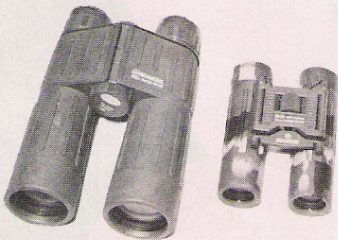


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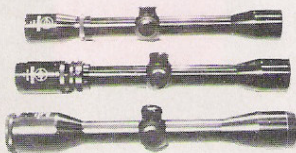
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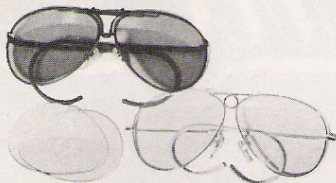
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GUN NOTES



By Elmer Keith, Executive Editor

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The following has been taken from Elmer Keith's book, Guns & Ammo For Hunting Big Game, published in 1965, and now out of print, by Petersen Publishing Company. This chapter, entitled, "Grizzlies And Black Bear," deals with Keith's many years of experience in hunting these animals, along with his observations of their habits and characteristics.

■ North America may truly be called the home of the bear, as this continent supports more bear than any in the world. Formerly, the grizzly ranged in great numbers from Mexico to Alaska along the Rockies and Pacific coastal ranges, but now is probably gone except from British Columbia north along the coast, and only scattered grizzlies occur the length of the Rocky Mountain chain. No great number of grizzlies exist anywhere south of Yellowstone Park.

The park still contains a nice comple-

ment of grizzlies, and Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, where they join the park, have a few, including the overflow from the park. Northward, however, we have grizzlies in increasing numbers, beginning at about the head of the Blackfoot River, the head of the Dearborn and the South Fork of the Flathead. From the section where these three rivers head on north, grizzlies occur in ever-increasing numbers. The divide between the South Fork of the Flathead and the Sun River is still fairly good grizzly country. To the west the Swan River and the Mission range contain grizzlies. Here on the head of the North Fork of the Salmon we still have an occasional grizzly. The Bitterroots today have only a few of the grizzlies left that formerly ranged these mountains when Theodore Roosevelt hunted along this divide in the eighties. We still have an odd grizzly in the Middle Fork country of the Salmon River and I saw four one evening, in a high alpine park this side of the Middle Fork. A

continued on page 14



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GUN NOTES



By Elmer Keith, Executive Editor

EDITOR'S NOTE:

This month, Elmer Keith's excellent treatise on grizzlies and black bears continues with Elmer's observations of the animals, garnered during a lifetime of hunting. Keith's colorful reminiscences of these game animals were taken from his book, *Guns & Ammo For Hunting Big Game*, published in 1965, and now out of print, by Petersen Publishing Co.

The strength of a grizzly is prodigious. They can kill any beast on this continent with one blow of a paw, even the bison or moose. They can kill a full-grown five-year-old steer and pick him up and carry him over an eight-foot corral and pack him away. We have seen where they had carried off full-grown bull elk, and only horns and feet dragged as near as we could determine from the trail. Where the White River flows into the South Fork of the Flathead, a trapper in 1920 told me to take a look at the remains of his Newhouse No. 15 bear trap. There to the right of the trail as I was coming up the South Fork stood a big yellow pine and I rode over to it. As high on the tree as I could reach while sitting in my saddle were pieces of trap embedded in the tree, and the balance of the broken trap and toggle lay at the base of the tree. He had caught a grizzly, but the old bear had simply raised up on his hind feet and smashed the trap against the tree. It takes enormous strength to break such a trap to pieces.

Mountain grizzlies, when they first come out of the den in the spring, will eat a bite of skunk cabbage or other herbage to doctor up their old tummy; then as soon as the tender feet toughen somewhat, they will work the bottoms of the snowslides and eat any big game they can find killed by the

slides. They can often scent a game animal under an unbelievable amount of snow and proceed to dig down to him. Probably no animal has a better nose than the grizzly, not even the wolf and coyote. While they are working these slides for dead big game animals, they often run onto big game that is thin and poor from the winter and are able to stalk it and carry it down with a rush, before it is aware of their presence. This meat, when they can get it, is also varied with a diet of grass and roots, much as a hog roots them out. We have seen the whole divide north from the head of the

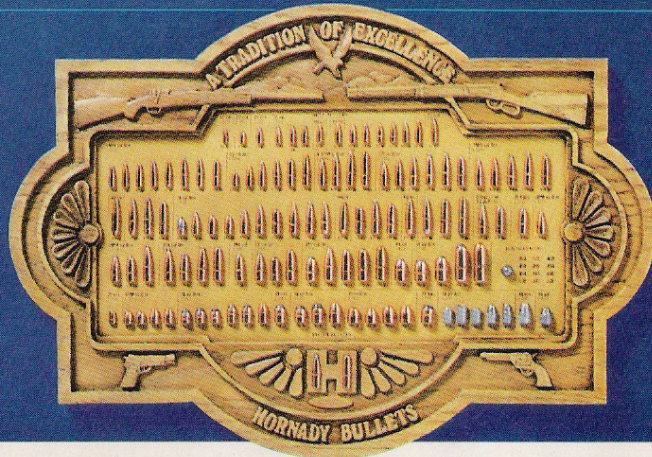


Dearborn River in Montana literally plowed up where grizzlies had dug out roots in the spring.

Their spring and summer diet is further varied with small rodents, ants, bugs, and such until summer brings on the berry season, when they spend a great deal of time eating various berries. Huckleberries and serviceberries are prime favorites with

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GUNNOTES

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them, but they will eat almost any berry fruit they can find. They consider honey delicacy and will tear up an old log that has a bees' nest in it, to get the small amount of comb and honey it contains. They are also very fond of ants. While the big bear eat elk, moose, caribou and other big game when they can catch it, as well as cleaning out the dead animals from under the tangle of logs and snow at the foot of the slides each spring, their summer diet is largely berries, rodents and bugs of various kinds, combined with grass and roots. If salmon run the streams adjacent to their range, the grizzlies will spend much time there and practically live off the salmon as long as the run continues. They will also eat the old dead salmon later in the season as well as what berries they can find.

After fall freeze-up the mountain grizzly usually works up near the top of the divide in this country and systematically combs all the high timbered basins for caches made by the pine squirrels. He will dig out and eat every squirrel cache of piñon nuts he can locate, and often almost every big tree will have such caches among its roots. When the bear finally hole up these are largely dug up and eaten so that the squirrel who hid them often has to go hungry.

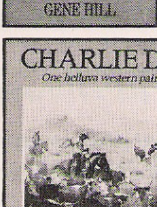
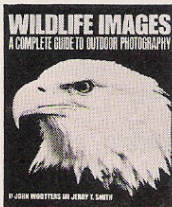
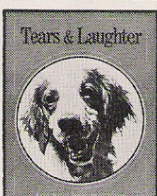
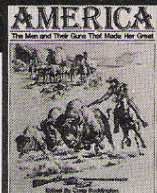
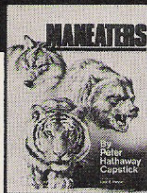
While a grizzly will kill a man in anger, I have never known of one eating its victim. Many years ago, after an enormous number of Canadian Indians on the east side of the divide had died from smallpox and their few relatives had simply abandoned their lodges and their dead, the grizzlies of that section, south from Jasper Park to Montana, learned to eat human flesh and cleaned up many of the dead Indians. For 30 years thereafter, mean grizzlies occurred in that section, who had formerly eaten human flesh and would attack a man unprovoked. We obtained this information from old hunters while living in Montana. They had not only seen the dead Indians and where the bear had eaten them, but had also been attacked several times by those bear.

A trapper at Fort St. John also told me of a man being camped along some 300 miles north of that little hamlet, when a grizzly came into camp and was simply rolling him over out of his blankets with his nose when he awakened. He crawled away from the bear to his rifle, where it leaned against a tree, and shot the bear. I do know the guides up there that I was out with prefer to sleep with their feet toward the front or opening of the lean-to tent and with a loaded rifle or sixgun within easy reach at all times.

Though I saw many blacks on Salmon River boat trips, the only grizzly I saw on any of them was one I got Mrs. G.G. Nesbitt a shot at below Horse Creek, and he had probably strayed in from the Selway or from the Middle Fork section. However,

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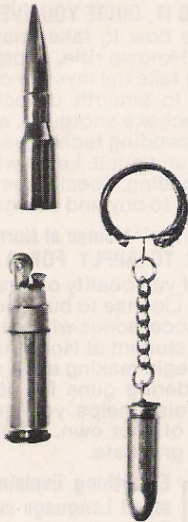
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GUNNOTES

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Captain Guleke showed me many sections of the river where he had often seen grizzly rise up and look at him as he flashed by in his big scow in earlier years. With the exception of those grizzlies who ate dead Indians, I have never known of grizzly bear having eaten human flesh, though I have talked to many men who have been mauled by grizzlies at different times. Some of them were a sight and crippled for life. Captain Guleke buried a drowned man and a bear later dug up and ate the body.

The rut occurs in late May or early June in Alaska, and I have seen huge old bears chasing the female up there on the north side of Cook Inlet over cliffs that looked passable only to a mountain goat. A grizzly is, however, a great climber and can go about anywhere in the cliffs, when he decides to do so.

The young, often only one but usually two cubs, and rarely three or four, are born in the den, usually in January, and are then about the size of a squirrel. They nurse their mothers the rest of the winter in the den and usually emerge in spring about the size of house cats. We saw one huge old brownie at Iniskin Bay in Alaska with two tiny cubs no larger than cats. The cubs den with the sow the next fall, and many do so again the succeeding fall unless she is to bring cubs again; when this is the case she will spank the yearlings on their way and make them hunt another den site. Usually they breed only every other year, and often only every third year, so the big bear do not increase fast like many of our hoofed animals. Many times we have seen sows with yearlings and quite often with two-year-olds and no young cubs.

Usually the finest grizzly pelts come from Alaska or far Northern Canadian provinces. We have seen pelts of grizzly killed in interior Alaska late in the fall, with silky fur fully six inches long and so soft that you could hold up the pelt by either head or tail and the fur would immediately drop down and point to the ground. Such pelts, when well-marked by silver-tipped or cream-colored guard hair over the shoulders, are the finest obtainable of the mountain grizzly. Some few of the big brownies on Kodiak and the Alaskan Peninsula also have long six-inch fur, but usually the guard hairs are much coarser than on those beautiful specimens from interior Alaska and the upper reaches of the Yukon, including adjacent sections of the Continental Divide.

I killed a grizzly with such a pelt in '37 on the divide between the Halfway and Siccanni Rivers, except that it was shorter, being killed earlier in the fall. At that it is a much longer and heavier grizzly pelt than a much later skin killed in this section, as snow and winter come early that far north. This bear, a male whose skull will just go in the bottom of the records, was very dark on the legs and under fur, but with cream-

colored tips to all the guard hair over the neck and shoulders and extending well down the back. The face was very light-colored tan and the front of the ears jet black making a strikingly colored grizzly. His fur is almost as soft as that of a fox.

Grizzlies have a comparatively large range, and may travel along the divide between some watersheds for 50 to 100 miles, but they will always complete their circle and come back. Each season their wanderings in search of different food at different elevations will take them over a great many miles, but they will very often come back and hole up in the same den used the preceding winter. If the snow has not melted and run under them during hibernation, thus pulling or matting the guard hairs, they will have the very finest and glossiest pelts when they first come out of the den, but as the sun warms them later they soon rub. They particularly like to back up to some old pitch stump or tree which they have previously bitten into and whose sap has exuded and plaster their pelts with pitch. This soon pulls out the guard fur and spring grizzlies must be looked over very carefully if they have been out for any time, or you may shoot one with a worthless skin.

Grizzlies are easily distinguished from black bear as long as you can see their contour. The back is much straighter and the hips do not drop away so fast as the black bear's. There is a decided hump on top of the shoulders and usually the longest fur on the entire skin, as well as the heaviest, is on this high shoulder hump. The side view of the head looks more like the profile of a Newfoundland dog, with considerable arch to the skull at the eyes, while the black skull and head, from a side view, are just a gradual curve from snout to the back of the head, with no high rise at the eyes. Tracks are also easily distinguished at a glance, the grizzlies' heels being more pointed than the blacks' and the front claws always striking well ahead of the ends of the front toes. In addition they are usually much larger than the tracks of the black bear.

Mountain grizzlies, who spend their lives in the high country and do not live on salmon in the Pacific Coast streams, are usually good eating. I have cut the loins out of several and they made most excellent mountain pork chops which were quickly eaten up when taken to camp. A young grizzly is also very good roasted and very similar to pork. It depends a lot on what they have been feeding on when killed. When living on berries, small mammals and grubs, at high elevations, they are usually very good meat, unless too old and tough, but a yearling or two-year-old is fine meat. Likewise the fat from a grizzly of the mountain species makes about the finest pastry lard you will ever find. It is held in high esteem by cooks and many ranchers' wives in the high country. Lard rendered from grizzly fat in the late fall makes up into clear white lard not so easily distin-

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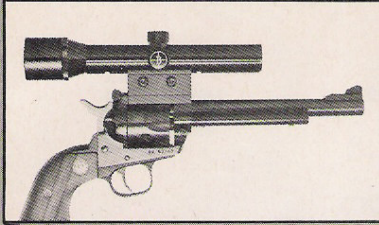
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GUNNOTES

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guished from hog lard, but the fat rendered from a spring-killed bear is merely an oil and good only for greasing shoes and such.

Bear meat is like that of other game animals, best in the late fall, when they are in prime condition and fat. No game animal, and no livestock either for that matter, is good meat when in poor condition. Grizzlies often come out of the den in the spring with considerable fat left on their frames, but it quickly leaves them after they are out. The fact that their body has consumed the best part of the fat during the winter hibernation probably accounts for the fact that they are usually tough and poor eating in the spring.

Though grizzlies probably travel more in the spring during the rut, from about the 15th or 20th of May or through June, than at any other time, and may be found then in almost any place, as the females often lead the males a merry chase, they also travel a great deal just before holing up for the winter. In the late fall they may travel miles of their range searching for the exact spot that is to their liking for a den. Just before denning for the winter, they seem to stop eating altogether, and finally just before hibernation usually eat a quantity of fir or spruce needles. This is probably to keep their stomachs from completely col-

lapsing, and on several occasions I have found a wad of such fir needles in the stomachs of spring bear when they first came out.

During the mating season, the old males fight a lot and Jim Allen, a guide at Petersburg, told us of once watching such a battle to the finish. Many of these old males get badly chewed up at that time of the year and are cranky. The term "sore-headed bear" is very appropriate, and the hunter is much more apt to get an unprovoked charge at this time of the year than later in the season. The bear may have neck, chest and shoulders covered with pus-filled fang and claw wounds, and to add insult to injury his lady friend may have jilted him in favor of his adversary. Under such conditions most men would fight if they possessed any guts at all, so it is no wonder the old males are then very cranky. Females with young cubs, or even yearlings, are always cranky and will fight at the drop of the hat if you get between them and their cubs, or scare a cub and it squalls for its mom. Bear are, however, individuals, and very intelligent individuals at that, and what one bear does is no criterion as to what the next one will do. Westley Brown and a couple of companions once caught a fair-sized grizzly cub and put it in one of their packsacks. It howled bloody murder and its mother ran back and forth on the opposite bank of the river, all the while she huffed and growled but never did come

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across and charge them, though they fully expected to have to kill her.

The advice of our most experienced old bear hunters, like Earl Olmstead, Andy Simons, Jay Williams, Ned Frost and many others I could name, is, whenever possible, to get up above a bear before you start hostilities. Wounded bear usually react to the impact of a rifle slug quicker than most any other animal except cats. They will drop and roll down the mountain, as a rule, from most any body hit and often from only a leg hit. Though they may drop as though killed and often lie for a time when they quit rolling, they may not be badly off at all and will suddenly jump up and charge or depart.

So always get above a grizzly before you shoot if possible to do so, for you can depend on him to roll downhill when hit and he will often decide to go downhill anyway in making his getaway, as he can travel faster down than up or around the side of the slope. Bears have good ears, I believe equal to moose, goats, caribou and sheep, but probably not quite the equal of elk and deer, and while they appear at times to be near-sighted, we have also had them spot us when we were clean out of effective range—500 to 600 yards in fact.

In all spring bear hunting, it is far better to establish a good lookout where you can comb the slides with your glasses and also search the snow fields and slides for tracks. If you do this day after day, you will see all


the bear in that section and you will not track up the country in so doing. In this way you will be able to see the best bear and can then stalk them to effective range. Busting brush will get you absolutely nowhere in bear hunting. Remember the old males will den highest and will be the last to come out in the spring, so you should not be in too big a hurry to take the first bear you see, if in good bear country. The sunny south slopes of the mountain, where the avalanches have roared down during the winter and swept the snow clear, will be the first to turn green in the spring in mountain country, and the same is often true in Alaska. There is where the bear will come first for their pottage, and that is the best place to stalk and kill them.

Never camp too close to your prospective bear country, as the smoke and scent from your camp will suck up the canyons for miles and one whiff of it will warn any grizzlies in the country. It's best to camp over some ridge or on some other creek from the one you expect to hunt, and a few miles' walk each morning is better than to chance giving them the scent of your camp. Usually the best place for a lookout is across some wide canyon or on some point overlooking a big basin, where you can cover a lot of likely bear country with the glasses. You will see and get more grizzly by this method than any other when hunting in the spring.

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