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April 2010

# HUNTING

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*Ursus americanus vancouveri*





# REALLY BIG BLACK BEARS!

by Dave Dolbee

Petersen's Hunting Adventures TV traveled to Vancouver Island, British Columbia for a face-to-face adventure with North America's biggest black bears.

Two weeks previous, while scouting for deer we saw him. John spotted him at 350 yards. I immediately called him on it. "Yes, it's right there, that black spot! It's got to be a big male," John said. "Look though your binos; you'll see."

"John, you're crazy. That's a burned-out stump." I brought the binos to my eyes and stared at the burned-out tree stump. Then the strangest thing happened. The stump turned and looked at me. With what suddenly seemed like a very short 350 yards, the hair stood up on the back of my neck as I saw my first black bear in the wild.

I hunted that bear for several days, but never saw him again. On the last day of bow season I found myself perched on a hillside overlooking a small stream bed the bears were traversing on their way to raid a local campground two miles down the draw. By 7:00 a.m. I was bored and chanting to myself, "I wish I'd see a bear. I wish I'd see a bear." Then a squirrel would scratch somewhere behind me, and as I puckered up, the mantra changed to, "I hope that's not a bear! I hope that's not a bear!" It's funny how your perspective changes when you're hunting something that could be hunting you. After nine sightings—one within 15 yards—an arrow downed my first bear, and the memory of its death growl still sends a tickle down the back of my neck. At the time, I felt as if I were on the top of the world, ready to take on all comers. Little did I know it would be more than a decade before I would once again have the opportunity to hunt bear.

## Vancouver Island

Not only was I ready to gear up for a bear hunt, but I was quick to learn that not all black bear are created equal it seems. In Southern California I was hunting *Ursus americanus californiensis*. Now I was headed for Vancouver Island, British Columbia, and would stalk the bigger *Ursus americanus vancouveri*. Simply stated, it's a subspecies that

tends to run a lot bigger than its southern cousins such as I had encountered in California. This was all the more special as Safari Club International was in the process of classifying the island bears as their own category for records-book purposes, and I was booked for the first hunt of the year with a camera crew in tow for an episode of "Petersen's Hunting Adventures TV."

After arriving at the lodge and settling in for the night, haunting images of big, black bears kept my hackles up into the night and through breakfast. I've had several encounters with bears since that first one, without incident, but for some reason they still put a knot in my stomach. I would not classify it as fear. Most bears will turn at the first hint of man. It's the "most" part of that last statement that gives me what I would call a "healthy respect" for a fellow predator (we all have to go someday; I just don't plan my next life to be in the form of bear scat is all...)

We got an early start for the two-hour drive to our first hunting spot, timing it to coincide with the tide on the tidal flats we were going to hunt. We arrived at a logging station, and after a quick rap at the door, a jolly gent named Denny popped out with a breakfast burrito in each hand and an enthusiasm that was simply infectious. We grabbed our gear and headed to Denny's jet boat.

While loading up, my sharp-eyed hunting companion,

## Big Bears!

Jason, spotted an eagle in a tree. I grabbed for my camera and went for a quick lens change. I was a bit slow with the camera, but I was treated nonetheless to a spectacular view as the eagle screamed toward the inlet and expertly plucked out its meal.

One of the advantages of hunting the early part of the season in Vancouver is that you're hunting bears fresh out of hibernation. This offers a few major advantages. First, all of the bears would be boars, and generally big ones. The sows and cubs were not likely to

40 minutes of glassing we spotted our first bears—two of them. I got the nod from outfitter Darren DeLuca and the cameraman that I would be the first shooter. On the water, the tide was too rough to judge the bears through glass, but we believed one of them was a definite shooter and angled the boat to shore a good half-mile away.

Darren hopped ashore, and I handed him my Marlin X7 after showing that it was unloaded. Donning my pack, I jumped off and quickly we began closing the distance while I greedily



Jet boats such as the one the author was ferried in provide a nice change from riding in a truck, but you'll still soften plenty of boot leather (however, rubber boots would be advisable) over rocky shorelines for the final stalk.

The best tactic the author found for early-season bear on Vancouver Island was to follow the tides. When the tide goes out, hunt the shorelines as the bears come down to feed on the soft sedge grasses. When the tide comes back in, hunt the surrounding forests as bears move back into cover, meadows and berry patches.

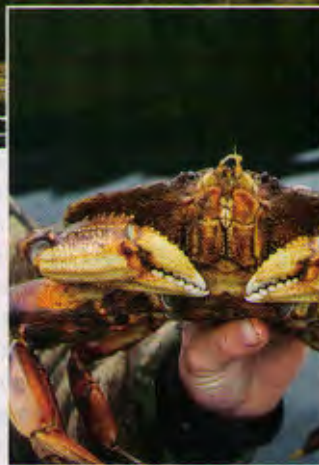
emerge from hibernation for a couple more weeks. The second advantage was diet. Due to the recent hibernation, the bears would need soft food, grasses and berries. As the tide went out on the tidal flats, the bears came in to dine on the soft sedge grasses and bits from the sea left behind. As far as a trophy is concerned, the bear are certainly smaller in the spring, having burnt off their winter store of fat during hibernation, but their coats are impeccable. The long hair is rub-free with a natural shine that lays beautifully on a rug or half-mount.

### On The Water

The tide was just going out, so we motored the inlet glassing for bears. We wanted to catch a bear on the shoreline with the intent of putting in and circling around him. After about

shoved 180-grain .30-06 cartridges in the rifle. Fifteen minutes later we rounded the point and caught a glimpse of the south end of a north-bound bear as he headed into the brush. The second bear was headed inland as well, grabbing grass in no particular hurry.

Popping from one stand of cover to another, we worked to a position where I could get a clear shot and better look at the bear. We got our chance when the bear disappeared into a small depression. I sprinted to the roots of a massive uprooted tree, 14 to 15 feet high, as Darren hissed at me to hustle up. I climbed the root structure and poked the barrel through bent wood, readying for a shot. I glanced over to Darren and could tell my efforts were futile by the look on his face. I had two tags and the bear was shootable, only



One advantage of hunting the tidal flats is salt water and plenty of crab. The author and company set a few traps and checked them a couple times a day scoring up to six crabs per haul, which the cook was all too eager to prepare for the evening feast.

75 yards distant, but he was far from a first-morning bear, possibly not even a last-evening bear given his size.

By this time the rest of the crew had almost caught up. We eased our way



**Weather conditions change, and events unfold fast. In addition to a lightweight set of rain gear, the author opted for a Walker's Game Ear. This assured him ample hearing protection and is outstanding when on stand or on a stalk for detecting game before it detects you.**

back to them and regrouped before heading to the boat. By now the tide was low and coming back in. It was time to change tactics and hunt the areas with soft grasses and berries on the surrounding hills—another food source bears would seek to jumpstart their digestive tracts after hibernation.

This pattern continued through the day, but with several bear sightings under our belt we still did not have a bear to show for our efforts. The next two days were near carbon copies of the first, with all the adrenaline-pumping excitement we could handle. On one sighting we spotted an absolute toad on the point of an island. Unfortunately, he spotted us, too. We sped around to the backside of the tidal flat and tried to stalk him in the brush, but he did not get big by being dumb and thus he gave us the slip.

### The First Shot

While the tide was high we decided we should be, too, so we climbed a fairly steep hill that had plenty of bear scat—big bear scat. Jason was the designated shooter this time. I was a bit out of shape and the hill was taking its toll, so Denny and Jason struck out ahead. By the time I arrived at the top they were already on their way back down.

When we met up, I expressed an



**During the early season bears are still trying to jump-start their digestive systems after hibernation and will dine primarily on soft grasses and berries.**

interest in taking a few photos near a waterfall we passed coming up the trail. When we were within 100 yards of the falls a good bruin was just finishing refilling his tank and turned to head up our trail. Caught in the open, we all froze for a second before reality set in and we dropped to the ground. Jason quickly readied his Marlin .444 lever action, and Denny, carrying the same-model rifle, prepared to back him up if necessary.

I risked stretching my neck a little higher to see the bear. Jason was on the shooting sticks and kept slipping Denny worried looks as the bear moved closer. The boar worked up the hill, back and forth, foraging, but never giving a clear shot. Then he disappeared behind a small rise 30 yards in front of Jason.

I was only about five yards back from the group and slid the cover off my Leupold VX-L. Darren raised a hand of assurance, but I started positioning my rifle just the same when the boar looked over the rise at 22 yards before dropping back down. Excruciating seconds passed as my heart pounded with such ferocity that my ears began to pulse. Then the black lumbered around the corner at 15 yards—facing Jason straight on. Suddenly, at 12 paces the bear's olfactory

senses must have screamed, "Danger!" He took two bounds straight toward Jason. The big .444 belched its massive dose of bear medicine, and the boar turned, running for cover. Jason leapt to his feet, and the .444 sounded twice more in quick succession as the bear crashed through the trees seeking safety down the mountain.

We searched the area, but could not find any sign of a hit. To be sure, before giving up on the track we reviewed the

Dave Dubois

still shinnying up the tree, I centered him in the crosshairs and crushed the trigger. The bear let out a fierce howl as I quickly cycled the bolt for another shot. He turned his head and seemed to look right through me just before giving up the ghost and plunging back to *terra firma*. We approached carefully, guns at the ready, but the behemoth lay still.

After posing with the bear for photos, we noticed the hair still on the bottom of his paws between the pads. It is unusual for a bear of his size to go up a tree. We figured the hair was a telltale sign he'd recently (within 24 hours) emerged from hibernation, possibly still a bit groggy, and that factored in to his fatal mistake of heading skyward versus escaping through the trees. Sitting with the bear and seeing the massive scratch marks where he nimbly clawed his way up the tree was a sobering sight, one that showed the true power and might of one of North America's greatest predators.



## ISLAND BEARS

Vancouver Island Guide Outfitters is adventure.

MUCH HAS BEEN read and said about Vancouver Island's black bears, and the accolades keep coming. Within the last couple of years, Vancouver Island's black bears were designated Island Black Bear by Safari Club International (SCI), distinguishing them from their mainland cousins, the North American Black Bear. The designation came because of their special diet, traits and most of all, size.

What you hear most often about Vancouver Island black bears is their abundance and size. Island hunters usually see multiple bears every day, and on a good day you can see 10 bears or more. The guides work with you to judge the bears and decide between bears that need to grow and ones that meet your personal trophy requirements.

Vancouver Island Guide Outfitters sets a trophy target of an 18-inch SCI minimum skull for its hunters and are very successful getting their hunters on record book bears. Vancouver Island Guide Outfitters take many bears in the 19-inch plus range every season and always one or two in the 20-inch plus range. My bear scored close to 22 inches. The annual harvest of fewer than 40 bears per year from its 1,500 square miles hunting area is some of the best black bear habitat in North America and ensures hunters both trophy quality and quantity.

Most hunts are conducted as day trips by 4x4 vehicle, small boat or ATV. Hunting is spot-and-stalk on the Island's ocean shorelines, river estuaries and on the logged areas of the mountain slopes.

Vancouver Island Guide Outfitters, (250) 724-1533; [islandhunter.ca](http://islandhunter.ca)

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