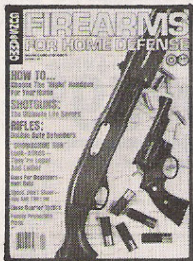


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GUN NOTES



By Elmer Keith, Executive Editor

EDITOR'S NOTE:

This month's installment continues the exciting account of one of Elmer Keith's memorable grizzly bear hunts. In the last issue, one of Elmer's hunters had wounded a sow grizzly, and the bear was attempting to get the hunters' scent for a charge at them. This passage was taken from Keith's book, *Guns & Ammo For Hunting Big Game*, published in 1965, and now out of print, by Petersen Publishing Company.

I asked Bates to bust her again, but he said he did not want any more holes in her hide. By this time I was thoroughly disgusted with him, as I well knew that sow would charge and be on us in a flash if she ever looked down the steep slope. Just behind me an opening ran up the mountain in the shin-tangle for 20 yards and I determined that if the sow did charge, I would duck back up the hill in that open strip and let her take Bates for a merry chase. He was a big six-foot athlete and could run like a scared jackrabbit, so I had hopes of seeing a damn good race before I busted the sow in the top of the rump to stop her. However, Jim Ross, one of the wisest old heads in the guiding business in that section of British Columbia around Hudson's Hope, spoiled my chances of seeing Bates run, by yelling to him, "Shoot that sow again or I am going to." Bates shot again and got her down to stay. Then Jim and Harry came up the mountain and Jim ordered Bates to bust her again through the shoulders, which he did. That shot finished the sow, but we stayed back and heaved rocks at her until certain. Then the Skipper and Pete came out in the slide about where the four-year-old had disappeared. The Skipper had accidentally fired his gun in the air the first shot as the four-year-old

came out on them, as he always wore gloves and could not feel how much pressure he had on the trigger of his Griffin & Howe Springfield. Then the four-year-old had reared up and looked at him at close range but he had missed as he was plainly disconcerted, hearing the savage bawling of the wounded sow just through that thin strip of firs and right behind his back. The yearlings had also almost run right over him and Pete.

Taking stock of the situation, Harry Snyder sent Pete to trail up the wounded four-year-old and finish him off. I offered to do the job, but at that time I believe Snyder had more faith in the Indian's tracking ability than mine. Evidently Pete had lost no wounded grizzlies, as he never caught up with it and soon lost the trail, he said, though it was bleeding freely. After skinning Bates's sow I went on after caribou that day. No doubt Harry's grizzly died, as he was plugged square through the lungs and the same load had simply demolished the lungs of a bighorn a short time before. I doubt if that bear went a mile. Bates had his "porcupine," but I still do not know how fast the laddie could have run. The sow was well furred, but jet black, with not a single gray or silver-tipped hair. The yearlings were very light-colored grizzlies, while the four-year-old was a normal colored silver-tipped bear.

Hunting grizzlies with a small-bore rifle is to my way of thinking simply asking for trouble, with every possibility of wounded bear escaping, or in rare instances charging home. Most grizzlies are content to mind their own business, and unless wounded will usually do just that, but once their anger is aroused you have an adversary worthy of the best that is in you and one that will come with determination. When a bear is wounded out in the open, there is no ex-

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GUNNOTES

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cuse for allowing him ever to get to close quarters, but when a wounded bear is trailed into dense cover, he then has the advantage and anything can happen quick. If a charge occurs around the side of a steep mountain, remember you can roll a fast-moving bear down the hill with a shoulder shot with more certainty than you can reach the relatively small brain pan in the back of the skull. Always break the lower shoulder. Large caliber, low or moderate-velocity heavy bullets are the best for such work. Today the old grizzly is about done in the U.S. with the exception of a few very remote areas and the two National Parks, but he is still plentiful in the North and I hope he so remains, as the grizzly is the grandest game animal on this continent.

He asks nothing from any man or any of his kind except to be let alone and given room to live in. Man is about his only enemy, though wolves may at rare intervals tackle an orphaned cub. When livestock was run on his natural domain in the States, the great bear very naturally killed and ate some of them and was in turn wiped out by livestock interests.

As a sporting animal in the United States, the grizzly is gone, and the few remaining specimens should be protected

wherever possible the year round. My sympathy is all with the great bear.

When *Outdoor Life* magazine, under the editorship of Harry McGuire, instigated the grazing hearing in the U.S. Senate, I filed a seven-page brief on the conditions relative to the game of this section, and the domestic sheep. It was published in the *Congressional Record* for that year, about 28 years ago, I believe.

BLACK BEAR

Black bear are clowns, the most comical animals in all the world. They are in the main timber animals and must be hunted in the timber. They are largely nocturnal as well, especially if much hunted. They will increase and live right near civilization if given any protection at all.

The little black bear has the widest range of all bear, extending from Florida to Maine and on north well into Canada on the East Coast and from old Mexico, to well north of the Alaskan Peninsula. Black bear very rarely kill any livestock other than domestic sheep. Their diet is largely small rodents, grubs, ants, berries and roots. They will catch the young of our big game, such as elk and deer if the mother is not around at the time, and eat them, but their regular diet is largely as has been stated above.

The rut usually occurs in May or early June and the cubs are born in the dens during the winter, usually in January or Feb-

ruary. Sometimes only one cub is born, but two are quite common, and three are not rare, and they may on rare occasions have four as does the grizzly. At birth the cubs are little if any larger than pine squirrels, but they grow very fast.

The cinnamon or small brown bear is merely a color phase of the black bear and we have many times seen an old brown cinnamon sow with black cubs and vice versa, and some families may have both black and brown cubs in the same litter. Man is their chief enemy, and in this section of the West sheepmen account for most of the black bear kills each year, while the sportsmen take the balance. They usually den in November or early December on rare warm seasons and come out of the den in late February, March or April, depending on how high they happen to den and on the seasons. Before denning up, they usually eat a quantity of fir needles and go for some time without food when hunting a suitable den, or place to dig one. Usually they dig out under a fallen log or the roots of a big tree and let the snow cover their den. They pack large quantities of bear grass or other grass into the den and make themselves a very nice warm bed, much as a domestic hog will do.

Cubs remain with their mother the first year after birth and often the second winter as well, unless she is again to bring cubs, which is rather rare. In this case she will force the yearlings to den alone. These young bear that are thus kicked out of the family circle early in life often den on the south slopes, where they may thaw out much earlier than usual, and we have seen them rambling around trying to make a living in early February at times. If they live and grow older, they will learn to den in a proper place where they can sleep until spring. Like the grizzly, they have excellent ears and a nose second to none; their eyesight, while not equal to that of many other big game animals, is surprisingly good and they will see you a considerable distance if you move. Like the grizzly's, their eyes are set fairly close together and in front of their face, so that they do not see to their rear or much to the side and can be easily approached if the wind is right and you make no sound and keep absolutely still when the head is turned broadside, and move forward only when the head is turned away from you.

Black bear are great travelers and while their range is not usually as extensive as the grizzly's, nevertheless they travel a lot. In the East the coat is always jet black, while in the West it has many variations of cinnamon and blue gray. The glacier bear of Alaska is another offshoot of the common black bear, and is a peculiar blue color. The white Kermodie bear inhabiting an island on the coast of British Columbia is also said to be an offshoot of the black bear. I have never seen a skin of this animal and my own experience is entirely with the blacks along the Rocky Mountain chain from Mexico to Alaska. I have one

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GUNNOTES

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ack bear skin that is almost white, with a nose and paws.

The black bear has no hump on the top of his withers as do all species of grizzly. The middle of the back is the highest part of the body except the head, and from the middle of the back, the rump slopes away sharply to the hind legs. The skull and head are also much different in shape from the grizzly's, the top of the skull being more convex in contour. The claws are short and sharply curved and these bear of all color variations, as far as I know, can and do climb trees. They do not turn over acres of mountain grassland for roots as do grizzlies, but spend far more time in search of ants and grubs and bees' nests as well as all kinds of small mammals, frogs, snakes, and in fact about anything that is edible in the forest.

In the southern extremity of their range, black bear do not hibernate to the extent

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that they do farther north and may be out all winter in some sections of Florida and Mexico. Wherever long hard winters are the rule, the black bear hibernates like the grizzly. They go into the den in the fall hog fat and come out usually with considerable fat still left on them, but soon lose this when they start eating grass and roots.

In the late fall when hog fat, black bear are excellent eating if not too old, and no finer roast is possible than a ham or saddle of a yearling or two-year-old black bear in prime condition that has not lately been eating carrion. It is, however, even greasier meat than a beaver and all surplus fat should be trimmed off and rendered for lard. It makes wonderful pastry lard, clean, hard and white when rendered from late fall-killed bear. In the spring, I for one do not care for their meat at all, as it is then tough and strong and totally unlike that of a fat fall-killed bear.

Black bear are the most playful of all animals, though solitary, except for sows with cubs or during the rut in the spring. The average black bear is a hobo, eating here today and what he can find at some other place tomorrow, and seemingly not caring when or what his next meal will be. In the early spring they work the slides much as do the grizzly and eat any dead big game animals they can find killed by snowslides, or winter-killed. For this reason they are more apt to be carrion eaters in the spring than later in the year.

Pelts are usually very good in late fall, just before bear den up, but even longer and glossier in spring when they first come out. However they soon rub and shed, and a spring pelt must be obtained just when they first show up, if it is to equal the late fall pelt. If killed when the bear first

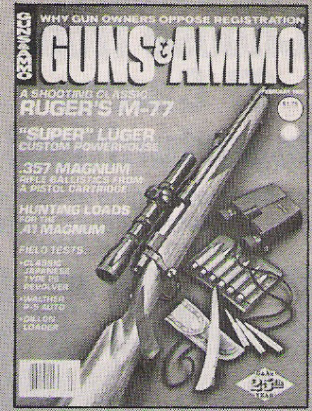
emerges from his hole it will be the finest pelt obtainable.

Wherever fish can be caught the bear will live on them, as along the salmon streams of Alaska, and Jim Allen directed our course to a couple of islands in Southeast Alaska that were inhabited only by deer and black bear. The salmon streams were choked with a full run of humpies and the black bear were living high. I saw more black bear there in a few days than I have seen in years on the mainland farther south. They were fishing constantly and would pin a salmon down just as do the grizzly, then reach down and grab it with their teeth. Bear may at times flip salmon out on the bank to their cubs, as most artists portray them, but I have never seen one doing this. Those I have seen have always caught the fish with their paws, then reached down and grabbed it with their teeth, dragging it ashore for a meal.

In this section, their earliest spring diet is usually skunk cabbage and other bulbous plants that they dig out, supplemented by early grass. Later, they will turn more attention to bugs and ants and the occasional rodent they may be able to dig out. Of course they scout the country for any winter kills, or snowslide kills of big game, and eat these up. They feed in the open on slides more in the early spring than at any other time of the year and for this reason are more easily obtained then than at any other time. Later in the season they will stay more in the timber at all times and feed in the late evening and night, to a great extent. They are very fond of mushrooms and eat them whenever encountered. In the fall after hard early rains they will often be found in the dense timber, on the north slopes, living on mushrooms almost entirely after the berry season is over. We prefer to hunt them only in the fall when they carry a lot of excellent lard, a good pelt and good meat as well, if the bear is young. For obvious reasons we do not intend telling anything of trapping methods for any of our bear. They are now getting too scarce in the U.S. to be trapped for the skins alone.

Black bear dearly love honey and will spend hours tearing up an old log or trying to break into a bee tree to get what honey is available. A bear also digs out every yellow-jacket nest he can find in spite of the stings of the angry bees, for the fat larvae as well as any comb or honey. Later in the summer, when wild currants first ripen, he will feed on them, and still later on the serviceberries, then when the huckleberries ripen the black bear will simply live on them for weeks. He will strip off leaves and berries, then cram all into his little open mouth. Bears consume gallons of them each day and their dung will be a mass of such fruit. They also vary this diet with fat picket pins and woodchucks when they can find them and will dig for hours to obtain them. However, they almost never make the huge excavations that a grizzly will for such a small morsel.

continued next month



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