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by Ron Gayer

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by Lee J. Hoots

Recognizing and Adjusting to Three Very Unique Habitat Zones

by Jack Ballard

This backyard gobbler fools one wise wingshooter.

by Jon Wongrey

An Expert’s Advice on Joining the Ranks

by Brandon Ray
6 – Observations
Sea Duck Hunting With Captain Todd Jackson
by Lee J. Hoots

10 – The Great Land
Hunting Black Bears Is A Springtime Standard In Alaska
by Phil Shoemaker

12 – Rifle Rack
The Challenge Of Using Iron Sights In Pronghorn Country
by John Haviland

16 – Wingshots
Taking Birds With Bullets
by John Haviland

45 – Catalog Corner

56 – Hunting Gear

58 – Trophy Board

62 – One More Shot
Brush Guns
by Ron Spomer
If your knowledge of springtime in Alaska was gleaned from Johnny Hortin’s famous ballad, *When It’s Springtime in Alaska It’s Forty Below*, I suggest you need to travel more. Alaskan residents – after enduring a long, cold, dark winter – rate spring as one of our best seasons. The mosquitoes have yet to arrive, and the warmth of the sun becomes palpable as it once again takes a prominent position in the southern sky. The insulating blanket of snow is in rapid retreat, causing the ice on the rivers and creeks to start breaking up and meandering downstream toward the oceans. Uncountable numbers of migrating waterfowl, shore birds and small passerine birds are arriving while purple and yellow Pasque flowers and twisted fiddlehead ferns pop out of the ground within inches of the retreating snow.

Ravenous black bears emerge from six months of hibernation and extricate themselves from their winter’s lair. They are sluggish at first, as if they have had nothing to eat or drink for six months and have not urinated or defecated either. Their kidneys have been filtering their blood of impurities and recycling it back into the bloodstream where the liver converts it to useful amino acids. Thirsty and hungry, they make their way toward open beaches and warm, south-facing slopes where the first succulent greens can be found. Those first high-fiber meals help remove the digestive plug of desiccated fecal material that has built up throughout winter.

As calories begin flowing through their systems, they rapidly regain strength and begin wandering in earnest. They easily overheat on clear spring days, as their thick black fur absorbs the sun’s rays. The thick calluses on their feet have fallen off due to inactivity, so they often wander between soft, cooling snow patches. With radarlike noses, any remaining berry patches, wolf
kills or salmon carcasses are avidly sought out and devoured. All bears – blacks, grizzlies and polar – are experts at finding calories.

After being cooped up all winter, Alaskans are anxious to get outside, and the opportunity to bag a black bear is a great incentive. Where legal, baiting is the most common method of hunting spring bears, and in many parts of Canada and the Lower 48, it is the most productive. I’m not fond of sitting over smelly baits and swatting mosquitoes, however, so my favorite method of bear hunting is to either spot-and-stalk or still-hunt south-facing slopes, river banks and tidal flats before the leaves of summer clothe the land and make it more difficult to find bears. Not only can you get out earlier and see more country, but you also get first crack at the larger bruins, with the finest pelts, before they move into their summer haunts where most of the baiting takes place.

Being able to spot bears at a distance also gives you a chance to accurately judge them for trophy quality while they are in the open. It can be done on bait piles, but without experience all bears tend to look large when they are close. Judging bears is an acquired skill, but if you have experience with dogs you understand the basics.

Young bears of either sex have not developed the secondary sexual characteristics of larger, more mature male bears. Young bears and females tend to have fuller, fluffier looking coats. They also have more slender, tapered heads and more prominent ears. In contrast, the largest boars have more massive front shoulders and forearms, square, blocky heads and snouts and ears that appear small and farther down on the sides of their heads.

From Mexico to Alaska, black bears come in many color variations, but unlike many grizzlies and brown bears, they do not change colors as they age. Black bears all have brown muzzles, and solid black is the most common color phase, especially in the humid, timbered eastern portion of North America, where more than 90 percent of bears are black. In the arid, more open country of the western U.S., natural selection seems to favor lighter color phases (in Yosemite National Park, only 9 percent of bears are solid black). In the silty, glaciated country of SE Alaska, there are bears with a gorgeous, blue/black color phase. Known as glacier bears, they are one of the rarest and most sought after trophies in America.

No matter what the color phase, black bear meat is a delicacy much sought after by many Alaskans. Unlike most wild game meat, it is marbled with delicious fat. The fat over the hips and ribs can also be rendered down into a pure, white lard and converted into the best pie crusts and biscuits. Both are a delicacy.

Statewide, the average weight for spring black bears falls between 90 and 150 pounds for females, and 180 to 200 for males, but large, mature animals can easily weigh double that. The musculature and bone structure of bears is more massive than deer of the same weight, and most hunters choose calibers and bullets accordingly. In addition, the heavy fur and thick layers of fat on bears plug up bullet holes and leave little in the way of blood trails. Calibers like the .270, .308 and .30-06 are popular with local hunters. However, if you are serious about a large trophy boar, many guides recommend .300 and .338 magnums.

Shedding Spring Rains

Although most riflescopes come with some sort of lens cover, the majority of them are flimsy, easily lost and not the least bit weatherproof. There are a few factory-made covers that work somewhat better, but the best I have found that hold up to Alaska’s infamous rotten weather are simple bands cut from inner tubes. They are small and light enough that I always carry a spare in case mine gets lost or I need to loan one to another hunter whose factory cover leaks.

In addition, they make great fire starters and burn hot even when wet. Depending on the length of your scope, you can cut them from four-wheeler or small Honda and Subaru auto tubes or standard automobile-size tubes. Often you can pick up used tubes from a local tire shop, but even if you have to purchase new tubes, the number of covers you’ll get from one tube should keep you in weatherproof scope covers for many years.
Montana Twofer

By Lee J. Hoots

Big Game Hunting Where Clients Take Priority Over Antler Scores
It was an unnerving situation, to say the least. Angioedema is the clinical diagnosis for swelling beneath the skin. In this case, my throat. It is often allergy related and mine came on quickly, unexpectedly, as we hiked up the back side of Dome Mountain on a cold November morning. I was certain it wasn’t the Montana grizzly tracks in the road that were causing my problem, but I had no clue what was, and once we reached the top and began glassing elk, I had to make a decision as my condition worsened. Risk possible death at 9,000 feet or get to a doctor stat! Our four-man squad consisted of Dave Scovill and I and Dome Mountain guides Matt Freudenberg and Darcy Hart. We had just spent an hour or more climbing to the top of the wind-swept slopes, and now, having just spotted elk, stalkable elk, I was causing the whole group to retreat. That decision was an easy one. The next decision was more difficult – at least for me.

Not 100 yards from the crest of the slope and a snow-covered road that would lead me down the mountain to a vehicle and a half-hour drive to the emergency room, I had another choice to make when a fine legal bull elk walked out of the timber and stood broadside well within range.

“Oh, we’ll get your elk down off the mountain all right!” I’m not sure who offered, Matt or Darcy. But having heard this very gracious proposal and with a dose of adrenalin pulsing through my veins, I pulled the trigger on the .325 WSM Kimber 8400 and began digging for my tag.

JB and Lennae Klyap operate Dome Mountain Outfitters, and as they sat with Dave and me in the waiting room at the hospital in Livingston, the swelling in my throat began to subside and I began feeling a little better. But I couldn’t help but wonder what Clem B. Potelunas of Idaho Falls, Idaho, would have been thinking had he been my hunting partner for the day. Clem actually won a free elk hunt in the giveaway this magazine and Dome Mountain sponsored last year, but he was unfortunately unable to make the hunt. In his stead was Dave, my boss. Always quick of wit, he did his best to make light of the situation, and I appreciated that.

In no time I was appropriately medicated, and we all headed back to Dome Mountain Ranch, where JB has been outfitting elk hunts for 11 years. The ranch itself is slightly over 5,000 acres in size with about 4 miles of riverfront on the famed Yellowstone. JB and his staff have done much to improve the land as wildlife habitat and to improve the hunting through strict management policies.
“We don’t graze much if any cattle at all, and if we do it’s very carefully,” he says. “The biggest change we made was limiting traffic through the ranch. This allows elk undisturbed calving and rutting areas. Elk need huge areas of habitat and need to feel safe.”

While there are elk that spend an entire year on Dome Mountain Ranch, the herds fluctuate naturally as well. This is dependent on a variety of influences.

“Mostly it’s hunter pressure,” says JB, “and how hard elk are pushed.” Dome Mountain is surrounded by both private and public land in the Paradise Valley, lands on which a great deal of elk hunting takes place each fall. An increase in activity on these lands results in more elk on Dome Mountain. “In rifle season, the numbers of elk on the ranch often climb and will increase as the season progresses. Mainly, I believe this is because we hunt so carefully with as little daily impact as possible.”

Under doctor’s orders, I was to stay off the top of the mountain for good and rest for a couple of days before I continued any hunting at all. So shortly after arriving back at the lodge, Dave and Matt went off to look for a mature Montana mule deer buck. As I rested in the comfort of the dining lodge, I watched through a spotting scope as elk worked their way in and out of the folds and stands of timber atop Dome Mountain. Somewhere up there with the elk, JB had a handful of other clients just waiting for the right shot opportunity.

“My most important goal is to give everyone that hunts with us the best opportunity I can provide,” JB says. “I want them to experience a true elk hunt. However, there is a thin line all outfitters have to dance along. Take yourself, for example. Your elk hunt was all of 20 minutes, but you did take a great Montana bull. You could have passed, but you’ve hunted long enough to know that old saying, ‘Don’t pass up anything on the first day that you would shoot on the last day.’ At this stage in my career, I think ‘trophy hunting’ is making ‘hunting’ seem unattainable to the average guy. It places unrealistic pressures on them.”

This is a refreshing attitude as more and more outfitters continue to promote antler size as a justification for sometimes overly inflated hunt fees.

“Every season [here] the average size of elk antlers changes,” JB says. “For example, this past season your elk was average or above, whereas the two prior seasons 300-class bulls were the average. My personal opinion of ‘trophy quality’ is what the hunter gets out of the hunt regardless of the size of his elk. I don’t really care how big the elk was to be...
honest. It’s the smile on a person’s face and the memories they will take with them that’s important to me as an outfitter.”

Fortunately for me, a good scare atop a beautiful Montana mountain and a nice supply of elk meat is not the only memory I’ll take home from the hunt. There is a whole other side to Dome Mountain, and it has to do with mule deer.

For many years JB has operated as an elk outfit. Hunters could also shoot mule deer, but it was mostly as an afterthought—which one of them had filled his elk tag and wanted something to do. Nonselective harvesting made for happy clients but put undue stress on the mulie herd on the ranch. So JB eventually decided to allow clients to continue to hunt mule deer for a small fee, but he now requires that when a buck is taken the hunter pays an additional trophy fee. By no means does it restrict a hunter to taking only the largest antlered bucks, but it does promote a bit more scrutiny. Clients are now more selective, and the deer herd is better for it.

“Since I added the trophy fee, it’s given the mule deer a chance to grow a bit,” JB says.

Each morning Dave and his guide Matt would brave the cold Montana wind searching for mule deer. If they saw nothing that interested Dave, they would head back to the lodge for a warm lunch. After lunch they would go out and glass mule deer ‘til dark. One particular afternoon the two rushed in and urged me to grab my rifle and come along after lunch because they had seen a very good buck that Dave was sure I would be pleased to hang my tag on.

That afternoon Matt and I relocated the very buck bedded in a drainage just above a hay field, and sure enough, it was a dandy. While Dave hung back, Matt and I put a

**Hunt Headquarters**

Elk and deer tags are available through the state draw system (March 15 deadline), or you can purchase outfitter sponsored tags straight from Dome Mountain Outfitters. Outfitter sponsored tags are guaranteed, but they are more expensive.

“The guaranteed tags, according to what hunters have told me, allow them to plan their hunts further in advance, and by the time the draw tags are issued, most outfitters are already booked, including us,” JB Klyap says.

Archery season runs from early September through mid-October. Rifle season usually begins the last week in October and closes the Sunday after Thanksgiving. JB’s low-impact approach to elk hunting also means he doesn’t book more than a small handful of hunters at a time, and he rests the ranch for days between each hunt.

“In both seasons [archery and rifle], we allow four days in between everyone’s hunts, this way there are good opportunities every week,” JB says.

Dome Mountain hunters stay in rustic yet comfortable cabins a short walk from the banks of the Yellowstone River and take their meals in a dining hall in the main lodge, with most meals prepared by Lennae Klyap. Almost all elk hunting is done on foot, in moderate to rough terrain, though hunts can be tailored to the needs of a client. These are truly wild elk.

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stalk on what appeared to be a small group of deer that included the big buck, one or two smaller bucks and a couple of does. Once we got to within 100 yards, however, and could see just the tips of the buck’s forked antlers, we realized there were far more does bedded with the group than we had previously thought. At that point we could not crawl closer, and I still had no shot at the buck.

After several minutes of waiting them out, several does spotted us and decided to blow out and take the entire herd with them a half-mile onto public land where my deer tag was no good.

“They’ll be back in this hay field tonight,” Matt told me. I hoped he was right.

As it turned out, Matt was spot on, and just before dark I had shot my second animal of the hunt, and my best Montana mule deer to date.

“Honestly, when I first started here 12 years ago, it was not unusual at all to see 300 mule deer in the hay fields in the evenings,” JB says. “There are some good bucks here, but a 30-incher is doubtful.”

During the rest of the week, Dave, Matt and I scoured the coulees, foothills and hay fields for a real trophy-class deer. The rut was coming on, bucks were checking does, and new bucks were showing up each morning and evening. Dave has been fortunate enough in his hunting career to have taken some tremendous mule deer, including a couple of them in Montana, so he was holding out for something larger than what he had previously killed. Each evening we would find two or three new bucks that were moving into the area looking for hot does. These were great looking young 4x4s that showed lots of potential. They are also proof that the overall quality of JB’s deer herd is improving.

In fact, by the time Clem B. Potelunas makes his trip to Dome Mountain ranch this fall, perhaps one of those deer will pique his interest after he fills his elk tag. Having gotten to know JB a little better, I’m sure Clem will be in for a quality hunting experience no matter what the outcome.

“Good outfitters and guides take every moment of every day personal, and some, like me, get upset even with things we can’t control – weather, animal behavior, etc. We take it to heart. In the end, I don’t want anyone to leave and be able to argue that they didn’t have a great elk hunt,” JB says.
“Trophy Board” Submissions

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Bigfork, MT
Montana Mule Deer
Burnham Brothers Compucaller III

It wasn’t but a few seconds after the Compucaller III was turned on that the coyotes came charging in across the New Mexico desert. These were perfect dogs, hungry and perhaps competing to get to the source of the sound first. In a blink they had covered several hundred yards of scrub and cacti before hitting the brakes right in front of my buddy Bill. His first shot anchored the closest coyote. Another shot felled the second dog as it whirled to escape. This scenario is similar to many I’ve seen played out multiple times while using a Compucaller III in coyote country.

Two things are needed to be a successful coyote hunter: coyotes and a good call. The Burnham Brothers Compucaller III is exactly that. With nearly 60 years of predator hunting savvy behind the brand, the caller itself is top notch. It’s small, weighs just over 3 pounds, including remote, carrying pouch and AC and DC charging adapters.

The sound system features an NiMH rechargeable battery that will run for 8 continuous hours with the call at full volume. Housed in durable plastic, the caller is programmed with 16 predator calling sounds from the famous Burnham Brothers library, and you can add up to four removable sound cards for a total of 32 high-quality calls. Other important features include a built-in amplifier and a 20-watt speaker delivering 123 dBs of volume. This is an absolute must for predator hunting in windy conditions.

The remote control with lanyard and digital readout is one of the best on the market. It’s a two-way remote that will reach more than 200 yards to the caller. It vibrates when it’s in communication with the caller, so even if you can’t hear the calls, you know they are playing. With one hand, at the touch of a button you can adjust volume, change sounds, turn the call on and off, and know battery levels of both the remote and the base unit, as well as the strength of the signal to the base unit. A backlit LCD display improves utility in low-light calling situations. The remote is powered by three AAA batteries and housed in durable plastic with a soft, quiet surface to keep noise to a minimum while on stand.

The call fits nicely in a Mossy Oak carrying sack that allows you to set the base unit away from cover if necessary. The carrying sack also holds both chargers and the remote in one handy storage unit.

What really sets the Compucaller III apart is that it utilizes sounds from the Burnham Brothers library. The company was a pioneer in recording natural sounds from many different animals, which truly changed the way predator hunting has evolved during the past 60 years. Nearly all these natural sounds are available for use in the Compucaller III. The calls that come standard with the base unit include the following: Grown Cottontail, Cottontail Duet, Baby Cottontail, Half-Grown Jackrabbit, Yellowhammer Woodpecker, Coyote Pup and Cottontail, Coyote Howl, Lip Squeak, Grown Jackrabbit, Fawn Distress, Canine Pup, Coyote Pup Whines, Gray Fox Pup, Baby Raccoon, Pair of Crows and Crows Fighting Over Baby Crow.

The Compucaller III is not the least expensive call on the market, but it is a full-featured unit that is backed by the manufacturer. If you take predator calling seriously, it’s well worth the investment.

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– Lee J. Hoots

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