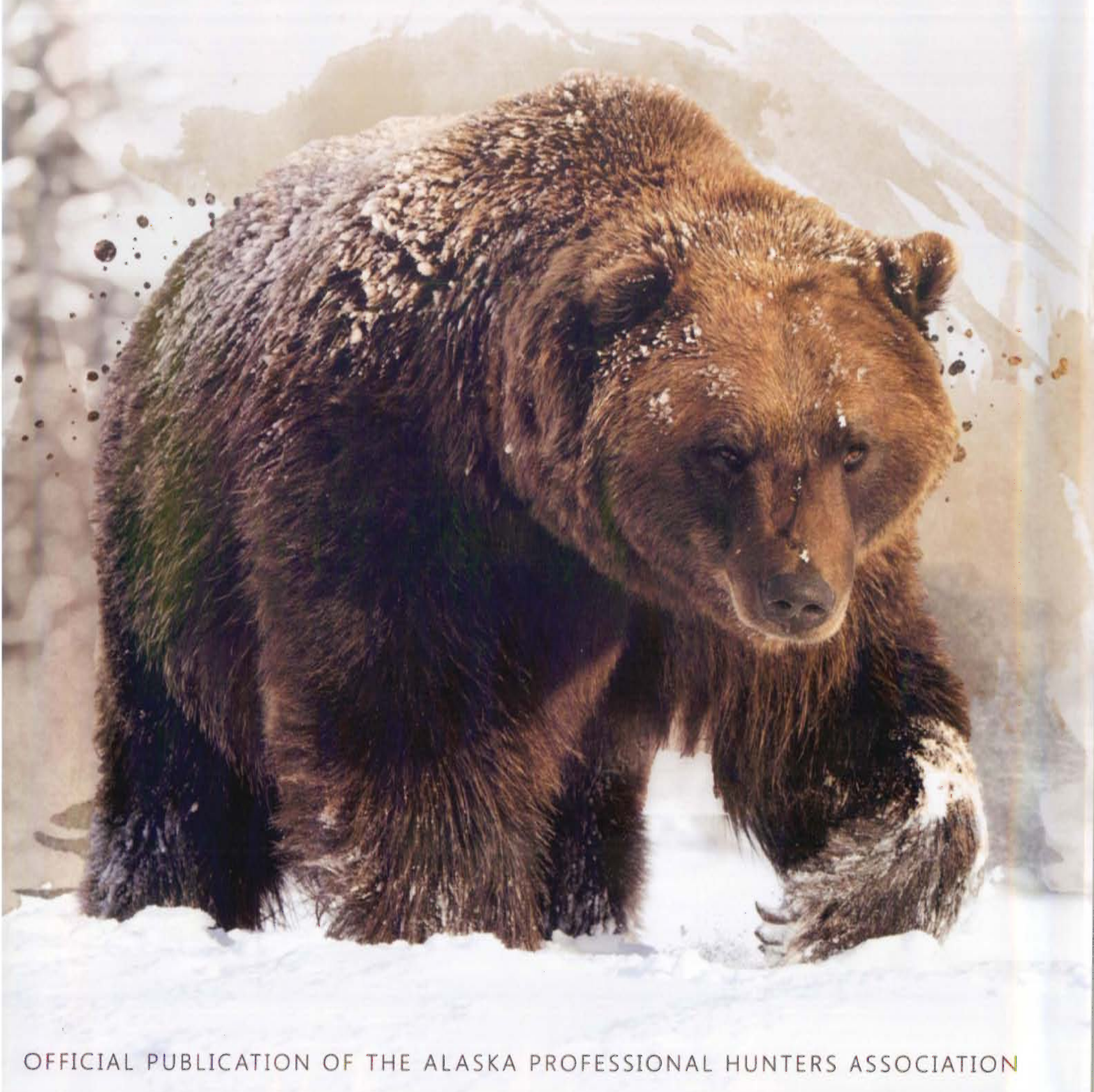


THE ALASKA PROFESSIONAL

# HUNTER

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Five grizzly walks through snow  
Southcentral Alaska

alaskastock.com

Mountain goat in snowy terrain





# The Lakina Five

By Dan Hammond

I once heard a man say that it was "better to be lucky than good."

That always struck me as odd. Point in fact; when it comes to remote outfitter hunts, my philosophy has always been it is "better to have a good guide than to be lucky." And in finding good hunting guides I truly have always been lucky!

In 2010, hunting in the Wrangell St. Elias National Park and Preserve of Alaska, I was fortunate to have harvested a quality Grizzly, Moose, Dall Sheep, Mountain Goat and Black Bear in 14 days of hunting. I had booked for 21 days, but the hunt was over 7 days early. 11 pounds lighter, with duck tape covering the better portion of my right foot and ankle due to blisters, and my belt synched 2 notches tighter than when I began, I had completed what those of us at camp now call the "Lakina Five."



I didn't fully appreciate what a feat that was, until a question posed to my outfitter days later as I listened in provided context: "How many other fellows you have do this same thing?" came the question. The reply by my outfitter caught my attention. "In thirty-five years of guiding, this is the first client that has done it." So, how can a "lower 48" hunter plan a hunt like this? What physical and mental skills, along with crew support, area selection, weather and game conditions contribute to allow this kind of accomplishment?

The answer for me began in January of 2010. Fifty years young, a seasoned triathlete and probably in the best condition of my life (or at least that is what I kept telling myself), I had just come off a 30-day hunt in Tanzania and a free-range New Zealand hunt for multiple species. I was newly addicted to the

heroine of remote and extended big hunts over combinations of game. After success on two continents Alaska was now beckoning.

I connected with Keith Atcheson of Jack Atcheson & Sons (hunting consultants and brokers). Keith never hesitated for a moment: "It is rare to find many opportunities to take a broad range of game in Alaska on a single hunt simply because the logistics are so complicated and unlike Africa or New Zealand, the physical challenge of the terrain and weather provide real hurdles."

There was one outfitter he was certain could put me in play, should "Lady Luck" cooperate, of course.

He described Kelly Vrem and his "Rough & Ready Guide Service" as capable of providing hunts to match anyone's desire. Kelly's operation also provided a rarity: "Dan, with Kelly you have the chance to reach out to all five animals from his Lakina base camp in the Wrangle Mountain range. By spike camping away from Kelly's base, but using his base as a hub, you could reach fantastically large Moose in the



bottoms and hill sides, Grizzly throughout, Dall sheep in the mountains and draws, Goats in the far reaches of the rockiest outcroppings and Black Bear are present, along with Wolf and Badger."

In short order, Kelly and I completed paperwork for a 21-day hunt. Without a doubt, my naiveté had to show as Kelly, ever the gentlemen, never questioned my mission to score the "Lakina Five." Rather, he was excited, I think, to see this fellow from the lower 48 and size him up. Triathlete? A dude with big hope

and appetite to score five species on one hunt? A big deal and big feat for anyone...Kelly had to trust that I was truly up to it for certainly this trip would prove an interesting deviation from the more standard logistical hunt, if that could ever be said about any hunt in Alaska: the land where mother nature deals you serious set-backs regularly!

I chose my favorite shooter, a Sako 300 Win short mag, in a mountain rifle configuration blessed with a synthetic stock and stainless steel workings, and two different loads of Barnes XXX

bullets to challenge the "Five." I had seen first-hand the incredible performance of Barnes on hearty African game, through the recommendation of my African PH Simon Evans and seconded by another PH that hunted me, Michel Mantheakis. Every round was true and retained 99% of its weight through

picture-perfect expansion. I used 180 grain for the Grizz, Moose & Black Bear, and 168 grain tipped for even further ranged shots on Sheep & Goat. It was a joy to carry that package and it performed perfectly including the Swarovski 2.5-15x 44mm scope, and my Lecia 10x42 rangefinder binoculars (the secret to good shooting because if there is any question on range, you are simply guessing).

I had five jobs before me: 1) to enjoy myself and make new friends with Kelly and his crew, 2) to take in the majesty and beauty



of the Alaskan Wrangle range, 3) to work hard, hunt hard, carry my full load and bring a positive spirit in all situations good and bad, 4) to exit as one of the most enjoyable clients "Rough & Ready" had ever hunted, and 5) most importantly, when the moment came to shoulder my rifle, to shoot true after so many worked hard to put me in that very spot.

All easily achievable goals when you think about it really. And adhering to these goals probably brings more smiles to outfitters than anything else - a client prepared, happy and with unwavering spirit in the worst-of-circumstances is a dream. But I have another hint for success! Outside of spending time on the range so my ballistics are solid and shooting proficiency is undeniable by even my own doubting subconscious, lowering one's expectation is the key to a great hunt. If you "expect" that you should harvest a record animal you are only setting yourself up for potential failure and disappointment. However, only setting the expectation of fulfilling those previously listed client jobs, and then knowing that at any turn during the hunt you may see a "shooter" promises your hunt will be an adventure of amazing quality and the trophies will match

your heart...and a record book entry might just show up along the way.

So beyond the desire is the planning: what needs to be in place to provide the opportunity for accomplishment?



You must first be mentally tough. Not stubborn...no, you want the kind of mental toughness that can recognize the challenge, sum up the risks, take calculated moves and avoid



foolishness that is often masked as testosterone. Also, being able to crack a smile when things look daunting is certainly helpful but above all, as conditions might worsen, you want a mindset that

gets stronger. When I have found myself in difficult circumstances, where maybe rations are low, or the elements are taking their toll, I usually turn the mental tide by asking myself how many fellows really get to experience this. And

from that point on the harder or stronger it blows the more resolved I become.

Physically it didn't hurt me to be a triathlete. My legs and wind were strong. In fact, at one point to my delight while trying to mask my own sheer exhaustion, my 24 year young guide Jeff Matney, who is twice his years in stamina,

heart and good spirit, suggested he hadn't seen an "old guy" keep up the way I had. But you do not have to be a world-class athlete. You do, you must, be in shape. We walked 6-8-12 miles a day

easily, with up to 4,000 ft ascents, slogging through swamp and tundra, busting brush that at times seemed impenetrable, while carrying a pack and gear. Water of course is ever present so hydration is not an issue. Legs and lung strength is paramount. You don't have to move as a 24 year old as I proved.

But you do have to cover the terrain and be able to physically sneak, crawl, remain motionless, glass for extended periods and shoot on demand.

Terrain and weather play a



huge role, often masqueraded as, well, Lady Luck. You need to be able to ford streams so hopefully they stay in their banks, and the rain, sleet and sunshine all play into the balance. And gear is critical. Choose the wrong boots as I did and you will be providing triage on your blisters with duct tape. Good quality, fitting gear is paramount.

The crew is the most critical piece next to selection of an area rich with game. In this instance, Kelly was able to service me & Jeff from the air as we made our way around the different terrains: low for Moose and Grizz, high for Sheep and Goat, back down low for Black Bear. I nearly froze one night because of sweating through and the following day Kelly was able to "air lift" a dry change for me. Without that rare luxury we would have been a day or so removed trying to dry gear.

So what about the game? What about Lady Luck? Kelly claims we made our luck. Maybe that is because after 4 days chasing Moose we caught sight of a nice Grizz but couldn't get closer than 308 yards. Because of my shooting confidence, we were able to collect him. Or maybe the fact that we then harvested a quite respectable Moose and continued the hunt rather than

hold out for the elusive 70" spread one dreams about. Or maybe we made our own luck by spotting two nice Dall rams and in multiple attempts did not spook them until the third attempt where I was able to lay cross hairs on them. Maybe



Lady Luck showed when Jeff and I found ourselves trapped on a dangerous cliff edge packing out the sheep but somehow managed our way down without injury or flaw. Or when we stumbled into



the old copper mine from the turn of the century no one but Kelly had ever been in...what a lucky gift to step back in time by entering that mine and touching the same equipment last handled

100 years ago. Or was it just dumb luck when chasing goat from a high mountain pack tent we encountered two college professors, decked out in the latest hiking gear, and listened to their research theory of the Wrangle Mountain's geological history? Made or happenstance luck... it all worked together to weave an amazing fabric for this hunt.

Returning to base camp in the end, to enjoy some outfitter tentluxuryandcooking thanks to Carolyn, an assistant guide and head wrangler, I was approached by Sterling, one of the other guides. A slightly older version of Jeff with biting wit but a twinkle in his eye that exposed his playful nature, he reported hearing of our successes over the radio. He stunned me by saying,

"so you are the guy having the epic hunt..."

Because of my preparation, mindset, and Rough & Ready's quality staff and support, I exited this hunt realizing that the door is wide open for anyone who wants to do this. Yes, it is a challenge but achievable if one really wants it...as long as Lady Luck cooperates,

of course.