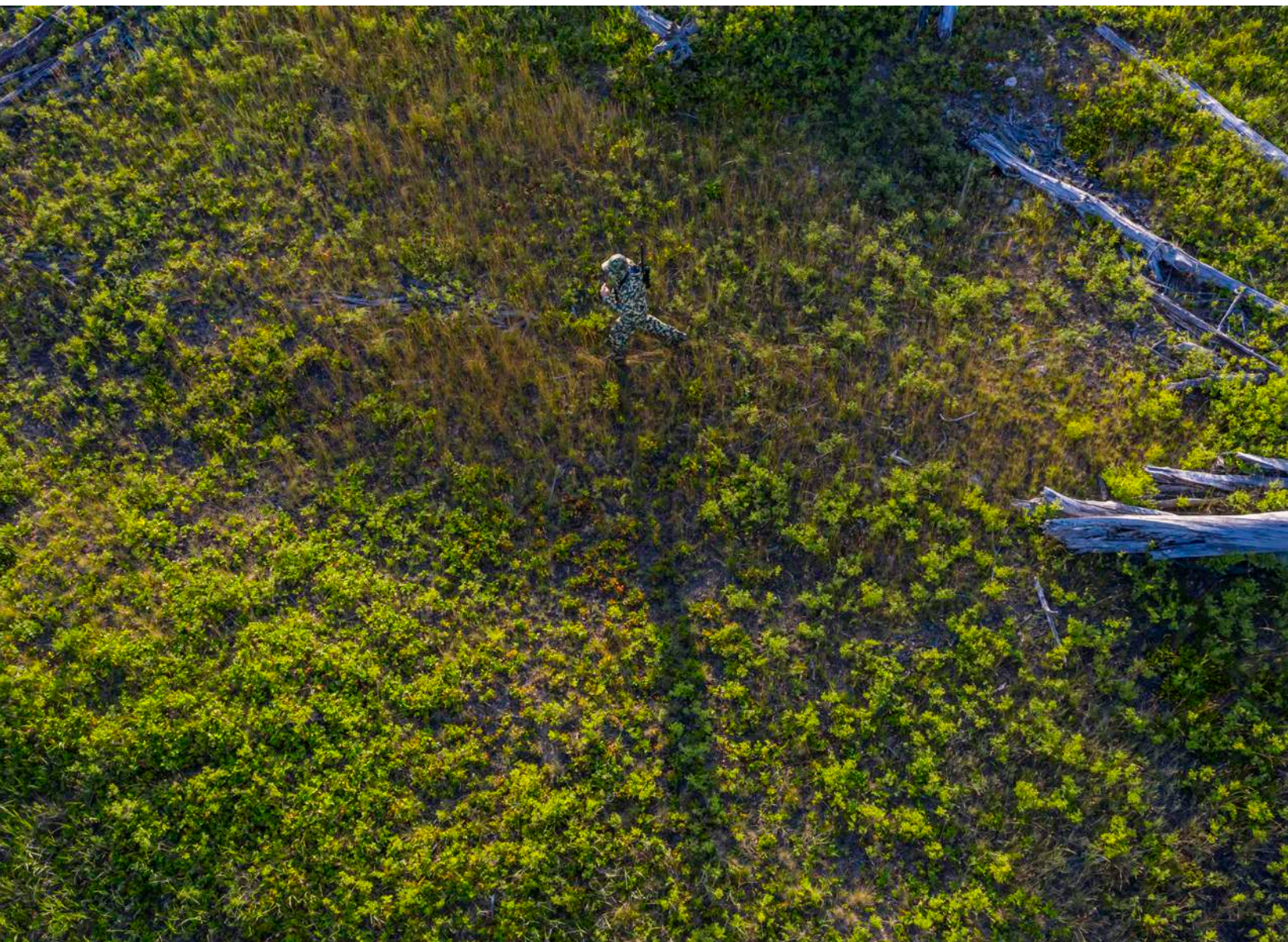
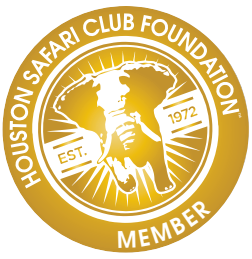


HUNTER'S ★ HORN™





The King Bear

“In the virgin forests of northern Manitoba dwell the kind of black bears dreams are made of.”

BY JOHN WOOTTERS—ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN PETERSEN'S HUNTING, JANUARY 1987

IF BEARS' EYES ARE SO LOUSY, WHY WAS this one peering up at me in my tree stand, from a distance of 20 yards, as though reading my dog tags? The question rattled through my skull as I instinctively tried to avoid eye contact, while the whole world stood still.

He had the drop on me, no matter how clearly he was or wasn't seeing me. He was where he wasn't supposed to be and going in the wrong direction. Worse, he'd caught me with my back turned, hands gloved, noisy rain gear on, and my rifle leaning unhandily against a tree limb. Finally, he was obviously the biggest black bear I'd ever seen in the wild and the one for which I'd traveled all the way from Texas to central Manitoba.

I didn't know it then, but the situation was about to go rapidly and steeply downhill from there, too!

I guess it all started when Editor Craig Boddington came back from a bear hunt with Manitoba outfitter “Trapper Don” McCrea last year. Craig had a bear hide, all right, but what really got my attention was his photograph of a pair of shed whitetail antlers McCrea had found on his hunting grounds. You may remember that picture, published with Boddington's report on the hunt (“Manitoba Black Bear,” February 1985 issue of Petersen's Hunting). Those sheds are fantastic nontypical, quite high in the Boone and Crockett listing if officially measurable. Anyway, when Craig called late last winter and suggested I book a spring bear hunt with Trapper Don, I had more than one reason for doing it.

The first is that bears and bear hunting interest me. Some game species do, and some don't. The black bear is one that does. My experience with Br'er Bruin is not all that extensive,

but what there has been was exciting and left me looking for more. The more I observe the black bear and the more I learn about it, the more fascinated I become with this mysterious creature. Its personality sets it apart from most other North American big game, even the other big predators. It's smart, cunning, wary, a little comical at times, and at other times, a little frightening. The black bear may possess the best nose of any game animal on the continent—and its ears may be even better than its nose!

In 1986, Trapper Don operated two spring bear-hunting camps. One is his home lodge on the Duck River between the villages of Cowan and Camperville in west-central Manitoba. This represents the ultimate in comfort, even luxury, for a serious big-game hunting “camp,” with outstanding food, inside plumbing, and soft mattresses. The actual hunting, however, is hardly luxurious. Don locates his bear baits in the best spots for bears, not for his hunters' convenience. Some of them are as much as 40 miles from camp, with no roads, and this usually means long, jolting, often cold hours on a three or four-wheel all-terrain vehicle or in an outboard boat, coming and going every day. Some of his best stands require as much as six hours, round trip, of such traveling. In view of the fact that you still have shooting light after 10:00 p.m. at that latitude in May, it means you'll sit down to supper at perhaps 1:00 a.m. or later, and must be in the stand again before noon.

Of course, most years McCrea does have a few baits out a little closer to the lodge, even including a couple that can be approached within quick walking distance of a pickup. They produce bears, too, but he saves them mostly for hunters who



Wootters
with the
king bear.

need a little easier hunt for one reason or another.

The other camp is a wilderness camp on Pelican Lake that is reached by floatplane. The 1986 spring season was only the second in which this camp had been hunted. Travel here is via outboard and/or shanks' mare. The country is wild and beautiful, and the bears are plentiful and bold. Don's camp is comfortable enough and the cuisine good enough that nobody suffers, but at the same time everybody knows he's in the boonies. It's a pleasant cap with a capable and congenial crew, and I particularly enjoyed my days at Pelican Lake. The maximum capacity of either camp is six hunters. For 1987, McCrea's talking about an even more remote fly-in camp, in tents in real wilderness where nobody has ever seriously hunted before! That should be an experience!

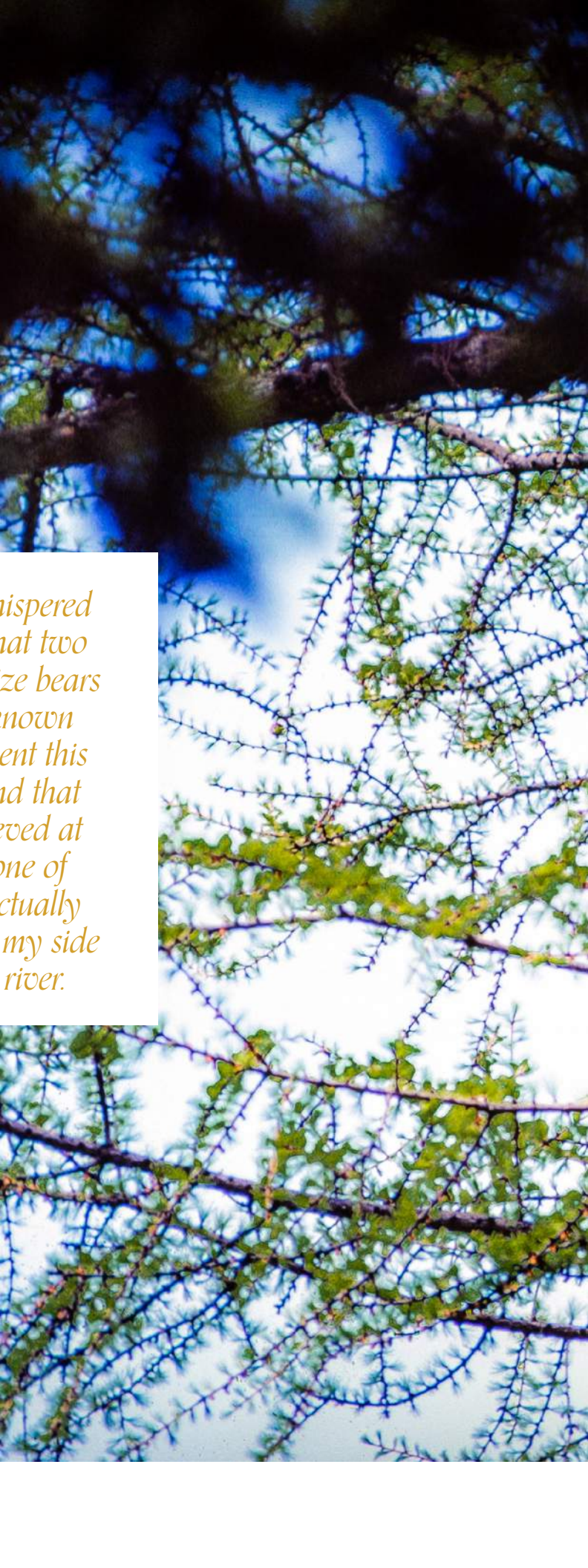
On my second afternoon at Pelican Lake, head guide Paul Flett took me across the big lake and up a river several hundred yards to the point where it entered the woods. There we quietly grounded the boat just below a small beaver dam across the river. From there, Paul led me toward the platform that I could see in a white poplar tree about 100 yards away in a point of woods projecting almost to the river's edge. Between the boat and the stand tree, we were walking through a semi-marsh with dry, six-foot-tall reeds.

The tree in which the portable stand was located obviously was itself an old bear marking tree, and from the platform I could make out at least two bear trails in the leaves on the forest floor below. Don McCrea believes that certain travel ways are traditional, being used by generation after generation of black bears. These historic trails and the marker trees along them used by the larger bears as territorial signposts are important elements in choosing bait sites.

As I settled myself on the platform and looked around, I was thinking that this place fulfilled all of McCrea's criteria for a bait site. The bait itself was about 125 yards distant, actually across the river. A bear trail atop a large beaver dam immediately in front of the stand tree showed heavy and recent traffic. Don tries to place baits in spots where the bears feel secure and comfortable, usually on islands of higher ground in the plentiful swamps of the area, with water close at hand. If that water is running, so much the better; its sound may help conceal any accidental noise of the hunter's movements from those fantastic ears.

Before leaving, Paul whispered to me that two trophy-size bears were known to frequent this area and that he believed at least one of them actually lived on my side of the river. He cautioned me, therefore, to watch the area immediately around me as well as the bait across the beaver dam, saying that the bear might appear on my side and cross that dam to get to the bait. Then Paul retreated to the boat to wait.

It's important that you understand these spatial relationships. The boat, with Paul in it, was downstream and across the wind from my tree, about 100 yards distant across open, reedy marshland. When Paul stood up, I could see him plainly. When he sat down, the reeds concealed him from my position, although I could tell where he was. My perch offered a lovely, wild vista across the golden marshes reaching to the



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lake in the east, bordered by scalloped edges of timber. Westward, I could see up the beaver-dam-broadened river as it curved away into the dark forest. As far as the eye could see, my stand and the bait barrels across the stream were the only signs that humankind had ever visited this lonely, beautiful spot.

My vigil began about 4:00 p.m. The sky was clear and the weather pleasantly cool, but a nasty little wind blew steadily from the southwest. Eventually, it chilled me to the point that I decided to put on my rain suit to break the wind. This camouflage Gore-Tex and Cordura suit is, like much of the gear available today (as far as I can determine), absolutely superb protection and impossibly, hopelessly, abominably noisy! I'd as soon have a rock band along as try to still-hunt in that gear, but there seems to be nothing else that has all the protective and comfort features of this style of garment and is also quiet. Anyway, I figured the wind would die down near sunset, and a bear probably wouldn't show up before then. I planned to slip out of the rain suit as soon as the wind showed signs of dying.

In the meantime, I sat facing away from the wind, turning my head to check the bait over my right shoulder every 30 seconds or so, and then twisting a little further to inspect the near riverbank, as my guide had instructed me.

The hours rolled by. I amused myself watching yellow-rumped warblers foraging among the just-budding poplars. Now and then, Paul would stand up to stretch and then disappear again in the yellow reeds. I dug out my lunch and polished off a sandwich and candy bar, saving the rest for later. I double-checked the rifle, for the twelfth time.

Both the rifle and its ammunition are notable. The former is a one-of-five custom edition of the Marlin 1895SS lever action chambered to the .45-70 Government cartridge. But the basic Marlin was only the starting point. First, gunsmith Harold Harborth neatly converted it to a takedown model. The barrel was then shortened to 20 inches, Mag-Na-Ported, and recrowned, all by Larry Kelly's craftsmen at Mag-Na-Port. Next, custom gunsmith George Vais restocked the rifle with a superlative piece of Fajen's finest, checkered it, mounted a Williams rear peep and hooded-ramp front sight, and installed a Sorbocoil II recoil pad. Finally, all metal except the sights; hammer, trigger, and safety crossbolt were given a satin electroless nickel finish by T&T Technologies, Inc.

The man behind this remarkable rifle is Mr. Jack Carter, guiding genius of Trophy Bonded Bullets, Inc., of Houston. Among the superb big-game bullets Jack manufactures are



King bear paw.

some designed especially for use in this Marlin model. They literally elevate the old .45-70 cartridge into a different category, and the Alaska Guide Gun (as he calls it) was Carter's way of dramatizing that fact.

It seemed a shame to me to have this beautiful and deadly little powerhouse sitting around unblooded, so I mounted a Leupold 3-9X Compact silver-finished scope (not currently cataloged) and took it to Manitoba. The ammunition featured the Trophy Bonded 350-grain flat-nosed bullet moving at 1840 feet per second from the short-snouted Guide Gun. All my testing of this bullet had been on saturated pulp paper, where it invariably gave very deep penetration, classic mushrooming, and a retained weight of better than 99 percent! What I needed now was a real, live bear on which to see whether that astonishing performance could be matched in real flesh and bone.

One thing that concerned me as I fiddled with the rifle, killing time in my tree, was the dual safety system on the new

Marlin. I'm an old hand with exposed-hammer lever guns, but all those I'd hunted with had only the traditional half-cock hammer position for a safety. The SS series of Marlins features a second safety, a positive, hammer-blocking crossbolt through the rear of the receiver. While I waited for my bear, I kept the hammer at full cock with the crossbolt "on." The big advantage to this was that making the rifle ready to fire could be absolutely silent-but I feared I'd forget which safety was engaged in the excitement of the moment. As it turned out, that fear was not exactly groundless.

I set the rifle aside and, lost in thought, went mechanically through the routine of checking the bait once or twice every minute. It was about 9:15 p.m. and the sun was lowering in the west. Suddenly, I became aware that something had - changed. I froze, dragging my wandering attention back from wherever it was, struggling to detect what it was that was different.

The wind! It had gone from fresh breeze to flat calm instantly. Not a breath stirred.

There was something else, too...a vague eeriness...every veteran outdoorsman has felt it; I just suddenly knew I wasn't alone. Slowly, slowly, I swiveled my head just far enough to peek around the hood of my rain jacket. The bait area was still empty, but that feeling of presence was still rippling the short hairs at my nape. I twisted just another half inch, straining to see back along the near bank of the river-and the bear was there, below me, not 20 yards distant!

He was staring calmly straight up at me. That he was a big, old boar was manifest by the breadth of skull and the ears that looked like little round teddy bear ears. Unquestionably he saw me, but I'll never know how well. It's even possible that the camouflage pattern of my rain suit actually saved me. In any case, he gazed at me for an eternity or two and then abruptly turned and started walking, with that exaggerated rolling of his rump that always marks a big bear. When he started moving, I started breathing again and began slipping the glove from my right hand and inching it with excruciating slowness toward the rifle.

Then I realized the bear wasn't headed for the beaver dam, the logical route to the bait. Instead, he was headed past me, straight for the boat and Paul! He passed almost under my stand, offering maybe a 10-yard shot, but I resisted the temptation to grab the gun and to heck with the noise the suit would make. By the time I managed to ease the rifle up into shooting position, the animal had turned down the very trail Paul and I had traveled, and was rolling along straight toward my guide-so straight in line with him that I didn't dare shoot! I could only sit there and wonder whether Paul or the bear would be first to notice the other, and what would happen then. In the deathly hush, I could hear the bear rustling the reeds quite plainly. Then he turned abruptly right, so that I could have fired without endangering Paul, but disappeared at once among the reeds.

A few seconds later, Paul's figure reared up out of the reeds, rifle in hand, waving and gesturing wildly and pointing into the reeds. The bear had crossed the river on the small beaver

dam, in plain view only a few yards upstream from the boat. Paul could only guess that I hadn't seen the big bear.

Meantime, I'd stood up on my platform and found a shooting stance of sorts to cover the area around where I'd lost sight of the bear. He had to come out somewhere, and he finally did, reappearing at about 100 yards, shambling steadily along broadside. The cross-hairs settled on the point of his burly shoulder. I eased the trigger back and heard a metallic click when the hammer fell on the crossbolt, that should have alerted every bear in Manitoba and most of those in Saskatchewan!

This one never hesitated, however, while I frantically slipped the crossbolt over, recocked the rifle, and lined up again. Once more the cross-hairs steadied, and this time the rifle bellowed. I heard the solid thump of the bullet and saw the bear buck as the scope rose in Mag-Na-Port-damped recoil.

He was dead in his tracks when that bonded-core bullet ripped through him, breaking both shoulders and demolishing everything between them. We found him just one long jump from the first blood. The gorgeous, chocolate-brown pelt was perfect, unrubbed, long, and silky. It later squared six feet, 6½ inches. Winnipeg master taxidermist Ron Telesky would later score that broad skull at 1913/16 points, well into the Manitoba record book. Even without entrails, Paul and I were unable to lift the 450-pound carcass (estimated) into the boat. We had to leave it covered with a tarp, to be recovered the next day in a howling gale, snow flurries, and rough seas, when six men and two boats could be mustered.

It was exciting while it lasted, but all worked out well in the end. One of the interesting things about black bears is their unpredictability. Even a lifelong bear man, like Trapper Don won't prognosticate about bears. He covers enough bases, however, to produce a shot at a bear for the large majority of his clients most years, in fact, 100 percent of them in a couple of recent years. Of the dozen

hunters in both camps during my hunt, 11 took bears by the fourth day (and the twelfth had had his chance.)

Oh yes, Don had those big whitetail antlers mounted, and they're even bigger than they looked in Boddington's picture. Meantime, McCrea is booking his first paying deer hunters this November, and I tremble to think what they may drag out of those swamps. He also has an excellent record of success on guided moose hunts.

He knows his onions, does Don McCrea, and he has the finest bear hunting I've ever seen. The address is Don's Guiding and Outfitting Services, Box 44, Cowan, Manitoba, R0L 0L0, Canada.

With outfitters like McCrea, and if the whitetail hunting turns out as I expect, relatively unheralded Manitoba may be taking its place among the premier big-game areas of North America. Couldn't happen to a nicer place! ★

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Mr. Wootters, a former HSC President, passed away in January of 2013. HSCF greatly appreciates his wife, Jeanne McRae Wootters, for sharing his legacy and wisdom. johnwootters.com