

WYOGA HUNTING STORY CONTEST WINNER

“BEAR STORY” BY RON SIMMONS

TO HUNT BEARS or not to hunt bears? That's a question I've pondered for many years. I've backpacked and hunted the Olympic and Cascade Mountain ranges in my home state of Washington since I was a Boy Scout. After a handful of encounters in some very majestic places, bears took on a special, almost sacred significance to me. For many years I chosen to not actively pursue bears and focused my efforts on deer, elk and turkeys. Then, during a 2015 spring backpacking trip in Washington's Blue Mountains, I had a stare down with a large blond boar that got my blood pumping and activated an innate desire that had been lying dormant for all these years.

Spring bear hunting in my home state is a limited quota hunt that can take years to draw. I knew Robb Wiley of Non-Typical Outfitters had a long history of successful bear hunts. I hunted Antelope with Robb in 2014 and was very impressed with his professionalism, character and commitment to giving his hunters the best experience possible. So when I decided to pursue bears there was no question that NTO was my preferred choice.

The planning for this hunt started in January 2017 when Robb and I discussed a bear he'd captured on trail camera in a remote drainage in the Bridger-Teton national forest. Some big bears had been taken from this area before so he knew there was good potential. Robb shared with me the type of hunt that I should expect and to prepare myself for "high adventure".

Four months later I meet up with Robb. We loaded up our gear and made the drive to camp. Camp was located alongside a creek in a site not far from where mountain men used to hold rendezvous to trade their fur pelts. I could picture in my mind what their camps might have looked like and felt honored to be sharing the same ground that had been used by these men and the native peoples long before them.

After meeting the guides, Dylan and Nick, I checked gear for the next day's hunt and confirmed zero on the rifle. That evening we enjoyed the sounds of the creek while sitting fireside and discussing plans for the morning.

The first day of the hunt, Dylan and I rode our horses to a high vantage point and spent the day behind optics. It was a great day with lots of deer and elk sightings but no bears. Riding back to camp that night was my first experience riding a horse in utter darkness. I was uneasy at first, but quickly grew to trust Clyde, my surefooted mountain horse. Riding across the rushing creek waters toward the glow of a wall tent was spectacular.

Day 2, we rode to a different vantage point and spent a long, wet day behind the glass. We got caught by a torrential downpour on an exposed ridge and dodged thunder and lightning while we led the horses to lower ground (this was part of the high adventure Robb spoke of). That evening we watched a good boar Dylan estimated to be about 6' long feed 300 yards away. Now a 6' boar is no slouch but we knew bigger bruins roam this country. I spent several minutes going back and forth whether to take a shot – earning the bear the nickname "Hem-Haw". It was difficult to pass this bear up but it was only day 2 of the hunt. I was second guessing myself the entire ride back to camp and hoped I wouldn't regret my decision.

The next few days involved more riding to vantage points and glassing, glassing and more glassing. The moon phase was perfect and we were betting on catching a bear "cruising" mid-day setting up a spot and stalk opportunity.

By this point in the hunt we had seen two sows, one with twin cubs (cute little buggers) and, of course Ol' "Hem-Haw". Nothing was moving mid-day, perhaps because of the warm weather. Regardless, we were getting a little discouraged and the mental toughness game was setting in. The beautiful mountains, abundant deer and elk sightings and Dylan making afternoon cups of coffee helped keep me going. On the ride back to camp that night the stars were absolutely amazing. I hummed some Chris LeDoux songs from the saddle while watching the northern lights ripple across the horizon. I was in my kind of church.

Robb had steel targets set out at 400, 500 and 700 yards near camp. Each morning we spent time sending a few rounds downrange. I like having confidence in my gear and validating that the system is dialed in. It's one thing to confirm a rifle's zero after a long road trip, but it takes confidence to a whole other level when you can shoot at distance throughout a hunt.

Monday night we made a fireside decision to relocate the next morning to a different drainage. It was a more difficult to access area that would require several creek crossings with



waters swollen from rapidly melting snow pack, then a climb on foot up a steep ridge tangled with snow drifts and blowdown.

Tuesday evening found Dylan and I sitting on the spine of a ridge looking across a deep canyon toward a series of intersecting finger ridges. This was our first time into this area so, to be honest, I wasn't terribly optimistic. We spent several hours glassing, waiting for the magical last light moments when bears often like to appear.

At exactly 8:01 PM I was scanning the far side ridge passing from right to left when my glass fell upon a very large bear bathed in the light of the setting sun. After spending nearly 40 hours behind optics this week, it was an absolutely unbelievable moment to gaze upon this animal.

I whispered to Dylan... "there's a bear...and he's huge...that's him". I gave a description on where to spot the bear and he started scanning. Next thing I hear is "yes sir that's him...that our super cruiser..." The next 30 minutes were a test of patience and self-control. The bear was moving down the ridge and would ultimately shave off a lot of yardage so we let him come. I had to convince myself I was looking at a bear and not a gorilla - he looked like a dump truck waddling downhill.

I spent this time in prayer asking for the Lord's guiding hand. Dylan kept me calm by saying "this is what we came here for...this is what we've worked hard for all week...we've been taking these shots on steel all week." This really helped me to focus.

By this time I'd established a solid shooting position and had the bear in the scope. We were sitting on a slight downhill so I had built up a solid position using my pack, puffy coat in a stuff sack, and shooting sticks. This is a position that Robb taught me earlier in the week and one I practiced each day. This position makes a very solid field rest and allows for a natural point of aim. The bear stopped at a range of 520 yards. The kestrel was calling for 7.4 MOA up. Dylan kept repeating to me... "break down the shoulders". These big bears are tough customers and breaking down the shoulders is the best way to anchor them. I went through my mental checklist: elevation and windage dialed, parallax adjusted, focus on the reticle, gentle trigger press, and follow through on the trigger.

I told Dylan that I was on the bear and ready for the shot. I recall him saying "as soon as he turns broadside...point of the shoulder". I could see him plug his ears through my peripheral vision. I took a couple deep breaths and started my trigger press. The break felt clean and the 300WSM sent the 200 grain Hornady ELD-X on its way at 2900 fps.

Even with a muzzle break I was not quite able spot the shot, but as I recovered from the recoil I could tell the bear had reacted. It looked like he hunched slightly and then quickly started to move. I chambered another round but was unable to get back on the bear before he was gone behind some trees.

After the shot, we listened intently for crashing or death moans but the distance and the creek sound in the drainage below made it impossible to hear. The next few minutes we were finally able to mentally relax, take stock of what happened and recount events. We were both still in disbelief that this magnificent bear had appeared and that we just took a shot at such a spectacular animal. I gave thanks to God and had faith that the shot was true. We packed up our gear and started descending down the ridge to where the horses were tied.

It's now dark and we reach the horses by headlamp. We start riding, cross the creek and try to find our way up the other side. We were both excited to confirm a hit and recover this bear. Things got a little western as we pushed the horses

up the ridge, around blowdown and over some slopes that were best not tackled in the dark. We stopped, got ourselves calmed down, then dismounted and led the horses to a safe point where we tied them then climbed the rest of the way on foot. There was no point in getting a horse hurt or one of us taking a fall...more of the as promised "high adventure".

We climbed about 500 feet on foot to where we last saw the bear. With headlamps we did our best to pinpoint the exact location where the bear was standing. We searched for blood via headlamp being careful not to disturb the area and damage sign. We picked up tracks but no blood. We stayed on the trail as it entered snow on the backside of the ridge but found no blood in the snow. How can that be I'm thinking? We followed these tracks in the snow for approximately 50 yards and decided that pressing further in the dark at a potentially wounded bear was a bad idea. We decided to come back in the morning to resume the search in daylight. It was a long, quiet and solemn descent back down the mountain and ride to camp. Doubt had crept in and without finding any blood in the snow I was concerned that I had blown this opportunity.

The next morning we talk with Robb on the phone, explain events and reported that based upon no evidence of a hit we concluded it was a "clean miss". Robb told me that bears are tough and can go a long way, even with a good hit (thus the need to break down the shoulders), and that all that hair absorbs blood like a sponge. Then Robb said, "Ron I've been watching you shoot all week, there is no way you missed that bear.... I'm going to meet you guys at the trailhead and we're going to get your bear".

After some breakfast, we saddle the horses and a pack mule and make our way back up the mountain. In the daylight, we are able to find a much easier path and ride the horses without danger. We tie the animals up about 100 yards from the top and resume our search. We start looking for hair and blood at the location of the shot but none was to be found. We started looking for a bullet crater in the event I had missed.

Robb instructed us to fan out and start moving down the last known travel route of the bear. After about 40 yards of careful tracking I hear Nick shout out "Hey guys I've got a bear over here...you better get over here!!!" Now my mind interpreted this as I've got a live bear over here so with the rifle in the high ready I hustled in his direction repeating "Where? Where?". I now caught sight of Nick and can tell he's looking at the base of a nearby tree surrounded by deep snow. As I approached I could see the mound of a bear at the base of the tree. We carefully approached and with Dylan and Robb now beside me my doubt was replaced with the surreal reality of success. Robb sidled up beside me and said... "Clean miss, huh?"

We celebrated and gave thanks to the Lord for helping us find this bear. It was all we could do to pull him out from under the tree and up onto the hill. The shot had impacted in the right shoulder, took out the lungs and exited just aft of the ribs. The bear died quickly. We had been within 20 yards of him last night but had walked around him in the dark. It was just the Lord's way of testing my patience and allowing us all to be present together when we found the bear.

After laying eyes and hands on the bear, Robb made it clear to me the trophy quality of this animal. It didn't take much discussion to convince me that a life-size body mount is the only way to honor this creature. The hide when stretched from nose to tail measured 74" and the skull measured right at 20". He is a bruiser with one ear split clean in half and the left upper incisor tooth pointing forward at about 45 degrees from an old injury.

After taking pictures we packed meat and hide down to the horses. It was a bit of a mountainside rodeo convincing the mule to shoulder this bear but he finally calmed down and accepted the smell of danger. Watching Robb hypnotically convince this mule was fascinating and one of the highlights of the trip for me.

This week in the mountains of the Wyoming Range was a gift from the Lord, an epic adventure that culminated in taking the bear of a life-time; a week where I made new friends and memories worth far more than the price of admission. It was an adventure I will never forget and will never grow tired of re-telling the story to family and friends. Bears are more sacred to me now than ever and I can't wait to have "clean miss" home where I can give thanks for him every day. 🐻