

DIY:

Alaska Bow Hunt

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GREG VIRDEN



We arrived at the Little Rock airport around noon. Apprehensions were high, all of our stuff had to get through, there would be no way to replace any of it, and every last item was critical. We were about to be dropped by super cub in the remote Alaskan wilderness for 21 days on a moose/bear/wolf bow hunt. There would be no possibility to resupply. And our total weight was limited to 80 lbs. apiece.

We made it to Anchorage at approximately 4 am with hardly a wink of sleep. The larger than life moose, grizzlies, and polar bears in the lobby were intimidating and surreal. The flight from Anchorage looked like something straight out of *National Geographic*. Below were glaciers and snowcapped mountain ranges that probably hadn't melted since the last ice age. We landed in a small community on the Kuskokwim River in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta where Rob was waiting. We had hired Rob as our air charter to get us in and out of the river we were about to go float. Air is the only way in, by super cub.

We grabbed our stuff, jumped on the back of an ATV, and within a few blocks, we were at Rob's place. I guess it was about 1 o'clock. We had already logged over 24 hours without sleep and so many miles that it really didn't matter anymore. We were on schedule for the drop today. The first flight was leaving in 20 minutes. There would not be any time for dillydally.

We were ushered into his den where he checked all our tags and licenses. He gave us a couple of maps that designated several problem areas on the river we were about to float, as well as tentative pickup location. From there, we went to a packing room filled with water proof bags and an electronic scale. Everything we had was to be inspected and packed into 20 quart size bags (this size fit into the cub better) and weighed. Rob told us to pack what we would need for two days and put it in a separate pile. Our drop-off point was on the side of a mountain

with a very short landing area; we would not be able to go in there with a full load. He would have to make multiple trips to get all the gear in. And he may only be able to get one of us in today—it would just depend on the conditions. I was about half way done with my two-day pile when Rob announced that Weathers, my son, looked ready to go, to which Weathers immediately acknowledged, gleefully, I may add. I told Rob I was to go first, but in Alaska you fly whenever the opportunity exists. When a bush pilot says go, he means now, period. I guess I had been dillydallying around and just got left.

Rob finally make it back. Forty-five minutes late. Needless to say, I was not in a favorable mood. I was informed that the flying conditions were too bad to get to our drop so he took Weathers to an old mining site that was relatively close as an alternative. That is where I was headed. But you never can be sure in Alaska. I guess it was about 4:30 or so. We took off, and the cub settled in at about 700-800 feet elevation, cruising around 60 mph due to a fierce headwind. Rain squalls were everywhere, but the visibility was good. It didn't take long for the total remoteness of this strange new territory to set in. There were no telephone poles, roads, or houses anywhere, just a seemingly infinite sea of untouched wilderness, mile after endless mile. As we approached the mountains, Rob tapped my shoulder and pointed to the pass we were about to go through. I tapped his shoulder back and expressed my concern. It looked like a death trap to me. The passes of opposing mountains disappeared into the fog layered clouds that were peppering us with rain. That cloud ceiling couldn't have been more than 3 or 4 hundred feet high. He pointed to the clear area between the mountains and beneath the clouds and announced, with stern confidence, "there is plenty of room in there to navigate." It didn't look like enough room to turn the plane around to me.

I said, "OK then," and cinched up my seat belt and gripped the plane's roll cage a little tighter.

The scenery was so spectacular with all the colors of the mountains, streams and creeks, spruce forests, alder and willow thickets, open meadows, and the sheer endless expanse of pristine wilderness that I temporarily became lost in the moment. The plane climbed, twisted, descended, weaved over here, ducked over there as Rob carefully picked his way through the rain and fog covered mountains. Finally, I spotted a tiny little landing strip cut out along the top of a ridge, and we were lining up right on it.

Ooh-wee I made it! About the time I stepped out of the plane, I could see Weathers' hat bobbing up and down in the alder thicket headed our way. Apparently, he had found it necessary to scout out the perimeter. He was soaking wet. He said it had been pouring, and that he didn't think we were coming back. In the Alaska bush, once you get wet you never really dry out again. Rob asked if we wanted to try to make it to the final drop, it was just over that last ridge in the distance. I responded with a resounding no. We had already been up over 36 hours with little food and it appeared to me the conditions were steadily deteriorating. Anyway, it was late. Does it ever get dark up here? He jumped back into his plane and told us to be ready to go first thing in the morning. All I could think of was I hope he makes it home.

After the buzz of the plane faded into the distance, the silence became deafening. There were no birds, squirrels, or critters of any kind. Nothing. What kind of a place is this? Is it so harsh nothing can live here? I hope we even see a moose. My brain was too tired to contemplate it. We heated up some water and poured it into our military surplus long range patrol rations (LPRs) dehydrated meal bags. Actually, Weathers ate two. It was seafood chowder. He loved it,

especially after he amped it up with a couple of shots of olive oil. He was already eating up all our rations. I just went to sleep. It rained all night.

The next morning the fog was so thick you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. I really didn't care. We had plenty of time ahead of us, and it felt great to finally be in Alaska, even though we weren't where we were supposed to be and had very limited supplies. About mid-morning, the rain started breaking up and low and behold a grouse flew across the runway. Weathers was on him like a bird dog and flushed it up in a tree and popped him with a little .22 rifle he had slipped in his bag. Things were already looking up. We had scored on our first protein of the day.

Conditions had improved to the point around noon that we could see some of the slopes on the surrounding mountains. About that time, we could hear a familiar buzz back toward the pass. We looked at each other in amazement. No way. Focusing our eyes on the noise in the far distance a tiny black spec pops out of the clouds. You guessed it. It's Rob. The final flight in was uneventful and delightful, other than the fact that the landing

strip was no strip at all but just an opening on the side of a mountain.

The last load in was the raft. A 120 pound roll of rubber. We loaded our packs and started hauling everything down to the river, or more appropriately, a small stream at this point. By the time we had gotten everything down to the stream, it was late. The water level looked OK to me, so we decided to make camp. It was going to take us a while figure out how to get this raft blown up and assembled properly. It was a first for me.

Upon awaking that morning we pumped the raft full of air and put the parts together in a way that made the most sense to us and loaded her up. We got in it but it didn't move. There was not enough water to float it over the rocks. So we got out and started dragging it. I was up front pulling it around the first little bend on a small stretch of sand. There, in the sand was a grizzly track so big a wash tub wouldn't cover it up. It had just rained a couple of hours ago, meaning this bear had just left. I was packing a 45-70 lever action with iron sites in case we were attacked, and understandably, after I saw this, I was wearing my gun like a pair of underwear.

It took us all day to make it 4 miles down the river. So far, there wasn't much floating taking place. Mostly just dragging. But the water volume was improving. It had begun raining again. Sideways. We set up camp. Most of the tent stakes pulled out during the night, and I guess we were lucky the tent didn't blow away. It was horrible wind and rain. It must have been blowing 50 – 60 miles per hour.

The next morning, the water was deep enough to float the raft, most of the time. During the first few hours of our float, we were more like a pinball bouncing all over everywhere and everything, totally out of control. One of the first snags the oar got caught in spun the raft around with such force that when the oar followed, it took the iron sites clean off my 45-70. I had let go of the oar, barely in time, and ducked, before it took me out as well. We were on a steep learning curve with more to come. It must have been 2 or 3 bends downstream when we had gotten out of the raft and were trying to maneuver it around a steep, downhill, bootleg cut to the left. Within the whitewater of the belly of that hair pin turn was a 50 foot spruce whose limbs had been broken and stood out like 100 jagged spears jutting out in all directions. As I was attempting to navigate around this obstacle, walking on dry land towing the bow of the raft in hand, the back end of the raft caught the current, yanked me off my feet, and was headed with me into the inevitable. Somehow Weathers managed to jump in and grasp the trailing back rope and coax the stern back toward the rocks out of the current, just in time. He wasn't too happy with the non-volunteered ice water swim. That was his last set of dry clothes.

There were moose and bear tracks on every sandbar we passed. We just weren't seeing anything. Every day we went on more and longer patrols into the bush off the river. We climbed to vantage points, we called, raked trees, and glassed for hours, in the rain, day



We packed up before daylight and set camp after sunset on our own daily.

by day, mile after mile. All the way from camp and all the way back again. And then we floated down to a new spot. We started each day about 6 am and finished about 10:30 pm. Then one day out of the blue it happened: a love sick bull came right in on us bellowing threatening and aggressive grunts-- ouuahhhh and unghhhh. One big problem though, it was 4 am, and we were in the tent. And it was pitch black outside. Weathers wanted to wait a couple of hours until daylight and shoot him. He was so close every time he grunted the walls of the tent would shake. I grabbed Ole Betsy, even though her sights were gone, jumped out the tent, and prayed that bull would run off and not charge. He did, whew! A strange fact, but in Alaska moose kill more people than bears.

We had almost completed our first week and had added fishing to our repertoire. The salmon and grayling fishing was unbelievable. We had been supplementing our meal plan with the occasional grouse, which was fabulous, but could not compare to a ridiculously fat 8 lb. silver sautéing in olive oil over a crackling fire in a cast iron skillet. We generally kept a legal stringer of live fish with us at all times. One unusual morning, I say it was unusual, because it wasn't raining, we were restocking our stringer when I saw a bear cross the river a couple of hundred yards downstream. Weathers let out a predator call and that bear broke out of the bush and was standing on his hind legs looking at us from 28 yards in what seemed like seconds. Weathers was at full draw waiting for

a double lung opportunity. The bear decided he did not want anything to do with us, so he made a quarter turn, and that's when Weathers stuck him. That bear took off into the bush like a bolt of lightning.

The four blade Magnus had found its mark. The bear had piled up stone cold dead in the neighborhood of 34 steps from impact. Good thing too. The last thing I wanted to do was blood trail a bear in that jungle. We caped the bear out and at the last minute decided to take the straps. Our freeze dried meat was barely edible. Had I known how delicious the meat was going to turn out, I would have taken all 4 quarters. The bear fat tasted like blue berry jam. They call these bears blueberry bears because they gorge themselves on blueberries this



Weathers Vir•en with a nice Alaskan bull moose.



Greg Vir•en with a silver salmon. Deliciously cooke• in a cast iron skillet in olive oil, garlic, re• pepper flakes, salt an• pepper, over crackling coals.

time of year. It was a beautiful, healthy, fat animal. The fur was blue-black, super thick and luxurious.

Moose hunting up to this point had been a considerable disappointment. Two weeks into the trip, and we had seen only one cow. Little did we know what was about to unfold. The cows were going into heat, and their calls were ringing out across the forest. We finally had a bull come within 20 yards and he was looking for a fight. It was a magnificent sight; he was bigger than a horse with horns galore. Best we could tell it wouldn't make the 50" antler restriction, so we let it walk. This general area was on fire.

Our plan that night was to leave before first light and set up in one of the most promising spots we had scouted out. The dawn broke to a still, clear, blue bird day, probably in the high teens. It was perfect. We started our calling routine by raking a huge spruce first, breaking limbs as big as possible, and just making an awful amount of racket. This seemed to make the bulls the maddest. The first bull showed up after about 90 minutes of calling and raking. It was an unbelievable experience. He came

in grunting, horns everywhere, stood broadside at 30 yards, destroyed a couple of pines, checked us out and left. Then another one came in. And another. We had studied all the literature and watched videos on how to judge antler size but they are so huge. We just couldn't be sure. We didn't have to wait long to see another one. The fourth bull was coming in fast, and he was really pissed. He had so many brow tines that we didn't have to worry with width minimums. Four brow tines on one side makes a bull legal.

My heart sank when the bull stopped in a cluster of small pines about 15 yards out. The wind was beginning to pick up and was blowing right to the bull. He stood there for what seemed like an eternity, then shook his head, and made a beeline straight to us. He stopped at 5 yards and looked at me eyeball to eyeball. I could see the blood vessels in his eyes. I was about to pass out from an overdose of adrenaline wondering why Weather's hadn't shot. The bull decided to leave; he turned and took a couple of steps. Weathers finally had the shot he was looking for and

released. Point blank. That 1,500 lb. animal took out of there like a runaway freight train.

At almost one ton the big bull went down in 52 steps, literally seconds after he was hit. Now the work began. We were three-quarters of a mile from the camp as a crow flies. We had waded across creeks, around beaver ponds, through mud sucking muskeg, fought our way through alder thickets, and crawled over green timber deadfall to get to the hot spot, in hip boots I may add. It was typical Alaskan terrain. The first order of business was to cool the meat down. It took us about 2-3 hours to quarter and remove all edible meat, ribs, neck, etc. (it is a \$2000 fine and a year in jail for failure to do so). We bagged all of it up and moved it one-quarter mile to get it away from the gut pile and bears. All 600+ back breaking pounds of it. Plus the horns and cape. The hindquarters weighed in at an estimated bone crushing 160 pounds apiece. In this unit, only the ribs can be boned out.

It was September 18, and there were two days left of the moose season. We had been there since the 2nd. Now it was my turn to kill. I was going to take mine with a custom made recurve. But this was not my time. We were busy packing the bull out when Rob did a fly over in the cub. We turned on the handheld VHF radio. Rob gave us a new pickup point and pickup date. All suitable gravel bars for landing had gone under due to the endless Alaskan storms, except one. It was a two-day float away. We were to leave immediately and hustle. Hunting was over.

The cold wind and rain pelleted us continuously, unmercifully, daylight to dark. Hypothermia was an ever-present concern. We had started rowing, in addition to floating, because we could pick up an extra 2 mph, and it would warm us up. We switched positions every hour, one rowing and one resting. It was all about getting out now. We made it to the new pickup point ahead of schedule.



Weathers Vir•en with his bear. The fur was in prime con•ition, thick an• luxurious. Shimmering blue-black in color.

Unfortunately, we were too late, the rising waters had swallowed up the last gravel bar. Thankfully, Rob had talked me into getting an inReach, a satellite texting device, before we left for the trip. I sent him a text message describing our predicament. A couple of hours later he responded back with a new set of instructions. We were to go to the confluence of this river and another larger river where we would be picked up by float plane the next morning. Jubilee! Great news.

The whole trip we had been plagued by rising water. With this in mind, we picked the highest spot on the river point available before setting up camp. True to Alaskan form, we awoke the next morning with everything floating around the tent. The water had risen several feet overnight during a God awful storm.

We had hunkered down in an alder thicket and the tent had held. It had sounded like jet engines outside that night. Miraculously, we had not lost anything. And the water was still rising. I immediately grabbed the inReach and sent Rob a new message detailing the urgency of the developing situation.

About an hour later he dropped the bomb on us. The southwest portion of Alaska had gone under a state of emergency due to the storm. All available float planes were being diverted to emergency situations. And our situation was not deemed an emergency. There would be no plane. Our only option was to paddle out. The next pickup possibility was 50 air miles away. I shuttered at the thought of how many endless meandering, turning, and twisting river miles it

would be. We had pretty much gone through all our supplies by this time, and were living off what we had killed and caught.

To make a long story short, we made it out eventually, including all the moose meat, no worse for the wear, maybe a little leaner and mentally tougher and considerably more experienced. The extra float was challenging and demanding, but more than worth every single hard earned mile. It was spectacular. Had an opportunity on a wolverine, saw more bull moose (season closed), and floated through hundreds of tundra swans, all manner of other waterfowl, and countless bald eagles – no people though... unimaginable.

Currently, I am busy planning my next Alaskan adventure. I can't wait to return!