



MANITOBA'S PARKLAND BEARS

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The evening shadows began to lengthen as the sun slowly disappeared behind the spruce trees surrounding the bait site. Several bears had already visited the small clearing that evening, including one nice boar that would have caused most bear hunters to pull the trigger. I admit the thought had crossed my mind, but the bear's behavior made me hesitate.

He was extremely nervous, reaching into the barrel and extracting a morsel of fat, then dashing off to the edge of the clearing where he would turn and lay down facing the bait site while he ate. After 15 or 20 minutes of this routine the boar stood, head up, staring intently into the forest. Moments later he spun around and quickly disappeared into the spruce swamp. There was no doubt that something bigger was in the vicinity.

I have been an avid bear hunter for over 30 years and have taken my fair share of bruins. I had always lived in areas with a grizzly population and baiting was prohibited, so I was restricted to spot and stalk hunting only. Although I have guided black bear hunters for many years and have worked for outfitters in areas that ran baited hunts, I had never har-

vested a bear over bait myself.

Manitoba has some of the finest black bear hunting in North America. The province has a healthy population that is stable or increasing and the bears are known for being big in body, with a surprising number of Boone and Crockett entries taken every year. The number one bear in the Manitoba record book has a skull that scored 23 inches, and several bears weighing in excess of 800 pounds have been recorded, including a behemoth that was hit by a vehicle in 2001 near Grand Beach, Manitoba that weighed in at 886.5 pounds.

When my wife and I moved to the Parkland area of southwestern Manitoba in the spring of 2003, we did not realize we had bought a farm in one of the premier black bear areas in Manitoba. As luck would have it, one of my new neighbors was Terry McLaughlin of Central Manitoba Outfitters. Terry guides along the southern boundary of the Riding Mountain National Park, a park that some experts claim has the highest density of black bears in North America. During the 2003 bear season, a hunter of Terry's killed a huge boar that scored 21 5/16" and was the largest bear harvested by a non-resident that year.

Naturally, by the following spring, I had arranged to go bear hunting with Terry. The hunt would be of significance for me as, if successful, it would be my first Manitoba black bear, my first bear taken over bait and my first black bear taken with a muzzleloader.

Since most bears are taken at rather modest distances when hunting over baits, I had decided to use a .50 caliber T/C muzzleloader with a saboted 250 grain PTX bullet and 100 grains of Pyrodex.

The spring of 2004 had been a rather cool one and bear activity at the bait sites during the first week of May was a bit slower than normal. Despite the cold temperatures, all of Terry's bear hunters tagged out with nice bears during the first week, including a huge chocolate boar that was well over seven feet.

My first afternoon in a stand was very enjoyable. The weather was still unseasonably cool and the odd snow flake drifted down through the big aspens. A weasel visited the bait site to gnaw on a beaver carcass and a red squirrel periodically climbed part way up the tree I was in to scold me.

Towards evening, the beavers in a nearby pond became quite active and made an incredible amount of noise as they worked on a recently fallen aspen tree. A beaver suddenly slapped the surface of the pond with its tail to warn of an intruder at almost the same instant I spotted the approaching bear.

I could see the bear peering over a low ridge, down wind of the bait; its head was up as it sniffed to see what was on the evening menu. I waited patiently to get a better look at the big bear but it slowly circled the bait site, sticking to the dense bush, and then disappeared. This bear was pretty cagey and undoubtedly a trophy size bruin.

Another hour went by before there was any more activity. The second bear of the day approached from downwind of the bait site as well, but there was no hesitation with this animal and it marched right in like a teenager to a smorgasbord. It appeared to be a young sow and she had a gorgeous coat, her bright red body contrasted sharply with her dark head and legs.

The young bear dragged the beaver carcass a few yards away into some brush and began to eat. There were no more visitors that night and at the end of legal shooting light, I slowly climbed from my perch and retraced my steps down the quad trail I had come in on.

Day two was sunny and warm, with close to normal seasonal temperatures. Terry decided to place me in a different location that afternoon, one which had traditionally produced a lot of bears. I would be concealed in a ground blind this time, instead of a tree stand. It was situated on a small hill overlooking a clearing on the edge of a spruce

swamp. The shooting distance would be approximately 75 yards, perfect for the muzzleloader.

I arrived at the blind around 4 p.m. and the only activity at the bait for the first hour was a raven. It would boldly drop through the hole into the barrel, emerge moments later with a tidbit and fly up into the branches of a spruce tree to eat it.

The first bear, a black yearling, appeared shortly after 5 p.m. What followed was a series of bears, increasing in size as time went by, until the bear I described in the beginning of this story disappeared into the swamp. Moments later I caught a flash of movement off to my right as a big black boar emerged from the timber.

This was the bear I was looking for. He was as tall as the barrel at the shoulders and his body dwarfed the 55 gallon drum. The bear immediately knocked the barrel over and reached inside, dragging a chunk of fat out with his right paw. I eased the hammer back on the muzzleloader and waited for a clear shot.

After eating several small chunks of meat the boar stood and turned, exposing his right side and quartering slightly away from me. I placed the crosshairs about six inches behind the right shoulder, intending to send the bullet through both lungs and break the left shoulder. I squeezed the trigger and when the hammer



Above is a view the author had of his bait site from his ground blind. Being patient and watching other bear's actions helped him realize a bigger bear was near and he was able to make the shot count.

fell, the bear disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

I dropped the gun from my shoulder and watched in the direction of the bear as I jerked the ramrod from beneath the muzzleloaders barrel. The smoke cleared and I could see the bear was down but still trying to get up, so I quickly finished reloading and shot the bear a second time.

The bear was now motionless, but I reloaded a third time before entering the clearing. For a change, there was no ground shrinkage as I approached this bruin. If anything, he was bigger than I had hoped. As it turned out, the second shot was not really necessary. The first round had done exactly what it was suppose to, punching through both lungs and breaking the left shoulder before exiting. But, since the bear only had to go a short distance to get into heavy cover, an insurance round is not a bad idea.

My bear was well over seven feet, weighed close to 450 pounds, and the skull would later score high enough to qualify for four different record books. Not bad for my first Manitoba black bear, first bear

on a baited hunt and first bear with a muzzleloader.

I was not sure how I would feel when I took my first bear over bait. Having done it, I think about it often. It was not any less of a hunt than the spot and stalk method, it was just different. To consistently produce quality bears an outfitter has to do a lot of homework in selecting the best locations, preparing the bait sites and maintaining them year after year. In country where black bears are found in heavy cover, as is the case in Manitoba, baiting is the only viable way to hunt black bear and have a reasonable chance at a trophy.

Manitoba's Parkland is well known for producing big whitetail, big elk and world class fishing for trout. What it should probably be known for, first and foremost, is big black bears. You can be guaranteed that each and every May from now on you will find me watching a bait in Manitoba's bear belt, waiting for that bruin of a lifetime.