

Up North: Chapter Four -- The Hunt

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September 7, 2016



Alaska is a sportsman's paradise. Opportunities for world class fishing for salmon, halibut and other species abound. Once you fish in the rivers, streams and surrounding waters of Alaska any other place is a letdown. I suppose the same can be said for hunting. People come from around the world to hunt in the 'Last Frontier'. Trophy species such as the legendary brown bear, moose and mountain goat attract hunters from the lower forty-eight as well as Europe, Asia and South America. Caribou, white tail and black tail Sitka deer are prized for meat by the locals and smaller game like ducks and rabbits are taken in season. For residents of Alaska hunting is not only a sport but a way of life. Hunting to put meat in the freezer and a familiarity with firearms is just a normal part of life for most men and a lot of the ladies too.

Living in Alaska was a dream come true for me. I loved working on the ocean. Fishing was just an excuse to be on a boat at sea. Likewise hunting was all about guns for me. I really like guns, holding guns, owning guns and shooting guns. Getting out in the vast Alaskan wilderness was an added bonus.

On one of the annual hunting contests, me and another guy were dropped off by skiff in a cove on the west side of Kodiak Island. We waded through the surf, crossed the narrow beach, chose a likely slope and started up the mountain. It was late August and the plan was to high-tail it up to the summit and hopefully surprises a black tail buck when he broke cover to graze in the warm sunshine. The thick alder cover slowed us down but we worked our way up through it knowing that it would yield to alpine meadow somewhere around the 800 feet elevation. My partner was somewhat of a fire plug with two pistons for legs. Before long he was well ahead of me and showed no sign of slowing down for me to catch up. I just let him go. By the time I got out of the alder he was long gone.

Winded from the climb I sat down to rest and take in the view and it was spectacular. The mountains and valleys seemed to go on forever in three directions with the waters of the Shelikof Strait forming a backdrop. There was no sign of human habitation visible anywhere, no buildings, vehicles or roads. It was the very definition of pristine. The higher peaks in the distance were white capped even in August. The lower mountain tops were almost treeless, covered with low grasses and lichens. The valley floors were covered with vegetation, mostly thick alder but also interspersed with pine forest. Thick moss hung from the lower branches creating a sub-tropical feeling. High overhead clouds drifted across the blue sky casting their shadows changing the color of the mountains, forests and the sea.

Once my heavy breathing abated the silence became deafening. Slowly I began to notice the sound of running water. It was a small brook about ten yards to my left. The water was so cold it hurt my teeth when I took a drink. I thought once again that this is why people climb mountains.

For a long time I had no inclination to move. Slowly I became aware of a sound. At first it was far off, a low grumble and a roar. I sat up, listened more closely and looked around. What was it? I scanned the

skies for aircraft. The sound got louder and my eyes were drawn by it to the long narrow valley directly in front of me. As I listened the grumbling roar took on a direction. It was coming from the valley floor and moving down the valley towards my observation post. Now it sounded like it was a diesel truck roaring down the valley at full throttle. I guess the valley was about three or so miles long and by the time the roar had gotten to the halfway point I began to hear crashing sounds of breaking branches. Next I could hear actual grunts.

My god was it a bear? What else could it be? I had my binoculars out by this time and focused on what I perceived as the path of this monster. And then there it was. I could clearly see the crashing movement of something big moving down the valley through the heavy underbrush and pine trees. Now it was more like a freight train tearing down the valley in a straight line not moving right or left to avoid brush or trees but running over them. Finally I began to catch glimpses of the beast. It was huge. A mixture of honey brown and a darker brown with a huge head and shoulders, it galloped on all fours with its head down. Although I was high above on the hill side and there was little danger that he would charge me I felt the thrill of fear grip my belly. At end of the valley were the small stream emptied into the cove the cover became sparse and the bear was clearly visible. It turned on a dime, splashed across the shallow water, charged into the alder and up the opposite hillside from my spot. Without slowing down he climbed a third of the way up and rounded the mountain and was gone. The Kodiak Brown Bear, largest in the world with no known predators, why was he running? I have no idea; maybe he was late for lunch.

On another day I was hunting off the road system with another guy. It was a warm October afternoon and we were out for a walk and for meat. We parked off the dirt road and started up the mountain through the alder and pine forest. As always it was rough going and by the time we cleared the alder I was soaked through with sweat.

As often happens we separated and each followed our noses in different directions with the promise to meet back at the truck an hour before sunset. I could have climbed higher but I decided to move around the mountain and through a large flat area. I followed a small stream through the thinning pines and after a short time came upon a football field size clearing with a lake in the middle of it. It was down- right pretty to look at and so as was my habit I found a small rise in the sunshine and sat down for a rest.

The stream that I had followed in meandered through the grass of the flatland and feed into the lake about 70 yards away. I took out my binoculars and glassed the lake shore looking for a deer drinking. The edges of the lake looked very marsh like with knee high grass most of the way around. The far end of the lake appeared at first to be a brown mud bank devoid of grass. On closer examination I realized it was a dam. This was a beaver dam and I started looking for the engineer.

A short time later I spotted two Vs in the water moving from the far side of the pond towards the dam. When they got to the dam one after the other they climbed out dragging pine boughs a good four inches thick and five feet long. They moved the branches into place, trimmed them and packed them down. Then they in turn slid off the dam and dove down under the right side and a few minutes later reappeared under the left side of the fortress like structure. Next the Vs glided back across the water to the far side and then lumbered out of the water and into the pine forest.

Not too long later they re-emerged with more building material and headed back to the construction site. I watched them for almost three hours. Back and forth back and forth, it was fascinating. At one point, I lay back on nature's mattress, closed my eyes and napped in the warm sunshine. When I woke up they were still at it. I know well where the expression 'eager beaver' comes from. Finally I had to rouse myself, saddle up and head back to the rendezvous. On the way I stumbled across a yearling, dropped it and butchered it out; meat for the freezer.

Hunting on the Alaskan Peninsula is quite different then hunting the mountains of Kodiak Island. The main reason is the terrain, it is all tundra. From the air it looks flat with a few rolling hill and is dotted with what seems like a million lakes. From the ground the tundra is not flat at all. Due to the thawing and freezing of the ground above the permafrost, or permanently frozen soil, the earth is shoved up into moguls like small mountains anywhere from two to six feet high. Some valleys are small enough to step into and break a leg and some are big enough to swallow an ATV. It is a very treacherous landscape.

Several species draw hunters to the area including moose, brown bear and the caribou. This large species of arctic deer still roam the tundra, I imagine, the way the buffalo once roamed the plains. They are big animals with magnificent velvet covered antlers. They migrate in huge herds, as many as 10,000 animals, to and from winter and summer grazing grounds.

If you are there at the right time of year you can watch the Alaskan Peninsula herd approach and swim the Egegik River several miles upriver from the village. Once I sat on hill and watched the herd cross for four hours. A trophy hunter can glass the herd and chose the bull that he wants, track it and bring it down.

I was a meat hunter so I was more interested in shooting an animal that was in a convenient place to get

the meat out. I've shot animals a hundred yards from camp. I guess I would have been happy if a good sized bull would have wandered right into camp. The area of the peninsula just north of the Egegik River and up to Big Creek was a known calving area. Cows would drop out of the herd, give birth and spend six months raising the calves before rejoining the herd on its way back south and so the cows and the calves were plentiful and were good eating.

The tundra was truly vast and we usually used ATVs (Honda 3 and 4 wheelers) to hunt it. One day I was on a 3-wheeler about three or four miles behind Bartlett's Lodge enjoying the afternoon sun and looking for some meat. I was on a small hill and glassing the surrounding area. Seventy yards to my right I spotted a good sized buck with a nice rack standing knee deep in a medium sized lake. I was packing my Springfield Armory M1-A1 chambered for .308 caliber. I had it loaded with full metal jacketed rounds; packs a punch but does minimal damage to the meat.

At 70 yards even with open iron sights I wasn't going to miss. I got down in a sitting position with the sling around my arm for support, got a good sight picture, put the top of the front sight blade on the buck's left shoulder and squeezed off a round. I know I hit it but it didn't go down. I took a quick look with the binoculars and saw blood on the flank. I fired another round and BAM, this time the animal staggered and began rushing into deeper water. BAM, BAM two more rounds and he went down.

Problem was he was now half submerged in the center of the lake. It is illegal to kill game in Alaska and fail to recover the meat. It is known as 'wanton waste' and so I had to get the beast out of the water. I packed up my gear and motored over to the lake. The lake was surrounded by alder shrub and stunted pine trees. With a little difficulty I was able to find my way through to a narrow sand beach. It was early October, the air was brisk and I knew the water was going to be colder.

I figured I was gonna need some dry clothes to bike back to camp so I took off my boots, all my clothes, put my belt between my teeth and waded then swam out to the middle of the lake. Luckily the caribou was only half underwater. I had done this before with a moose that sank to the bottom and I had to dive on it. But that's another story.

It was not a problem to wrap the belt around the beast's neck and slowly tow it back to the beach. Once I had dragged it three feet up onto the gravel and sand I began the process of field dressing it. The first step was to position the animal so that I could make a cut from the throat, down the sternum to the genitals. Next I had to cut through the sternum in order to remove the heart, lungs, stomach and other organs. It was a big animal and I put it on its back with my knees spreading the rear legs and using my elbows to hold the front legs apart. I was using a K-BAR (7 inch long Marine Corps issue fighting and utility knife) to break the thick bone. I struck it once, twice and on the third strike the pointed blade glanced off the hard bone and was driven an inch and a half into my thigh six inches down from the crotch. Of course I pulled it out and the blood pulsed out in a three inch geyser.

First there was shock then the realization that this is going to take some fast action. Still naked I looked around to find something to stop the bleeding. The belt was still around the buck's neck and was in reach. I used it to fashion a tourniquet and cinched it tight above the wound. The bleeding slowed to a ooze but I knew I needed to get back to Dodge (slang for town) for some stitches.

Before I could do that I had to finish the field dressing, get the caribou on the three-wheeler and get it off the tundra. I got into my dry clothes and began to wrestle the 200 pound plus carcass onto the rear of the ATV. It was no easy task. After three attempts I managed to get it balanced on the Honda and tied down with cord. It was a good four miles back to the nearest civilization which was Bartlett's lodge. Under ideal conditions I could make it in twenty minutes but losing blood and trying to keep the caribou on the bike it took a bit longer.

A shifting 200 pound weight added to my weight on the back of a three wheeler was a big problem. The weight over the rear wheels made it impossible to keep the front wheel on the ground. Like any tricycle, contact of the front wheel with the ground was the only way to steer the bike. Although I leaned as far forward as I could the front wheel could only be coaxed to kiss the earth on the rare occasion. All I could do was go straight ahead until I came to an obstacle, dismount and wrestle the bike on to a new course. Often I had to stop and re-secure the animal to the machine.

I had a hand-held VHF radio and used it to contact the lodge. Helen (the lodge owner) came up on the radio and I told her I was on my way in with a knife wound. She said there was a spotter pilot in the bar drinking coffee and she offered to send him up in his piper cub to have a look for me. Twenty minutes later I heard and saw the plane circling three miles to the south west. I couldn't get him on the hand-held so I plowed on.

An hour and a half later I pulled up behind the lodge exhausted and relieved. I went directly to the social center (the bar) and was greeted by a small crowd who were drinking whisky and discussing sending out a search party. The first order of business was to get the tourniquet off, wash, and dress the wound. There

were three middle aged guys sitting at a table with a bottle of Old Grand Dad and three glasses between them. They were intently interested in what had happened and the condition of the wound. One guy told me it was important to get the wound stitched up right away and he could do it with a sewing kit he had in his pack. I asked him if they were doctors and he replied with assurance "No. We're lawyers". I said no thanks and waited for the medivac out of King Salmon (the nearest town that had a clinic with actual medical staff).

When the plane rolled to a stop at the gate in King Salmon it was met by paramedics in an ambulance and the Alaska State Troopers. The troopers had heard that a stabbing victim was coming in from Egegik and they were there to collect evidence and to fly back to the village to pick up the perpetrator and bring him or her in. With a red face I had to tell them that I had stabbed myself.

We once had a famous guitar man come to Kodiak for a guided hunt. I'll call him the client. The Roosevelt Elk, the largest of the North American elk is not native to Alaska but were introduced to Afognak and Raspberry Islands in 1928. Bulls can weigh in at almost 1300 pounds and stand as tall as six feet at the shoulder. We figured this would be a great challenge for the client. Captain Allen Hokanson was an experienced Alaskan hunter and was tapped to head up the expedition.

The plan was to book the "U-Rascal", local charter boat owned and run by Captain Chris Fiala, load it up with supplies and use it as our headquarters and bunk house during the hunt. Groceries, cooking gear, ammunition and hunting licenses were all bought in advance and loaded on the boat. When the client arrived we were ready to go but he wasn't. He went immediately to his room, locked the door and remained incommunicado for 16 hours. We just stood by.

The next day late in the morning, the client sent word down that he was ready to go and he wanted to leave after lunch. We hit the dock by 2 pm and cast off. It was the client, Capt. Hokanson and Captain Fiala and I on board. It was about two and a half hours to Afognak. The weather was overcast with some light showers. The sea was flat calm and we arrived at Afognak Bay without incident around four thirty. The captain motored down the bay looking for a good anchorage with easy access to the beach. We dropped the hook thirty feet off the beach and I assumed would soon have a nice dinner and a long nap. It was not to be. The client was well rested and anxious to get started.

Of course it made no sense. It was late August, after five o'clock and the sun would be going down in a couple of hours. The client insisted we get on the beach and head up the mountain right away. He said it would be a good condition. He said we would be back before dark. So we grabbed rifles, ammo and day packs and took the skiff to the beach. Allen distributed to each of us one bar of chocolate, one hunk of cheese and a hunk of bread. These, along with the tube tent in his pack, were our survival gear.

The client in the lead, we started up the mountain. Afognak is a relatively low slung island and for that reason is home to a fairly large logging operation. Where we were there was no sign of human habitation or activity. The slope was steep and the thick alder made for tough going. Also Alaska is a wet, very wet place. The sweat from the exertion and the moisture from the vegetation combined to soak the climber to the skin. By the time we broke out of the tree line at around 600 feet of elevation, I was soaked through and through.

Above 600 feet or so the vegetation thinned out and we climbed through the grass of the alpine meadow. Another 400 feet above us was a peak and beyond that a series of peaks that together formed a ridge line. In the fading light we walked the ridge line and scouted for elk sign. Two black tail does appeared but we held off, we were elk hunting. In the last light we looked back behind us and knew there was no way we were going to get down the mountain this night.

Once the sun set the wind picked up and as wet as we were we got real cold real fast. We needed shelter and a fire. Allen got a hold of Chris on the hand-held and told him we were spending the night. At 1200 feet there were no trees or other vegetation so we moved down lower to find a wind break and something to make a fire with. After ten minutes it became so dark that the hand was hardly visible in front of your face. We found a slight depression that might block the wind a little. We dropped our packs and started looking for firewood. There wasn't much and what there was almost waterlogged. We gathered up what we could and tried to start a fire. It took an hour or longer before we coaxed a small flame out of the damp pile of kindling. For the longest time we continued to feed wet sticks into the flame. All the heat from the fire was being absorbed by drying out the wood and precious little heat was given off to warm our frozen fingers.

In particular the client was worried about his hands. At the time he was a musician and his fingers were important for playing the guitar. The three of us hunched over that pitiful fire and tried to get warm for hour after hour. It was the longest night of my life. We walked around and stamped our numb feet and flapped our arms in a futile effort to warm up. We took turns dangling our wet socks over the flame but all they did was drip water on the flame and threaten to extinguish it.

Finally the client gave up on the fire and said let's get some sleep. Allen broke out his survival tent which was like two garbage can liners with a string running through it. We set it up as best we could and crawled in. We laid in close skin touch with each other because that was all the room we had. In a short while the three of us began to shiver and our teeth began to chatter. It was the first stages of hypothermia. We tried for what may have been an hour but there was no way anyone of us was going to fall asleep. The client made an executive decision. Get up and start the fire. Another hour later and we had the same insufficient fire going again.

We spent the rest of the night huddled over the fire just hoping for heat. With time on my hands and nothing else to be done it was a good time to pray and so I prayed for daylight. I don't know how the other two occupied their minds but there was no conversation. First light brought new hope and with a cold breakfast of the remains of yesterday's survival rations we broke camp and started out along the ridge line with our eyes peeled for the elk.

We hunted for several hours but having no sleep and little food we soon decided it was time to find our way back to the U-Rascal. By this time we were well away from the point where we had ascended so Allen called Chris and asked him to bring the boat around to Marker Bay with the idea we could walk down from where we were.

The way down looked pretty straight forward. It was a steep slope going all the way down to a stream. The slope was no problem. I slid down most of the way on my butt using my rifle butt to slow down. When I got to the bottom the client and Allen were nowhere to be seen. I was on my own. I quickly found the stream and an animal trail that ran along the bank. At first the trail seemed to be my highway out. Before long, as it descended, it became difficult to follow. It went up hill six or eight feet and then down six feet again and again up and then again down.

I realized I was running on empty. I thought then that walking in the stream bed would be easier. The bed was strewn with boulders large and small. They were wet and slippery and I was wet to the waist. I abandoned the stream bed and went back to the trail. I began stumbling and I realized I was in danger of falling and injuring myself. I just kept going and wondering if the others were in front of me or behind me.

Finally the terrain began to flatten out and I found myself walking through an area of pine trees and low brush. Here I heard two rifle shots and knew that they were in front of me and somebody had killed an animal probably a deer. Who would carry it out? I would be lucky to get myself out.

Next I began to hear noises, voices and animal sounds that I knew were not there. I was hallucinating. For the first time I began to think I might not be able to make it out. I sat down and looked up at the tree tops. I had a radio but even if I could reach somebody I was pretty sure they couldn't get a helicopter in here. I thought I have only two choices now. I could lay here and die or I could get up on my feet and walk out. In a second I decided. I wasn't going to die here. I got up and started putting one foot in front of the other.

Down and down I walked. Several times I stumbled and once I fell but the crisis was over. I kept going. Eventually I came to the mouth of the stream and found the U-rascal on anchor. I hailed the boat and they sent the skiff over to get me. Of course the client and Allen were back with the deer that the client had bagged and Allen had carried out. All they said was "where the hell you been"?

Back in town everyone wanted to know how the hunt had gone. I kept my mouth shut.