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A black bear cub is the central focus, peering through a dense thicket of branches and ferns. The cub's dark fur contrasts with the lighter, moss-covered branches and the vibrant green of the ferns in the foreground. The background is a soft-focus forest scene with various shades of green and brown.

Bear Island

By Ron Spomer



Stalking black boars in a beautiful coastal rainforest leads to plenty of close encounters.



By mid-September it hasn't rained for weeks and the snowfields have melted off the high, granite peaks of Vancouver Island.

The raging torrents locals call "streams" are now a series of pools in which sockeye salmon – some red and green with lust, most yellow with time running out – circle and drift, their missions nearly completed. A few late bloomers squirt into trickles of water leading to the next pool; their humped backs like sunburned keels carving wakes, their tails thrashing water over the smooth rocks. They slap and grind and belly slide into the next languid pool – or a bear's teeth. Grizzlies may be the most famous fishing bears, but they've never gotten a toehold on this big British Columbia island. So black bears handle the piscatorial plunder.



"There's one. Swimming across the bend," Darren DeLuca says softly. I look hard at the twilight water, but all I see is the silvery wake of a fish.

"That's the bear," my guide explains.

It appears tiny, inconsequential. The bend where the river turns to the falls is farther away than I'd thought. I pull out my rangefinder. It glows 418.

"Wait until it gets out. We'll see how big it is," Darren says.

"Too far anyway in this light," I decide while raising my rifle.

A deep-chested silhouette emerges, draining silver beads into the dark water. At 10x I can see the crosshair against wet fur. The bear climbs onto a log, leaps into the pool and emerges with a salmon writhing in its jaws.

"Fishes like a tern. Nose first," I whisper.

"Most are chasers. They pounce on them with their front paws."

This one swims ashore, doesn't pause to shake. Two steps and it merges with the alders, the only sound we hear is the murmur of the water, the splash of a salmon leaping, the faint, lonesome cry of a gull over the saltwater bay behind us.

Like most bears we've seen, this one falls just short of Darren's expectations. "Six-footers are a dime a dozen," he'd explained at the start of our late September hunt. "We average six-and-a-half feet, but we should find a seven-foot boar." But drought and heat are keeping them in the shadows. The berry crop is weak, the red salmon are old and tasteless, and the silver salmon are still staging in the bays, awaiting a flush of fresh water.

"Here comes another." Darren nods toward the far bank where another fallen fir is bouncing over the water. A small bear walks out on it. "There's a third one upstream. Just came out on the bank." This is a larger bear. It seems we've found the smorgasbord, the all-you-can-eat buffet, a black bear bonanza.

It has taken us two days to find this place. We first checked clear-cuts and streams closer to Vancouver Island Guide Outfitters' Sproat River lodge, clouds of dust rising behind the truck. Late summer is berry time, nature's fruit salad appetizer before she serves her fish course. Fragrant piles of used berries dot the road edge. "There's one." We stop and watch a good-sized bear hump over and under broken logs and brush far out on a clear-cut slope, its head dipping and rising to strip a few berries here, a cluster there. It looks huge atop a log, but then disappears behind a stump wide enough to hide an elephant. Trees are the giants in this ecosystem.

"Should we go after him?" I ask.

"He's rubbed on his left side. See the brown patch? Skinny, too."

The next half-dozen bears – loping down logging trails and plunging through berry thickets – are scrawny, reflecting a tough summer. Too thin, too rubbed, too unbearable, needing salmon to put on winter fat. The

In the junglelike environment of Vancouver Island, hunters find bears in clear-cut debris, second growth brush and berry shrubs.

spawning streams we hike to are like lakeshores, expanses of rock interrupted by pools that are too quiet. "No fish." We move on to the next watershed where ravens cluck and croak from dark hemlock boughs. A bald eagle flushes off a snag. "Load your rifle," Darren advises. We hear splashing. I thumb the single shot open, slide the golden cartridge in and ease the rifle shut. We duck-walk over spongy mosses, crawl under wind-toppled logs shaggy with ferns and saplings. More splashing. Something is down there. Darren parts alder limbs, and we peer down a cut bank to a green pool, its surface rocking. A spoor of wet stones leads out the lower end. We wait there an hour, silently, the air heavy, no-see-ums whining softly 'round our heads, but the bear is now prospecting downriver.

The next afternoon we find water. A big river, now small, but it has fish. Red salmon spawning and splashing. Dead salmon, half chewed on the bank. Recycled salmon in mounds of bear scat. Darren walks brazenly, crunching gravel where I would tiptoe.

"They don't pay much attention," he says. "Could be another bear, an elk. The rapids cover most of the sound anyway."

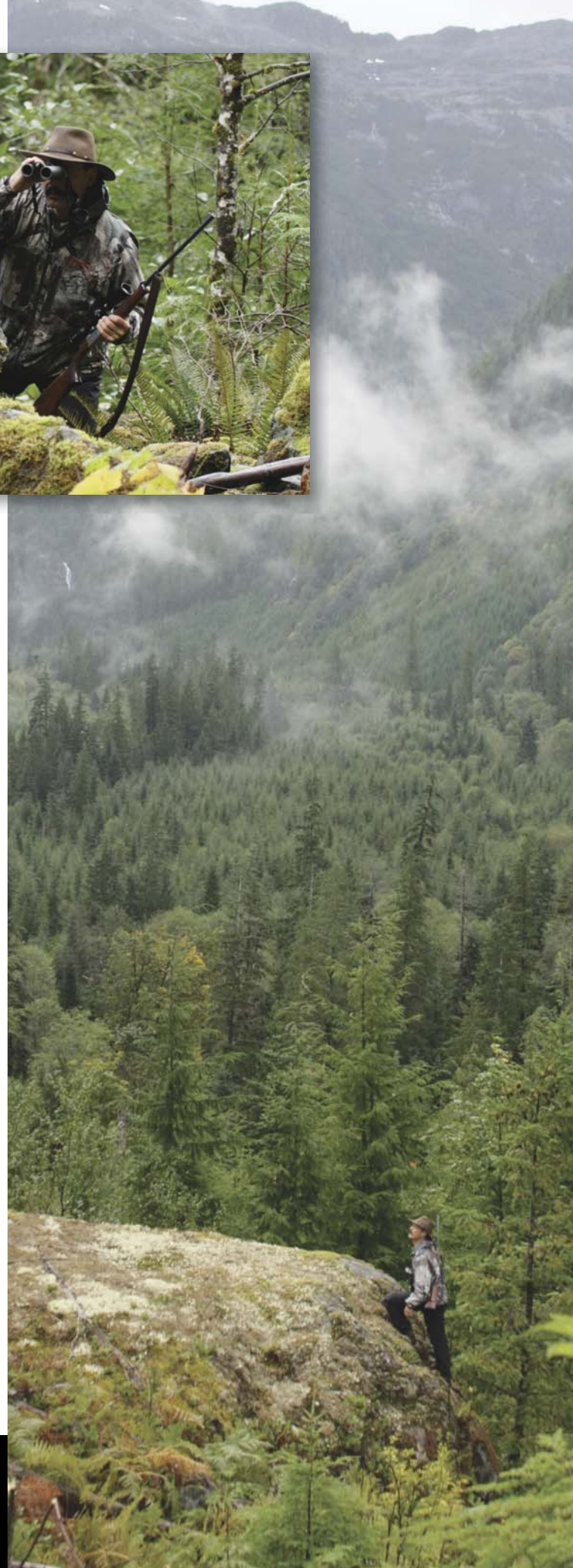
A young sow emerges on the south bank, passes us at 40 yards, wades to the center of the rapids downstream and begins chasing fish, splashing, dashing and pouncing. She wades back to shore with one red flopping in her jaws as a second bear joins her. On the opposite bank, a bear pads to the edge of a pool where another pod of salmon churns. This looks to be a fat sow. She leaps into the hole. Races through it. Paces an overhanging log. Frustrated, she gives up and prospects the bank, stopping to drink 30 yards from us. Her place on the log is assumed by a smaller bear. Eagles soar, gulls cry, twilight descends, but we find no seven-foot boar.

"We'll hit this spot again," Darren promises.

In the morning we boat the bay for a beach bear.

"They eat kelp, dig for clams, especially when the berry crop's poor like this and the salmon aren't in yet," Darren says.

We putter in and out of quiet bays that would be state parks in most states. Hemlock boughs drip with the falling tide. We pound big waves across Barkley Sound and find three bears, all easily stalkable, none big enough. In late afternoon on a rising tide, we quietly paddle into a "secret stream" bordered by a minefield of berry piles. Darren smiles and nods; this is more like it. We ease over the gunwales and wade upstream, rifles ready. Silver salmon are already at the first rapid, squirt-



Picking a black bear out in the massive coastal habitat is no easy task. Making sure it is a shootable boar requires additional skills.

Bear Island

ing through quickly like battery-powered toys. The pool ahead swirls with activity. A big boar could step from the alders and willows any second. There! Under the big hemlocks on the high bank, a black bear pads down a trail. It comes relentlessly, unconcerned, enters the willows and is screened by a spit of alders. We hear it splashing and wait. It does not come out. We continue upstream to where a trail crosses it, from which we can see upstream to the bend and downstream almost to the boat. If anything comes out, we'll see it.

Within 15 minutes a shimmering, black boar saunters from the willows on the low side and wades toward us. I look at Darren and he shakes his head. Not big enough. I raise a camera and begin shooting. At 20 yards the bear hears the motor drive, whirls and heads into cover. Two minutes later he is back for a repeat performance, full sun in his face, the perfect model.

"Fall hunting is a little tougher than spring," Darren says on the drive back to the lodge. "We still see plenty of bears, but the old boars aren't out as much, because it's hot and they're not patrolling for sows. Usually, though, the salmon are

running by now and that brings them out. We need rain so the rivers rise and the salmon come in. Then we'll have bears."

If this was slow bear hunting, I was on it like wolves on Herefords. The last time I hunted bears back home, I didn't see a fresh track in five days. With Darren we can't even get off the lodge porch without making game. As we sip coffee on the deck over the river one dawn, a bear woofs and hauls itself up a hemlock not 20 yards beyond the railing. When we returned that night, it's still up there.

The second time we hunt the river by the falls, we jump two bears on the way in. "Slide through

Darren DeLuca of Vancouver Island Guide Outfitters provides comfortable accommodations for his clients.



there," Darren whispers, nodding toward a gap in the wall of brush, the thunder of the falls now loud. "Watch out. There's a cliff." From our high perch, we spot a large bear fishing from a boulder below the falls. "Don't shoot. It'll fall into the river, and we'll pay hell trying to retrieve it. Wait'll it gets on shore," Darren cautions. As we wait, a second bear steps onto a muddy bank across the stream. It looks good too. I could hit it with a rock, but Darren waves me off. Then a third bear splashes directly below us. We grab limbs and lean over in time to see the animal leave the water with a silver salmon in its mouth. When we look up again, the bear at the falls is gone. "Watch for him to come out on that mud bank and hammer him there." But before he does, the brush beside us begins to swish and bounce. I swing my rifle 'round to see a silvery fish emerge from the foliage, followed by beady brown eyes set in a black face. The bear below us has scaled the cliff with its catch.

"Hey! Hey, bear!" Darren shouts to prevent an altercation, and that clears the neighborhood.

The next morning I head home



Assistant guide Henty Wolfhagen and Ron study bear sign on one of the many bear trails leading through the heavy cover.

for business, but two weeks later Darren calls. "It's raining. Come back. Bears everywhere." Now there is too much water. Banks are flooded well back into the trees. We can no longer walk their edges, so we settle for poking our noses through the brush where Darren and assistant guide Henty Wolfhagen know we'll find exposed banks, gravel islands and choke points where bears fish.

The big boys are coming down from the peaks, out of the deep woods, but their coats are still ratty from the poor summer. One long-legged boar with a head like a lion walks onto a long, open beach and trudges steadily closer while we size him up. I level the Merkel K-1 and await the verdict. "He's huge," I say by way of encouragement.

"But look at his coat. It's patchy," Henty says. "He's still skinny. All head. He'll score well but there's no pelt. In another month he'll go over 400 pounds."

"Kind of a waste to shoot him now, eh?"

So we let him walk right past us, the biggest, ugliest bear of the hunt.

Of course, we pass up additional six-footers, several with thick, shiny coats, but by my last morning, my second "last day" of this hunt, I'm prepared to take a six-footer. "Here comes one from downriver," Henty announces. We're on a sandbank examining scat, dead salmon and big tracks, and now it appears the bear that made them is approaching.

"Small, rounded ears," I note. The bear keeps coming, sweeping the bank for scent.



Between salmon runs, bears turn to berries to aid in their voracious caloric intake.

"Confident swagger," Henty pronounces. The bear pauses, sniffs and resumes its walk upstream.

"Deep chest. Looks fat."

"Good coat. I don't see any patches." The animal turns toward the woods, takes a step into them, and then swings back.

"Do we take him?"

"We do."



Black bears large and small visit salt marshes regularly. Guide Darren DeLuca studies the sign they leave behind to determine if there is a large boar in the area.



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I sit in the sand, spread the legs of my tripod, rest the sleek little single shot on it, dial the Swarovski to 6x and look for an opening along the bank. The wind is quartering downstream, so I have to shoot before the bear cuts it. At 85 yards there is a gap in the alders, just a split trunk stretching horizontally across an otherwise open bank. It's my only shot. "I'm going to stop him and shoot when he hits that opening." When its nose emerges from the leaves I shout "Hey!" The bear throws its head and stares, its chest behind the split alder trunk. My rifle is sighted to put 100-grain Barnes TSX bullets 3 inches high at 100 yards. If I aim 3 inches under the limb, the slug should just miss

Spawning sockeye salmon turn red with green heads. By then, however, their fat content is used up and bears are looking for fresh fish.



Ron eventually got his mature boar with a Merkel K-1 single-shot .257 Weatherby Magnum.

it and hit the bear about heart high. If it goes high, it will catch the high shoulder, an instant kill on a bear. I pull the trigger.

"Where'd he go? Did you see him? Where'd I hit?"

The heat from the shot has mixed with the moist air to create a veritable fog. When it clears, the beach appears bare of bear. I stay to mark the spot while Henty claws his way over. He finds no bear. I join him. No hair, no blood, but fresh, pale wood ripped from that alder limb.

"I hit the darn log, but that X-

Bullet might have gotten him," I suggest.

Henty climbs the short bank and finds a single drop of red. Now we have our work cut out for us. I rush ahead, following obvious bear trails and fanning to pick up better sign. Nothing. But Henty patiently and persistently tracks, finding a scuff in the duff, a broken fern leaf, another drop of blood, a line of travel. I trace it forward toward a fallen cedar, a jumble of broken limbs and debris, just the kind of place a wounded bear might seek safety. I scan around it, climb atop and look around. Nothing. Meanwhile Henty has progressed another 20 yards, finding more blood drops still lining toward the fallen cedar. I climb it again, this time 20 yards farther up the trunk, and stare down into a black hole. Dead bear. The X-Bullet has not only hit the beast, but also has broken its front shoulder, penetrated its heart and lungs and exited the far ribs.

Fall bear hunting on Vancouver Island may not reveal the numbers of brazen, mature boars one sees during the May rut, but stalking the streams and beaches, watching bears catch salmon and nearly run you over with their catches – well, that's excitement enough for me.

Ron and Darren used skiffs to access hidden bays where big boar black bears might hang out.



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