

# Outdoors



John Wootters photo

The Bear Hunters' emergency camp on Portage Lake, where we were stranded for days with no communications and no way to escape without help. If this appears to be the bleakest, most foreboding scene imaginable, that's exactly how it felt, too.

## Stranded in the Arctic

Actually, every hunting trip is an adventure of some sort, but some turn out to be more adventurous than others.

Regular readers may recall tales of the Deep East Texas Bear Hunters Association, a band of ruffians and misfits who insisted on hunting with muzzleloading rifles. We traveled far and wide in search of such game as whitetail and mule deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, black bear, wild hogs and many species of exotic game. The most ambitious – and most eventful – of all our hunts, however, was a self-guided moose hunt in Alaska's mighty Brooks Mountain Range.

An outfitter set up a tent camp on Crows Nest Creek and provided a camp helper and cook. Because this was excellent grizzly bear country and we carried single-shot rifles and had no back-up, we hunted in pairs and each of us had a magnum revolver in a shoulder holster.

After the hunt, we learned that the Alaska Game & Fish Department had recently searched its records and found that the number of occasions on which anyone had been attacked by a grizzly/brown bear, defended himself with a handgun of any kind, killed the bear, and survived was exactly ... zero! But we were blissfully unaware of that statistic as we roamed the tundra, comforted by our big pistols.

Fortunately, only one grizzly was seen on the hunt, and that one was a long way off and unaware of the intrepid Bear Hunters.

Horses are useless in that country, so all hunting was on foot, and it was almost too strenuous for us middle-aged Bear Hunters. Still, the four of us managed to find and bring down with our black-powder rifles two bull moose.

The real adventure, however, began after the hunting ended and we returned to Portage Lake, where we were

### Currently Outdoors



John Wootters

to be picked up by a bush pilot with a floatplane.

The plane didn't come, and as it grew too dark for a plane to land on the small lake, we realized that we were going to spend the night. We began checking our assets. There was a tent by the lake, but it was too small for all of us to sleep. There was a trash dump nearby and in it we discovered a tattered old tent that beat – barely – sleeping out in the freezing Arctic night. We also rescued the remains of an old sheet-iron shepherd stove that might be patched up and wired together for cooking and warming one of the tents.

Best of all, there was a stack of firewood that somebody had packed in several miles from the nearest stand of stunted jackpines. There was a skillet and a couple of pots in the cache, but few utensils for cooking and none at all for eating.

To our delight, that same cache held coffee, sugar, flap-jack flour, condensed milk, salt and pepper. Added to the hundreds of pounds of fresh moose meat we had and the fact that Portage Lake was full of trout (and that we had a little fishing tackle), we didn't face starvation even if the plane didn't show up for days.

Although we didn't suspect it that night, that was exactly what was to happen!

An appraisal of our down-

side was sobering: we had no radio or other means of communication; we couldn't contact our families back in Houston, nor could they reach us.

The weather was not promising for aviation, and those conditions in the Arctic often prevail for days or even weeks at that season. My father was to undergo serious surgery the day after we got home and we were already certain to miss our return flight. Our families would be frantic about our "disappearance" in the Alaskan wilderness.

We were all hale and healthy at the moment, but any accident or unexpected illness could be disastrous since we had only Boy Scout-level first-aid supplies and medical knowledge.

Finally — and most ominous — Portage Lake was slowly but steadily freezing over, closing our only escape route. Daytime temperatures hovered below 20 degrees, and every morning the ice extended farther out into the

lake. If the lake froze hard enough that a floatplane couldn't land, weeks would pass before a ski-equipped plane could land. There was no place to which any of us could have walked, and some of the higher passes in the hills were already blocked with five feet of snow.

If the lake froze, our only hope would be a helicopter.

**NEXT WEEK:** Escape from Portage Lake ... but not without further adventures. Don't miss crippled airplanes, drunken Indians, a hostile village, and icing conditions on the flight to civilization!

**John Wootters, of Ingram, 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.**