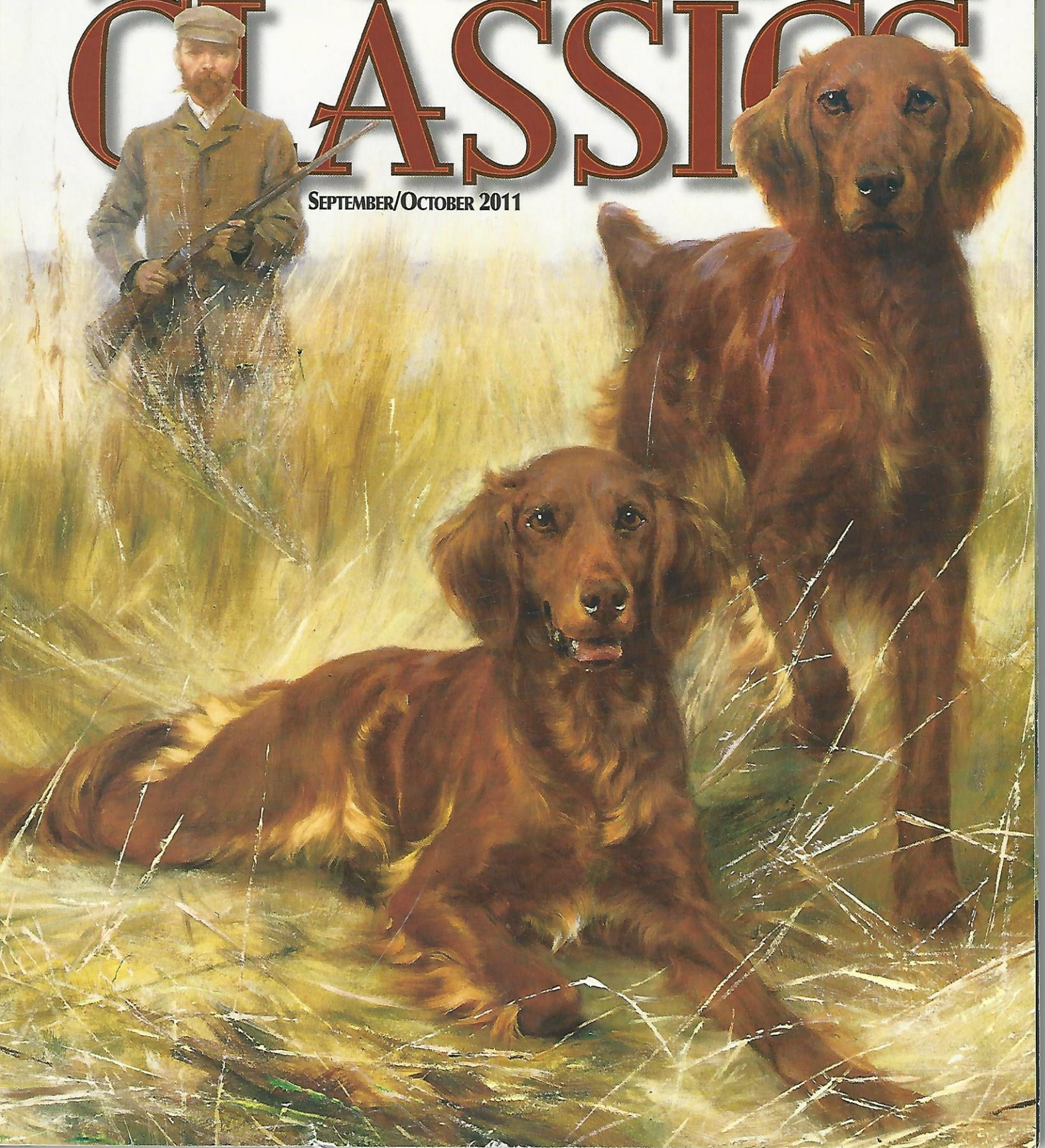


SPORTING CLASSICS

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2011



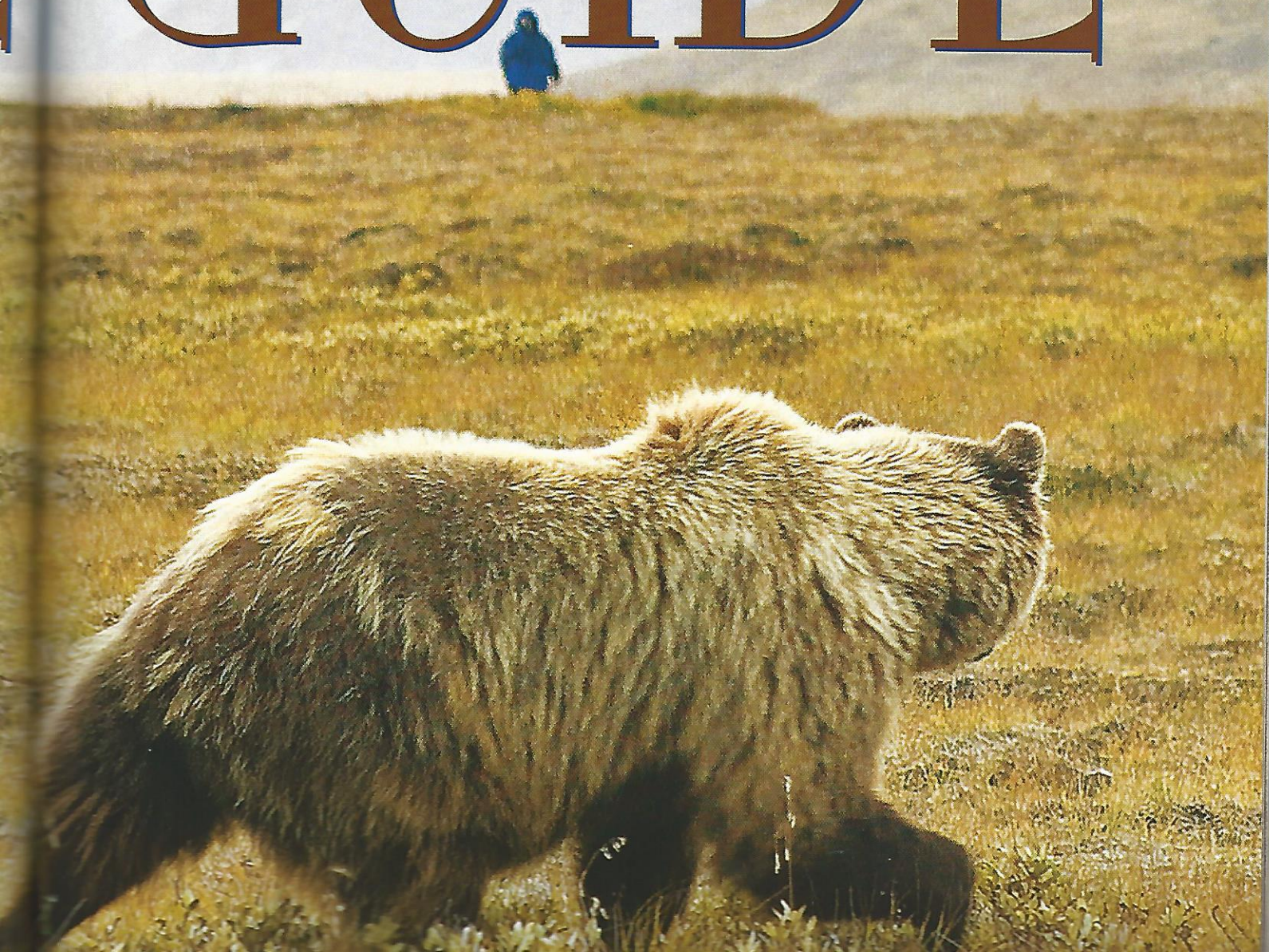
When your guide kills a grizzly illegally – and with your rifle –

ROGUE

*by John
Ross*

do you just ignore his misdeed or do you tell the authorities?

GUIDE



Articles reporting on field tests of new rifles or cartridges follow a structure that's as old as the hills. It goes like this: Gun scribe drools over new offering, wowed by some improvement in barrel, action, stocking or chambering. Gunmaker sends scribe sample for testing. Scribe hies himself to the range; produces 100-yard groups the size of your thumbnail; travels to Canada, Alaska, Idaho or other big game terrain; shoots a respectable bull; is photographed with the new rifle and said bull; and sings rifle's praises in print. That same story has been published at least four times a month since the first outdoor magazine hit the streets in the 1880s.

I've written my share of those yarns, and they were beginning to bore me. A better idea, I thought, would be to place a new rifle in the hands of a hunter whose experience with the intended big game quarry and appropriate rifle/cartridge combinations is very, very deep. That way he could tell me how the new gun and ammo stacks up against those he and others have used to take trophies in similar conditions.

What a great concept! I pitched it to the editor of a hunting journal who liked the idea and gave me the assignment.

When the .280 Ackley Improved first came on the market, I was impressed. P. O. Ackley was a master at wringing maximum performance from standard length cartridges by sharpening their case shoulders. The .280 Ackley Improved yields 7mm Magnum performance with two-thirds the powder. And 7mm bullets tend to retain velocity and thus deliver energy better than similar bullets in other diameters. The cartridge is ideally suited to larger deer, moose and elk.

To field test the .280 Ackley Improved, I contacted the Alaska professional hunters association, which recommended an outfitter who specialized in trophies from the Western Arctic caribou herd. I talked with the outfitter, and he agreed to host me, gratis, and to provide a hunter who'd shoot the bull and tell me what he thought of the rifle and cartridge. I hopped a plane to Alaska, overnights in Anchorage, caught the first flight to Fairbanks, then switched to a commuter run into Galena up on the Yukon River.

Here, dear reader, my story begins to depart from the normal bill of gun-test fare. I have made up all the names in this article, save for the Alaskan Wildlife Trooper who recorded my statement the morning after I was flown off the mountain.

At the outfitter's headquarters I met the owner, Dave, along with his right-hand man, Shaun who was talkative, helpful and seemed like a good sort. Little did I know. We repacked my gear, discussed how we'd wring out the rifle, boarded Dave's Beaver, and flew for an hour or so northwest into the Selawik watershed. We landed in a lake near the river and transferred my dunnage to a Super Cub, piloted by Josh, for the last lap, which landed me at a tent camp on a



gravel bar. There I hooked up with another hunter, Tony, who had a ticket for moose and who had agreed to use the .280 Ackley to harvest his trophy.

For three days Tony and I rafted down the river. We saw one possible trophy moose, but Tony was not certain the bull's rack spanned the required 50 inches and so he passed on the shot. Though I thought it would qualify, I admired his restraint. Each night by satellite phone, we discussed the next day's hunt with Dave. During our floats, Tony tracked our progress by GPS. Though we were more than 100 miles from any semblance of civilization, we were in constant communication should an emergency arise.

Because we were seeing few moose and only one herd of caribou had crossed our path, Dave decided to move me to a camp on a rocky knoll just west of a low mountain that rose north of the river on the edge of the plain. There, a day before, a TV crew had filmed the killing of two trophy caribou. Dave reasoned that more caribou would follow the same trail. My hunter was to be Shaun, whom I'd met at Dave's headquarters and who would be hunting on his own license. I would photograph the hunt, which would be the general focus of my article.

Alaska law prohibits hunting on the same day one flies into the bush or moves by aircraft to a new location. So Shaun and I spent the first afternoon scouting the mountain's flanks and glassing the tundra 1,500 feet below. Small bands of 25 to 50 caribou were trekking south, but none appeared to be headed our way. Though the sky had



been reasonably clear when Josh and his Super Cub had dropped me off, the clouds were moving in rapidly from the west and lowering by mid-afternoon. Shaun wanted to keep scouting north, away from our camp.

Aware that the weather was very likely to deteriorate further, I proposed staying at the edge of a cliff about a mile from camp and glassing the flats beneath us. Shaun suggested I sit tight and that he'd return in a little while.

With my back against a boulder, I tracked caribou across the tundra. Half-an-hour passed before fine drops of rain began to speckle my glasses. The ceiling was closing in fast. Another half-hour passed before Shaun appeared out of the increasingly soupy fog.

"What did you see," I said welcoming him back.

"There are herds of caribou moving south, but they don't appear headed our way," he replied.

"Let's head back to camp," I suggested.

"No," he said, "We're better off waiting here. These clouds will lift."

An alarm went off in my mind: *That's dumb. The fog is thickening . . . dusk will come in an hour or so. Last thing I want to do is to spend the night out here without a tent, food, rain gear or rifle.*

"You know what, Shaun?" I said. "It's been a long day for me. Why don't you get out your GPS and let's go back to camp."

What he said next startled me. "I don't have a GPS on me."

Oh shit, I thought. This is how you get in trouble big time.

"If we stick to this side of the ridge," I said, "we'll eventually find that gap and the steep slope that leads to the carcasses of the two caribou."

I stood and he reluctantly agreed. At last light in thick cloud, we finally found the camp. I'll admit that I don't own

The author's Alaska caribou camp overlooked the broad Selawick Valley, home to both caribou and big grizzlies.

a GPS, preferring to rely on observation, common sense and worst case, a compass to find my way.

Over freeze-dried dinner, Shaun regaled me with his bear-hunting exploits. Though only 54, he reported killing 119 bruins on hunts here in Alaska, in the Lower 48, from a lodge he ran in Saskatchewan and in Ontario. He told me that Dave hated bears and wanted him to kill every one he could.

We left camp after breakfast, crossed the crest of the knoll where the caribou carcasses had been gnawed further by either bears, foxes or wolves, and settled ourselves in a patch of willow scrub from which we could glass the tundra. A half-mile away, by a clump of firs, we spotted a huge bull moose. When he turned his head toward us his left shovel hid his hump.

"How big," I asked Shaun.

"A good seventy inches."

Since neither of us had drawn moose permits for the Selawik area, we couldn't hunt him. Instead, Shaun offered to call him in so I could get photos. He stood, cupped his hands together, and made a mournful call that seemed to come from deep in his chest. It lasted for three or four seconds and seemed to hang in the air. Two minutes later, he called again. Through my binoculars, I could see the bull turn toward us.

Shaun continued calling, and the bull ambled in our direction. Shaun and I split. He headed east to draw the bull up a westward draw that carried a small spring creek. I

Continued on 159

300 yards away and motoring on with a destination in mind, but I had shooting sticks and a superbly accurate H-S Precision in .300 WSM. I put the crosshairs on her and waited until she came out from the shadows into full light. Doug whistled, she stopped, and that was that.

Apart from the fact that she was well over 200 pounds of great eating, she was unusual in being a tri-color. Doug said that in a lifetime of hunting and observing pigs in this area, she was the first tri-color he'd ever seen.

We made a quick run back to headquarters to deposit the pig in Camp Five's walk-in cooler, and then went looking for Mike's buck. We saw numerous tule elk, including a bull with one main beam snapped off about six inches from his skull ("A good way to keep from getting shot," as Doug observed), a golden eagle and two coyotes with very unusual coloration (one with red ears almost like a fox, and one with an extremely pale ruff almost like a collie), but no deer.

The morning wore on until, about the time when you would expect all sober and industrious deer to be bedding down, they suddenly began popping up everywhere – does, fawns, spikes, small forkies and finally, grazing in the shade of an oak, a dandy three-by-two.

When you hunt at Camp Five, take some time to be a tourist. Three missions and the Hearst Castle are all within easy drive, Paso Robles is as charming a town as you can find; you can't swing a dead cat without hitting a world-class winery, and there are enough five star restaurants in the area to ensure you go home almost as fat as the pig you shot.

Contact Doug Roth at Camp Five Outfitters, 736 Oxen Court, Paso Robles, CA 93446; (805) 238-3634; email: camp5@charter.net. 🐾

ROGUE GUIDE

Continued from 97

slid down the mountainside, scurrying quietly as I could from brush patch to brush patch until I reached a bench with provided a fine view of the creek and the floor of the draw. Off to my right, I heard Shaun call and then saw him stand waving a pair of sticks from side to side over his head as if they were antlers.

I could hear the bull moving up the draw and suddenly he emerged from a screen of stunted willows along the creek.

I began shooting pictures. Had I a permit and rifle, the bull would have been dead. It was less than 200 yards away. Shaun called a time or two more, but the bull realized he'd been tricked. He turned and retraced his path into the willows.

"Masterful calling," I congratulated Shaun. We began the climb up to our perch atop the knoll. It took me 45 minutes, and I was deeply winded when I collapsed into my patch of stunted willows, glad to shed the cameras that hung like heavy pendulums around my neck.

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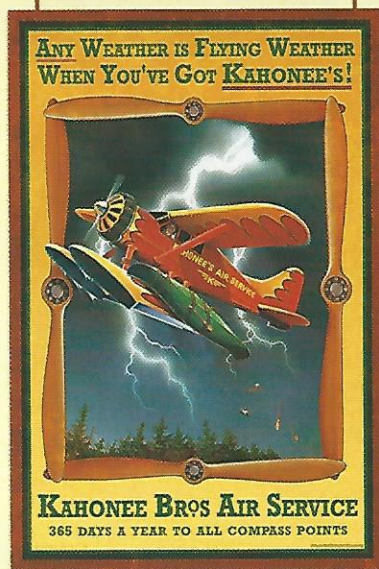
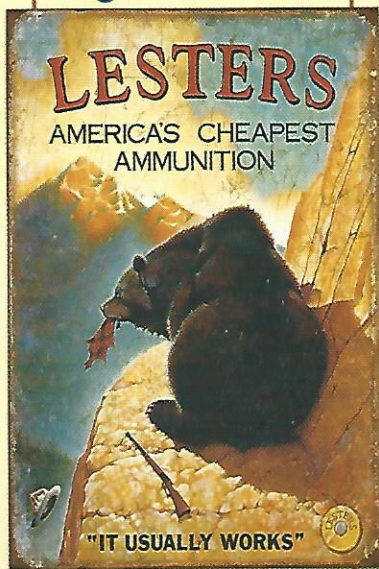


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After lunching on sandwiches, I dozed off. "There's a grizzly," Shaun elbowed me, "in the yellow next to the creek line."

"Where?" I whispered, afraid any sound would carry across the plain.

"On the path the moose took," he replied. I focused my binoculars on the track taken by the bull. There it was, a grey dot, no bigger than the head of a nail, wobbling over the boggy terrain. When it stood, it revealed its black chest and belly. "Can you call him?" I asked.

Shaun said he didn't have a predator call but would try. With that, he tented his mouth with his hands. That same mournful wail rose and fell. He repeated the call. The bear paused, then stood and turned in our direction.

The bear was a good half-mile east of us and way down in the flat. He'd have to come closer, if I were to get a picture. No way we could go to him, nor would I have wanted to, armed as I was with only a telephoto lens.

The grizzly continued to amble toward the mouth of the valley below us. When he vanished from sight under the brow of our mountain, Shaun said, "I'm going to whack that bear. You stay here."

He slung my rifle over his shoulder and disappeared down the path we'd taken to intercept the moose. *Whack that bear? Was this guy nuts? We were here to hunt caribou. A bear wasn't in the picture. I didn't have a bear tag, but maybe Shaun did and if he succeeded, it'd make a hell of a story,* I thought.

About staying put, I didn't argue. While the performance of the .280 Ackley Improved approaches hot magnums of the same bullet diameter, nobody I know would consider it suitable for Alaskan brown or grizzly bear. And there was one more concern. If I were with Shaun and he wounded the bear, all Shaun would have to do to save his own skin is out-run me . . . a very easy task.

Down the slope of our mountain Shaun went. I lay in a soft and fragrant patch of all-but-dried up blueberries, sedges and ferns. Splotches of sun broke through the leaden clouds, firing the umber tundra into a rich palette of ochres and oranges. Birch and aspen flamed

against loden pine. Black-water kettle ponds gleamed like burnished stainless steel. A stand of dwarf willow, no higher than the length of a rifle barrel, broke the incessant wind from the east, northeast.

And I'll admit my curiosity about Shaun's quest for the grizzly ebbed as I dozed contentedly, pleased with myself for having come now at long last to this scree-covered knob just shy of the Arctic circle.

The first shot, a hollow thump, woke me. The second, a sharper crack, echoed out across the vast plain and seemed to carry all the way westward to the peninsula where the United States and Russia bump elbows. Eagerly I awaited Shaun's return.

He reached me about an hour later. Though the temperature was in the 50s and the wind was stout, he was sweating profusely and panting like a draft horse pulling logs. He'd stripped off his shirt and his torso was bare.

"You okay?" I shouted.

"Hot." Shaun panted. "The climb. Then he asked, "But did you see?" His eyes were bright.

"No," I said. "Couldn't see you from here."

"Whacked it good. First shot, just behind the head. Tumbled over backward, rolled down the slope over there," Shaun said gesturing across the valley. "She paused. I gave her another. And she tumbled into the brush. Four-hundred-yard shot. Shoots flat! Held just above her back."

He went on to say that the bear was a six-foot sow with a brown coat, and not the silver-tipped seven-footer that he'd called.

"She surprised me," he admitted, saying he hadn't expected a second bear in the valley.

With my binoculars, I could see that the bear we'd first spotted, or another like it, was now headed out of the valley toward a low ridge of sand dunes well to the west. And half a mile to the north, another bear was moving south toward the river on a track taken earlier in the day by a small herd of caribou.

I'll admit, I didn't ask why Shaun had climbed back up the mountain in such a hurry. I'd assumed, I suppose, that he wasn't sure the bear was dead and didn't want to confront it armed only

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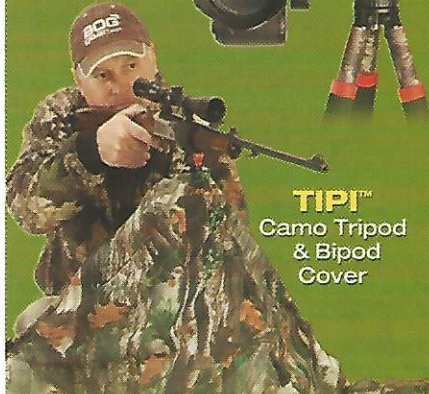
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with 160-grain Spitzers out of the .280. His regular rifle was a Remington 700 in .375 H&H, but that was back at camp.

For the next couple of hours we sat glassing the plain for caribou. A small herd of a dozen crossed the saddle on our mountain to the north, but chasing them would have been an exercise in vain. The reason we weren't seeing more caribou, Shaun said, was that the bear population was out of control and preying on caribou fawns and moose calves.

The wind was sharpening and I was getting chilled. Needing to stretch, I stood up and said I was going to take a walk. Shaun said he wanted to stay where he was for a while, and as I passed him, he admonished me not to tell Dave, his boss, about the bear.

His comment halted me mid-stride. "What?" I asked, hoping that I'd misheard him.

"Dave doesn't need to know about the bear," Shaun said. "It's between us, okay?"

Now, there is only one reason why someone asks you not to tell someone else about something like shooting a bear. My gut told me that Shaun probably didn't have a permit and shooting the bear was illegal. News about a bear-killing would not bring joy to Dave's heart. It sure didn't to mine.

Dusk comes late to these latitudes in September. An hour before dark Josh landed in the outfitter's Super Cub. With him was Tony, with whom I'd floated the river for moose.

I took Josh aside and told him what had happened. Then Tony joined us. I asked whether either had a tag for the bear. No, they said. Further, to tag game with a permit issued to another hunter was highly illegal, Josh added. If Shaun had shot a bear, he broke the law.

The wind was beginning to gust. With ropes, we anchored the Cub to the biggest boulders we could find and chocked its wheels with stone. Shaun came up to us and I took him aside and told him I'd just told Tony and Josh that he'd killed a bear.

I asked if he had a permit. He said not to worry about it. He and Dave would take care of everything. He insisted it was no big deal if we were quiet about it. Stuff like this

happens all the time in the bush, he said.

For me, the shit had just hit the fan. A registered guide on a personal hunt had just used my rifle to shoot an illegal bear. That made me an accessory and exposed to undefined liability the magazine that had assigned me the story. Any idea of testing the rifle now on caribou or moose was strictly out of the question. I had a story all right, but it wasn't anywhere close to the one I'd come here to write.

Josh climbed in the Cub, radioed Dave, and told him what had transpired. As soon as he got out of the plane, he said Dave wanted us to give him our hunting licenses. I handed mine over gladly; Shaun was a little reluctant. I took the rifle from Shaun and told the pilot to tell Dave that I wanted to leave the mountain as quickly as possible. The sooner I returned to town, the sooner I could contact the Alaska Wildlife Troopers and report the incident.

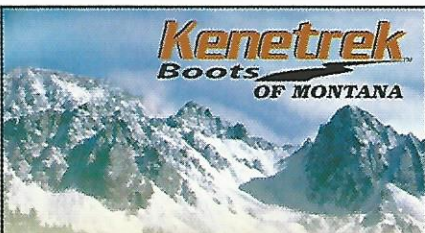
What else could I do but file a report? I thought. Most wildlife law enforcement officers understand that hunters make mistakes. Penalties are usually modest — as long as the hunter reports what he did at his earliest opportunity AND if evidence substantiates what the hunter says.

That night Josh, Shaun and Tony sat around a fire discussing the incident. Wishing to avoid any additional involvement, I read, lying on my cot in the tent I shared with Shaun. Later he came in; I had nothing to say to him. A set of showers washed over our camp in the night and in the morning, our tents were flecked with ice.

Josh and Tony took off in the Cub. Josh promised to return for me before dark if he could. But he had other hunters to move from one camp to another and a couple of moose that needed to be ferried to a lake where Dave could pick them up in his Beaver. Low clouds hung in the valley over the river. The wind was steady. Grey streaks of rain slanted in from the west.

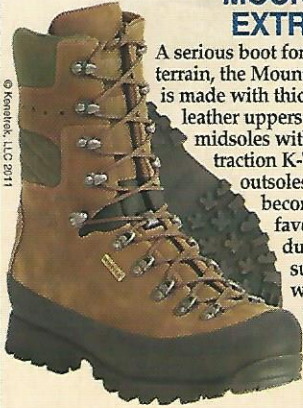
As soon as the aircraft had left, Shaun slung his .375 over his shoulder and said he wanted to go check on the bear. I asked if he would take a camera and get a picture. If this guy was dumb enough to shoot an illegal bear, he might just be dumb enough to take a picture, I reasoned. And if, by some luck, the bear became legal, I'd have photos for a story about the rifle.

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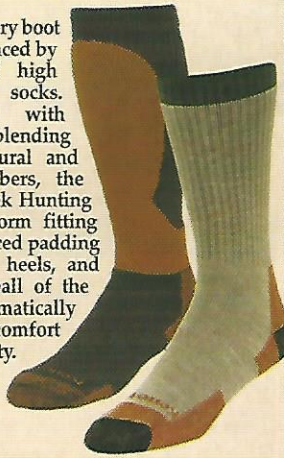
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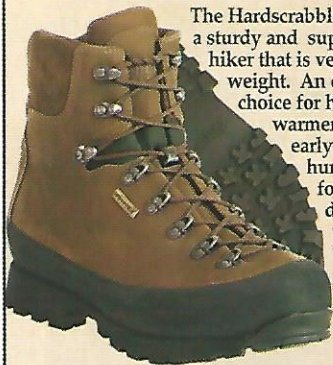
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Shaun squelched the idea. "I don't want no evidence," he stated and turned and headed over the knoll toward the valley where I assumed the bear lay.

I busied myself packing my gear to be ready at a moment's notice should Josh return. Not wanting to delay my departure, I stayed close to camp. I sat, mainly, in a camp chair and read a W.E.B. Griffin thriller. When ruminations about the damn bear intruded, I watched the play of sun and cloud in the valley.

It was early afternoon when Shaun returned to camp. He was lugging a sun-bleached caribou skull with a full set of antlers. I asked about the bear: "Whacked (I was beginning to loath that word) her good," he said. "But the first shot was a little right of the neck, cutting through the shoulder. I could see where she'd crashed through the brush. I could see her blood trail."

"Did you find her?" I asked.

"No," he replied.

Oh man, I thought, first this guy – a registered guide – breaks the law and shoots a freaking bear. Now it appears he wounded it seriously, but he doesn't have the cajones to go find and kill it.

Later as we sat together glassing the tundra for game, Shaun turned to me. He said he'd made up the whole story about the bear. The first shot he fired into the ground, so there'd be no echo, he said. And he'd fired the second shot into the air to create an echo just so I'd hear it.

"There is," he stated, "no bear."

I didn't reply aloud but thought to myself: B.S. A shot that hits big game often sounds hollow while one that misses generally produces a sharp crack. He'd probably gut-shot the bear and missed with his second shot. Isn't this great! At worst case, Shaun's an outlaw and, best case, a liar.

Back at camp as we spooned our way through a supper of reconstituted rice and meat from Mountain House bags, I asked Shaun if he'd been able to call Dave on the satellite phone. He said we didn't have a phone.

Some guide. First no GPS, then without a license he wounds a bear. Now he admits he has no way of contacting the outfitter or anyone else should an emergency arise. That's a recipe for tragedy.

Next time I head into bush this wild, I'll rent my own. Costing about \$200 a month, a satellite phone is excellent insurance.

And later, as Shaun snored snug in his sleeping bag, the blackest thought of all crept into my mind. Would I make it off this mountain alive? I wasn't concerned about the weather or starving. What chilled me was the possibility that I might have a fatal hunting accident.

My rifle was a prototype. In my haste to test it from the bench, I hadn't tried the safety. I won't overlook that step again! Only when I handed the rifle to Tony on the first day of our river float did I learn that the safety did not work. To hunt moose, Tony had filled the magazine but left the chamber empty. That made the rifle perfectly safe but more than a little cumbersome to use on a hunt such as ours. Shaun had likewise carried the rifle with a full magazine but empty breech.

Though I'd removed the bolt from the rifle, Shaun could easily find it in my duffel as I slept. He could reassemble the rifle, and arrange to have it appear that I was cleaning the rifle in the tent when it accidentally went off. In my mind, I could hear him say: *Them dumb outdoor writers . . . ain't even smart enough to unload their rifles before entering the tent and or to check the safeties.*

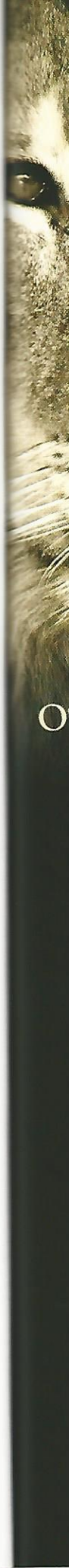
As I tossed and turned in semi-sleep, this thought came to me: *For a successful hunt, we must pattern the behavior of game animals. That's not hard to do. Yet, the one factor we cannot pattern is the behavior of man. And I was stuck in camp with a rogue guide.*

Five inches of snow fell overnight and the morning found us socked in. Shaun made coffee, and we munched on granola bars and listened to the wind whip the tent. Would have been nice to call the outfitter and for an update on the weather and his plans . . . but no phone. Toward noon, the weather began to clear.

About 3 p.m. I heard an aircraft engine. We scrambled from the tent and in the thin, blowing snow, we saw Josh circling in the Cub.

"Pack your gear," Shaun ordered. All I had to do was stuff my sleeping bag in its sack, and I was ready to go the minute Josh landed.

Mountaintops taller than ours were shrouded in clouds, but the valley was



reasonably clear. Turning the plane into the wind, we were airborne in less than 100 yards. Half an hour later we landed on a gravel bar close to the lake where Dave would pick us up in the Beaver. Tony was waiting on the bar with his gear, and Josh returned to the mountain for Shaun and the camp's tents, kitchen and dry boxes.

Tony told me that Dave had called the Alaska Wildlife Troopers and reported the illegal bear as soon as Josh radioed him. "The troopers planned to fly in yesterday, but their plane was grounded at another camp," he said.

The next morning, back in town, I spent a couple of hours giving my statement to Darrel Hildebrand, a wildlife trooper stationed in Galena. On a map, I showed him where I believed Shaun had shot the bear. We copied images from my camera, which showed the general area where the incident occurred. I turned over to him the empty cases from the cartridges Shaun had fired and a loaded round of ammunition from the same box in case investigators wanted to compare composition of the bullets recovered from the bear. The rifle was

impounded and locked in the evidence room. Darrel told me my story matched what he heard from Dave, Tony and Josh. Shaun claimed, on the other hand, that he'd made up the story as a prank.

That afternoon I boarded the flight to Fairbanks that would connect with one into Anchorage. I've never been so glad to leave the wilderness.

When the weather cleared, the troopers planned to fly to the mountain, hike into the valley, and search for the carcass of a brown bear sow. I hoped they'd find it. If they did, Shaun would face up to four years in prison and a \$20,000 fine. I would be delighted to testify against him.

It was April, 2010 before Trooper Hildebrand called to report the status of the case. He said that about a week after my interview, a team of agents had flown into our camp and hiked down into the draw where Shaun had supposedly shot the bear. They searched but found no carcass. Maybe there was no bear. Could be that Shaun was merely lying to make himself important to a not-very-bright outdoor writer. Better bet is that the wounded bear limped away, died in pain and illness, and was eaten by wolves and other bears. Most likely we'll never know the truth. ■

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

While we cannot be expected to understand all of a state's laws pertaining to hunting a species, we ought to be very familiar with the basics. With most game laws posted on the web, there's no excuse for not having some familiarity with the statutes. Go online and read the regulations.

If you think you may have violated the law:

- Make write a note covering what happened and time, date and place.
- Prepare a chronology or timeline of the events that led up to and immediately followed the incident.
- Report the incident to a game warden or other law enforcement officer as promptly as possible.
- Ignore entreaties to overlook the infraction from hunting pals, guides, outfitters or others involved. Remember, it's your arse that's headed for the sling (possibly fine and jail) if you don't do the right thing.

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Pursuit Ultralight Barrel with Premium CeraKote™ | Stainless Steel Barrel without Premium CeraKote™

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