



BILL LEA

Biggest Big Game

Large eastern black bears have become the North Carolina big game animal.

written by Chris Powell

Not that long ago, the most prized big game animal for hunters in North Carolina was a mature buck deer. Their elusive nature, large size and ability to produce stunning antlers kept big bucks at the pinnacle of hunting accomplishments. Sure, bear hunting has always been around in North Carolina, but for many years the possibility of bagging a trophy bear was remote.

That all changed in the 1990s, when black bear populations really hit their stride and reached a current high of about 7,000 in the East and 4,000 in the western part of the state (see "The Best of Times for Black Bears," November 2003). Near the coast, bears expanded into farming areas with heavy densities of food crops such as soybeans, corn and peanuts. Hunters started recording kills in the 400-pound class, then 500, then 600, and then in 1998 one unnaturally obese bear pegged the scales at 880 pounds—the heaviest black bear ever recorded in North America.

Since then, bears have claimed the throne of big game animals in North Carolina. And it's easy to understand why. A mature black bear is guaranteed to provide a memorable hunt and a lot of meat, as well as the ultimate trophy—a shiny, black bearskin rug or stuffed mount. Most hunters have antlers of some size hanging on their walls. But not many have a bear mount or bear rug in their living room like Sid Cayton does.

Cayton, a Beaufort County native, farms a considerable amount of acreage in that area and has access to one particular farm that has been so productive for bear hunting he requested its location be kept out of this story. The increase of bears, and especially big bears, in counties such as Beaufort, Craven, Hyde and others has sparked heavy interest among out-of-town hunters.

"Every year it seems to be more and more bear hunters," Cayton said. "There's more and more strange trucks coming in. In Aurora you hang out at that [N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission] bear-weighing station, you'll see a bunch of activity. You'll see trucks that you don't see any other time of the year."

Cayton is in the minority among eastern bear hunters in that he prefers to hunt bears by stalking or ambushing instead of running them with dogs. He also has no desire to cash in on the sport as a commercial guide, even though he could. Instead, he takes family and friends so they can experience the thrill of a type of hunting like no other.

It is just that sort of hunt that prompts Randy Myers to drive up from Orlando, Fla., each year to hunt alongside Cayton. A friend of Cayton's, Myers has tried during several past seasons to claim his bear. He put a round into a very big boar bear three years ago, but it was able to travel far enough that another hunter finished it off. On smaller bears, Myers has passed up shots, holding out for one larger than 500 pounds.

Bears are creatures of habit, and Cayton, who regularly works the land, can pattern bears so consistently that he actually names them. Once Cayton has an idea of where a bear is crossing, he sets up on the spot in the early morning hours to try and catch the animal coming out of the field. However, if the situation calls for it, he'll try a stalk hunt. Bears have an extremely good sense of smell but very poor vision, making it difficult for them to see a still or hidden hunter. So hunters can creep into rifle range provided the wind is favorable.

For Cayton, who has ample access to a variety of game species, bear hunting is it. "Everybody wants to get one," Cayton said. "I guess it's the trophy. I've killed 10-pointers—nice bucks. But the thing to me is I want to break into the 600-pound class of bear, and it's going to be tough to do. The bears we were killing up here were 400 and 450 pounds. They were fat, but they were short, and they just couldn't get any more weight. You've got to have some height to weigh a lot. Ol' Big Earl, he was long. One of my friends' momma killed him back there in those woods. He weighed 500 pounds, and that was the first 500-pounder. But now, you know, that is not uncommon."

Stalk Hunting

I accompanied Myers on a morning stalk hunt to experience for myself what it would be like to slip up on a bear. Cayton and Myers hunt bears only in the morning, which gives them the best opportunity at a big boar bear. Large male bears prefer to feed in the early morning hours, taking the first pick of fields and foods, then leave at dawn. The smaller female bears are left to enter a field at dusk and feed at night.

I had imagined we would be belly-crawling through woods, hiding behind trees and taking it real slow. Instead, we walked at a good pace down a dirt farm road that was on top of a dike that encircled a 500-acre soybean field. Thanks to the full moon and clear sky, we could see

most of the field with binoculars. I thought a large black bear would be easily noticed in a knee-high soybean field, but as hard as I looked, I could see nothing.

Yet as we continued on toward a far corner of the field, Myers suddenly froze, and we both immediately dropped to the ground. Having concentrated our glassing on the parts of the field farthest away, neither one of us had seen the bear that was visible to the naked eye no more than 100 yards in front of us. It was a half hour before legal shooting time, so we had no choice but to sit in the middle of the dirt road and wait. I felt exposed and had to remind myself that we were hunting not deer with razor-sharp eyesight, but bears



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that can't see worth a lick. As long as the wind stayed in our favor and we didn't move too much, Myers would likely get a shot.

With his knees bent in front of him, he rested his rifle and flipped the caps off the scope. I sat nearby with the binoculars glued to my face, watching the bear grazing on soybeans and making his way directly toward us. Occasionally the bear would stand straight up and look in our direction, as if he smelled something but wasn't quite sure.

Twenty minutes before legal shooting time, I estimated the bear's distance. "One hundred yards," I whispered to Myers, helping him get his range for the shot. The bear meandered ever closer. "Eighty-five yards," I whispered again. Now it was 10 minutes to legal. "Seventy yards," I said, barely audible. And I began to get a little concerned that the bear would



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The search for black bear begins at first light as hunters gather, then check for sign in a nearby field. The dogs, meanwhile, remain in their boxes, eagerly sniffing the air.

be right beside us by the time a shot could be taken. Probably too late to crawl for cover on the other side of the dike, I thought.

With day breaking all around, five minutes left before legal shooting time and a bear at 70 yards, I thought this one was in the bag. But then for no apparent reason, the bear headed toward the road. It then zipped across faster than it seemed possible for an animal that size to move, and disappeared into the adjacent swamp. In the blink of an eye, we had gone from sure success to nothing.

After the hunt, we described the way it had acted to Cayton, who said it was probably a smallish bear between 100 and 200 pounds—well below what Myers was looking for. Younger bears have a tendency to bolt for the woods at the first hint of light, while mature bears prefer to ease out, taking their time. The full moon also didn't help, because the moonlight likely prompted the bear out of the field before legal shooting time.

For the first time in a number of seasons, a bear wasn't taken off the farm Cayton hunts. He blamed it on a failed corn crop; a good crop would have brought in large male bears to feed. "I've never had to hunt the December season before," Cayton said. "Usually we have all of our tags filled during November."

Dog Hunting

The other popular method to hunt bears in eastern North Carolina is with dogs. The use of dogs to hunt bears is the opposite of

hunters to judge a bear's direction and, more importantly, size. No one wants to chase a pack of dogs through impossible low country, only to find a juvenile bear treed. Following a big breakfast, we divided up into groups and proceeded to look for tracks.

Two sets of paw prints from different bears were soon discovered at opposite ends of the property, and after comparing notes over the radios, the hunters made a decision. Neither track belonged to a huge bear, but one did show promise, so the dog boxes were emptied and the hunt was on.

Convoys of vehicles bounced down a labyrinth of hunt club roads, trying to determine where the pack was headed

This particular bear climbed up a tree a few hundred yards off the road, and Tim Williams of Raleigh was the first to arrive on the scene. The firearm of choice for this type of hunt is any revolver that is a .357 Magnum or higher. Pistols are preferred because the dense, swampy pocosins that must be traversed are so thick that a rifle would simply be too cumbersome to carry. A pistol in a shoulder holster isn't as likely to snag branches, and a hammer-operated revolver dunked in muddy water will still fire, whereas a semi-auto could jam. Taking careful aim, Williams trained his .44 Magnum pistol on the bear's neck and dropped it to the ground. Once the first shot was fired, a volley from fellow hunters quickly finished the bear off. The boar weighed in at 267 pounds, not a huge male bear by eastern standards, but a shooter nonetheless.

"They found the track, turned the dogs loose, and once it jumped, they bayed," said Williams, reliving the chase. "Then it came on over to another road, and we packed more dogs to it, and once we did that, they bayed him again probably 150 yards further up, and we slipped in there and killed him."

With the bear on the ground, it quickly became obvious why so many people are needed for this type of hunting. The bear was in a tract of land that was extremely difficult to walk through, much less drag a heavy four-legged animal. Using machetes, some members of the party went to work hacking a path back to the nearest road. Meanwhile, 2-foot lengths of saplings were cut and tied into a rope about every 5 feet, so that 10 men could drag the bear out like a team of horses. What I thought was going to be an arduous task actually proved surprisingly easy, and in no time the bear was hanging up at the skinning shed.

But that isn't always the case. "It's taken us 10 or 11 hours to get one out before," Batchelor said. "I killed one in Turkey Creek, and we got that bear out at 11 o'clock that night, and I killed him that morning."

Indeed, everything about bear hunting is an extreme sport. Whether it's stalk-hunting a bear in a field or following a hot chase through low country, the experience is sure to get the heart pumping and the adrenaline coursing. With bear populations so healthy in both eastern and western North Carolina, more hunters likely will get a chance at North Carolina's biggest big game animal. ♦



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stalk hunting. Instead of a quiet, solitary sport, dog hunting can involve 30 or more hunters chasing a clamoring pack of hounds.

Tim Batchelor, a longtime bear hunter from Duplin County, invited me along on a hunt at Camp Brinson, a 1,000-acre hunt club located in Craven County. The hunt actually starts the day before, when the hunt club roads are dragged to loosen up the dirt. The softened roads record all of the tracks from the night before the hunt, which allows the

and where the dogs might bay or tree the bear. A bayed bear is one that has stopped running and is on the ground, usually surrounded by the dogs. A treed bear, of course, is one that has been run up a tree. Either way, once a bear has stopped, it's a mad dash through briers and cold swamp water to see who can get there first. A stationary bear can't be left that way for long because it might fight the dogs and possibly injure or kill one.