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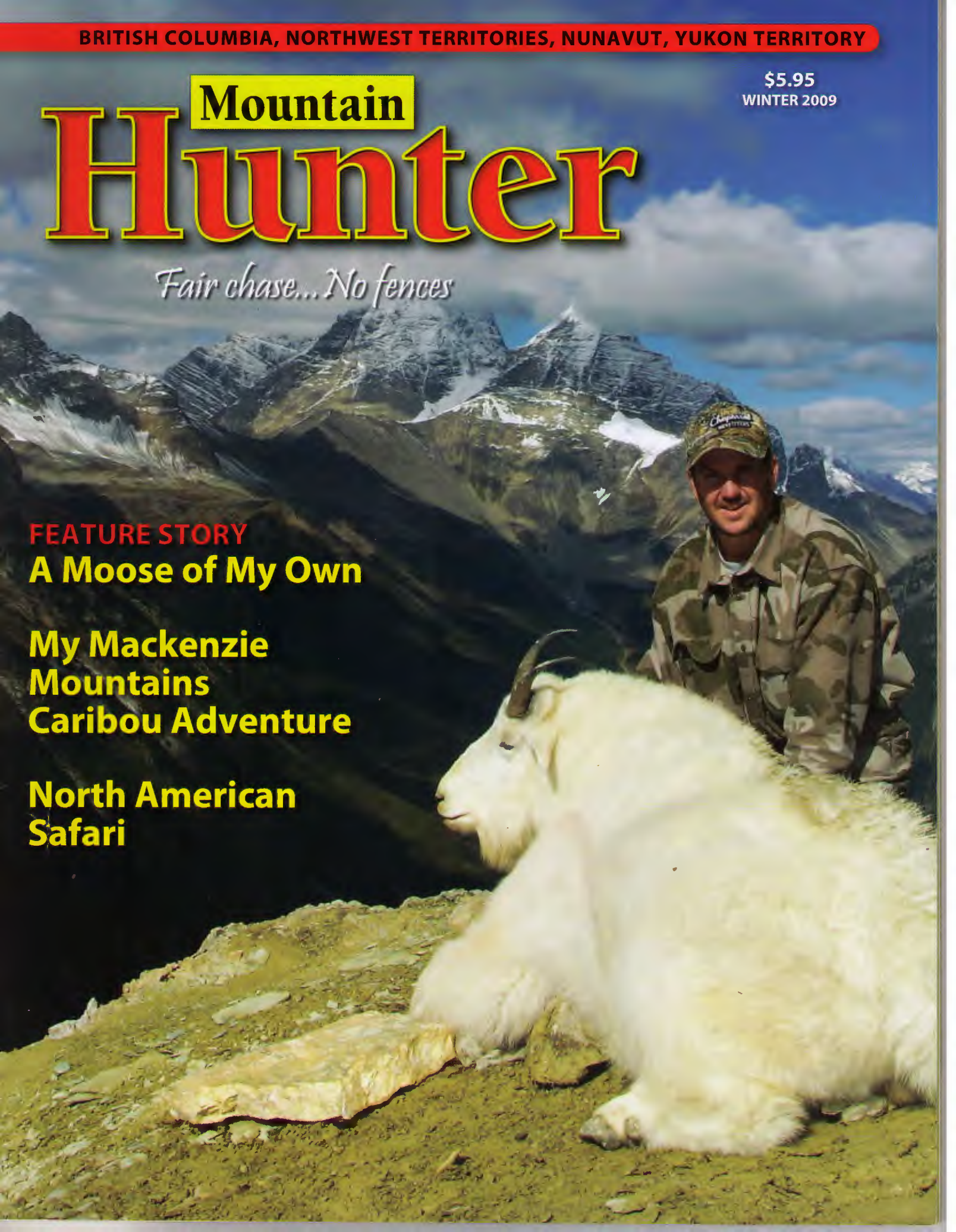
Mountain Hunter

Fair chase... No fences

FEATURE STORY
A Moose of My Own

**My Mackenzie
Mountains
Caribou Adventure**

**North American
Safari**



Uncle Mort's Springfield Rifle & Vancouver Island Coastal Black Bears

By Stephen Stainkamp

From the time Springfield Armory was established in 1796 until its final closing in 1968, an impressive variety of firearms, from the flintlock U.S. Musket model 1795 to the U.S. Rifle, cal. 7.62mm, M14, were manufactured there. Yet when we speak of a "Springfield Rifle" we usually mean the U.S Magazine Rifle, Model of 1903. -Dr. Thomas E. Mott,

The Springfield Story, The American Rifleman, November 1983

Throughout our history, the guns used to protect our freedom, and the men who fought in our wars, have often become inextricably linked. Such is the case with the U.S. Magazine Rifle, Model 1903 and my uncle, Eldon D. Mortensen of Gilbert, Arizona.

Lt. Colonel Eldon D. Mortensen (USAF, Ret.) served as an Army Air Corps flight instructor at Enid Army Airfield, Oklahoma (today's Vance Air Force Base), during the early years of World War II. There, as a young, swashbuckling first lieutenant, he married Dorothy Gene Fauchier of Medford Oklahoma, my mother's sister.

Mortensen flew P-51 fighters during the final stages of the war in the Pacific.

During and after World War II, Mort, as he is widely known through his circle of friends, became enamored with such legendary military weapons as the .30 caliber Garand, the Government Model 1911 and the 1903 A-3 Springfield.

After serving with occupation forces in Japan, Captain Mortensen returned home with a Remington rand, Inc., Government Model 1911. Over time, his interest in the Springfield rifle grew. In the 1950s, through the auspices of the Directorate of Civilian Marksmanship, a post-war

program to promote shooting, he bought a 1903-A-3.

By the outset of WWII, the rifle had already distinguished itself in combat.

As Dr. Mott's *The American Rifleman* piece states: "In 1941, Remington arms Co., anticipating a contract to produce rifles for Great Britain, leased the M1903 tooling in storage at Rock Island Arsenal. Remington production began, under U.S. contract because of the passage of the Lend-Lease Bill, in November 1941, at serial number 3 million.

"Remington was assigned the numbers 3,000,000 to 3,607,999; 3,708,000 to 4,707,999; and 4,992,001 to 5,784,000. Actually, production stopped in February, 1944 somewhere about 4,190,714, well before the second block of numbers was exhausted, and only 6,300 rifles were manufactured in the third block."

In the early 1940s, Springfield rifle Rem.#3833083 came off the assembly line.

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As a boy, Mortensen endured the Great Depression; he served his country with distinction during World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam. Mort is my uncle by marriage, a hunter and a crack shot---he is my mentor, friend and hunting companion.

Mort hunted big game with the Springfield he purchased from the Red River Arsenal in Texarkana, Texas, in 1957. After paying \$17.85 for it, he had it sporterized.

With the help of a gunsmith in Springfield, Ohio, a Jaeger Model 50 adjustable trigger was added. Mort secured a kit of milled steel replacement parts from the Rock Island Arsenal to replace the original stamped sheet

metal parts (e.g., follower, trigger guard and floor plate). A new safety was added and the barrel was cut to 22 inches.

The rifle was drilled and tapped for Redfield Jr. mounts, and Lyman, All American, four-power scope added. A Walnut, Monte Carlo stock was ordered from Herters for \$6, and the mated barreled action and stock were glass bedded.

Thus, the sporterized Springfield 1903-A-3 was born.

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After dad died of cancer in 1996, Mort and I forged a father-son bond; we enjoyed hunting trips together to Colorado, Texas and Arizona. During our hours afield, Mort was seldom seen without the Springfield at his side. To be sure he used a lighter .243 for pronghorn, but when it came to mule deer and elk, his weapon of choice was the Springfield. Guides were astounded by his proficiency, especially on running shots.

On his last hunt, when I lured him to Texas to "hunt over a pile of corn," as he so fondly recalls, Mort took a whitetail south of Freer. And before returning home at age eighty-two, he left the Springfield with me to continue its legacy.

When Mort passed the rifle to me in 2005, I made a solemn vow: I promised I would keep it in pristine condition, hunt with it often and maintain its proud tradition.

I hunted south Texas with the Springfield in May 2005, where I scored a feral hog. The rifle performed flawlessly, and I dropped the eighty-pound sow with a single shot.

My second hunt took place in the Texas Hill Country west of Austin. The Springfield scored a handsome black buck antelope with



twenty-inch spiral horns.

Then I had an opportunity to hunt black bear in Canada.

The prospect of hunting an animal that is capable of hunting me was chilling. But stalking dangerous game with a World War I-vintage rifle, one that was manufactured before I was born, caused me no trepidation. I trust the Springfield; I trust its lineage; and after having countless rounds fired through it, I trust its accuracy. While other hunters hunt coastal bears with nothing less than a .300 Win Mag or a .357 H&H, I had no doubt as to the -06's hard hitting pedigree.

I left D/FW bound for Vancouver, Canada on October 1st, the Springfield safely nestled in the 737's cargo hold, inside a locked, aluminum and foam-padded case.

Traditionally, hunters seem to prefer spring bear hunting to fall hunts, but upon arriving in

Vancouver, and through my five-day stay on the island, I found the conditions sunny and inviting and for the most part, bug-free.

The view from the KD Air twin-engine plane, as it passed over the Strait of Georgia bound for the Vancouver Island airport at Qualicum was breathtaking. After a brief scenic ride from the terminal to Port Alberni, I met outfitter, Darren DeLuca of Vancouver Island Guide Outfitters, who got me settled into the bed and breakfast where I would stay sharing space, meals, and friendly banter with a host of itinerant fisherman.

The next morning, I dressed and went downstairs where I met my guide, Kim Cyr. Kim is a wiry fellow in his fifties. That should have been my first clue. He put me through the paces of hunting bear that sunny Yom Kippur. We scaled peaks and clamored over and about slash-cut timber like—well, like a black bear. By midday, each of my double layers of camo was soaked through with sweat.

After playing hopscotch over fallen trees the size of telephone poles, my guide took me to a waterfall off the beaten path. Kim reported that locals had hewn steps into that fallen fir to access the area to net fish. The log ladder was set at a steep incline, and we descended (and later ascended) it with the aid of a yellow rope that took us through a canopy of undergrowth.

Bear, Kim said, would stand on either side of the cascading rivulet, swatting salmon hell-bent on spawning upstream. We saw a pair of bears, but again, no shooters.

On our return from the falls, I came face to face with a bear on the trail. "There's one!" I whisper-shouted to Kim. He peeked around the corner. "Too small," he said.

Somehow I got the lead returning across the tree-bridge. Every step of the way I prayed I wouldn't meet that bear. And I wondered what I would have done had we met—jump?

No doubt to provide me a respite from his boot camp introduction to bear hunting, Kim opted to sit the banks of the Kennedy River that first afternoon to glass for bruins.

We spied a bear from the bridge and began a stalk. Stealthily, we made our way to the water's edge, between a thicket of alder and the forested tree line. As we stood glassing the gently rolling Kennedy, a bruin, no doubt the one we had spotted from the road, burst out of the alders with a growl, headed uphill for the safety of the forest.

We were ten yards from that bear.

"How's that for close, eh?" my Canadian guide quipped.

Each day we tried a different mode of hunting. We hunted the rivers in search of fish-hungry bears. But the fish were scarce, perhaps a result of the drought that has plagued British Columbia.

On Day two, we scoured logging roads in Kim's truck, glassing for bear.

On Day three, we floated the Port Alberni Inlet, glassing for bear along the shorelines, studying the grassy slopes where the rivers flow into the salty inlet's expanse.

We floated since first foggy light, spotting and passing on several specimens. Kim deftly avoided other boats and the frequent stick-ups and log

flotsam, a byproduct of the local timber industry, as we listened to the crash of salmon breaching.

Then we saw the bear—a heavy specimen, ambling along the shoreline, pausing to sniff as he went. Instinctively, I knew it was a male. Kim is a great teacher.

The bruin sported broad shoulders and forearms, paws turned inside—pigeon toed. His backside swayed with every step. His paunch was pronounced, his ears abbreviated. His paws sprouted a lethal array of inch-and-a-half long claws.

Yes, this was a boar—maybe even a good one.

We beached the boat, tethered it to a limb and climbed out.

Crouched in our dripping waders on the bank of the Nahmint River, hefty Chinook and steelhead swam in the crystalline water at our feet. Overhead, a bald eagle flapped effortlessly before settling in the top of a spruce. At water's edge, water ouzels, alternately know as water thrushes or American dippers, bobbed and flitted on the rocks.

The sun peeked through the misty morn, warming us.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"He's a good eighteen inches," Kim replied, "Not huge, but a shooter."

I sat in the oozing mud and readied my shooting sticks.

The bear ambled closer.

"It's your call," Kim advised.

I had the perfect place for this bearskin rug before the fireplace in Plano.

"Let's take him,"

I murmured.

Kim stared down the barrel of his .300 Winchester Magnum.

I chambered a 180-grain round and prepared for the shot.

He nodded to a weather worn boulder at water's edge.

"Let him get to that rock," Kim advised.

I took a deep breath.

I acquired the perfect sight picture in the old Lyman.

At sixty yards the bruin loomed larger than life.

I exhaled halfway.

I placed the reticle on the bear's front shoulder.

He posed on the rock, the image seared into my brain.

I squeezed the trigger.

The Springfield's retort shook the morning calm, followed by Kim's backup shot.

The bear tumbled into the water, struggled briefly and succumbed.

We were unable to pull my bear into the boat, so we tied the bowline to his neck and dragged him ashore. Moving all that dead weight—Kim estimated the six-foot, six-inch bear weighed 350 pounds. Kim positioned my bear for photos before beginning the hour-long process of skinning and bagging the cape and quarters.

My coastal bear hunt could not have been more fun. We counted dozens of bald eagles and thirty bears. On two occasions, I found myself nose to nose with large black bears. Each time, thank goodness, the bruin growled and ran off.

We saw three sows with a pair of cubs each. In the middle of Alberni Inlet, we witnessed a huge sea lion, bobbing on her back, nursing a cub. After approaching her, the mother rolled, exposed her black, whiskered maw and sank into the swells.

Vancouver Island and Port Alberni is idyllic—definitely Norman Rockwell material. Salmon and steelhead fishermen frequent the island, and islanders live out their quaint, stress-free lives in quiet harmony—or one would like to think that's the case.

On the return trip across the Strait of Georgia, I felt a twinge of remorse, but I'll return—with the Springfield, perhaps next spring. Thanks for the memories, Mort—and the Springfield rifle. ♡

EDITOR'S NOTE

You can reach Vancouver Island Guide Outfitters at 250-724-1533 or www.islandhunter.ca

