

GRIZZLIES OF THE LAST FRONTIER

AN UNFORGETTABLE QUEST FOR
NORTH AMERICA'S TOP PREDATOR
ON THE ALASKAN TUNDRA.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DIANA RUPP

There is no feeling in the world quite like standing on the tundra somewhere in the wilds of Alaska and watching the small single-engine plane that brought you in get smaller and smaller and finally vanish in the clouds. This is the moment when you realize that you and your hunting companions are truly on your own. It's a lonely feeling, but also an exciting one.

That feeling really sank in as the hum of the airplane motor died away, leaving only the light pelting sound of raindrops, which only seemed to amplify the tremendous silence of the Alaska wilderness. I turned to my two companions, hunting partner Scott Grange, who had flown in with me, and guide John Rydeen, who had arrived earlier in the day and set up our backcountry camp. We had flown northeast from the tiny Norton Bay town of Unalakleet in northwest Alaska, in a red Cessna 180 piloted by bush pilot Jim Tweto (star of Discovery Channel's *Flying Wild Alaska*), to this remote spot on the tundra. Now, John was surveying the small pile of gear that Scott and I had hauled out of the Cessna's tail compartment when we landed.

"They did send another tent in with you guys, didn't they?" John asked.

Scott and I looked at the small pile with some concern, seeing only our packs with their raincovers, our sleeping bags encased in dry bags, our two rifles, and a cardboard box that was rapidly soaking through in the rain.

"Um... I thought they did," I said, having a momentary vision of spending a very wet night on the soggy tundra. "Maybe in the box?"

Much to our relief, the box contained a sturdy, green, two-man backpack tent nearly identical to the one John had already set up. We staked it out quickly, and our Spartan camp immediately doubled in size. I unrolled my foam pad and mummy bag in the tiny space and stashed my pack and rifle in the tent's vestibule. I was wearing all of the clothes I'd brought in, other than two spare pairs of socks in my pack. Per instructions, I'd pared the rest of my gear to a bare minimum.

Near the tents was a rain-spotted plastic garbage bag containing several days' worth of freeze-dried Mountain House meals and beef jerky; there was also a tiny backpack stove and a small pot with a lid. John issued each of us a plastic cup with his company's Freelance Outdoor Adventures logo on it, a sturdy plastic spoon, and a roll of toilet paper in a Ziploc bag. That was the extent of our camping gear.

I felt strangely happy with the utter simplicity of this life. There was nothing ahead of me for the next ten days except to live in the wilderness and hunt North America's apex predator, *Ursus arctos horribilis*, the grizzly of the Alaskan interior. Surveying my tiny stash of possessions and then looking out across the vast sweep of tundra at a herd of shaggy muskoxen moving slowly across the horizon, I could not think of a single other thing I needed.

Reality set in quickly as we spent the next thirty-six hours trapped in the tiny tents by a storm that lashed us with torrential rain and high winds. Our nylon cocoons snapped and rattled noisily in the gusts like flapping flags, but they held. The four of us—we had been joined by a second guide, Bernie Babcock—huddled in our mummy bags, chatted, dozed, and passed around a dog-eared copy of the Alaska Fish & Game regulations, our only reading material. Bernie proved a cheerful companion, but when he recounted how he'd once been weathered in a tent for six days on a goat hunt, my heart sank.

I awoke on the third morning to utter silence. Burrowed deep in my sleeping bag, I lay still for a moment, hardly daring to believe there were no wind gusts or raindrops pelting the tent. Cramped and stiff from hours of inactivity, I reached up to unzip the tent flap and peeked out into the chilly dawn. Clouds, yes. Soggy terrain and a cool breeze, yes. But no rain or wind—practically a bluebird day for Alaska. Everyone scrambled gratefully out of the tents, relieved to be upright and moving again, and even more relieved that we could start hunting at last.

In no time, the stove was huffing and hot coffee steamed from our cups as John and Bernie whipped up tasty breakfast burritos using freeze-dried scrambled eggs, precooked bacon strips, and Tabasco. Bellies full, we stowed lunch, snacks, and our

soggy rain gear in our packs and started hiking across the tundra, stopping at a swampy seep to refill our water bottles.

We hiked across squishy, treeless tundra and up smooth, lichen-covered hillsides and stopped to glass from the ridges where ledges of rock jutted from the mossy ground. Huge patches of red leaves—tundra blueberries—blotched the hillsides around us. As the silver salmon were mostly done with their fall spawn, these berries were the current favorite food of the omnivorous grizzlies. We sampled some as we hiked, and they dissolved on the tongue with a tart sweetness that was addictive.

Grizzlies stake out large territories, and that means covering a lot of ground when you're hunting them. This is big country of endless rolling hills, some of them dropping off quite steeply into broad, spruce-lined river valleys. We covered several miles the first day, working our way from one glassing knob to the next until we were overlooking a river valley far below. I stopped to sweep the valley with my binocular. The guides moved on ahead, paralleling the top of the ridge but staying just under its crest. Suddenly, they both crouched low and gestured frantically for me to come up quickly. Bent double, I jogged over and dropped to my knees beside them, shedding my daypack.

"We just saw a bear right here on the ridgetop," John whispered excitedly. "Chamber a round."



Diana Rupp with her grizzly, taken at 99 yards with a Model 70 Alaskan in .338 Winchester Magnum.

John and I sneaked forward, creeping along the hillside and watching carefully. We rounded the tip of the point and glassed. I caught my breath when I saw a round, furry shape below us. The bear stopped to put its nose in a blueberry patch. I sat down and propped my Model 70 on the Bog-Pod, and John quickly set up the spotting scope.

"It's a sow," he said. "Want to take a look?"

The bear's blond coat, which occurs more often in sows, had initially tipped him off, but he confirmed his assessment by studying the body shape and behavior of the grizzly. Sows without cubs are legal to shoot, but we wanted to hold out for a boar, if possible.

I watched in fascination through the spotter as the sow browsed the berry patch below us, strolling unconcernedly across the tundra with the air of an animal with very little to worry about. Indeed, she was perfectly adapted to this harsh, beautiful landscape, strolling easily across the soggy ground on huge paws, feeding on the varied bounty of the Alaskan wilderness, and staying warm and dry under a thick layer of fat and fur.

Stalking a Griz

We had covered a circuitous five miles or so by that time and it was late in the afternoon, but the hour wasn't much of a concern in mid-September this far north, where it stays light until well past 10 p.m. John and Bernie led us back down the ridge, and we crossed a patch of squishy tundra and headed up another, much taller hill with a rocky crest. The four of us bellied down near the top and peered over. There, in a sea of red leaves on the opposite hillside, was a grizzly—a much darker one than the sow we'd seen earlier.

I fixed my binocular on the bear and studied it intensely. It was sitting on its butt with all four legs stretched out in front of it—looking for all the world like a fat man in an armchair. It was panting slightly, as if it had just climbed up to the berry patch and was taking a break before starting its meal.

"It could be a boar," said John in a low voice. "We'll have to get closer to

know for sure, but it's very likely. What do you think of him?"

"I like him," I said immediately. "He has a beautiful coat. If you think he might be a shooter, we should go after him."

The bear was across a broad valley from us, quite high up on the opposite hillside. Getting within range without being seen required a lengthy, circuitous hike. First we dropped back down the ridge we'd just climbed, crossing a plateau until we found a place to descend into the valley without being seen. This proved to be a steep, brush-choked hillside. At the bottom was a boggy creek where we fought our way through a tangle of wil-

lows, slogged through more soggy tundra, and finally started up the steep slope on the opposite side. We climbed high and then worked our way across the side hill until we figured we were just above the bear and his berry patch. Now we eased along at a snail's pace, peering over each contour of the hillside, knowing that the bear could be very close.

At last we spotted him. He was right where we'd last seen him, feeding in the berry patch, which was now about 200 yards below us. We sprawled on the ground to study him, and John confirmed he was a mature boar. He didn't want me to shoot yet, though. The bear



Weight is the limiting factor on a fly-in Alaska hunt, so camps aren't fancy. Each piece of gear you bring has to be carefully chosen if you hope to stay reasonably warm and dry.



The hunters floated downstream in this inflatable raft, camping each night on the riverbanks.

was feeding close to some head-high brush, and the guides were concerned that when hit, the bear would immediately run into the brush, creating a potentially dangerous follow-up situation.

The bear turned his back to us, and the four of us crouched low and scuttled to a point lower on the hillside, cutting the distance in half. I lay prone with my .338 Winchester Magnum across John's pack, watching the bear vacuum up blueberries in the long Alaskan twilight. John still wanted him to get a little farther from the brushy patch before I shot, so we waited. The rangefinder read 99 yards, and the bear looked huge in my

scope. I admired his lush, gleaming fur as well as the dished face and shoulder hump that reminded me that this was no black bear feeding just yards from me in the wilds of Alaska. I had plenty of time to consider the seriousness of the situation I would create when I pulled the trigger.

The bear gradually fed some distance from the brush and was facing away from the cover. It was still unaware of our presence, concentrating on the blueberries. Because of the downhill angle, I could see only the top of the bear's back, and I wasn't about to shoot until I could see its entire shoulder, so I waited

some more. Eventually the bear moved higher and gave me a full broadside.

"Right in the armpit," John whispered.

With such a solid rest it wasn't a difficult shot, but it was an important one. At the shot, the grizzly spun and bit at its shoulder, snarling. I racked the bolt open, intending to make an immediate second shot, but because the rifle was nestled low in the pack, the ejected case hit the pack, rolled back into the magazine, and blocked the bolt from closing.

I quickly cleared the jam, but by the time I had reloaded, the bear was down, out of sight, just under the crest of the hill. John and I moved forward quickly and the piled-up bear came into view below us, looking like a small mountain that might erupt at any moment.

"Hey, bear," John yelled as we approached. "Hey, bear!" There was no movement from the furry mound.

"Go up and touch its eyeball with your rifle," John instructed.

Heart pounding, I moved toward the bear's head with my rifle leveled, safety off. Time seemed to stand still as I reached forward and touched the muzzle of the Model 70 to the grizzly's eyeball. There was no reflex. I let out a long breath and re-engaged the safety.

"We're good!" I called.

John, Bernie, and Scott were immediately at my side, congratulating me and exclaiming over the grizzly. It was a gorgeous animal, with a thick, dark-brown coat and even darker legs. I sat for some time with my bear, admiring its broad forehead and glossy fur, and picking up each massive paw with both hands to study the blueberry-stained pads and the impossibly long claws.

It was after dark when we finished skinning the bear and stuffing the thick pelt and the heavy skull into the frame packs, and it was well past 1 A.M. by the time we arrived back at our tiny tent camp. Exhausted but ecstatic, we wolfed some freeze-dried beef stroganoff and crawled into our sleeping bags.

Airdrop Camp

The temperature dropped precipitously during the night, and we woke to frozen water bottles and tundra that crunched under our boots. Over break-

fast, John announced that we would pack up and head to our next camp, a full day's hike to the northwest. There, our pilot had airdropped a larger tent, waders, some extra gear, and an inflatable raft. We divided up the gear, sleeping bags, tents, and my grizzly into our frame packs and began the overland trek.

We had a perfect day for the hike, cloudy and chilly enough to keep us from overheating. We kept mostly to the ridgelines, where the hiking was easier, passing incredible vistas of rugged hills splashed with lichen and berry patches, spotting the occasional distant bear—none judged worthy of pursuit—and watching and listening as massive flocks of sandhill cranes passed overhead, their noisy conversation providing the soundtrack to these wild northern lands.

The hike was enjoyable but we were nonetheless relieved to reach our new camp, set along the shores of a broad, lovely creek, a tributary of the Shaktoolik River. Our comfort level improved markedly here; with the guides and gear sharing a big dome tent, we hunters each had one of the little backpack tents to ourselves. The four of us cleaned up and changed clothes, spread out the grizzly hide flesh-side-up, and indulged in a welcome cup of hot chocolate as we considered our new surroundings.

We were confident Scott would get a fine bear in this promising locale in no time—so confident, in fact, that we figured we'd be floating downstream on the raft to our pickup point, a gravel bar along the Shaktoolik, within a couple of days.

Someone forgot to tell the bears of our grand plan, though. We hunted hard from the Airdrop Camp for the next three days. We saw some spectacular sights: bull moose with massive antlers furiously battling willow bushes; two lone wolves, one black and one white; and young grizzlies chasing each other across rocky hillsides.

We even cleared an emergency airstrip on a rough patch of tundra when word came in via satellite phone that John's wife was about to have a baby. I wasn't sure how good a job we'd done as I watched the oversized tires on the Cessna bounce dramatically on the makeshift runway as it landed, but Jim touched down successfully and soon he

and John were winging their way safely back to civilization, taking my bear hide with them. Bernie and Scott continued their single-minded pursuit of Scott's grizzly, with me tagging along to glass, assist, and provide moral support.

One afternoon the three of us sat high on a hillside overlooking the river valley and watched a sow grizzly make her way rapidly downstream, following the S-curves of the waterway as she swept the shallows for fish. Around the next bend, two feeding moose raised their heads alertly as she approached. We anticipated a confrontation, but just upstream from the increasingly nervous moose the bear stopped, pounced, and came up with a fish. She waded out on the bank to consume her catch as the moose slipped prudently away through the trees.

Bernie and Scott finally stalked a nice boar feeding in some creekside brush, but the grizzly winded them as they approached. It took off at an astonishing pace, crashing through the water and racing flat-out across the valley and up a ridge as I watched, amazed by how fast grizzlies can move.

Float Trip

Somewhat frustrated with our lack of luck at Airdrop Camp, we decided to float downstream and try a different area.

Bernie inflated our sturdy blue raft, and we loaded it with tents and gear. Bernie sat in back and steered while Scott and I provided paddling power in the bow. The river was wide and fairly shallow; we frequently had to jump out and tow the raft through the rockiest areas.

Some six or seven miles downstream, we found a gravel bar broad enough to set up our tents, and we pitched camp, swapped waders for boots, and climbed into the hills above the river in search of bears. The new location was a bust, though, so the next morning we floated ten more miles downstream, pitching our last camp on another narrow gravel bar just yards from a set of fresh grizzly tracks on the muddy riverbank.

On the last day of our hunt, the three of us sat high on a hillside opposite our little riverside camp, the tents and raft looking like toys far below us. We had fixed our binoculars on the broad vista behind camp, a sweep of blueberry-strewn tundra with a long, narrow finger of timber extending from the top of the ridge down toward the river.

A lone grizzly was working its way through the berry patch and toward the timber strip. It was a big bear with a magnificent coat—so blond it appeared almost white in the bright sunlight. Bernie and Scott held a quick conference and decided to stalk this last-chance bear.



Pilot Jim Tweto gently touches the tires of his Cessna 180 to the water's surface, slowing the plane before rolling it to a stop on a bumpy gravel bar along the Shaktoolik River.



A riverside campfire on the last evening of the bear hunt.



Scott Grange with his beautiful blond grizzly, taken on the last afternoon of the hunt.

They would need to move fast. To simplify their task I volunteered to remain on the mountainside, and the two of them gathered their gear and rushed away. Rifle and snacks close at hand, I got comfortable and focused my binocular as the drama below began to unfold as if on the greatest of all IMAX movie screens.

Bernie and Scott quickly made their way across the river and I lost sight of them for a while as they vanished into the trees that lined the river on the other side. I could see the bear, still ambling along the hillside. I was concerned, however, that it would enter the finger of trees that extended down the hillside before my companions could spot it again. Suddenly, I spotted them: They had emerged into the open and were watching the bear. In just a few seconds, however, the plot thickened as the grizzly vanished into the strip of timber above them.

I watched Bernie and Scott as they conferred, then turned and made their way to the far side of the strip of timber—the side that the bear would likely

emerge from. They found a bit of cover and got set up for what would probably be about a 150-yard shot when and if the bear emerged. From my vantage, I could see the entire timber strip and knew that the bear was still in it.


I waited for the second act to open, but fifteen minutes passed, then thirty. Apparently the bear had decided to bed down in the timber.

Bernie and Scott didn't move. I knew the bear had not come out anywhere else; it was definitely still in the timber. Forty-five minutes passed, then an hour.

Just as I was wondering how long this movie was going to go on, there was a movement at the edge of the timber and a gleam of white. The bear was coming out!

From my lookout point more than a mile from the action, I could see the beautiful blond bear clearly as it moved out into the open, walking briskly along the hillside. Suddenly it spun, bit at its shoulder, and broke into a run, and subsequently the boom

of Scott's .325 WSM thundered across the distance between us. Another shot and the bear was down, and I leaped to my feet in excitement from my hillside balcony seat. Hoisting my pack, I jogged down the mountain to admire Scott's hard-earned, last-day bear.

That night, we hauled branches and deadfalls out of the timber, built a campfire on the river, and sipped hot chocolate in the long Alaskan twilight as Bernie fleshed the bear skull. The next morning we'd float a few more miles downriver to our takeout point. There, we'd deflate the raft and the red Cessna would swoop down and land on a gravel bar, ready to take us back to civilization and all its complexities. For now, though, we could relax and enjoy the firelight reflecting off the dark water, a fitting end to ten days of true adventure in wild Alaska. 

For information on this hunt, e-mail Lance Kronberger of Freelance Outdoor Adventures at freelanceOA@mac.com; www.freelanceoutdooradventures.com.

The Model 70 Alaskan

The Winchester Model 70 Alaskan is *the* classic Model 70, and the new version is just like the original—only better. Designed and built to be true to its famous predecessor but with enhanced fit and finish and updated trigger technology, there could be no more traditional choice of a rifle to take on a grizzly hunt in Alaska, especially during the 75th anniversary year of the Model 70. Featuring a satin-finish walnut Monte Carlo stock, 25-inch barrel, and a forged steel receiver with integral recoil lug bedded front and rear, this rifle is chambered for the classic cartridges that are tailor-made for big bruins, moose, and caribou, including my choice for the bear hunt, the .338 Winchester Magnum. The rifle has the pre-'64-style controlled-round-feed system with claw extractor and a three-position safety, Winchester's new M.O.A. trigger system, and a Pachmayr Decelerator recoil pad that takes some of the punch out of the big magnum calibers.

Although the rifle has a folding adjustable rear sight and hooded brass bead front sight—just like the original—I topped my .338 with a very high quality scope, a Swarovski Z3 4–12x50. This wasn't a light-weight rig; the rifle with optic weighed 9.25 pounds. And while conventional wisdom holds that stainless/synthetic rigs are the way to go for an Alaska hunt, I experienced no problems with shifts in zero despite rain and dramatic temperature swings. After all, the original Model 70 Alaskan was the top choice for some of Alaska's greatest bear hunters and guides for decades before the advent of today's synthetic stocks, stainless steel, and high-tech metal finishes.

My grizzly load was a 225-grain Barnes TTSX in the Barnes VOR-TX factory ammunition. The rifle grouped into an inch at 100 yards, and the one-shot kill of the grizzly provided testament to the performance of the TTSX bullet.—D.R.



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