

A Wilderness Grizzly Adventure

By Mike Duplan, Field Editor

Alaska is a land of superlatives, epic landscapes, and thousands of nameless peaks and waterways. It is a land that I am drawn to, in a way that no other place can match because of the grand scale and beauty of the land and the wildlife that inhabits it. Remnants of wild creatures from the Pleistocene era, Alaska's wildlife, exhibit the extremes of evolution. Eons of adaptation to living on the edge of polar climate have given the animals of Alaska unique characteristics. It's these characteristics that lure people like myself to hunt this last great frontier. I have hunted the tundra for caribou bulls with snow-white manes and rocking chair sized racks. I've hunted the taiga forests for the giant Alaskan bull moose and felt "schooled" and humbled after a week of playing cat and mouse with this draft-horse sized member of the deer family. While on these North Country adventures, I have seen ever-present grizzly tracks in the field but had never seen a live grizzly while hunting.



"In hunting, the finding and killing of the game is after all but a part of the whole."

The free, self-reliant, adventurous life, with its rugged and stalwart democracy; the wild surroundings, the grand beauty of the scenery, the chance to study the ways and habits of the woodland creatures — all these unite to give to the career of the wilderness hunter its peculiar charm.

The chase is among the best of all national pastimes; it cultivates that vigorous manliness for the lack of which in a nation, as in an individual, the possession of no other qualities can possibly atone."

*Theodore Roosevelt
Sagamore Hill, June, 1893*

It is hard not to be bear-aware while hunting in Alaska. From the moment you get off the jetliner in Anchorage you are deluged with bear images in Alaska. The giant world record Kodiak Brown bear stands glaring, preserved for eternity in his glass enclosure in the airport. Every store in the state has copies of the book "Alaska Bear Tales" which is filled with stories of bear lore, encounters, and maulings. Reading this book is almost obligatory to every tourist, hunter and visitor to Alaska. Shops, restaurants, gas stations, campgrounds, and businesses all across the state bear the name of "Grizzly." No other animal epitomizes the state of Alaska like the Brown/Grizzly bear. Although the moose is the official state animal of Alaska, it's probably only because Alaska's declaration of statehood was many years after the grizzly was already named state animal of Montana and California. Alaska is the last frontier and the grizzly is the symbol of America's wilderness.

On my previous trips to Alaska, I've lied awake imagining them padding around camp while I slept in my nylon fortress. You awake after sleeping your first night in the Alaska Bush with a sense of subtle euphoria knowing you weren't dragged out of your tent and eaten by a bear that night. It's a different feeling to be in bear country carrying around the subconscious knowledge that you are not on top of the food chain on that mountain. Seasoned Alaskan outdoorsmen and hunters will tell you the bears don't bother them and you get used to knowing bears are always out there. Nevertheless, most are also packing a really big gun for fishing trips and sleeping with a loaded pistol in the tent. I guess that's the Alaskan version of "getting used to it."

It was on my first trip to Alaska over a decade ago when I started thinking about hunting grizzly with more than just idle fantasizing. Most people hold a fascination



The the view into the valley above the "bear camp" shows the rich colors of September in Alaska. The reddish colored vegetation is low growing blueberry bushes that draw the bears to this high country.

and reverence for these great bears and I was no different. I had read bear books since I was a kid almost memorizing Frank Dufresne's "No Room for Bears." I was in Denali National Park and my wife and I watched a big blonde-shouldered boar grizzly grubbing for berries high on a mountainside more suited for Dall's sheep.

More than 12 years later, this dream became a reality when I booked a hunt with Steve Johnson, owner/operator of Ultimate Alaskan Adventures. My good friend Victor Clark had also booked a hunt with Steve for Dall sheep the month before my hunt and it was because of Victor's faith in Steve, and his one-on-one personalized service that I decided to go on a hunt of my own. I pestered Steve with the standard questions in a few phone conversations during the months preceding my hunt and he answered them all with patience and honesty. One of the reasons I chose Steve was that I wanted a true backcountry Alaskan Wilderness adventure. It would be a trek into the wilderness on foot with everything I hoped to need stuffed into a pack and strapped to my back.

Steve and I hit it off right away. We had gotten to know each other over the phone but being on-foot together in some "wild-ass" country cultivates a bond between hunters. Conversation came easy and we both shared a similar sense of humor that frequently left us laughing aloud. Steve impressed me right away with his intelligence, outdoor skills and his incredible level of physical fitness. More than just Joe Blow who got his guide license, Steve is a former military man with special ops training, a lifelong Nordic skier, and an experienced mountaineer and backcountry expert. He is probably the toughest individual I have ever had the privilege of hunting with. Steve cut his teeth guiding in the formidable glacier country of Alaska's Wrangell Mountains. Steve could have walked me into the ground on the first day but matched his pace to mine, knowing from experience that a worn out hunter doesn't kill many bears from the tent.

I had spent all summer doing as much hiking as possible in the mountains near my home in Colorado. I live at 8,600 feet in elevation and spent most of my time



Mike Duplan and guide Steve Johnson enjoy a cup of warm Gatorade during their first evening at the "bear camp." A "packable" down jacket is a "must have" during a September hunt in Alaska's high country.

hiking between 11,000' and 13,000' above timberline. It was a luxury to be able to train at such elevation on a regular basis and that made a huge difference in my stamina and endurance over the course of our hunt. In my opinion, there is no substitution for actually hiking with a pack on your back in rough country. Unfortunately, many hunters live in the urban setting or many miles away from any suitable hiking terrain, so their training must consist of miles on the treadmill, stair climber or stationary bike. Needless to say, a hunter would be foolish not to try and train as vigorously as he can in preparation for an Alaska backcountry wilderness adventure.

Our first day started out like most Alaska hunts in that we spent a majority of the day punching back into the wilderness through alder jungles. Alders are a way of life for hunting in most of Alaska, covering a majority of the lower slopes of the mountains. I grew up hunting deer in tangled oakbrush jungles but the alders are an entirely new challenge; strong as steel, but flexible. Alders choke, grab, and slow you down and humble even a guy like Steve. You simply just deal with them and keep going.

The highlight of the day was a black bear sow and her triplet cubs grubbing blueberries on the top edge of the alder line. We broke out into the open, set up

camp on the ridgeline and feasted on a Mountain House freeze-dried meal. The clouds had thickened during the afternoon and the highest peaks had become shrouded in a veil of mist and fog. A storm was coming.

That first night was a nice slice of Alaska's notorious weather for us. Gale force winds and driving rain through most of the night rocked the tent and left us both groggy from lack of sleep. After a quick breakfast of green tea and oatmeal, we dropped off the ridge and into a nameless valley with a roaring "creek" in the bottom – a creek as large as a river back in my home state of Colorado.

The previous day's climb through the alders had shredded my Frogg Togg rain gear and luckily, my trusty guide just happened to have a small, stout sewing kit. Steve "reconned" up the valley for bear sign while I sat on a rock and stitched. Later that morning the sun broke out of the gray gloom and lit the valley up, highlighting the vibrant fall color of blueberry bushes and willows.

That afternoon we sat up on the mountain watching another black bear feeding in the berries. I was watching this goofy-acting black bear when Steve spotted a grizzly. Through the spotting scope, we watched him work the open creek bottom at a distance of 700-800 yards and he grew

larger with every minute. From the rear he seemed to waddle. From the front his head looked small compared to his body and his ears looked tiny on that barrel-head. This was a really big bear and it explained why the nervous black bear was way up on the side of the mountain.

Steve said in a low voice with his head pressed to the spotting scope, "That is a hell of a bear." I knew it was and could tell by the tone of Steve's voice that it was as much a question to me as a statement about the bear. I also knew the decision that I wanted to make and that was not to end it on the first afternoon on the first bear. I wanted to savor the wildness of Alaska and as Steve often says, "put the boots to it" for a few days. I wanted to gaze up on the un-named peaks, walk through forgotten valleys, skirt glaciers and experience the silence and the solitude of the bush country.

We watched the bear for quite a while and could see quite plainly that this was the apex predator of the valley placidly grubbing berries but capable of making a meal of any four-legged creature that might offer itself up. We nicknamed him "Bad Bob" because his body language and the black bear's showed that he was the baddest creature in the valley. He seemed strangely out of place in that alpine Shangri-la, looking more like some salmon-eating giant from the coastal rainforest. It was a treat to just sit and watch him as he delicately plucked blueberries and meandered up the benches above the creekbottom.

We made our way into the next valley that evening and made camp. The best available camping spot with some cover was right on a bear trail; not a worn footpath, but individual depressions in the spongy ground made by eons of travel by the great bears of Alaska. This was our "bear camp" and would be our home for the next few days.

On the ridge above camp, we were treated to one of the most majestic sights I have ever witnessed in the wild. A great old billy goat lay bedded upon the craggy ridgeline in some charcoal colored slate

rock. His magnificent fall coat was prime with long flowing white hair. The billy was backlit in the evening sunlight giving him a silver halo as his hair blew and shimmered. He looked invincible in his high mountain lair, fully outfitted by Mother Nature to survive one of the longest and most extreme winters on the planet.

The sight of "Bad Bob" and the location of our "bear camp" fueled my imagination that night until a dreamless sleep took over. It's hard not to let your imagination run just a little wild with the vision of a giant bear fresh in your mind. We woke the next morning to a valley rich with fall color and full of bears and Dall rams. A sow grizzly and two cubs fed in the berries way up the valley and a lone boar was moving towards a high mountain pass as if he had an agenda – better berries, new scenery or just wanderlust. Only he knew his agenda and we were too far away to do anything about it. The bachelor group of sheep was "cliffed up" at the head of the

valley near a small glacier and appeared to have a general uneasiness about them. Perhaps there was way too much grizz scent in the air for casual grazing on the emerald green hillsides below them.

The days came and went quickly other than two tent-bound "weather days." Rain is a fact of life in Alaska. Its not if it's going to rain but for how long and how much. I had brought along a hefty paperback version of Theodore Roosevelt's "Hunting Trips of a Ranchman" & "The Wilderness Hunter." I particularly enjoyed the excerpts of some of Roosevelt's grizzly encounters and hunts. I read aloud and shared them with Steve. The stories were nostalgic and fitting for the adventure that we had undertaken and reading T R's work seemed to add an intangible to the hunt that inspired us both.

Bear spottings were frequent during our hunt and it felt as though there was always a grizzly or black bear within sight. The bears were in a pre-hibernation state

of hyperphagia, where they eat as much as possible, and the ripened blueberries on the alpine slopes had drawn them from miles around. Sometimes black bears were seen miles away as an inky black spec moving in the greens, reds and yellows of September in Alaska. Grizzlies were spotted with less frequency and often were on the move on distant mountainsides. There was a sow grizzly and her two-year-old cubs that we saw almost daily. It was a great source of amusement for us to watch the cubs, as they seemed to be always on the move, feeding on berries or playing amongst themselves.

Hunting and traveling on foot in Alaska's wilderness can give one a sense of timelessness. The days melded into each other and I was near the end of my hunt without pulling the trigger. Steve knew of a mountain pass that was the point of least resistance for bears traveling from one drainage to the next. He suggested that we set up and watch the pass while



Mike and Steve are all smiles for good reason. A great bear is taken at the end of an epic Alaskan adventure.



Mike Duplan is outfitted for his Alaska wilderness adventure. Synthetic clothes with great "wicking" properties, a sturdy external frame backpack, Lowa's Sheephunter boots, gaiters, and the mandatory trekking poles are all items needed for extended backcountry travel in Alaska.

in view of the valley where we previously camped and hunted. We had already seen two bears cross during the last few days and Steve thought it was reasonable to see another.

We were making our way down a boulder-strewn hillside above this saddle on the ridgeline when we both spotted a grizzly at the same time. We immediately shucked our backpacks and closed the distance at a run, using a large boulder to hide our direct line approach. The shot was less than two hundred yards and a rock solid rest over an appliance-sized boulder allowed me to take a perfect double shoulder, broadside shot on the bruin. The bear rolled at the sound of the shot but immediately regained his feet and took off uphill. Suddenly, he whirled around into what seemed like a strangely defiant pose with his head high and swiveling, looking for his hidden enemy. It was a look that seemed to epitomize the essence of the grizzly and his wilderness home. Another shot from my .300 Ultra Mag ended my hunt, but not my adventure.

We camped that night on a bench a safe distance from the kill in case another bear came by after dark to claim the carcass of our bear. We now had the additional weight of a well-fleshed grizzly hide and skull to pack out so Steve took the hide and I took some of the gear from his pack.

The trekking poles that Steve insists his hunters carry now showed themselves to be worth their weight in gold. There was no pack trail out of those mountains. We just "put the boots to it" and kept motoring, trying not to linger too long at rest stops. The descent from the open alpine country took us to the alder brush line and we pushed downward to the valley bottom.

More than just a hunt, this adventure was quickly coming to a close. It was a trip into country wilder than any I had ever experienced and the journey left me feeling richer because of it. The bears were there in large numbers because of the isolation of these valleys and the protection that sheer distance in rough country offers.

Returning to Colorado and my mountain home, I gazed upon the peaks of the Gore Range that now seemed tame in comparison to those I had experienced in Alaska. No longer did grizzlies roam these majestic peaks of Colorado's Gore Range. Although they looked the same, these mountains were now-a-days missing something, and that was a true sense of untamed wilderness that only the sight of grizzly tracks in the mud can bring. " "

www.ultimatealaskanadventure.com

Steve Johnson is the owner/operator of Ultimate Alaskan Adventures. Steve moved to Alaska in 1988 after serving in the United States military as a Navy corpsman attached to a Marine Corp Recon unit. Steve has received extensive training in military survival and orienteering and has extensive backcountry and mountaineering experience.

Steve offers personalized one on one hunting opportunities for the hunter who wants to experience the wilds of Alaska. He has a history of impressive success rates for his clients. He has many return hunters and they make up a substantial portion of his business every year. That speaks volumes about the quality service that Steve provides. Visit Steve's website for additional information on his service and to see some of the bears, billies and rams his hunters have taken on his backcountry expeditions.



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