

B.C. Odyssey Basin

By Dwight Schuh

Silver fur, shining and rippling in the wind, appeared just over the rise. Grizzly fur. Fifty yards away. I'd reached the point of no return. Something was going to happen. Was this really smart? Sneaking 10 yards closer, I watched the bear gracefully lope back and forth, gorging on blueberries. Every few seconds it would suddenly stand on its hind legs and peer around. The grizzly looked very big at those times, and those beady eyes, backed by an explosive attitude, seemed to be boring holes through me. But then the bear would drop back on all fours and resume stripping berries.

We all reach climactic points in our lives, and this was one of mine. For more than four decades, I'd been haunted and fascinated by the thought of hunting grizzly bears. It was, perhaps, the "acme" of my hunting desires. Who knows why? Maybe it was Fred Bear's many stories about hunting grizzlies in B.C., Yukon, and Alaska. Maybe it was the grizzly collecting expedition led by Saxton Pope and Art Young into Yellowstone Park in 1920. Reading those tales certainly lit the spark.

But my drive went beyond grizzlies. What fascinated me most was the prospect of an odyssey, an "extended adventurous wandering," to northern British Columbia, a quest into the wilds scarcely touched by man.

But because of the expense - and maybe fear - this desire had remained strictly an intellectual quest, a longing in my heart and mind, that seemingly would never blossom into a reality.

Then, in early 1999, Bryan Martin, a 27-year old engineering graduate, who decided he would rather be a big game outfitter than an engineer, bought an outfitting area in British Columbia, just south of the Yukon border. Because his Canadian Mountain Outfitters business was new, he had some openings and could tack on a few extra days at no extra charge. I could hunt moose, caribou, mountain goats - and grizzlies. That sounded like the makings of an odyssey to me.

On September 14, I flew to Smithers, B.C., where I boarded a Beaver bush plane the next morning for the 200-

mile flight north to Bryan's hunting area. As civilization fell behind and the endless wilderness crags rose ominously ahead, I felt tingly. The real odyssey had begun.

Camp 1

Bryan's base camp on a long, narrow lake consisted of three comfortable log cabins. As we settled in, Bryan introduced me to Dawson Deveny, my guide for the next three weeks. Dawson's age concerned me slightly. At 21, he could have been my grandson. However, Dawson grew up in the Canadian bush, 40 miles from the nearest neighbor, where he'd worked and hunted all his life. He was an excellent woodsman who took good care of his client. My concerns were unnecessary. The next morning, Bryan's resident pilot, Jason Butler, flew Dawson and me by Super Cub 20 miles north to an upland lake, where we set up a small camp. That very afternoon we spotted a grizzly high on a distant hillside, and early the morning of September 17, we saw a caribou on the same hillside. To get to them, we boated across the lake and hiked for 2 hours, which put us on the tundra well above treeline and at about the same level as the animals we'd seen. High on the mountain here, we could see for miles into the jagged peaks of the Rocky Mountains. I've lived my entire life in Oregon and Idaho, both major mountain states, but they seem very small and civilized compared to the staggering vastness of northern B.C. This land has gone undeveloped because it's so remote, huge, and difficult that it simply has resisted modern encroachment. Just treading this wild place seemed to fulfill the purpose for my trip.

All day we plied the highest ridge, inspecting the sweeping valleys and bowls below us. We located a few small caribou, but we never saw the grizzly again.

The next day Dawson packed a 6-horse outboard motor to an upper lake where a canoe had been stashed. We motored down this lake and located two grizzlies eating berries high on a hillside. They were young bears, not ones we wanted to stalk, but just watching these grizzlies confirmed the rare wildness of this area.

Over the next few days, we hunted moose, shot grouse, and caught big Dolly Vardens from the lake. We also

spent many hours - without success - looking for the grizzly that had left a 7-inch track along the edge of the lake. By September 21, when Jason returned with his Super Cub to move us to Bryan's main grizzly camp, we'd seen three grizzlies, a half-dozen caribou, a couple of mountain goats, and we'd heard a bull moose grunting, all of which only whetted my appetite for some serious hunting. At base camp we took hot showers, washed clothes, and got a good night's sleep. Rejuvenated, we were ready to continue the odyssey.

Grizzly Camp

On September 22, we flew 30 miles east to another lake where we met guide Jim Richards with his string of horses and rode 10 miles up a "trail" to grizzly camp. For half of that distance we rode up the middle of a rushing creek, and the other half we plowed through the willows and spruce. We reached camp about 4 p.m. and settled into comfortable wall tents with wood stoves. Rain fell so hard during the night it sounded like it might tear the tents apart. Fortunately the rain had stopped by the morning, and the day was looking pretty decent. After a big breakfast, Dawson and I walked 45 minutes up from camp to a glassing point from which we saw a big bull moose crossing a mountain top a couple of miles away and two grizzlies a quarter mile above us. I was champing at the bit to go after a grizzly, and these were within *easy* striking distance. But two grizzlies together means either a sow with an offspring, or litter mates, probably three year olds. We had to find a large, solitary bear. For a broader view, we climbed to the top of a main ridge where we could overlook a giant burn. Following the fire, berry bushes had flourished, and the thousands of acres of prime blueberries attracted grizzlies from miles around each fall. That's why the grizzly camp was here. On top of the ridge, we hunkered out of the ferocious wind, and through binoculars and spotting scopes, we scoured the burned mountains, painted red and purple by autumn foliage. Right off we saw a herd of caribou, including a large bull. They were tempting. But then we located a single, dark grizzly, which looked hopeful and took our focus off the caribou. Inspecting the bear through the spotting scope, however, we agreed it was a youngster. Not a stalker.

Then, at 2:30 p.m., straight across on the next ridge over, we saw a bigger bear, its silver coat rippling in the wind. It was clearly a mature bear and, because it was alone, probably a boar. It was a beautiful sight. This one deserved a closer look. To get over there, we first had to descend 2,000 feet to a creek bottom, which took 45 minutes. Near the creek we found a grizzly trail leading to a traditional rubbing tree. Over untold years, bears had stepped in exactly the same paw prints to rub on that tree, forming deep depressions in the ground the size of paper plates. Starting the climb up to the silver bear, we looked back to the side we'd just come down and saw a cow and bull moose. The bull's rack was probably 50 inches wide. He, too, was tempting. But how many lone, silver grizzlies would we see? We kept climbing. At 5 p.m. we finally reached the top of the ridge. As we took a breather, I camoed my face and thought about this. Is this a smart thing to do? Will I perform under pressure? This was a major part of my odyssey, but would it be the end of it?

For a half hour we searched near the top of the ridge, where we'd last seen the bear, before realizing the grizzly had fed 200 yards down the hill, where we could see just the top of its back and head in the berry bushes and scrub willows. One person is always quieter than two, so we agreed I should proceed alone while Dawson watched from above, the backup rifle ready. I swung to the left to get in front of the bear and slowly descended a little wash, out of the bear's sight. When I'd gone down about 150 yards, I tiptoed up out of the wash and crested over the hill. Where will the bear be? How far? Will it be looking at me? Will it smell me? If so, will it run away? Or toward me? That's when I saw the silver fur rippling in the wind at 50 yards, much closer than I'd anticipated -the point of no return. Crouching below the curve of the hill, I crept 10 yards closer and rose to watch the bear feeding back and forth. Surrounded by bushes, it offered no clear shot. I took a rangefinder reading off a log near the bear. Forty yards. I nocked an arrow and waited. The bear stripped berries in big gulps, then stood to look around. "While one senses dignity about them, there is power and fury hidden there that is unexcelled by any animal on this continent ...I hope he will not recognize the limitations of the bow!" Fred Bear had written in 1957. How true that

seemed at this moment. This scene was just as haunting and fascinating as it had been in my mind the past 40 years. Amazingly, so intense was my focus that I remained absolutely calm as the bear fed uphill toward me. I've been more nervous shooting doe deer at Texas feeders. This situation, however, did not allow the luxury of anxiety. As the grizzly emerged into an opening and turned broadside, I released an arrow. The bear did not growl, snarl, or snap. It simply walked 20 yards downhill and stopped. Had I missed? For 10 seconds it calmly peered around. Then it collapsed and rolled out of sight into the willows. My legs began to shake, and I fell to the ground in disbelief.

MooseCamp

Dawson and I spent the next couple of days taking care of the bear hide and hunting caribou, and then, on September 27, we rode the 10 miles of "trail" down to the lake where the plane was scheduled to pick us up on September 28. However, when we crawled from our sleeping bags that morning, heavy snow was falling and clouds hung low over the lake. No planes would be flying this day, so Dawson and I worked the edges of the lake in a small boat, searching for moose. We motored up to a cow feeding in the shallows, and late in the evening we got a bull grunting in a creek bottom, but we could never call him into bow range. When the clouds lifted on September 29, the Beaver arrived late in the morning and took us back to base camp. We settled into our cabins, ate lunch, and took showers, and then, about 3 p.m., Dawson and I walked a mile to an upper lake where Bryan had stashed a canoe. We paddled the canoe about 5 miles to the far end of the lake, moose calling as we went.

Gliding into a calm bay, we cow-called, and somewhere up in the spruce trees, a bull grunted. We called from different angles, trying to get a fix on his location, but he faded in and out and we couldn't tell for sure where he was.

We beached the canoe and hurried toward the latest grunting. Since part of the fun of hunting for me is calling animals, I asked Dawson if he minded if I did some calling. He had no problems with that, so about 300 yards from the lake, I took a stand under some big spruce trees, broke out some shooting lanes, and began calling. Also, I raked the spruce trees violently with the top off a caribou antler I'd found. The bull grunted not far away and tore into a tree. Back and forth we challenged until

his antlers broke into view 60 yards to my left. He lumbered within 30 yards and stopped behind a tree, offering no shot. Holding my bow ready in one hand, I grabbed the antler with the other hand and raked a limb. The bull postured back and forth, cutting a swath through the brush with his massive rack. He was getting ticked off. As he entered an opening, I grunted loudly and he stopped, 25 yards away. My arrow passed cleanly through his chest, and he crashed to the ground, 40 yards away.

That in itself would have been a fitting ending to my B.C. odyssey, but since I was not scheduled to fly home until October 6, Dawson, Bryan, and I backpacked high into the mountains for caribou. Winter comes early to the far north, and now all the higher peaks were covered with a foot of snow and the cold air had a threatening bite. We saw several bulls, including one monster, but they all eluded us, and on my final hunting day, we sat on one of a thousand nameless mountains, looking at an endless succession of peaks stretching into the Yukon and beyond into Alaska. My trophies meant a lot to me, but perhaps the climb to the top of a snowy mountain and this view of the last great wilderness in North America had even more depth. For decades the prospect of an odyssey, an extended adventurous wandering, to northern British Columbia had fascinated me, and this place now fulfilled that longing. But sitting on that mountain in the snow and bitter wind, I knew the odyssey wouldn't end there. With indelible memories of a wild land stored in my heart, the wonderful odyssey would continue the rest of my life.

AUTHORS NOTES

To plan your own adventure odyssey for mountain goats, mountain caribou, Canada moose, black bears, or grizzlies, contact:

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For this or other North American adventure bowhunts, contact:

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