

The Bendeleben bear

Gazing upon the pathetic wreckage of a full-grown moose surrounded by giant paw prints in the snow, the quotation, "What manner of beast do I pursue?" ran through my thoughts.

It was April, springtime in the brooding, eerie, icy Bendeleben Mountains 50 miles north of Nome, Alaska. The temperature was 17 degrees and the land lay beneath eight feet of snow, but the shiver that ran down my spine was not from the cold; it was from the condition of the moose carcass at my feet, now only a tangled mess of skin and splintered bone. No overgrown teddy bear had done this; it was the work of the world's largest and most powerful terrestrial carnivore, a big male tundra grizzly.

Scientists say that grizzlies and brown, or Kodiak, bears are the same species, distinguished only by the fact that the brown bears grow larger because of better nutrition from the salmon runs in coastal rivers.

Trophy grizzlies are usually hunted in the spring when they first leave their hibernation dens, when their fur is in peak condition after six months of winter sleep. As a rule, males emerge a week or so before the females. Sows with cubs, which are born during hibernation, are not legal game, so early hunts reduce the chances of shooting mama by mistake, at the same time offering improved possibilities of finding one of the much larger he-bears before his winter coat begins to itch and he ruins his trophy pelt by rubbing.



Photo by John Wootters

The author always said he didn't want but one grizzly in his lifetime ... but that one should be one to be proud of. It took him 10 hunts over 20 years to get his bear, but he's happy at last with this big male Alaskan bear.

Hibernating bears eat nothing for six months, surviving on stored fat. Metabolism and all bodily functions slow down, including bowel functions. A kind of rectal plug develops which prevents defecation and remains in place until digestion is reactivated by fresh food intake. Black bears leaving hibernation after the spring snow-melt seek fresh green grass and will literally graze like cattle when they find it.

A grizzly leaving the winter den to find a snowbound landscape wants fresh meat and a lot of it. About the only creatures about at that season big enough to satisfy a grizzly bear on a six-month fast are moose. A moose is half a ton of tough muscle, but a grizzly

is an awesome predator able to knock down a moose as easily as a bobcat bowls over a cottontail.

Some years earlier, in central British Columbia, a guide had led me to a spot, just at dusk, where a young grizzly had killed a moose. We

Currently Outdoors



John Wootters

watched the two-year-old bear playing with his empty moose hide like a kitten with a catnip mouse, and then we turned and walked away with my grizzly license still in my shirt pocket.

It was one of nine unused grizzly tags I'd accumulated over 19 years of northern hunting. Part of it was bad luck, my being unusually choosy; I always said I'd shoot only one grizzly bear in my life, but he'd be one I could be proud of.

On this hunt I'd already turned down three legal grizzlies, and it's asking an awful lot of a guide to find four in six days.

I was asking it of the right man, however.

Looking at those monstrous clawed prints in the Bendelebens, I had a sense of being very close to the bear of my dreams. My guide (the police chief of Nome, believe

it or not) studied the sign, and lowered his voice as though the bear might hear. "He was here this morning," he murmured, "maybe not long ago."

He indicated with a gesture that we'd follow the line of tracks down into a narrow draw.

"Load your rifle and keep your eyes open; we may run up on him by surprise and pretty close," he tossed over his shoulder as he turned away.

Following the trail not even a mile, we found the bear where the draw opened up into a broad valley. The grizzly was up on one of the flanking slopes, about 125 yards out and making tracks for the horizon.

At a glance, the situation violated three of the dangerous-game hunter's cardinal rules: 1.) Never shoot at a dangerous animal running; 2.) Never shoot at a bear uphill from you (because you may find him in your lap, alive and mad as hell); and 3.) Never shoot at a dangerous animal at more than 100 yards (or less than 50).

This grizzly was getting closer to the 200-yard mark with every bound, but I couldn't hesitate — not after 20 years of grizzly frustration. I was strangely calmed by the

imminence of action. I knelt in the snow and slammed three 250-grain .338-caliber, Trophy Bonded "Bear Claw" bullets into an eight-inch group behind his shoulder. The first would have been enough, but the fourth rule of the dangerous-game hunter is: "Keep shooting 'til he quits twitching!"

Only eight brown bear licenses had been issued that year for Alaska's Seward Peninsula where the Bendelebens lie; mine was No. 1, and the last to be checked in at the Alaska Game and Fish office in Nome. My bear was eight years old, eight feet, seven inches long, and weighed over 500 pounds right out of hibernation, after a six-month fast. Before he'd denned up in the autumn, he might have gone 700 or even 800.

He was the one ... my one and only lifetime grizzly bear, at last. I was satisfied.

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 the NRA, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.