

My First Alaskan Brown Bear

By Tony Arpaia

My hand went up, there was a cheer from the crowd. The attention went to the other side of the room and focused on the gentleman that was also bidding to see if he would do the same. The anticipation was building. I was in the Lancaster Host convention center attending the 2001 fundraiser for the Eastern Chapter of the Foundation of North American Wild Sheep. Currently on the auction block was a Grizzly hunt that was donated by past president of the Alaska Professional Hunters Association, Neil Webster. Neil owns and operates "Beardown Adventures" in Alaska. He guides hunters for most of the animals there are in Alaska. Neil is a big fellow in stature and personality and is what one visions an Alaskan guide to look like. I spoke with Neil at his booth regarding the hunt that he donated prior to the banquet and upon our first meeting I knew that we would be friends for quite some time. After our initial conversation I decided to pay close attention to his hunt when it came up on the auction block.

The cheer of the crowd confirmed that there was another bid on Neil's hunt. All attention in the room was now focused on me again. The auctioneer rattled out words that only he knew the meaning of and while wiping the sweat from my brow I found the strength to raise my hand again. The cheers sounded, my heart pounded. This hunt was in high demand and a focal point of the evening. I heard the auctioneer calling for a final bid once, twice and then waited for an eternity for that final SOLD. Accolades were given along with a tremendous amount of back slapping from friends and hugs from my wife. I was the high bidder and was smiling like a kid in a candy store. It took quite some time to calm down from the excitement that comes when participating in an event such as this.

I met with Neil after the event to go over the final details and dates and we chose the fall season of 2002 because my wife was expecting and I did not want to leave with a new infant in the nest. Little did I know that we were to have another child right after the first so there were now two little ones to contend with. The day of departure came and all went well on our part. I arrived at camp along with fellow hunter Dial Duncan from Texas and was excited to start our hunt. What we didn't expect was that the area that we were to hunt in was designated to be surveyed that week and that unbeknownst to us helicopters were going to be buzzing around more than the local mosquito population. The first few days of the hunt produced a great black bear for Dial and a Barren Ground caribou for me. We had high hopes for completing the hunt in record time. The second part of the hunt started with us on a hill viewing a natural corridor that many of the local animals used. Then all hell broke loose. The constant bombardment of the helicopters swept through the land in a grid pattern and we were left with only an occasional bird to view. From that particular afternoon on the area was wiped clean of all animal life.

The reason that this sport is called hunting is that there are many variables that we have to contend with to be successful. Neil had no knowledge or control over this disturbance and was not in any way responsible for it either. These are just things that happen. We

spent the next several days there in the hopes that the local fauna would return but it was not to happen. Neil, being the type of person that he is, made the offer to me right then and there to come back the next year on another hunt. I would only be required to pay expenses and trophy fees. This was by far the best offer that an outfitter has ever made to accommodate a client that I have ever seen. I graciously accepted his offer and we headed out of the area with the knowledge that we would be hunting together again very soon. After further discussion with Neil we decided to do a Brown Bear hunt in the spring of 2004 in an area that he was purchasing outside Yakutat in South East Alaska in the town of Dry Bay.

May 3rd 2004 was chosen for our departure date and I spoke with Neil many times on the phone prior to that. It would be a long time to wait but before I knew it May 3rd was here at last. I didn't bother to sleep the evening before with having a 6AM flight and needing to be at the airport at 3AM it just didn't seem worth it. Taking four planes to get to my final destination of Yakutat, Alaska I expected some problems with either delays or lost luggage but was very pleasantly surprised that everything was on time and all my luggage was there on my arrival. I met Neil at the Yakutat airport on schedule. We loaded our gear into the little Cessna 185 and headed out to camp. Neil had two other hunters in spike camps already, Joe Tanis and John Faith, both from Colorado. We found a note at base camp, where we would be staying, that John and his guide Dale Benson had come back to restock and were seeing several Brown Bears every day and were holding out for a really big one. I read that note and my mouth dropped. Several bears a day. Could this be true? My excitement was building and when Neil told me that we would be hunting in the valleys behind camp where no one has been since last year I knew that we would see action.

After unpacking our gear we went to test fire my new Winchester 416 Remington Mag. And found its mark to be true. Dead on at 100 yards. So far everything is working out fine. Since Neil and I hunted together before we both knew each others capabilities. May 4th, our first morning out, Neil and I found ourselves on a hill behind base camp glassing a valley and snow capped mountain range. Within the first few hours we spotted several nice mountain goats and an 8 foot brown bear sow with a cub. What a great way to start a hunt. Later in the afternoon we spotted a 7 foot black bear and then another mid sized brown bear. The sow and cub entertained us throughout the day with their antics. May 5th, we headed up to our vantage point again and glassed. We spotted a good sized brown bear around 8 foot but decided that it was too early in the hunt to make a stalk on one that size so decided to pass. We saw a few more black bear and the goats came out again to say hello. May 6th, I woke up during the night to what sounded like a slicing and grinding sound outside the tent and it took a minute to realize that it was a brown bear in camp looking for a fight. By the time we regained our senses he thankfully headed out of camp. His tracks were all around camp and measured almost 9 inches wide. The thin material of the main camp seemed a lot thinner after that. We glassed from our hill again all morning and then came back to camp for lunch and saw a 9 foot hide that John had taken the evening before down river. That fueled our excitement. May 7th, John and Dale stayed in camp to work on his hide and Neil and I went back to our hill. We again saw plenty of bear but nothing that was worth making a stalk on.

May 8th. We started up our hill again along with John, now that he already had his bear. We glassed for about two hours and decided that it was time for a change of scenery. We packed our gear and headed up river about a mile to another vantage point that Neil had used in the past. We weren't sitting for more than a half hour when a sow materialized across the valley. She kept looking behind her as she walked. We wondered if she had a cub with her when all of a sudden the largest brown bear I have ever seen came out behind her. He was following her around like a love struck puppy. Where ever she went he was right behind her sniffing away. We watched them for nearly an hour while they went up and down the hillside until they disappeared into a thicket. We decided that this was the bear that I came to Alaska for. We took off from our hill on our bellies and attempted to close the distance to them. After crawling across the valley we got into the river and were able to stalk in silence with the flowing water masking our sound. We kept poking our heads up over the bank to search for the bear and finally spotted him looking in our direction. I ranged him at 160 yards with my rangefinder and steadied my 416 on a tree root sticking out of the bank. My crosshairs came to find a spot on his left shoulder and I felt my finger squeeze the trigger. Upon hearing the report I was happy to see that the bear simply dropped. The follow up "insurance" shot was dispatched but not needed. After a tremendous amount of hooting and hollering we waited about twenty minutes for safety reasons and moved in to see my first Alaskan Brown Bear. He was huge, after a lengthily picture taking session we got down to the work of skinning and packing. My bear squared just over 9 feet and had an excellent hide. Neil managed the carrying of the entire hide while John and I shared his gear and packed the skull. We were all a bit sore at the end of the day but it hurt so good.

My hat goes off to Neil Webster for the tremendous amount of effort he puts into running his camp and to assure that his clients are happy. There is definitely a lesson here that other outfitters should learn. I am already planning future trips with Neil and would highly recommend that if anyone has a need or desire for Alaskan game they give Neil Webster a call at 907-696-5104 or, even better, come to the next Eastern Chapter of FNAWS fundraiser and get the fever while bidding on one of Neil's donated hunts.