

Swanson River Moose Hunt, 2009

by Pat Shields

I believe it was about 1985 when I first started canoeing down the Swanson River in search of a bull moose that would provide meat for my family. My hunting partners have gone by the names of Steve, Jim, Joel, Rene, Arnie, Tim, Jon, & Jeff. Lea has a theory about this diversity of names, but we won't explore fiction right now.

Well, this year turned out like many in the past, that is, I did a little hunting locally, but my wildlife encounters mostly consisted of barking dogs, clanking boat trailers traveling down Tustumena Lake Road, and jet skis and screaming children recreating on Centennial Lake. So, into the back of the pickup went the beat up canoe that my father-in-law, Pete Weatherford, had given to me after he had made several trips down the Swanson River with it, and down river went Pat and his new hunting partner, Jeff (the camera pans over to see Lea grinning).

Hunting out of a camp on the Swanson River provides a bit more of a challenge than hauling in a camp on a pack of horses, but it is nothing like sheep hunting. When you get to the "trailhead," you unload your canoe and line it with a tarp and begin packing. Let's see, you need a tent, two sleeping bags and pads, 5 gallons of water, a cook stove and fuel, lantern and fuel, an axe, two pack-boards, two hunting day-packs filled to the brim, two rifles, and food for two for a week. This may not seem like a lot, but when it gets stuffed into a canoe and both hunters take their seats, the very obvious question becomes, "where in the world will you ever put a moose?"



After an uneventful 6 hour trip downriver to our hunting camp, we got everything unpacked, got both tents set up (one was to store our food and supplies), and headed out for an evening hunt. It really didn't concern me that we neither saw nor heard any moose, regardless of gender. After all, we had five more days of hunting ahead of us. However, the next couple of days of hunting produced the same results, but we weren't without hope. My hunting partner strolled into camp after a morning hunt, took his hat off and threw it at me and said, "What do you think?" I took one sniff of it and asked him if he forgot to put toilet paper in his pack. That didn't even faze him though. He just smiled and said, "I scared up a bull today and that's when I found his rutting pit; I rubbed his scent all over my hat, what do you think?" What did I think – well I thought he smelled like the tail end of a bull moose that had only one thing on his mind. "You ain't bringing that hat into our tent, partner," I told him. "Don't worry, he said, "I'm saving this hat for tonight's hunt."

On the fourth day of hunting, we awoke to frost on the ground and clear skies. Our tact this day was to split up and head for two rutting pits we had found. This should hopefully put us in the

vicinity of a bull moose, which we hoped to entice into the open by doing some cow calling and bull scraping with the scapulas we each had brought. I got to my spot in about a half hour and turned on my GPS. It said that my hunting partner would be located about ¼ mile to the west of me. This was perfect. We could feed off of each other's calls, making any rutting bull in the area all excited to either pick up another cow for his harem or to fight off any male challenger. I got all situated on a nice down-fall and let out my best version of a cow moose wanting a new husband. I only wish I knew what that was supposed to sound like, so in reality I just made some loud moan and hoped no other hunter was in the area. My partner responded a few minutes later by scraping the brush with his scapula followed by a grunt or two. No response. I waited about 15 minutes and scraped the brush with my scapula and grunted a few times. I then heard my partner cow call. It shouldn't be long now I thought. It wasn't. About a minute later I heard my partner yell out (not in moose language, but in Alaskan English), "That's far enough, now back off." That "call" immediately sent chills down my spine. I knew what was happening. He had encountered a bear. I grabbed my pack, threw the scapula in it, and started



out on a fast trot in his direction. I again heard him yell out, "Now, back off, don't come any closer." Then the noise I had been waiting to hear the past few days occurred. A rifle shot. I stopped dead in my tracks and briefly contemplated what might have just happened. It was altogether possible that my friend had been charged by a bear and he had gotten off one shot. Either he or the bear

could be seriously hurt or worse yet, dead. I briefly waited to listen for another shot, or any other noise, but heard nothing. I then called out, "Are you Ok?" Thankfully I heard him yell back, "Yes!" I then needed to know something very important, so I followed up with, "Is the bear between you and I." He responded, "Yes." Oh great! Down went the safety on my rifle and into Rambo-mode I went. The last thing I wanted to see was a bear coming through the brush on a full gallop. Well, I finally made it to where my partner was standing and he still had his gun in the ready position. "What happened," I said. He told me that after he cow called he heard a "whoof," and knew immediately that the respondent was not a moose, but a bear. He said he stepped out into a little clearing and saw a brown bear sow and her two cubs approaching him at a steady pace. When he yelled out to her, "That's far enough, now back off," she did not react like most bears do when they figure out they have encountered a human. She stopped for a moment, walked around some brush and then came right at him again. That's when he told her to back off, but she kept coming, so he fired a shot in her direction. When he did this, she and her cubs reluctantly strolled off, but did not seem bothered by the noise of the 338 magnum

rifle shot. By the time I got to where this had all occurred, we could hear her growling off in the distance, which could have been a response to some unruly cubs or it might have been the result of her being unhappy about being run off by the rifle shot.

After discussing (not whispering) the situation for 15 minutes or so, Jeff and I decided to take a hike to another area and do some more hunting. As we were leaving, he made the comment, "I sure hope she doesn't end up in our camp." I didn't say anything to that comment, but I did think to myself that no way this bear would travel to our camp. I had been hunting in this area for more than 20 years and had never had a bear in camp or on any moose gut-piles, and I had harvested multiple moose in the vicinity.

We made the ½ mile hike to a nearby lake and did a little moose calling, but were greeted by nothing other than the warm sunshine that had made its way above the treetops. We observed all of the footprints in the mud surrounding the lake and could identify various shorebirds, wolf, moose, xtratufs (human), and of course our new friend, bear. We decided to head back to camp and plan our evening hunt.

As we approached our campsite, I saw Jeff shoulder his gun and say, "bear." I thought he was trying to get a reaction out of me, but when I looked into camp I could see that we had received a visitor while we were gone. Our supply tent had been torn up and the remains of our supplies were strewn all over camp. Gone was much of our food. "I can't believe that sow came into our camp," I said, "this has never happened to me before." "Well, it has now," responded Jeff.

We made the obvious decision that our hunting trip for 2009 was over. It was time to pack up and get out of there. I pulled my cell phone out and dialed Lea, because she wasn't expecting to pick us up at the pull-out point for a couple of days yet. As I was talking to her on the phone, I heard some splashing in the river, and Jeff was already walking down to see what was making the noise. That's when I heard him yelling, "Get out of here." Our friend was back. I hung up with Lea, even though I knew she was not going to be happy about the sudden end of our conversation. The sow and her two cubs had crossed the river to the opposite shore, but were now back in the water attempting to cross back to our side of the stream. They were about 150 yards downstream of us and the last thing we wanted was to have them back in camp while we were packing up. Our yelling did nothing, so Jeff fired a shot in their direction. Momma bear slowly climbed back up on the bank and growled a few times. But, back in the water she went. Again Jeff fired and once again the sow and her cubs crawled back up on the bank. This same scenario happened four times. After the fourth shot, we watched the sow continue on into the brush and we heard her quite a ways away from the river growling and snapping brush. We went back to camp and started packing up our supplies.

After getting camp all cleaned up and packed up (~1 hour), Jeff and I sat down for a few minutes to once again discuss all that had happened. We were not happy with this bear's behavior. Our presence and our shooting had never seemed to really bother her much at all.

Well, it was time to head for home, so I picked up a couple of items and started for the canoe, which was about 25 yards away. I had just got started when I heard Jeff yell, "Bear!" I turned, grabbed my gun and saw the sow walking into camp. She and her cubs had obviously crossed the river downstream from camp and had circled back and came in silently to look for more food. Jeff told me to be ready to fire, if needed, because he was going to put one in the ground

at her feet. He fired off his 338 rifle and all this did was cause the sow to slowly turn around and slumber off into some nearby alder. But, she didn't stay there long. She came back, this time snapping her jaws. She really wanted to get at our pile of belongings, which of course were positioned between her and us. Jeff and I slowly moved to our left, keeping as much open ground as possible between the sow and us. If she charged, we did not want any brush to block our view. Again, Jeff told me to be ready to shoot because he was going to put a round right in front of her. Right then, I was pretty sure that one of us was going to end up taking a shot at a charging bear, which is not an easy shot with a rifle and scope at close range. Most people prefer a pump shotgun with slugs in these situations. But, with my eye in the scope, finger on the trigger, and the safety in the fire position, I waited for Jeff to shoot, which he did. Dirt flew up from the ground just a couple of feet in front of the jaw-snapping sow. This time, she turned and walked off into the brush with one of her cubs bawling. They walked probably about 100 yards away. That's when Jeff and I quickly went to our pile of supplies and with one hand holding a rifle to our shoulder, we used the other to grab a bag and toss it toward the river. After getting the pile moved one toss closer to the canoe, I started hauling the camp supplies down to the river and throwing them into the canoe while Jeff kept his eye out for our friend.

When the last bag had been tossed into the canoe (not neatly stacked mind you), I yelled at Jeff and down to the river he came, jumped into the canoe, and off we went. For those of you who are Beverly Hillbilly's fans, our canoe looked just like their truck; the only thing missing was Granny. We paddled down river, keeping a close eye out on the south bank, the side of the river where our camp had been located. After a couple of miles, we pulled over where we could unload our mess and repack it for the rest of the trip.



During our departure, my cell phone had rung, but this was one call I for sure didn't have time to take. I knew it had to be Lea. It was. She couldn't take it anymore. After cutting off our first call with shouts of "Hey bear, get out of here," she needed to know what was going on. I kind of figured she was a little nervous, but I didn't realize she had emailed a number of you asking for prayer.

As Jeff and I paddled downstream, we again discussed the whole ordeal and came to the following conclusions:

- This was a young bear, probably 4 or 5 years old, with her first litter of cubs.

- She had come to the cow moose call to investigate the possibility of taking a moose calf, if available.
- Although she looked very healthy, the added burden of nursing two cubs had left this sow needing additional calories.
- Most likely this bear had been around humans before, either as a cub herself, or as an adult, and she now associated people with an easy source of food.
- She followed our scent back to camp and tore up our supply tent to obtain food.
- Although our camp was very, very clean, with our food in ziplock bags inside a tote placed inside a tent, we should have made a food cache.
- Because of the belligerent behavior she displayed, and the reluctance to leave, even when confronted by yelling and shooting, this is a problem bear that will likely teach these same behaviors to her cubs, and therefore should have been shot.

PostScript

A few days after getting home from our hunt, we heard of two other hunting parties that had an encounter with a brown bear sow and her two cubs. One group was camped on the Swanson River and from a distance they observed a brown bear sow tear up one of their coolers before heading straight in the direction of another camp. The second report was from some hunters located about 10-12 miles from our Swanson River camp. They had climbed a small hill to do some moose calling. After letting out a few calls, they watched a brown bear sow and two cubs come out of the brush and onto the same trail they had walked in on. When these hunters saw that she was going to come all the way to where they were at, they climbed down the hill to retrieve their packs. But, the sow had already reached the area. It took four rifle shots in her direction to convince her to move off. They picked up their packs and quickly hiked the two miles they needed to cover to get back to their truck. A couple hundred yards short of getting there, they were confronted by the same sow and her cubs. This is where her life came to an end. The cubs were not shot at this point, but because they are young of the year offspring, their chances of survival are very minimal. Is this the same sow that harassed us. Most who hear of this story believe it is, but at this time, we can't be 100% sure.