

FIELD RAGE: Are Hunters Losing Their Cool?

PETERSEN'S

www.huntingmag.com

HUNTING

• THE #1 WHERE-TO-HOW-TO HUNTING MAGAZINE •

Big Bores

3 calibers with crushing power

Spring Bears

An Island Adventure

EXCLUSIVE!

Varmint Guide

Wind reading advice, scope tips, 7 new rifles and more

Great New Slugs For Deer

A Year Of Deer

One man's quest for a BIG buck

MAY/JUNE 2005

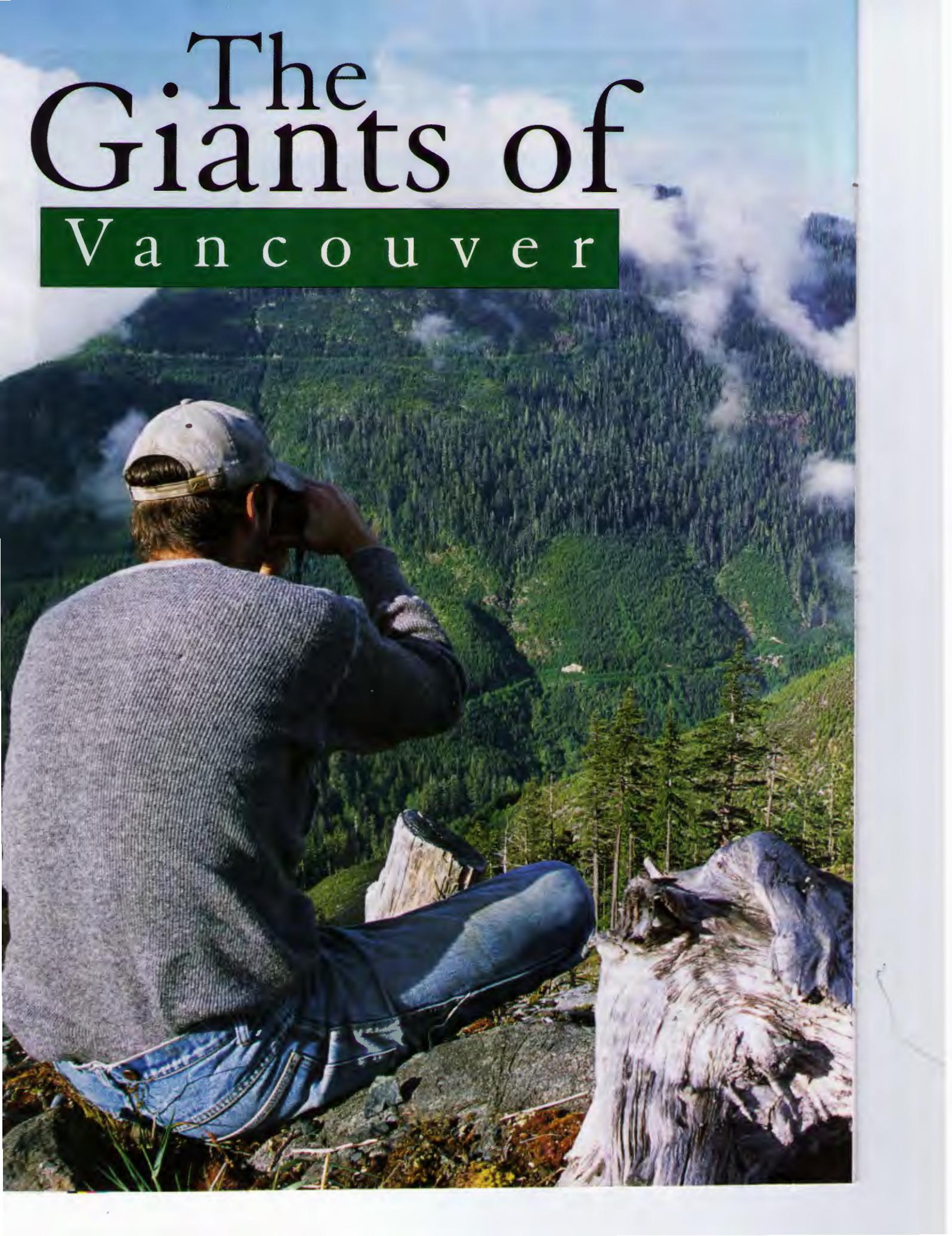
U.S.A. \$3.99 CANADA \$4.99

Display until May 31, 2005



The Giants of

Vancouver





Some of the world's largest black bears call this Canadian island home.

STORY & PHOTOS BY J. SCOTT RUPP

Darren DeLuca's truck coasted to a stop. With a gesture, he cautioned us to be quiet as we got out. We pushed the doors shut against the frame with subtle clicks, slipped into our daypacks and silently loaded our rifles—easing bolts closed on empty chambers. Before us was a logging road covered with chalky white stones. Tall cedars and firs towered on both sides, and the pale green of new grass showed along the road's edges and in its middle.

"Now we walk," Darren said quietly, and we set off down the road like soldiers on patrol, on edge and alert. At each bend that obscured the view ahead, we fell single file behind Darren and eased carefully forward, straining to catch sight of a bear.

The morning was sunny and warm, and through the tall conifers we could see glimpses of snow-capped peaks of the Mackenzie Range in the distance. Occasionally the sound of the river rapids to our left would reach our ears, and warblers and other unseen birds chirped in the underbrush and overhead in the canopy.

After half an hour or so—the hike uneventful save the discovery of a few fresh bear droppings and chewed and broken saplings—Darren veered off the logging road and plunged into the brush. Now, the need for silence gone, he moved with quick agility through dense stands of alder and pole timber. I struggled to keep the pace and quickly worked up a good sweat, as did Harry Hindman, the third member of our party, but eventually we emerged from the tangles onto another, fainter logging road.

Darren indicated that a big bear frequented the area, so we checked a few vantage points, but morning was turning to midday, and with the sun now high, the chances of catching the bear out and about were slim.

Vancouver Island—a 33,000-square-mile island off the coast of British Columbia—is legendary black bear country. Because of the island's expansive forests, many of which have been timbered extensively, and the strong runs of salmon and steelhead that fill its rivers several times a year, the black bears here grow big—on average, they are probably the biggest in the world. In fact, these bears are so large that Safari Club International has even established a separate scoring category for them.

A typical spring finds the bears, fresh out of hibernation



and hungry as hell, prowling the clearcuts to feed on the grasses and forbs that grow profusely once the overstory is gone and sunlight reaches the forest floor. Because of that, spring hunting usually involves pulling up a comfortable stump and glassing acres and acres of downed timber and brush for foraging bears. Then you judge them for size, figure out a stalk if they're big enough, and go after them.

That's how it's usually done. But last spring Vancouver Island—which sees 300 inches of rainfall a year—was in the grip of the same drought that has plagued much of the western United States over the past several

Two steps later I spied two black ears bobbing quickly out of sight just around the bend.

years. As a result the best grass was found on the edges of the logging roads rather than in the clearcuts.

On the plus side, it meant that if we did our jobs right, getting a bear out might not involve as much of a grunt-and-curse, fall-and-swear retrieval job. On the downside, the odds of spotting bears in the narrow confines of grown-over logging roads are pretty long—especially considering that if they hear or wind you, they vanish in a black flash.

And then there's the time factor. Limited visibility means more moving than looking, and when you do spot a bear, the guide has to be able

to make a split-second decision—and anyone who's hunted bears knows how hard it can be to tell a so-so bear from a really good one.

For a guy like me who's new to bear hunting, I wouldn't have it any other way. I've always loved to sneak along logging roads anyway, and when you add in the tense excitement of having the realistic chance of coming face to face with a bear at each bend in the road, well, I can't imagine how you could have much more fun.

Darren, Harry and I got back to the truck about lunchtime and stripped down to camo T-shirts before Darren drove us to the next area, and the next, and the next, without a glimpse of a bear. I didn't mind the tour. Vancouver Island's spectacular scenery—its high, snowy peaks, deep green forests and beckoning trout/salmon rivers—held my attention between hunting spots as I hoped for sightings of the island's other native big game: Roosevelt elk, blacktail deer, cougars and wolves.

Bears aren't known for being big on daylight activity, so it came as no surprise that we didn't spot the first bear until the sunlight began slanting at a shallower angle. A sow dashed across the road in front of us, barreled uphill through thick cover with amazing speed, and then went back to feeding when she figured she'd put enough distance between us. We watched her through Zeiss binoculars, fascinated, as she eased her considerable bulk over, around and

Vancouver's Island's vibrant logging industry ensures plenty of regenerating forest and therefore good bear habitat.

across rocks and downed treetops—disappearing for long minutes then reappearing in unexpected places.

The day was getting on, though, and we couldn't watch her forever. Darren put the big Ford F-250 in four-wheel low and took us up an incredibly steep and narrow road, the bank dropping quickly away on the driver's side to reveal a tiny stream that cascaded down in a series of little waterfalls. I tried not to think about how quickly we could be in that stream, or about what an experience it was going to be when Darren backed the truck down.

"OK, we're going to walk from here," he said after a while, and I quickly made to get out of the truck. "Hold on—I want to turn around first."

By this time, I'd learned that Darren has a quick wit and a great sense of humor, so I laughed with disbelief. But somehow he did it, and with a grin and a wink said, "Easier to load the bear if the truck's facing downhill, you know."

We set out again, Darren and I walking abreast, Harry right behind, and pushed steadily up the road. Immediately we began seeing fresh bear sign, and we hadn't gone but a quarter of a mile when Darren motioned, palm down, for us to slow the pace, whispering, "Go real careful around this bend."

I was on the outside of this particular turn, and two steps later I spied two black ears bobbing quickly out of sight just around the bend. I dropped to one knee, whispering, "Bear, bear!" Well, I'm not sure I actually whispered anything, but when Darren saw me go into a crouch and look over at him with eyes wide in amazement, he side-stepped quickly over to me and got behind my shoulder.

We eased forward carefully, and when the road ahead came into full view, we spotted the bear walking away from us. Darren quickly sized him up.

"When you get a shot, kill him."

I dropped to one knee, wrapping the sling around my arm and bringing the Remington 700 CDL to bear, as it were. The position felt solid, and I put the crosshairs of the scope on the steadily walking bruin.

At first there was no shot, not one I was comfortable with anyway. I couldn't see the left shoulder, nor was there a good angle from which to try to drill him between the shoulder blades, and I remembered Darren stressing the importance of taking shots that will break a bear's shoulder or otherwise immobilize him.

I cranked the Zeiss up to 9X so I could place the shot more precisely. When I looked back through the tube, the bear had paused briefly, and he swung his head to the left as he nipped at blades of green grass in the road. Right then I felt a breath of air on the back of my neck; if the shot didn't come now, the bear would quickly realize he wasn't alone. Just then, he slowed and swung his entire body slightly to the left, giving me a decent quartering shot at 75 yards.

At the blast, the bear upended, rolling on his back with all four legs in the air.

"Hit him again," Darren urged calmly, and I sent another 180-grain Core-Lokt Ultra into the boar's chest. The second .30-06 slug rolled him onto his side, and he stretched out without a sound.



The author's first boar was estimated at 10 years of age and scored more than 18 inches, the kind of bear hunters travel to Vancouver to shoot.

The sun had yet to slide behind the mountains, and we admired the deep jet black of the hide glistening in the late afternoon light. Darren estimated the bear to be 10 years of age, and the teeth in the old boar's big, blocky head were worn down and broken from a lifetime of feeding and fighting. He was rubbed slightly on his flanks and a bit on his front legs, but otherwise he was a perfect specimen.

I was fortunate to have a second tag, and this time it fell to Glen Wallman to show me around. We covered a lot of ground over the next two days without much luck.

For a change of scenery, we traveled to the west coast of the island where Glen wanted to explore a remote valley. We hadn't gone more than a couple hundred yards from the truck, though, when a huge bear stepped into the road in front of us less than 30 yards away.

"Shoot that bear, shoot that bear, shoot that bear," Glen chanted as the bear stared back at us, just his top half visible.

I slammed a round home and threw the rifle to my shoulder. There wasn't a lot of leeway, and I took an extra millisecond to ensure that the bullet was going to hit the bear's

shoulder and not plow into the dirt. The first shot dropped the bruin in his tracks, but I quickly reloaded and on Glen's advice pumped two more into the bear in rapid succession.

Some bear hunters go a lifetime without taking a bear measuring over 18 inches, and I'd just taken two in less than a week which surpassed that mark. Quite a testament to how good—and justifiably famous—the bear hunting on Vancouver Island is.

Back at the lodge, my tags filled, I walked down to the Somas River and sat on the bank as the sun dropped limb by limb behind the giant cedars and firs on the far shore.

In the slack water by the shore, tiny fish leaped skyward to nab even tinier insects. These steelhead smolts, two to three inches in length with blotchy gray markings, will spend a few years in the river before making their way to the Pacific Ocean, where they will grow to immense size and return once again to this very river. The bears will be waiting for them as they, too, grow larger year by year. **H**

For more information on bear hunting, contact Vancouver Island Guide Outfitters, 250/724-1533, WWW.VANCOUVERISLANDGUIDEOUTFITTERS.COM.