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Photos Courtesy of Rebecca Spring



# BLACK BEAR

It was the second year we had Montana residency, and the berry crop had failed that fall. Still getting to know the local area prevented us from having a go-to archery elk spot we could hit after work, but black bears can be found nearly everywhere in western Montana. We grabbed a quick dinner at the sub sandwich store attached to the gas station, filled up the truck and headed to an area not 30 miles from Missoula to go see what we could glass up that evening.

The woods were crunchy from the lack of summer precipitation, and smoke hung in the air from the wildfires burning across the West. The sky turned a vibrant orange far earlier than a normal sunset as we crested the ridge and turned back toward the east. Not much further, an old logging unit was bisected by the ridge road with gated access roads on both sides. The meandering logging roads and trails behind the gate were wide open for a couple miles. It was too late in the day to be able to access the more hidden areas that generally held the bears, but we stopped to glass it anyway.

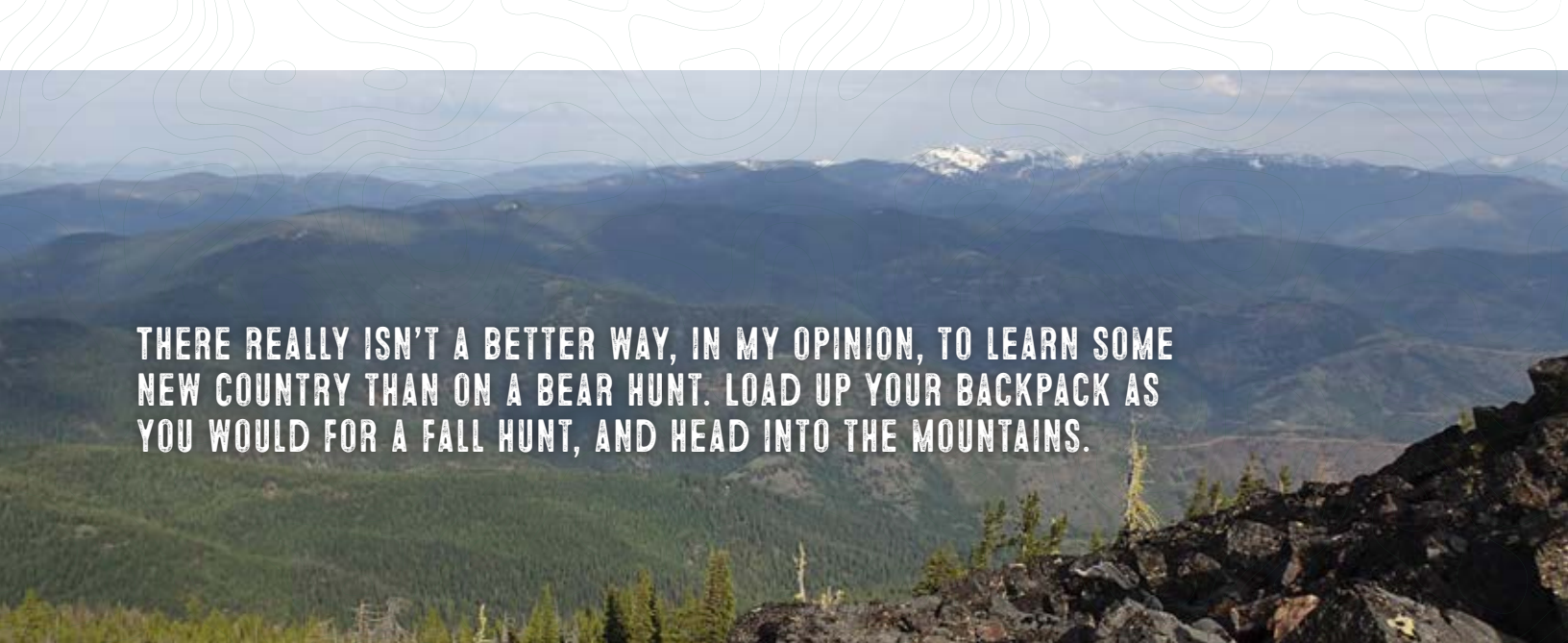
The first spot resulted in some quality scenic photos with an almost ominous feel to the early evening, but we soon moved on.

With bears, time and again it seems you investigate every burnt stump or log trying so hard to make it move or turn that knot sticking up into an ear. Then, when your frustration level with glassing for bears has nearly reached the point of surrender and you start swearing at spot-'n'-stalk bear hunting, a round black or brown ball appears on an opposite hillside or walking down an old road or skid

Justin kneels admiring a spring black bear taken in Southeast Alaska.







**THERE REALLY ISN'T A BETTER WAY, IN MY OPINION, TO LEARN SOME NEW COUNTRY THAN ON A BEAR HUNT. LOAD UP YOUR BACKPACK AS YOU WOULD FOR A FALL HUNT, AND HEAD INTO THE MOUNTAINS.**

trail. You instantly know it is a bear, the color is black but almost shines in comparison to the dull hue of a burnt stump. Your heart rate begins to rise, not necessarily due to the potential pending stalk, but rather the fact you have laid eyes on a bear in his natural settings.

They all seem big to start, but after some experience, a quick look at the body language and stature will tell you far more. A trick I like to use is to compare him to a tree or stump then look around and try to find one of similar traits for comparison. With a truly big bear, though, you instantly know. I generally utter something along the lines of “Volkswagen,” reminiscent of the line from Happy Gilmore after he is struck by the car on the course.

The second glassing point was a wide spot in the road where a few steps down the hill opened up our view to the bottom edge of the cut. The second spot revealed a bear that would square about 6-feet, 8-inches, and once spotted, it wasn't two minutes until we had on packs and were covering the 500 yards that separated us.

Stalking a bear is far different than the ungulates we generally hunt; this is especially true of a mature boar. He owns the forest and goes where he wants. And with no predators other than humans willing to take on a mature bear, a twig snap

or misstep is as likely to go unnoticed as it is for him to investigate the sound. This generally means coming closer to you to see who the culprit of this interruption may be and, if perhaps, it may not be just the tasty snack he has been looking for.

This bear was no different. He could care less about his surroundings. He was far too light for this time of year to make it through hibernation, and he was constantly digging roots, looking for any nutrients he could find, which allowed us to slip to within 50 yards. He turned broadside, and the roar of the 7mm Mag. echoed throughout the canyon.

People will say bears can't see well, and in comparison to most hunted species this is true; I have heard their poor vision likened to the vision of a human, which, in my experience, holds true. They are working with about what we have without binos.

Bear hunting is commonly questioned, more so than other types of hunting, in that people assume the bear is only shot for his hide or skull. Once you have taken a bear, or at least tried some, you will realize that the meat of a bear is just that, meat. And knowing the flavor and attributes of it creates table fare that commonly results in people going from a look of disgust to inquiring to the likelihood of them being able to take one as they enjoy a piece of



**Justin and his wife's spring bear camp somewhere along the Oregon-Idaho border.**

**After seeing plenty of bears from their first camp, they moved camp to a lower elevation where bears seemed to be congregated.**







fall bear ham, or go for a second helping of sweet-and-sour bear. Another favorite of ours is bear pepperoni, and if you are fortunate enough to take a fall bear fattened up by berries or acorns, the rendered fat is still the secret to a flaky, delicious pie crust much as it was before the introduction of Crisco in 1911.

Bear hunting is conducted in many different states and provinces, and in each location the tactics used to hunt these bruins vary. Ranging from a classic bait hunt in the hills of Arkansas, where baiting is not only a

science but also an art, to the hounding of bears in the Northwoods of Maine or Wisconsin, to the classic bear drive of a Pennsylvania bear season, each tactic has its loyal supporters whose roots can stretch back over generations. Many houndsmen, for example, prize their bloodlines of hounds and treat them as members of their family. When bear baiting was outlawed in Oregon via a ballot initiative I was 12 years old, the age you could legally hunt in Oregon.

As I came of age, the bear population increased, and once I was 16 and had a four-wheel-drive F-150 at my disposal to access areas out of reach of my mom's minivan, I began teaching myself out of necessity to spot and stalk black bears.

Today, all states in the West offer bear seasons. Idaho and Montana have a spring season that can be hunted with an over-the-counter tag, while Oregon offers spring hunts through a draw. The Southwest has bear seasons and spring hunts as well,

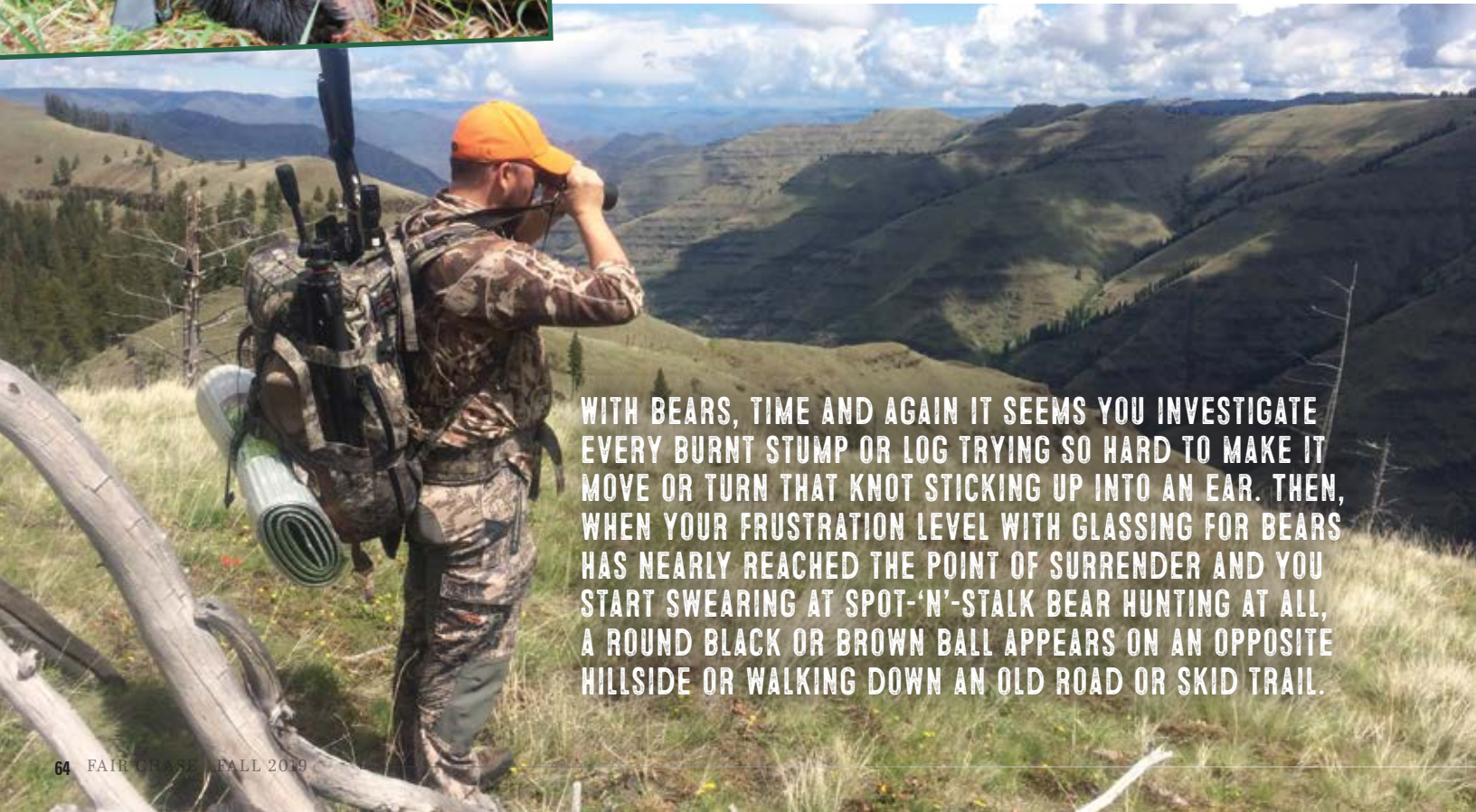
though in this article I will focus on Oregon, Idaho, and Montana as those are the states I have found success in. Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Washington, Nevada, California, and Alaska all offer bear seasons as well, along with an ever-growing list of eastern states.

A spot-and-stalk bear hunt in the Pacific Northwest is not only affordable, but with proper research and effort, offers a relatively high percentage of success. Don't be fooled by low harvest odds; many folks buy a bear tag in case they happen onto one while out pursuing other game. The number of actual hard-core bear hunters, especially in areas where they are limited to spot-and-stalk, is relatively low.

I really enjoy spring bear hunting, and generally speaking, I have found my best success between about the 20th of May through the end of the month. An early season fall hunt can result in more bears being seen and ultimately, more opportunity as the bears are in a summer



**TOP:** Justin with an early September Montana archery bear. **LEFT:** Official Measurer Carl Frey is all smiles after taking this Alaska bruin at 12 paces.



**WITH BEARS, TIME AND AGAIN IT SEEMS YOU INVESTIGATE EVERY BURNT STUMP OR LOG TRYING SO HARD TO MAKE IT MOVE OR TURN THAT KNOT STICKING UP INTO AN EAR. THEN, WHEN YOUR FRUSTRATION LEVEL WITH GLASSING FOR BEARS HAS NEARLY REACHED THE POINT OF SURRENDER AND YOU START SWEARING AT SPOT-'N'-STALK BEAR HUNTING AT ALL, A ROUND BLACK OR BROWN BALL APPEARS ON AN OPPOSITE HILLSIDE OR WALKING DOWN AN OLD ROAD OR SKID TRAIL.**



feeding pattern and are starting to feel the pressure of the looming fall. Oregon's opening day of August 1 is one of the first seasons to open and doesn't conflict with most other fall hunts. In southwest Oregon where I grew up, you can actually buy a second bear tag over the counter in the fall should you fill your first. The advantage to a spring hunt is if you hunt early, even earlier than previously mentioned, the large boars come out first and you can limit your encounters with smaller bears. Waiting until later in states that have seasons running into June, you can catch the bear rut. This can be problematic as the big boars are out moving and checking sows, so getting on one even after finding him in the glass can be a challenge, but with better access due to snow-free roads and the bears being visible, it also offers you a chance at a true monster.

The biggest key to success is finding what the bears are eating, which varies by locale and season; prickly pear cactus in the Southwest,

huckleberries in Montana, remnants of orchards from old homesteads in Hells Canyon, long before it was made into a wilderness. All these have served as draws to congregate bears and allow the hunter to pattern and ultimately get eyes on one. A year a food source fails has, for me, worked out well as the bears almost go into a panic trying to replace the missing calories, which causes them to be more visible; my best bear fell under these conditions. And one year when we had a late spring, the arrowleaf balsamroot around Montana was not up by late May had the same effect. This pushed my wife's best bear down low into an accessible area which he rarely would visit.

Oregon offers a bear tag to nonresidents for \$16. You must purchase your \$167 non-resident hunting license, but for under \$200 you can have two bear tags in your pocket. Montana is \$350 for the license with a few additional costs necessary such as the \$10 conservation license and \$15 base hunting license. Add

another \$10 if you want to use a bow. Idaho falls in between with a required license of \$154.75 and a bear tag in most units costing \$186, though some of the over-populated units offer a reduced price tag at \$41.75 and hunting these overpopulated units would allow you to purchase a second tag for an additional \$41.75. These Idaho units also allow baiting with some additional stipulations, but with a bear population well above objective, all tactics can be successful. Idaho also offers a spring draw hunt in two particular units that are limited to spot-and-stalk only. We have found great success with encountering bears on that tag but the odds are very long to justify applying unless you already are purchasing an Idaho license to apply for special draws or already have a hunt planned there in the fall.

Western Montana and northeastern Oregon have ample public ground, nearly all USFS, that have plenty of bruins to chase. Idaho has both timber company lands and national forest that hold

plenty of bears as well, mainly in the northern two-thirds of the state. Eastern Montana and southwestern Idaho have very few bears and many units don't even have a season. The majority of Oregon's bears will be in the northeastern mountains and the west side of the Cascades, though much of that westside country is held by private timber companies. Most allow bear hunting but require either walk-in hunting, or in recent years, an access permit that can be purchased online but in some cases are limited in availability.

One of my favorite ways to identify areas with high bear populations is to read hiker or biker forums on the Internet. I have found folks complaining of encountering three or four bears on a trip, and they generally will be very explicit in the exact area it was encountered to warn outdoor enthusiasts of its presence. Be advised, though, that too many of them report that they are all huge bears, so take a size report with a grain of salt.



**JUSTIN TAKING GLASSING INSTRUCTIONS FROM HIS SON ON AN IDAHO SPRING BEAR HUNT, HIS ADVICE WORKED.**

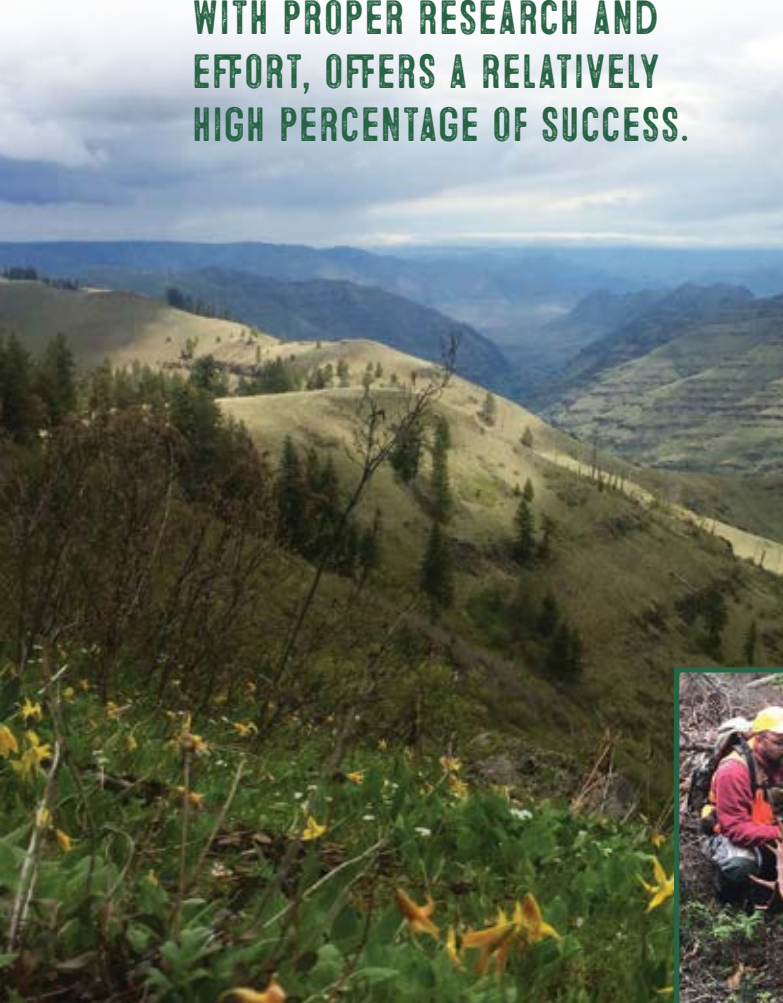




There really isn't a better way, in my opinion, to learn some new country than on a bear hunt. Load up your backpack as you would for a fall hunt, and head into the mountains. Early spring can reward you with morels, shed antlers, and a freshly emerging bear from hibernation whose coat and meat is second to none. A fall trip can serve as a scouting trip for an upcoming hunt, and without the common spring thunderstorm, it is really a great time to be out in the woods as well. Bear hunting takes some time to really learn how to glass and read the country and sign

to determine where bears are frequenting. While it may not be on the first day of your first trip, taking a bear on your own in the mountains is generally a highly rewarding accomplishment. With any hunting trip though, remember it's about the overall experience—everything that happens outside of the taking of an animal. What better way to experience the outdoors than on your own, challenging the wits of an old bruin as the snow is first coming off, or the first evening frosts of fall start to cover the high mountain meadows at dawn? ■

## A SPOT-AND-STALK BEAR HUNT IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST IS NOT ONLY AFFORDABLE, BUT WITH PROPER RESEARCH AND EFFORT, OFFERS A RELATIVELY HIGH PERCENTAGE OF SUCCESS.



### GEAR LIST:

**HUNTING RIFLE:** Any normal hunting caliber will do; I have taken bears with a .257 Weatherby to a .338 Winchester Mag. The shots are generally close if you want them to be, so no need to buy a new rifle for this hunt.

**OPTICS:** Buy what you can afford, and let the glass do the walking for you. I generally carry 10X in a chest harness and then will take a spotting scope or my 15X on my tripod. In western Oregon, the timber cover and terrain allow you to get close and a 10X power is more than sufficient. In big burns or glassing open areas across a timbered canyon in Montana or Eastern Oregon, the 15s are ideal.

**QUALITY BOOTS:** Finding bears requires covering ground and so does getting them back out when you get one down. There are numerous brands out there that make a great mountain boot; any will work, but other than a coastal hunt on grass flats in Alaska, rubber boots don't really have a home in the bear woods of the Northwest.

**RAIN GEAR:** It's spring in the mountains, thunderstorms are common in the afternoons but generally pass quickly. I have some lightweight packable stuff I like to use.

**PACK:** I use a larger day pack that I can fit a quarter or two and a hide inside. Bears are generally far smaller than most folks imagine, so between two folks, there isn't a bear I have encountered that would be more than one trip for two people loaded heavy once the meat is boned out.

Even including gas and a trespass fee if you elect to hunt timber company ground, it shouldn't set you back more than \$1,500 to do this hunt—at least until you kill a big bruin and want to have a life-sized mount or rug, but that is something to worry about once you have one down.

## NEXT UP: CANADA MOOSE

