The Left Handed Grizzly

      It was the beginning of August and time to pack up and head to Alaska. I will leave on the 7th and not return home until the 22nd. I am now very familiar with the process. I have been hunting in Alaska,The Last Frontier for over a decade and look forward to this with great anticipation.

As the plane descends through the fog, I once again see the familiar landscape of Deadhorse Alaska come into view. I notice something unfamiliar to me. I am not concerned or worried about anything...did I bring everything I need, will someone be there to pick me up, what will the weather be like. None of these thoughts seem to matter. I have all the excitement but without the worry and concern which is unusual for me. My wife tells me I obsess over things, but of course I don't, at least I don't think that I do.

      My thoughts quickly return to my trip last year. I had my trip cut short by my brothers failing health. He passed away on my way home followed by the passing of my older brother two weeks later. Remembering the events did not trouble me. I was comforted knowing both of my brothers had reached their ultimate goal, "In His Presence."

 The plane hitting the Deadhorse strip brought me back to reality. I was there ready for another Alaskan adventure. I was met at the airport on time and all my gear arrived with me, which is amazing!! Wasting no time, myself and a couple other hunters loaded up and we headed down the Dalton highway to Happy Valley base camp and airstrip. Anywhere else the trip would take 1  1/2 to 2 hours. On the Dalton highway, after several thousand potholes and several construction sites, we arrived at Happy Valley about 4 hours later.

      I had assumed we would arrive at Happy Valley then fly to base camp closer to the Brooks Range where we would overnight. The next day we would fly to our respective field camps. I have been educated not to assume too far ahead on an Alaskan Adventure.

      True to form this hunt would be no exception. We were met at Happy Valley but from there things would change. I was met by my long time friend Emily Thoft. Emily is one half of the Ovis Outfitters team. She and her husband, Matt, own and operate Ovis Outfitters. They are both experienced guides and pilots. A more energetic, professional and accommodating team will not be found anywhere. They work tirelessly to give their hunters the hunt of a lifetime.

Base camp was to our east but my camp was west. I would be going directly there. As best and fast as I could, I changed clothes and repacked my gear for the super cub flight to camp. I would leave the rest of my gear in a little trailer at Happy Valley.

      Once in the air, the beauty and majesty of the Alaskan tundra came into full panoramic view. The day was beautiful with a few broken clouds. On the way in we saw several caribou, a couple grizzlies, and a lone bull moose making his way to the mountains. It was simply a beautiful day and the feeling of freedom overwhelmed me. About a half hour out we began our descent and I could see my "hunting' pal" Billy Molls, had marked out a decent landing strip on the river bed.

We landed without incident, unloaded my gear and some supplies. The pilot bid us goodbye and was up and away leaving Billy and me on the tundra 50 to 60 miles from civilization.

      For a temporary time all you know of your life has been left behind. For some this experience is disconcerting and frightening. I have witnessed grown men frightened to tears and demand the pilot return to be flown out. This is not a condemnation of these people. What I am saying is the first time on this type of hunt, the emotional disconnection and the feeling of being alone can be overwhelming. For many before me,  and myself, I reach of calmness and feeling of peace. The solitude brings your spirit in concert with the Creator. Life takes on a whole new clarity as I reconfigure my priorities. I simply recharge!

      Our home away from home was by Alaskan standards, comfortable. A nice Cabelas tent, that we could stand up in, situated on a soft sand bar. Billy had set up with a willow patch blocking us from the prevailing winds. Much nicer than I was used to especially given the nice weather.

      Can't hunt the day you fly in so we headed to a nearby hilltop to glass. The day ended with a spectacular sunset.

The next day we were awakened by the pitter patter of rain on our tent. Normally we would get out the rain gear and push onward. When Billy asked me what I wanted to do, I quietly responded, " I don't feel like getting soaked the first day of a  ten day hunt. Let's fry up some bacon and eggs and just enjoy the morning."  The rain would stop soon.

The memories of last year intruded my mind as I reminded myself to calm down and enjoy this time to the fullest. Fortunately, God gave us no ability to predict the future. We enjoy things most when we live in the present.

As expected the rain ended and a couple hours later we packed what we had prepared for in an all day vigil from the hilltop and set out on a half mile hike. It was wet from the rain but pleasantly cool. We hiked on as the excitement was building. Arriving at the hilltop, we both started glassing before setting up a wind break. There were several caribou on the tundra but too far away to pursue and  one irritated hawk.  Obviously we had taken his lookout. He buzzed us a couple times to make us aware of his displeasure. He then settled for second best on a little bush on the hillside.

      From our vantage point we would sporadically  pick up caribou crossing the tundra and at one point Billy spotted a female grizzly coming directly our way. Her presence caused a little excitement but she veered off to the river bed and made her way across the tundra. The day was beautiful, cool and calm. We left the hillside as the sun set and tucked the tundra to sleep. Tomorrow there would be a little more excitement!

      We were sitting on the hilltop glassing as Billy alerted me he had picked up a grizzly making his way down the river bed directly toward our camp. As we guessed the bear we could see was young and really not what we were looking for but I wanted to get a little closer. It would be good to work out some of the adrenaline in an actual hunting situation.  We agreed and made our way down the hillside to a bluff about 50 feet above the river bed. From here Billy could set up above me and get some good bear behavior footage while I lay prone and observed the young male bear. It was now that I made an amateur mistake. I kept inching and moving further down the bluff as the young bear worked the river bed in our direction. I suddenly became aware the bear was about to walk out of sight directly below me at the foot of the bluff I was on. Remember I said the bluff was about 50 feet. Above me I heard Billy stir from behind his camera. Quickly I decided to stand, I didn't want to confront a grizzly point blank laying down. As I stood I could see the youngster 60-70 feet directly below me looking straight at me! He was very unsure of himself. This may have been the first time in his life he had seen a human. He would stand then drop down. After about thirty to forty seconds, he decided to leave and took off on a half hearted run down the river. I was relieved but embarrassed and ashamed I would make such a mistake. I have been up close and personal with many browns and grizzlies and have always respected their presence. I vowed never to get complacent again around any dangerous animal. The "real deal" would take place in a couple days in this very same area of the river.

      The following morning as Billy stepped out of the tent to glass he quickly spotted two caribou bulls to our east. They were headed in our general direction and were both respectable bulls. After a little conference we decided to not look a gift horse in the mouth and set out after the best one of the two.

      Quickly we threw our gear together taking as little as possible expecting a successful hunt. The bulls were probably 1  1/2 miles away but still headed in our general direction. We made our way through the alders and willows that completely covered the valley. About a half hour later we were well with 300 yards but could only see the plateau and I decided to take a rest on a tundra tuff. We waited for several minutes as the bulls fed to the top of the little ridge and the bull we wanted came into view. He just wouldn't stop walking. They started to feed away from us when Billy left out a little squeal to get their attention. They stopped and came to attention. That was my cue.  I squeezed the trigger and the Blaser cracked. Immediately we heard the thump. The bull was hit but still had enough energy to get just out of sight over a little rise in the tundra. We quickly gathered our things and made our way toward the bull. All we had to do is cross a small stream between us and the bull...we thought.  We reached the bank of the river, 50 feet wide, 3 -4 feet deep and moving fast. What a surprise! When we reached the river all I heard from Billy was, "WHOA!!!" We both knew our caribou lay dead, possibly wounded on the other side of the river and we needed to get there quickly. We also knew waders would be of no use so we got our our trekking poles and headed across. I believe the scariest thought I had while crossing was when we got near the other shore and knew we would have to come back across with at least 100 lbs + per pack, gear, cape and horns. I decided to not think about that right now and we had a caribou to go get. We made it across, up the bank on the other side. Over the little rise we saw our caribou down but not out, I quickly dispatched him.

      As we approached the bull we could see he was no Booner but as absolutely beautiful animal. His antlers were still in full velvet and to this day I kept them that way. We caped the bull and Billy decided to pack it all in one trip. The extra weight would help us crossing the river. I have to admit I had second thoughts. Arriving at the river we started across. Somewhere about the middle of the river I veered to my right a little thinking I crossed there, wrong. One more step and the ice cold water rose to my mid section! The water was so cold it almost took my breath. Quickly I realized I needed to retreat one, more step and I would be overpowered by the water and it would be a life threatening situation. Billy had already made it and was intently watching me. I managed to keep my balance and find water that was thigh high as I made it to the bank. Both Billy and I were grateful as we dumped the water out of our boots. We agreed we would look for a good bear on this side of the river!

      At camp the harrowing event soon turned into laughter. There is something to be said for surviving a dangerous challenge that helps you mature and become more of a whole person. We would sleep peacefully tonight.

      The next morning we were back on the hilltop hopeful to fill a grizzly tag. A short time after we set down Billy noticed a bear around the corner, to our left in the river bed. He was slowly cruising much the same as the bear did two days prior. In fact, for a moment we thought it might be him again. After closer inspection it was obvious this was a much older mature boar. A little discussion and the decision was made to go for the bear. He was big, old and gnarly looking..a beautiful tundra grizzly. Descending the hilltop, I almost had the feeling of de ja vu. We had made the exact steps two days earlier only this time it was in earnest and there would be no distractions, this was the "real deal".

      We finally reached the cut bank and settled in. I got prone and ready to shoot, while Billy got prepared to back me up. He was about 110 yards out, perfect! I brought the Blaser to life. The first shot entered the back of the half of the front shoulder and sent him up and completely over on his back! He went down but immediately got back up!! I quickly shot a second and  third shot with Billy hitting him twice for insurance.

     I know it sounds like a lot but you  don't let a grizzly get to cover if you can stop him. Retrieving a grizzly from cover is not like hunting rabbits. As long as they have an ounce of life left they are prepared to take yours. When you get them down, you keep them down.

      We made our way across the riverbed crossing at least two small streams as we cautiously approached the downed monarch. He lay still.  His life had been taken by someone he never met. We knelt in prayer giving the moment its  proper reverence.

      Looking closely at the grizzly revealed a life of struggle. He had numerous deep scars, a torn ear, worn teeth, and a handicapped right paw with his right claw broken and healed sideways. We wondered why he only dug with his left paw, now we knew. Upon field dressing him, scores of parasites left his body. I am not trying to bore everyone with gore, I am trying to decently represent the hard life these animals live. His long life was a day to day struggle to survive. Not a pretty picture as some would have us believe. I don't care for or condone reckless slaughter, but I will forever be a hunter, selecting game to be taken by the highest standards, such as those of the Safari Club International.

      It was day four with my main tags filled. We called base camp to move us. Billy wanted to get to the mountains and set up camp for his sheep hunter coming in. I would pick up another caribou tag to augment my wolf tags and go with him to set up and scout for rams. The weather was beautiful as the super cubs lifted to take us to the mountains. We touched down in a valley that was very familiar to me. In 2012 I spent ten days in this valley with Billy. We took a beautiful Dall sheep on that hunt but the weather was completely different. We spent almost every day hunting in the rain and snow. Hunting white sheep in the snow can be a challenge but we prevailed and left the valley only to return today.

      The next four days were the most peaceful days I have ever spent hunting. There was no pressure. If a really, really good caribou or  some wolves came by we would be hunting again. If not, we would just sit, glass and enjoy the beautiful days God gave us.

      Day five came and late morning I heard the familiar sound of the super cub coming up the valley. A new hunter was arriving and it was time for me to go. Billy and I said our goodbyes and it was back in the air headed for base camp, onto Happy Valley, then to Deadhorse, a flight to Barrow, Anchorage, Minneapolis and finally to my destination, Pittsburgh.

The hunt was over but the memories were completely intact. A beautiful caribou, a dangerous river crossing, and many memorable days spent with my best friend, Billy, and of course the "left handed grizzly."

Barry C. Barton