

Backwoods Maine 'bay-ah' camp provides a week to remember

Up in the northeast of Maine, where bear is a two-syllable word (pronounced bay-ah), there are plenty of bruins roaming the woods. Bear, grouse, big bucks and lately moose seem to like that countryside, too.

I wouldn't call it wilderness, but it can be a long hike between paved roads. Of course, such things are relative, and if you're reading this in Alaska, we're just thick and hilly up here.

A friend went to Spruce Mountain Lodge last year, but was there during a bad storm that came in off the coast. He was anxious to return and asked Sharon and me to tag along. Sharon hadn't yet shot a bear, so it was a plan.

Mid-September can be great in the northern states, where early cool weather is the harbinger of fall game seasons. The weather this year was a bit warm for daytime bear activity, but comfortable enough for a hunter to sit over bait for several hours each day.

In camp there were 11 rifle hunters (including Sharon and her new Marlin .450), one archer, and two muzzle-loader shooters (including me toting the new Savage smokeless powder rifle).

Actually, I brought two guns, the Savage muzzle-loader and a Smith & Wesson 629, chambered in .44. The Savage looked like a bolt-action rifle, complete with a Bausch & Lomb 2.8-10X scope. Only the ramrod underneath gave it away as a muzzle-loader.

With smokeless powder, there are no corrosive by-products to require the thorough cleaning typical of black-powder shooting. I like the outfit, but I must caution against exceeding the listed load data, as slight overloads can drastically raise pressure with smokeless powder. I also advise extreme care to avoid anyone accidentally loading the smokeless powder into any other muzzle-loader. Loading data is provided with the gun; follow it

very carefully.

We were staying with Steve Cole at his lodge in Brookton, just outside Lincoln, Maine, near the New Brunswick border. The guides were bear hunters, one keeping his own pack of bear hounds to mix with Steve's. One unassuming guide was actually a state fisheries biologist, taking a few days break away from his normal routine.

There is no Sunday hunting in Maine, so our arrival Sunday afternoon was taken up with conversation, eats, and a drive to replenish a few baits. By evening we knew of White Rock, Twin Maples, Ricochet, Oooie-Oooie and a couple dozen other bait sites scattered over approximately 500 square miles. Steve divides his area into three sections for the three weeks of bear baiting.

We saw plenty of bear sign in spite of the mild weather. We were hunting the third and last week of bait season, to be followed by hound hunters. Steve had saved the nearby area for this, the third week, and some of the baits were within a couple of miles of camp.

One o'clock the next afternoon found me sitting atop a ladder stand at the Greenland Mountain bait in the middle of nowhere. The wind was dead calm. It was interesting to be in a tree stand in summer foliage; visibility was only a couple of yards, save for the slotted opening to 20 yards away, where a pile of rocks covered a basketball-sized hole in the ground that had been filled with a "secret" bait that appeared to be mostly baked goods and chocolate, but with a definite odor of anise.

About 5 o'clock, a shadow materialized into a bear approaching the bait, and the suggested charge of Hodgdon's H-4227



Ed Hall with his fall 2000 Maine "bay-ah."

smokeless powder sent a 250-grain Barnes Expander through the bear's heart. I could have dropped a billiard ball right through the entrance and exit holes.

That evening we put six bears on the pole at camp, ranging from about 120 pounds up to 250.

A seventh was hit but not recovered immediately. Taking the track after dark, we found considerable blood at first, but it eased to very little within a couple of hundred yards. The next morning hounds were cast on the track, and the bear was treed and shot. The original well-placed shot from a .30-06, 165-grain factory load had penetrated the shoulder but then apparently changed course and not penetrated the vitals. It happens.

To keep myself oriented, I carried Delorme's 3-D TopoQuad topographic maps of Maine, a step farther than their previous detailed mapping. This, with my Garmin 12 Map, gave me all I needed

to navigate an unfamiliar country; the Garmin carries a topo quality map inside the GPS unit.

Before taking the track of the wounded bear after dark, Steve Cole took a compass reading and I logged the truck as a waypoint on my GPS. On the way out, when we were halfway back, we heard a faint truck horn and turned 45 degrees to go to it, in spite of my GPS reading telling us to continue as we had been. I was a little disappointed with the GPS, until we reached the road and found that the other hunters had moved the truck.

Tuesday was cool and breezy. A nice bear came into Sharon's bait, but between the angle of the shot and the bear's thick fur, she misjudged and just grazed it. There were only a few drops of blood. We tracked it out that evening and the next morning with two leashed hounds. Seeing no sign of serious injury, we turned back.

Wednesday morning, Sharon and I decided to try calling in a bear. Steve sent us to a nearby road that had active baits but where no one would be using the stands. He said we could disturb these bears all we wished. We didn't know exactly where the baits were, but we set up and called at several points along the road, walking a few hundred yards each time to get away from our truck.

After 20 minutes of conventional predator calling, you know, the typical squealing rabbit, we switched to crow calls. Crows gather over dead things in the woods, and it seemed likely that raucous crow calling might lure in a bear.

We called in two pileated woodpeckers, several jays, assorted squirrels and other small creatures, but no bears.

Such is life.

Sharon's Wednesday afternoon on stand was uneventful, but Thursday afternoon she saw a dark form in the fringes of her view, which transformed into the bulk of a huge bear moping in the brush near the bait. Tracks from the bear, estimated at more than 400 pounds, had been seen at this and other baits. Remembering her previous miss, Sharon was extremely cautious. She assumed that the bear would eventually come to the bait, but it just slowly drifted away, never to return and never giving her a sure target.

Though she sat most of the day in

the rain on Friday and Saturday, neither that bear nor any other appeared in daylight.

While hunting, I kept remembering my early days, when I settled on a Marlin in .35 Remington as a combination deer/bear rifle. I liked the heavier .35 slug over the .30-30.

Sitting in the tree stand reminded me of evenings I had spent sitting uncomfortably in the upper branches of apple trees, watching over fresh bear sign, waiting for a bruin. I was still in high school, and the possibility of being that close to a bear seemed like tremendous adventure. The orchard was only 15 minutes from my home in southern Vermont.

Now, I have many opportunities to get close to bear, as several friends are serious

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houndsmen. But I'm not sure how long the opportunity will exist. In Vermont, houndsmen lost the option several years ago to charge guiding fees. Massachusetts and New York ended hound hunting for bears all together. Most of the negativity toward hunting bears with hounds comes from a lack of knowledge.

For example, many nonhunters believe the use of electronic tracking collars on hounds gives the hunter some advantage over the bear. That's just ridiculous. Collars don't help the hounds track, catch, or tree a bear. Collars serve two purposes. First, since the bear and the hounds almost always run out of hearing within a few minutes, it gives the hunter an idea as to which direction they went or perhaps which mountain they are on, so that he can drive or walk there and hear

them again. This saves hours of zooming up and down country roads to try to locate the hounds by ear.

Second, hounds don't always stay on the track. The bear might run 10 or 15 miles, and especially young dogs in training may drop off anywhere along the way. Sometimes the entire pack may leave the bear if it goes into a ledge hole. They usually wander into nearby residential areas, ending up in someone's backyard where the homeowner typically waters the dog and may even take it inside.

I recall a Saturday in October, several years ago in the early days of telemetry, when I was hunting with Ernie Blake. We had a transmitter on one hound, but its range wasn't great. We didn't strike a bear until 9 in the morning, on County Road near Pownal, Vermont, just about where the Appalachian Trail crosses.

That bear took us northeast about 6 miles through pine thickets and hardwoods to the top of the mountain overlooking the town of Stamford. Then the bear turned northwest and ended up in the ledges overlooking Bennington, Vermont.

We came out on Route 9, northeast of Bennington, long after dark. Our trucks were back on the mountain in Pownal, 20 miles away. Bear hunting sure is fun.

Before telemetry, houndsmen often spent one day hunting for bears then two days hunting for hounds, often waiting anxiously for someone to read the dog tag that said, "Please phone collect."

With the collars, we can collect the hounds in an hour, maybe two.

Houndsmen must be dedicated to their sport. It isn't easy to own and train hounds, keeping them in shape year-round. Chasing bears throughout summer training season and during the fall shooting season can be fantastic sport, but also a tremendous physical challenge.

The typical houndsman is a conservationist and a sportsman, knowing the future of his sport is determined by the bear population. Quite a few bears may be treed each year, but only a couple are taken. No houndsman I know would knowingly shoot a sow, let alone a sow with first-year cubs.

Sharon didn't get her bear this year, but we're already thinking about next year. You may contact Spruce Mountain Lodge and Guide Service at: (207) 948-2908; www.sprucemtn.com.