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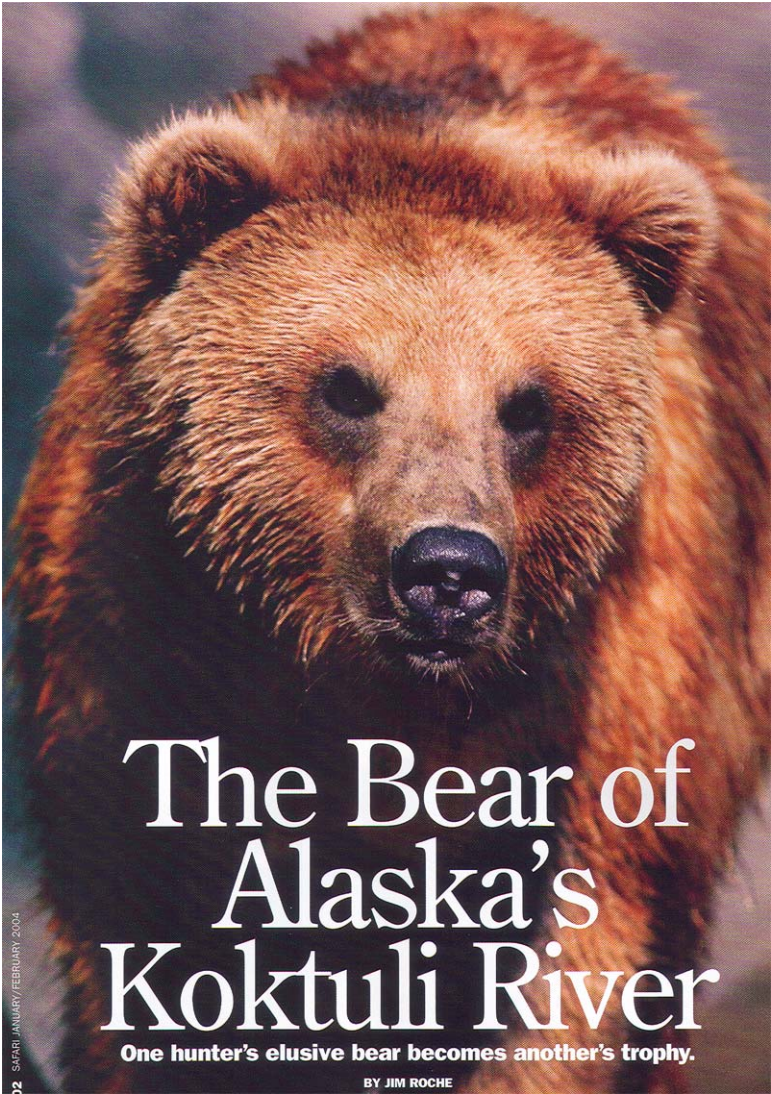
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The Bear of Alaska's Koktuli River

One hunter's elusive bear becomes another's trophy.

BY JIM ROCHE

first saw the bear while guiding friend Gary Killian. It was the last afternoon of Gary's ten-day hunt, and it looked like Lady Luck was finally smiling on us. Snow, sleet and rain, combined with 40-to-60-mile-an-hour winds, had kept us pinned down in our tent for most of the previous nine and a half days. When there was a rare break in the weather, we would quickly grab our gear and slip out to glass for distant bears.

During those brief moments, we did see a few bruins, but they were either sows with cubs, or bears so distant that they offered no opportunity for a stalk. Then, in short order, the clouds would once again lower their veil, and visibility would be reduced to nothing. Snow and sleet would soon begin blowing sideways, stinging our faces and forcing us to beat a hasty retreat back to the sanctuary of our tent.

Once inside, we would both wonder out loud why Gary's luck wasn't like that of my first hunter. Gerald Farris had arrived in Alaska to find mild, 65-degree temperatures – no clouds or fog, just very clear. We saw three bears the first day, and on the second morning of our hunt, Gerald tagged out on a nice bear not far from camp.

Now, with our newfound luck, Gary and I were looking at a really huge bear that was ambling slowly along a barren ridge a half-mile away. Gary's ten-day hunt had come down to this last chance.

We quickly closed the distance, working the wind and trying to cut the bear off before he entered an endless sea of spruce trees and unforgiving alder patches. When we reached the planned ambush point, the big bear had vanished. We were tired, dejected and beaten. Gary's hunt was over.



Good-Looking Bear Country

I flew Gary back to semi-civilization the next morning and picked up Barry Cooper. He had done most of the special effects for the movie *The Green Berets*, which starred John Wayne. He blew up bridges – along with numerous Viet Cong – and even made the infamous “bamboo boobey trap” that skewered the likable Green Beret, “Peter San.” Barry himself was a real-life Green Beret on loan to Wayne as a technical adviser, compliments of the U.S. Army. He was a demolition expert and a master of hand-to-hand combat. Now, 34 years later, Barry was flying shotgun as I piloted the Piper Super Cub. We were 250 feet over the Mulchatna River.

We flew for many miles, gazing at numerous moose and bald eagles through smudged windows. Our attention was diverted to a cow and calf moose crashing wildly through the shallows of the twisted river. I banked the plane to investigate further. As we closed on the racing pair, a large bear exploded from the thick alders at a full gallop.

The charging brute was awesome. His powerful back legs threw rooster tails of gravel and mud high into the air as he pursued the fleeing moose. Seconds later, the race faded from view as we passed overhead on our way upriver. The endless struggle of life and death would continue another day. I hoped this was a good omen for our upcoming hunt.

We began our hunt precisely where Gary Killian and I had hunted. However, despite our best first-day efforts, we saw no bear. Over supper that night, Barry asked me what the game plan was for the following day. I told him I wanted to go back to the same area as I just had a good feeling about it.

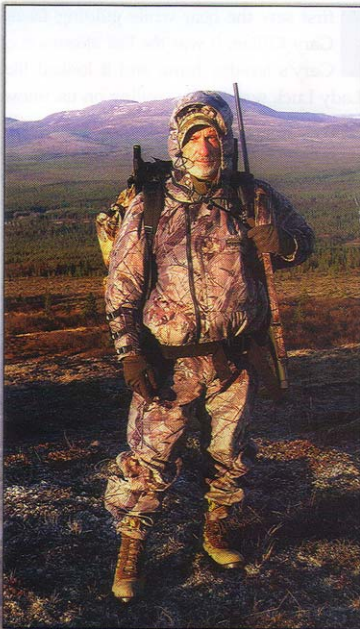
I had located a vantage point overlooking a spot at which three valleys came together. One valley was fairly open, another was heavily timbered in spruce trees, and the other was thick with alders. All three valleys drained into the clear waters of the Kottuli River. It was good-looking bear country, and I was intent on hunting the bear Gary and I had seen two days before.

The morning flew by with brief sightings of moose and a couple of dozen caribou. The wind continued to pick up throughout the day. When it finally reached 35 miles an hour, Barry and I took shelter in a rocky outcropping that overlooked the three valleys. About 2:30 p.m., we finally spot our first bears – a patient sow with two lively cubs about two miles away. At 6:30, we located a large, dark-colored bear moving down one of the long valleys a mile away.

Barry and I took turns peering through the spotting scope. We both marveled at the bear's size and ground-consuming pace. We watched helplessly as he worked his way toward our downwind side, leaving us no option for a stalk.

Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, the big bear turned 90 degrees and started heading in our direction. As he closed the distance between us, he simply continued to grow and grow. When he reached a small clearing half a mile away, I knew, without reservation, this was the bear for which we had been searching.

The bear continued heading in our general direction, occasionally raising his stovepipe-sized nose to check the wind. For brief moments, he would disappear in the thick alders and scattered spruce trees that blanketed the valley's bottom. A little later, he popped out of the cover 100 yards



Bears of Koktuli River

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or so closer to our position. His deliberate stride left little doubt of his dominance. Then he changed his direction once again and began climbing up the hill toward our vantage point 400 yards away.



The hunters flew in to the Koktuli River hunting area in a Piper Super Cub. The white spots are falling sleet.

Foaming at the Mouth

Barry and I hurriedly put on our packs and stalked down the mountain to set up an ambush for the big bear. An immense head with gray-tipped ears peered out of the twisted alders 200 yards away. Thinking the bear would come closer, Barry held his fire, but as quickly as the bruin had appeared, he disappeared.

I was really beginning to believe that bear had nine lives. We quickly re-ascended the mountain to our rocky vantage point. Tired and sweaty, our legs burning, we frantically glassed the surrounding area – to no avail. Thirty minutes passed and still no bear. The unrelenting wind stung our faces and burned our eyes.

A few minutes later, we saw movement on a hillside 500 yards away. A bear cub? Where had he come from? Wait – two bear cubs! Where was their mother? We watched as both cubs, hair bristling, squatted and urinated simultaneously in apparent terror. Their small mouths were ringed with white froth, a visible sign of fear and extreme stress.


Immediately below the cubs, a dark shadow passed through the leafless alders that circled the base of the bald hill. The shadow finally escaped the alders and materialized into our huge bear. We stared helplessly as he tried to catch, kill and eat the two motherless cubs. We guessed that the big bear had

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lier 90-degree turn into our valley.

He had apparently killed the sow as she tried to defend her cubs. Even with her gone, some primal urge was still pushing him on to finish the job. With a sinking feeling in our stomachs, we could only watch as the two cubs fled for their lives, our determined bear in tow.

All three disappeared into the alders three-quarters of a mile away. We knew we couldn't catch them. The adrenalin rush had gone, leaving our bodies cold, tired and beaten.

We drank the last of our water and saddled up our packs for the long hike back to camp. We traversed the same hillside the bears had crossed a half-hour earlier. There, in a patch of snow, were the tracks of the big bruin. His front pad measured 9 1/2 inches across. We began glassing for the bears.

Our spirits soared when we spotted one of the cubs a half mile ahead. He was sitting on his haunches, staring intently below. I told Barry, "I bet that's where the bear killed the sow, and now he's feeding on her carcass."

Volkswagen Bear

The adrenaline began to flow as we stalked into the driving wind. We finally reached the head of the valley and cautiously peered over the edge into the alder thickets. Something looked out of place in a small clearing below. We both lifted our binoculars - it was the big bear, taking a nap.

After carefully and quietly removing our packs, we took up prone shooting positions on the sloping hillside 200 yards above the bear. Barry readied his .300 Weatherby Mag, while I whistled in attempt to get the bear to stand up. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, he groggily rose to his feet.

What was once a tiny brown spot was now a full-grown Volkswagen of a bear. Barry quickly gathered him in his scope, adjusted his aim for the stiff crosswind and squeezed the trigger. At the shot, the bear bit savagely at his right side, where the 200-grain Nosler Partition bullet had stung him. He spun around once and dived headlong into the endless sea of alders. Lead flew freely as we both tried to stop the disappearing giant. Fourteen shots and 300 yards later, Barry had his bear - a very big bear, my friend Gary's bear. 🐻

For more information, contact Magnum Guide Service, 707 N. U.S. Highway 277, Eldorado, TX 76936, (325) 853-1555; fax (325) 853-1556; on the web: www.magnumguideservice.com or email frjoch@magnumguideservice.com.