black bear, a hulking, 400+-pound chocolate-brown beauty from the north woods of Manitoba Province, Canada.



Although all belong to the black-bear species, not all "black bears" are as black as this one from British Columbia Province, Canada. They display a wide variety of shades, from cinnamon red to beige, chocolate, blond, and even a ghostly grayish-blue in one region of Alaska. Wootters' first bear (from northern New Mexico) was a beautiful two-tone job, honey blonde on the body shading to chocolate-brown on the legs.

A routine bear hunt?

You sit, all alone, in the deep north woods of Manitoba, Canada. The hush of dusk accumulates around your shoulders like a black fog. The sun is going. Shadows stretch and slide silently across the ground like disembodied live things, not quite corporeal. Birds of the day have quieted, as though expecting ... what? The night birds have not yet cleared their throats.

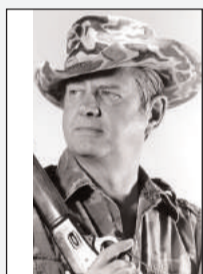
Your eyes try to penetrate the cloud of mosquitoes hovering around your head-net like thick coils of smoke.

Your only companion is a very dead cow — shedding dripping waves of maggots 40 yards to your front. You are here to keep a long-awaited rendezvous with a black bear, hoping he will come ... yet somehow aware that there is, deep down, a half-formed hope that he will not appear. Then you will not have to try to shoot him, with all the things that can go wrong when the shooting starts.

It's one thing, in your den at home, to anticipate the excitement of a bear hunt, but quite something else to sit alone in the woods a few steps from the bait that is intended to attract a 300-pound carnivore.

The mosquitoes drone, probing relentlessly for a chink in your defenses. Maggots drip from the carcass like some ghastly liquid. You can literally taste the stench. The bear knows about the carcass; he came on the previous

Currently Outdoors



John Wootters

evening when he left his flat-footed paw-prints — wider than your hand with fingers spread — challenging you with their evident maleness.

By now, you guess, he must be on his way; little shooting light remains. Having traveled 1,600 miles to keep this appointment, you hope nothing warns him.

Listening for the bear in the eerie woods becomes a fevered, physical effort, even knowing well how noiseless a bear can be.

A dry stick snaps loudly in the dusk! Where was it? Which direction? It is not repeated. You wait, motionless, rigid, mouth open.

Then you realize, with a rush of adrenaline, that you are looking at a bear at the bait. It materialized out of nowhere, exactly where your eyes were focused. My God, the size of it!

The animal has not settled on the bait, but continues to look suspiciously around,

demonstrating all the legendary wariness of his kind. Does he sense my presence? Was he looking at me just now?

Not much time remains to shoot ... or not. The muzzle-loading rifle comes up, the front sight sweeping along the shape, seeking the underlying vitals. Your eyes even note the play of massive muscles beneath the shaggy fur, lending an unanticipated immediacy to the moment. Later, you cannot recall thinking through what comes next; when the sight looks right, you go on automatic: draw in a deep breath ... hold it ... steady the rifle ... touch the set trigger. You do not hear the black powder exploding. The muzzle flash in the dusk illuminates the scene, freezes it on your retinas. In slow motion, you see the bear rear, try to turn, then sink to the ground!

Still on automatic, you commence the well-drilled ritual of reloading a single-shot muzzleloading rifle: measure a new powder charge and dump it down the muzzle ... slap the side of the rifle to settle the powder ... start a .54-caliber round leaden ball in a patch of greased pillow ticking, and ram it home with a single hard push with the ramrod. Uneven seating force can cost the primitive rifleman accuracy, and worse, misfires. Finally, flick away any fragments of the percussion cap previously fired, and slip a fresh cap onto the nipple from the capper dangling from a thong around your neck. Lower the

hammer to half-cock. Relax.

Relaxing is the hard part. But this went well — a routine bear hunt. You chuckle aloud, shaking your head, thinking there's no such thing as a routine bear hunt!

The shot was heard at the bear camp at the foot of the mountain, and you visualize the crew running to the truck. You have only a few more minutes to be alone with your bear before the excited well-wishers arrive, eager to see the dead bear and congratulate the triumphant hunter.

Bears have always captured the imaginations of outdoorsmen all over the world, and noted hunters like Davey Crockett and Dan'l Boone made their reputations on bears. Both the forest Indians of the Great Lakes region and the Plains tribes celebrated successful bear hunters, seeing in bears icons of the wilderness — and of "Nature, red in fang and claw." Taking a bear, one-on-one, conferred great prestige on a tribal hunter.

And now upon you, too, as you sit beside your bear, waiting for your heart to stop pounding.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.