


Bringing Home A **BRUIN**



Filling your bear tag hinges on planning, prep, and finding the right outfitter. Here is how to achieve all three.

BY DICK SCORZAFAVA

After three days of sitting in his stand, anxious, apprehensive, and eager, Lee Hetherington thought he heard what he had been straining to hear—sounds of a bear approaching. Not sure if his mind was playing tricks, he heard the snap of a distant branch breaking. Then he was surprised to catch a glimpse of a big bruin very near the bait. It was closer than he thought it would be. All Lee's waiting was reduced to one adrenaline-inducing moment.

His heart began to pound. His pulse hammered in his ears and throbbed at his temples. Waiting for the bear to reach the bait, hands visibly shaking, Lee carefully reached for his bow. He was nervous and didn't want to make a bear-spooking mistake, so he sat down. He popped up again as the boar advanced and stood near the barrel.

Lee recalls that he hesitated, and did not draw during his intense wait. He had one chance at a shot and didn't want to blow it. The bear started to quarter away. That's when Lee realized that it was now or never.

Taking a deep breath, Lee looked for the right spot to place his arrow, gave a mental "thanks," told himself to stop shaking, and pulled his Mathews Reezen to full draw. He placed the 20-yard pin on the bear and then, he rose his head to check and see if the pin was actually on the vital area. It was. Slowly squeezing the trigger on his release, he silently launched the arrow. In under a second, the arrow hit home.

The arrow bored into the loud, growling bruin's side, slicing through both lungs. Impaled, the massive boar took flight and darted to the edge of the forest, disappearing into the deep woods. Lee could hear him breaking brush as he ran. Then the woods became silent.

Exhilarated, Lee knew that he had made a killing shot. His adrenaline surged through his veins, and now he shook from his supercharged reaction. Intense excitement had him practically jumping out of his skin. Despite his excitement, he tried to calm down for the hardest part: waiting for his guide to return so they could retrieve his bear.

Time seemed to drag. Darkness fell. Lee stayed in his stand for the duration of the vigil. Although sure of a solid hit, he was not about to climb down and look for a potentially wounded bear on the ground himself. So he waited.

When the guide returned, they looked for a bloodtrail with flashlights. At the bait barrel, they found blood and began tracking. Lee recalls, "I was a bit apprehensive tracking a wounded bear in the dark and asked my guide if it was safe."

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After about 40 yards, the guide crouched down and cast his light under the brush and said, "There's your bear, Lee, and he's a monster!" In the morning, Lee's monster bruin weighed in at exactly 400 pounds. He measured just over seven feet. The skull looked like it would definitely make the P&Y record book.

Lee learned some valuable lessons as a novice bear hunter. At first he was anxious about being in the stand, especially after hearing tales of bears climbing into tree-stands. We offered to stay with him for the first few nights with the caveat that two people in a stand create more movement, noise, and human scent. Lee opted to go it alone. In hindsight Lee stated, "I was able to gain a little confidence just being in the stand despite not actually seeing a bear for the first two nights. Not sighting a bear gave me a chance to get my feet wet without the pressure of having an opportunity for a bear."

Bear hunting is like no other kind of hunting, as Lee discovered. The element of danger as you hunt a predator creates an intense sense of excitement and satisfaction. But, as with any hunt, success depends on planning, resources, proficiency, and knowledge.

Plan A Successful Bear Hunt

Selecting the right outfitter is critical for success. But "Googling" black bear hunting guides will get over 2 million hits! It would be impossible to select a perfect outfitter from listings alone. To narrow down your prospects, you need to ask these questions:

- What does the hunt cost?
- What services does the outfitter provide?
- Is the outfitter familiar with bowhunting?
- How many hunters hunt the property each season?
- How many hunters take bears annually?

Once you pare your prospects to about six or so, ask these more in-depth questions:



- How many active baits are maintained each season?
- Bait to hunter ratio? (Insist on three baits per hunter minimum.)
- Are baits re-hunted? How often are they re-loaded?

It is important to find out just what is considered a trophy bear in their area. Don't be overly concerned about the weight, since it can vary quite a bit based on the season. Instead ask about the hide length and skull size, as these do not change.

Next, ask for references. Then talk to those references. Chances are, you will have more questions after talking to the references, so talk to the one or two top outfitters again. This is the time to clear up any unclear information or to ask any outstanding questions.

Essential Prep: It's Up To You

Once you have selected your outfitter and made plans for your hunt, you need to do some more homework. All the research in the world cannot guarantee you a successful hunt. Outfitters make every effort to provide the promised services and present opportunities for you to bring home a bear. The rest is up to you.

Check with your outfitter to make sure that the distances you will be shooting from are between 12 to 20 yards. Find out if you will be shooting from an elevated stand or a ground blind. Then make sure you practice shooting with these conditions in mind. Fiber optics are especially important to the bear hunter, as most of the hunting action occurs in low-light conditions. There are also lighted sight pins, but electronic versions of these would make a trophy ineligible for record book entry.

Practice handling and using any new equipment. A 60-pound bow with proper shot placement is adequate for harvest-



ing a bear. Equipment and gear used for whitetail hunting will suffice.

Scouting cameras offer bowhunters a chance to zero in on a hot area. If your outfitter does not have scouting cameras, plan on bringing your own. Make sure that your camera is bear-proof. There are boxes on the market that protect your cameras from bear damage.

Insects can be brutal in the spring. Being invaded by swarms of bugs can not only be uncomfortable and exasperating, but additional movement caused by swatting or moving can ruin your hunt. Find a bug suit that covers head-to-toe. Also useful is the butane-powered ThermaCELL mosquito repellent device that creates a bug-free

The Bear Necessities

I MET LEE HETHERINGTON, when I was doing a book signing for *Radical Bear Hunter*, and the talk just naturally turned to bear hunting. Lee had not ever been on a bear hunt. He was a bit apprehensive about undertaking this new experience. Plans were made for a bear hunt the next spring featuring Siggie Sigurdson of SS Outfitters in Barrows, Manitoba. This province has consistently produced recordbook bears, and this would give Lee optimal opportunity. And what an opportunity it was! Here are the resources and equipment we used to make it happen.—*Dick Scorzafava*

SS Outfitters

Siggie Sigurdson
(877) 734-2979
www.ssoutfitting.com

Travel Manitoba

(800) 665-0040
www.travelmanitoba.com

EQUIPMENT that aided in the hunt:

Mathews

(608) 269-2728
www.mathewsinc.com

Easton Axis Full Metal Jacket Arrows

(801) 539-1400
www.eastonarchery.com

NAP 100-Grain

Bloodrunner Broadhead
(708) 488-2500
www.newarchery.com

Nikon's

Archers Choice Rangefinder

(631) 547-4200
www.nikonusa.com

Tight Spot Quivers

(406) 388-9060
www.blackgoldsights.com

Scent-Lok Technologies

(800) 315-5799
www.scentlok.com

Wildlife Research Center

**Scent Killer
and Ultimate Bear Lure**
(763) 427-3350
www.wildlife.com

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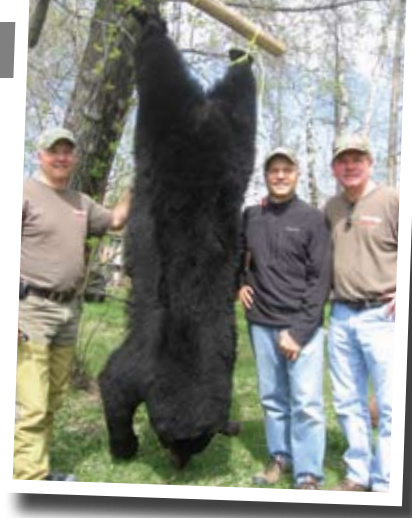
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zone around a bowhunter, eliminating the need for sprays or lotions.

Black bears have a keener nose than most people realize. Because most of the time bears are aware of a bowhunter's presence, odor-eliminating clothing and scent-eliminating products can help insure that a hunter remains as undetected as possible in the woods.



Judging The Shot

When all the elements come together, and you see a bear, there are two final considerations: Is this the bear you want to shoot, and can you make the shot? For the beginner, a good pair of field optics is an essential field-judging aid. First, look at the head and ears. Small bears seem to have big ears planted close together. Larger bears have ears that seem proportionally small in regards to the head. Small ears far apart indicate a large bear. Immature bears have a streamlined belly and longer-looking legs. A mature bear has stocky legs and a thick body with a pot belly nearly reaching the ground.

If you remain unsure about the bear's size, compare it to various objects to help with evaluation. If your bait is in a 55-gallon drum (metal ones usually have two rings), a bear whose backline is over the second ring is a good bear. If the bear's back is over the rim, it is a monster. A 6-foot log with surveyor's tape marking the 5-foot mark can be placed so that a bear will walk by it, enabling you to quickly determine the bear's length.

When you have shot your bear, and you are waiting in the stand, before retrieving it, you may or may not hear a death moan. Some bears will expire quietly or too far from the stand for a hunter to hear this eerie, loud sound. Other times there will be no mistaking this sound emanating from a fatally wounded bear. Just be sure that even if you have heard a death moan, that you wait at least 20 to 30 minutes before you descend from your treestand.

A spring bear hunt can be an exhilarating bowhunting experience. Like Lee, if you exercise proper research, preparation, and good judgment, bear hunting can present excitement and a sense of satisfaction like no other hunt.

Editor's Note: To order an autographed copy of Dick's critically acclaimed book *Radical Bear Hunter*, go to www.radical-bowhunter.com or visit your local book store.