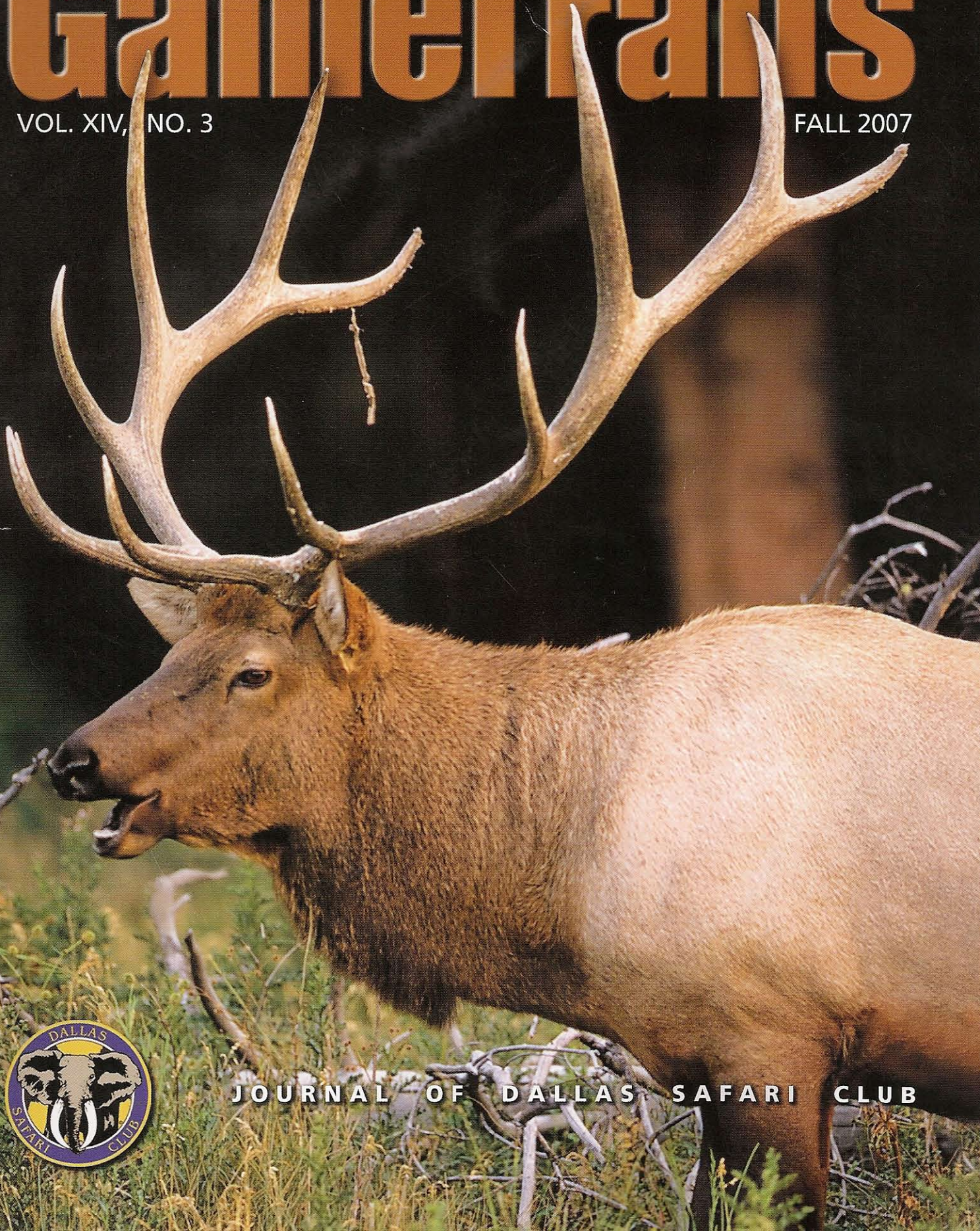


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SNAGGLETOOTH

Spring Black Bear Hunting on Vancouver Island



“What do you want to do,” inquired , owner of Canadian Guide Outfitters, “relax after your long trip here or go hunting?”

“Go hunting,” Chance Parker and I replied in unison. It was about 5:00 PM, but the remaining daylight provided us another four and a half hours of hunting time. My trip from Dallas to beautiful Vancouver Island was short compared to Chance’s much longer trip from his ranch in Alpine, Texas. I knew from hunting with Chance on his ranch, though, that sitting around the lodge was an attractive activity only when daylight was gone. That’s why I invited him to join me on this hunting opportunity. It was great to reconnect with Sean as well, this being my third time to hunt with him.

The balance of the day was spent driving a small sample of the logging roads in Sean’s 2,500 square mile hunting area around Port Alberni. Spring black bear hunting on Vancouver Island requires covering miles of territory stopping often to glass the broad slashes left by the timber companies harvesting trees. These open areas provide the sole opportunity for seeing black bears as the uncut forests are simply too dense for spotting bears from a distance. Nature helps too because the green grasses planted for erosion control along the logging roads provide the nutrient of choice for black bears in their first several weeks out of hibernation. Before sunlight expired, we saw six bears, none large enough for a stalk in close, but certainly a nice start for our five day hunt. We wrapped up the day around the fireplace in the fabulous lodge Sean provided.

The next morning, a pair of geese honked their way up and down the Somass River flowing behind the lodge. Their noisy racket, joined in higher octaves by their dozen

goslings on the opposite shore, signaled a welcome wake-up call and helped drain away thoughts about business back home. The lodge rested within view of the confluence of the Stamp and Sproat rivers just upstream co-mingling their clear, icy-cold flows into the headwaters of the Somass.

Sean and I headed for the bush about 10:00 AM, a late hour for normal hunting but sensible for black bears as this is their first hour to stir. Over the course of the day, we saw twenty bears. One, however, almost made it to the taxidermist!

Parking the truck on a mountainside logging road, Sean led us further along the road on foot into an old slash. Stopping often to glass, Sean spotted a black bear about half a mile away. The topography of the mountainside and the huge piles of forestry debris kept us moving constantly to maintain a line of sight to the bear. Sean’s keen, experienced eye for finding small bits of black peeking through the brush was the sole reason we were able to follow the bear’s movements. I was no help in re-finding the bear when it occasionally disappeared but worked hard to just see it in my own binoculars under Sean’s patient direction.

After a while, we lost all sight of the bear but believed it still to be close by. We walked about fifty yards from the road out into the slash hoping for a better view and discovered a large grassy depression completely masked from the road. We guessed it was here that the bear made his way daily to munch undisturbed on the grass. Then, Sean spotted him once again. Apparently tiring of the grass and seeking more variety to his diet, the bear meandered slowly up a steep slope to our left, dining on berries along the way. At the top of the slope, Sean

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Chance Parker
and Sean Lingl



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the decomposing undergrowth to enhance the sense of our wilderness experience. During one brief sunny moment, a hawk, cruising on the updrafts, streaked through a sun beam illuminating his tawny gold cloak of feathers.

Late in the afternoon while driving and spotting, Sean caught a glimpse of a black bear high in a slash above the road. Continuing on beyond the slash and out of sight kept the bear from spooking. The island bears have become used to passing traffic, but a vehicle stopping for a look-see invariably sends them packing. We halted at an intersecting road leading back into the slash where we had seen the bear. Sean predicted that the bear would move right onto the road, directly in our path. About a hundred yards up the road, Sean suddenly signaled for us to drop into a crouch. At that moment, a bear, smaller than we had hoped, stepped out of the slash and crossed the road to a stand of green grass along its edge. He dined on the dewy greenery chomping his way down a slope towards us as if sampling a cafeteria line. So close he came that we could distinguish the individual hairs in his dense coat highlighted by tiny drops of mist providing thousands of watery reflectors mirroring sky above. Twenty feet away, our human aroma interrupted his engorgement, and he shuffled away. Such close encounters with dangerous game add a unique quality to the hunt. This one capped another great day of seeing fourteen bears.

Day three of the hunt looked ugly weather-wise, and the forecast was discouraging. Sean described a weird characteristic of black bears. In the fall, they are undeterred by river water while wading into the shallows, often dunking their heads completely to catch spawning salmon headed upstream. But if rain begins to fall during the bears' fishing efforts, they head for the trees. Thus we expected a poor time of hunting in rain that pelted us intermittently all day.

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judged him to be a good bear and suggested I take him. The range-finder showed 211 yards, but just as I settled the scope on the bear, he moved on.

Sean led us at a fast clip up a logging road parallel to the bear's course to get ahead of him. The wind, previously swirling irregularly in many directions, now cooperated with a steady blow into our faces. Stopping on high ground at the edge of a draw, we watched as the bear ambled slowly toward us. "Get ready," Sean whispered, "and don't move." Closer and closer the bear came.

"You say the word, and I'll shoot him," I spoke softly while centering the crosshairs on the bear just thirty feet away. Sean has been hunting black bears on the island for over twenty years, having guided and shot some two hundred bears during that time. I was listening for that enthusiastic edge in his voice about this bear—but it didn't come.

"He's a good bear, a mature bear, but I just can't say he's outstanding," Sean concluded.

"Then I'm going to pass," I said. "Besides, this is just the first day!"

Lowering my rifle was sufficient movement for the bear's sorry eyesight to detect. He "whoofed" at us, loped a short distance, turned to inspect the intruders into his space one last time and sauntered into the brush. I

congratulated Sean on a perfect stalk and a superior experience. He seemed to be chewing on his evaluation of the bear, so I told him, "Don't dwell on it. I made the decision not to pull the trigger."

The rest of the afternoon continued to confirm that there is no shortage of black bears on Vancouver Island. From a late afternoon vantage point on a high switchback, we enjoyed a broad view across a narrow valley to a slash dotted liberally with black bears. Sean especially liked the genetics on one young bear, not a candidate to stalk this year, but certainly a shooter in years to come. Fading light from the setting sun ebbed into long shadows slowly closing down our visibility, so we called it a day.

The skies turned gray the next day as a front rolled in from the Pacific. A nearly constant drizzle delivered a fresh water wash-down to the dust-choked logging roads. When the rare bit of sunshine muscled through the thick clouds, the landscape turned pristine as if a dull plate glass window had been squeegeed into crisp clarity. The spring foliage struggling up around the decomposing tree stumps glistened with an enriched green color in sharp contrast to the darkened, rain-drenched wood. The fresh smell of the rain combined with the musky-loam aroma from

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Since we were on the island to hunt and not to sit comfortably by the lodge fire, we saddled up right after breakfast and continued our quest. We covered much new ground that day as well as re-visiting areas ripe with bears on the two days before. Nothing! During walks into prime areas, we appreciated the wet conditions that muffled our footsteps on the gravel roads. Along one walk, we encountered bear scat every thirty to forty yards. Sean toe-tested the scat for "freshness" earning him the title "scat master"! In spite of fresh scat, no bears appeared, and we moved on, all the while wishing desperately for sunshine to lure the bears back out of the trees.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, Sean pulled off a main road into a previously uncharted slash and parked at the edge. With a momentary break in the rain, we left our coats in the truck and walked quietly to a high point to glass over the slash. Just a few seconds of



"Snaggletooth"

glassing revealed our first bear of the day. Even more exciting, Sean liked him. The bear was more than a quarter mile away, but Sean compared his body size to the adjacent tree stumps, observed his lumbering gait and judged him a shooter. "He's a hog of a bear," he enthused! By this time another element of the front passed over us delivering chilled winds

and a heavy rain. We hustled back to the truck and donned our coats before Sean sought a road through the slash that would deliver us closer to the bear. Encountering an impassable gully, we abandoned the truck and stalked towards the bear on foot. Sean hurried us along in the hopes that our route would quickly bring the bear once again into view before he sought respite from the rain and wandered out of sight into the trees.

Rounding the side of a hill, Sean spied the bear still chowing down on the foliage on the opposite hill across a wide draw. The wind through the draw swirled unpredictably. Sean's normal objective is to use the terrain and the wind to bring his clients to within a few yards of the bear for a close shot. The terrain before us offered no apparent route, and the multi-directional winds were the final determinant that a close stalk was impossible.

Chance accompanied us having taken a monster bear squaring seven feet three inches the day before. When we stopped at a point as close as Sean believed practical, Chance ranged the bear at 265 yards. Sean asked me hesitantly, "Are you comfortable at this distance? It's rare that I ask clients to shoot from this far away."

Having taken a long-range shooting course several times, I replied, "I just need to know the yardage."

"Then find a rest you like," Sean suggested. "We might get lucky and



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see the bear move towards us. If he moves the opposite way, I'll tell you when to shoot."

I took a prone position at the edge of the road with my forward elbow resting comfortably on a tuft of grass. Chance reconfirmed the range at 265 yards. I dialed my scope to the proper minute of angle for the distance and steadied the crosshairs on the bear's vitals. The bear moved toward us about fifteen feet. This small change in distance didn't require a scope adjustment. Then the bear reversed course and headed away from us. Sean, sensing a missed opportunity, instructed, "Take him when he turns sideways." And sideways he turned, quartering slightly away, right at the original 265 yards. I squeezed the trigger. Chance observed a burst of spray from the bear's wet hide at the impact of the bullet. The bear wheeled and ran about thirty yards before piling up on some rocks.

Sean instructed us to stay put while he followed the long curving route of the road to the bear. "Keep your rifle trained on him, just in case he tries to

get up." The bear didn't move during the five minutes Sean trotted towards him. Reaching a distance of fifty feet from the bear, I watched, now through binoculars, as Sean tossed some rocks to see if the bear stirred. No movement. Sean disappeared behind a brush pile as he approached the bear, but a few seconds later, he climbed into view and waved us over.

Sean's first comment when we reached the bear was, "He's really old! Come look at his teeth, what's left of them." As Sean rolled back the bear's gums we could see an upper fang broken in half. All of his top teeth between his fangs were missing. His bottom teeth were nubbed down to the gum. A serious abscess rotted another upper tooth. He was truly a snaggletooth. The bear's poor mouth must have constricted his diet because in the six weeks from hibernation, he had not put on any fat at all, completely untypical in Sean's twenty years experience. "He probably wouldn't make another year," Sean estimated. "I'm guessing he's fifteen to twenty years old, likely closer to twenty."

The bear's luxurious coat, however, hid his lean condition, and his age added to the large dimension of the white triangle on his chest. All in, I was ecstatic with my ancient trophy bear. Final measurements totaled just under seven feet square on the hide and 19 4/16 inches on the skull.

A new gust of driving rain dulled the photos but not our enthusiasm. What we lacked in long-term imagery for the album, we made up by logging into permanent memory a lifetime experience. *GT*

EPILOGUE:

Follow up with Sean over several weeks about this article gave us a chance to learn about the balance of his Spring black bear season. In the final week of the season, one of his clients took a monster black bear squaring seven and a half feet with a 21 inch head. Sean promised that there are more such trophies still on the island. It's a grand reason for a return hunt!

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