

My First Black Bear Hunt

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“If he looks at you, FREEZE!” The words echoed in my head as the bear stood 15 yards away and had its eyes locked on mine. Gary had given me a lot of bear facts and tips, but those words were the only ones coming to mind at the moment. Fortunately, that bit of advice is most likely what led to my first successful bear hunt. Actually, it was the third day of my very first bear hunt.

I was at this same tree stand on the second day of my hunt and since I didn't see anything there, Gary had decided to move me to another location for the third and final afternoon of our trip. The only reason I ended up returning to the same stand on the final night was because my camera had fallen out of my pocket when I was climbing down out of the tree stand after dark the night before. I had mentioned it to Gary and he said he would see if he could find it. When he checked around the tree stand, he not only found my camera but also found that the bait had been hit.

Gary Thornborrow is the outfitter who guided us during our three day bear hunt in central Ontario. He is the owner and operator of [Bear Acres](#) and is located just outside the North-West edge of Algonquin Provincial Park in Bear Management Area BR-50-002. I was invited along on this trip by the president of the Tavistock and District Rod and Gun Club, Dave Featherstone. For Dave and the other two guys in the group, this was their fourth trip to Bear Acres.

Since I was given an option, I eagerly opted to return to the same site. I sat in the tree stand for four and a half hours that afternoon. It was a beautiful day and I sat still and quiet...lost in my thoughts. When suddenly there was a single loud ‘SNAP!’ It was definite and close. I snapped out of my daydreaming and felt the instant rush of adrenaline as I recognized the sound of something heavy stepping on a twig. It was 25 yards away at most in the heavy undergrowth. My heart started its familiar racing and my breathing became heavy as the anticipation began building. Most seasoned hunters can relate to this feeling. I have experienced this rush many times before but what really took me by surprise this time was that my mouth went instantly dry. I didn't have enough saliva to lick my dry lips.

He came in from my right and I saw bits of black between the leaves as he moved closer. He was cautious and stayed well beyond the bait. He walked past the only shooting lane I had, being careful to shield himself with foliage as much as possible. It was then I remembered Gary saying that bears can be even more aware of abnormalities in their environment than whitetail deer. I started to wonder how long that bear may have been listening and/or watching me. Knowing that he was probably aware of my presence only added to my anxiety.

He walked about 10 yards and stopped. I could barely see him. It was then I realized my heart was pounding loud enough for me to hear it. This prelude in the bear's movement gave me a much needed pause to focus on relaxing and trying to bring my breathing under control. My efforts though, were futile. This was the most intense moment I had experienced in a long time. Since relaxing was out of the question, I had to concentrate on just keeping still. The bear came back in from the left and very slowly stepped into the shooting lane. He then did something I hadn't counted on...he turned and started walking towards me. Fortunately he only took a couple of steps in my direction and stopped. He then raised his head and looked directly at me. Besides Gary's warning, I remember screaming “don't even blink!” in my head. Any movements will certainly verify his suspicion that something wasn't right.

He stared at me for what seemed like an eternity before he finally dropped his head and snapped up a cookie that I hadn't even noticed. He turned 180 degrees and walked straight away from me into the woods. I was left dumbfounded. I couldn't believe that after all this waiting and finally having a 200lb bear come through my shooting lane, I had absolutely no clear shot. I remember thinking, “This can't be it. This can't be how it ends. The guys will never let me live this down.”

I could hear him munching on the cookie about 30 yards directly in front of me but could not see him. I was hoping the cookie would entice him to come back for more. As luck would have it, he wasn't done with the bait. He walked back straight towards me and stepped directly into the clearing. He slowly turned to the left and took a few steps towards the bait.

This is it, I thought. This is my chance. He lowered his head to the bacon grease bait and as he did so, I slowly and steadily raised my crossbow. I didn't as much as blink or take my eyes off of him for a second. I brought the stock against my shoulder and aligned my eye with the red dot sight. He presented me with a perfect broadside shot.

It's amazing how the mind and body function in these situations. In the matter of a few seconds, I am running distance calculations, determining the vital zone, timing my breathing, removing the safety and checking my arrow's flight path including the area beyond the bear where the arrow would ultimately end up. Whenever I think back to that moment in time, it seems to have happened in slow motion.

I squeezed the trigger and the arrow launched. The 125 grain broad head found its mark. The bear lurched to his right, away from me. He growled and ran. I held my breath so I could hear which direction and how far he would run. The infamous 'death moan' came shortly afterwards. I estimated he ran about 70-80 yards and either stopped or dropped. Fortunately it was the latter.

It took a few minutes for the shaking to subside to a level where I could reach for my radio to call Gary. He was parked a few kilometers away and with an unsteady voice, I told him that I got a bear and to come to the stand. "That's great!" he said..."But who is this?" In all the excitement, I forgot to mention my name. When Gary showed up we were losing light. We quickly picked up the blood trail and as I had suspected, we located the bear about 80 yards from the stand. The shot was clean and the bear went down quickly. Just what every hunter dreams of.

Of course there were the ceremonial handshakes and picture taking of the rookie with his first bear. It was a great moment to cap off a great hunting trip. If you ever have the opportunity to go on a black hunt, especially with a bow, I strongly recommend it.

I have been hunting since I was 10 years old and grew up in a family of hunters. My dad was a moose hunter and every fall would make the annual pilgrimage to the most desolate regions of Newfoundland in search of the mighty moose. At the time, dad coming home with a moose in the back of the truck was a normal part of life. Hunting was, and still is the most natural thing in the world to me. I realize now, many years later that my dad loved hunting. I didn't know then that I would grow up to love it just as much.

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