

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

September 21, 2009

EXCLUSIVE, ON-SITE REPORT FROM THE FIELD

State Record Black Bear?

639 pound boar may challenge Wisconsin's top spot

By Dick Ellis



Bear hunter Craig Cichanofsky of Green Bay with his 639 pound black bear taken September 17th in Bayfield County on the second day of the Wisconsin black bear season for hunters using bait. Guide Mike Foss of Northern Wisconsin Outfitters baited the station which was also visited frequently and captured on cuddeback camera by the legendary Snaggle Tooth, a black bear expected to be even larger. The bear tagged by Cichanofsky is expected to challenge the existing state record for skull size after a 60-day official drying period. (Photo by Dick Ellis)

Wisconsin bear hunter Craig Cichanofsky's hopes began to fade like the tangled Bayfield County forest floor fast disappearing below his treestand. Cichanofsky had already held vigil for more than nine hours above the bait

pile that had in recent weeks drawn in the monster bear known as Snaggle Tooth. But in these final minutes of light September 17th, the legendary boar was apparently once again a no-show.

The Cuddeback camera mounted



Guide Mike Foss of Northern Wisconsin Outfitters captured this Cuddeback photo of the 639 pound black bear on the bait pile less than one month before hunter Craig Cichanofsky of Green Bay tagged the big boar in Bayfield County.



Guide Mike Foss of Northern Wisconsin Outfitters, left, and hunter Craig Cichanofsky of Green Bay with the 639 pound black bear. (Photo by Dick Ellis)



Wisconsin bear hunters enjoy a 100 percent shot opportunity due to months of baiting work by Guide Mike Foss and his team at Northern Wisconsin Outfitters in Bayfield County. After four days of hunting in 2009, eight hunters out of 12 in camp had scored, including Craig Cichanofsky of Green Bay, who tagged this monster bear weighing 639 pounds. (Photo by Dick Ellis)

on a tree near the bait had revealed the recent visits of a bear estimated to weigh well over 600 pounds, and another bear almost as large. The long tooth jutting from the side of the bear's mouth, a badge of war almost surely inflicted in a fight for dominance with another bear earlier in life, verified that it was indeed Snaggle Tooth, the startlingly large boar Guide Mike Foss had first seen years before in broad daylight during the black bear mating season.

Over several years of diligent scouting Foss, owner of Northern Wisconsin Outfitters in Washburn, had narrowed the bear's travel and bedding areas. His clients, though, had played a futile waiting game on strategically placed stands during the bear hunting seasons that came and went. Big bears don't grow to exceptional size or live to old age without an uncanny sixth sense for survival.

Cichanofsky checked his watch and checked his emotions. He could legally hunt for three more minutes. That was the plan. The digital clock on the motion camera had told Foss that Snaggle Tooth was a nocturnal feeder and arrived at the bait, when he came at all, only for the final few minutes of legal shooting hours. Foss,

in turn, stressed patience to the first time bear hunter from Green Bay who had already waited nine years for a coveted Wisconsin kill permit and now held vigil over bait within the favorite haunt of one of the largest bears that had ever roamed the state. With the thought of a potential face to face encounter on the ground with the enormous boar if the bear did arrive even a few minutes after legal shooting hours, Cichanofsky was not anxious to leave the stand in complete darkness

"When Mike asked me if I would like to hunt the Snaggle Tooth stand, I said I would be honored to have the opportunity even though I also knew the chances of him coming to the bait were slim" Cichanofsky said. "I remembered Mike's words to be patient. But with three minutes left, my hand was literally inside my coat and on the rope that I would use to lower the rifle."

The stand itself was Cichanofsky's portable climber set in



The big boar is transported from the field to the scale for unofficial weighing at Outdoor Allure in Washburn. The bear weighed 639 pounds.

a mature poplar just 14 yards from the bait. Sweat lay heavy on the hunter in near 80 degree heat. Below, wild apple trees mingled with thick stands of briars and dense pines, sloping from the bait to tangled river bottom. Rising from the looming darkness, an eerie grunting...the rhythmic, and labored breathing of an obese bear coming to feed...broke the quiet. Cichanofsky watched the monster bear come in like a black ghost. "Snaggle Tooth", he thought.

The shot of adrenalin pushed emotions even higher. He reached back to his experience as a deer hunter, mentally pushed aside the enormity of the moment, picked out a single log on the bait pile, rested the crosshairs of his Winchester Short Mag 300 on the spot, and waited for the bear to enter the field of vision....

Just a day before, Wednesday, September 16, opening day of the Wisconsin bear season for hunters using bait in Zone D, Cichanofsky had been disappointed when Foss asked him not to hunt the stand at all. A changing Lake Superior wind threatened to kill even the best laid plans that had been in motion for months and even years.

"This time of year, opening day was a prime example that we don't know what the wind will do," Foss said. "It can change in a hurry. That stand needs a southwest or a northwest wind to be alright. Three out of the first five days of the season the wind was out of the east. If Craig would have sat in that stand the first night, the game was over. The bear would have caught him without question. On the second night, the wind had changed back. The bear came in from the south. He never had an inkling Craig was



Similar to Snaggle Tooth's mouth injury no doubt inflicted in a battle with other boars over female companionship, a close-up of the Cichanofsky bear shows the mangled and split snout. (Photo by Dick Ellis)

there. It was absolutely perfect."

It was a field-savvy Cichanofsky who immediately agreed to the request of a guide with a reputation for working hard from the first day of legal baiting on April 15 to ensure that his clients enjoy 100 percent shot opportunity during the September season. This year, Cichanofsky had traveled north several times to Washburn to help Foss and Northern Wisconsin Outfitter guides and assistants Bill Kurtz, Nathaniel Doucette, Jake Macabee, Gary Dressen and Chris Martens bait numerous stations on a circuit over 20

rugged square miles of Lake Superior country. Cichanofsky had even transported loads of sweet bait to Washburn received from his close friend, Brian Bolssen, who works in a Green Bay ice cream cone factory.

In 2009, bear hunters Darren Selk of Jackson, Rob Johnson of West Bend, Dave Rondeau of Plymouth, Mark Black of Lake Geneva, Chris Abel of Menasha, John Kohls of Sheboygan, Al Jordan of Waukesha, Ryan Tearney of Germantown, Bob Lipstreuer of Burlington, Scott Pita and

Kurt Rojemann of Dubuque, Iowa would reap the benefits of the team effort. By day four of the season, eight bears would be tagged with bow or firearm, and each hunter would have bears come to bait while on stands, offering the choice of shooting or not.

"Mike said 'I hate to do this to you but I'm not going to put you on stand'," Cichanofsky said. "He asked me how I felt

639 pounds



Bear hunter Craig Cichanofsky is shown with bear weighed at 639 pounds on the scale at Outdoor Allure Guiding Service in Washburn. After a 60 day drying period the bear is expected to challenge the Wisconsin state record determined by skull size after a 60-day drying period. (Photo by Nathaniel Doucette)



The big bear is about to be tagged by successful hunter Craig Cichanofsky of Green Bay as Northern Wisconsin Outfitters guide Nathaniel Doucette lends a hand and other hunters stand by for the long haul out. (Photo by Dick Ellis)



A tooth is extracted from the 639 pound black bear for aging purposes. A large bear is not always an old bear and this animal had feet that measured only five inches across. (Photo by Dick Ellis)

about that. But I get it, especially when working a bear like Snaggletooth. I understand working the wind. A southeast wind would have put my scent right on the bait pile. I had mixed emotions. But I was able to sit that first night to film John Kohls' hunt when he shot a 300 pound sow. I would never have known what a grunting bear sounds like coming into the bait if I had not sat on that stand. The next night, I knew what that noise was coming into my bait."

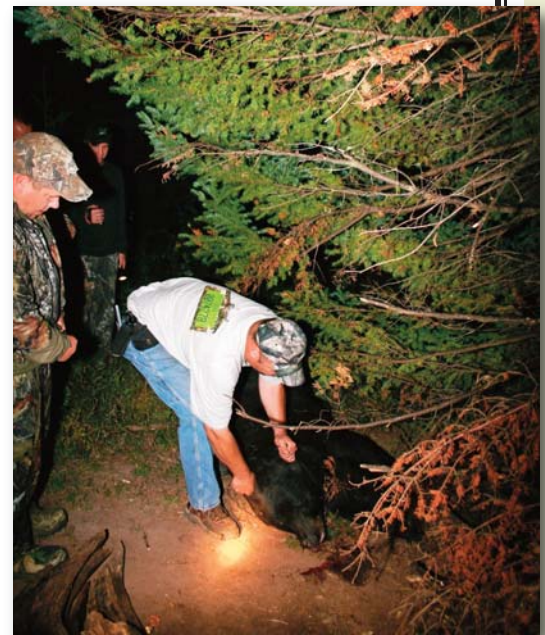
...Cichanofsky held the 300 mag steady on the log and waited for the bear to step in. When it did, he adjusted the crosshairs to the vitals and squeezed the trigger. The big boar dropped on the bait, never taking another step. The hunter would return to camp believing he had dropped Snaggle Tooth. Foss, in fact, would identify the boar as another captured on motion camera at the bait station less than a month before; not only by its obese size, but by a badly split snout that with little doubt had also been inflicted in battle with other boars during the summer mating season.

It would take 11 hunters and guides using the Bear Scents, LLC Big Game Cot of Lake Mills (taking numerous stops to rest and gaining just 10 yards of terrain at a time) to transport the bear from the wild forests of Bayfield County to the trucks. At Outdoor Allure in Washburn, the boar was unofficially weighed at 639 pounds live weight. The bear, Foss said, will likely challenge the Wisconsin state record determined by skull size.

"This is a world class bear," said Guide Kurtz, who also serves as the camp bear butcher at Northern Wisconsin Outfitters. "Most people won't see a bear like this...even on another hunter's truck. It's 100 pounds bigger than the black bears found in Alaska or a coastal black bear. Tagging this bear was like winning the lottery. It can happen to

anyone. Field cameras are great for narrowing down the areas being used by a special bear, but a bear like this knows every bait station around for 20 miles. We're not trying to bait the bear as much as we're trying to out bait the other hunters. They like different foods and we try to give them what they like. These big boars are gorging themselves trying to get enough carbohydrates for winter hibernation after running sows in May and June. If you're finding leftovers, someone else is baiting in the area and the bears don't like yours."

According to Steve Ashley, Director of Records for the Wisconsin Buck & Bear Club in an interview Sunday, there is a 60 day drying period after the skull is cleaned before the bear is scored to the nearest one-sixteenth of an inch by measuring length plus width. The current state record, according to the most recent Wisconsin trophy Records book published by the Buck & Bear Club, is 22-12/16 taken in Zone A1 in Washburn County in 2002 by George Spaulding of Shell Lake. Regardless, the Cichanofsky bear is a once in a



Guide Mike Foss and hunter Craig Cichanofsky recover the big boar on the bait pile where he dropped with a shot from the Winchester 300 short mag. (Photo by Dick Ellis)

lifetime trophy in any bear hunter's book, targeted by a one-of-a kind professional guide.

"An average bear is 125 pounds but I don't think people realize how big some bears are out there. The bait pile is placed in a big bear Mecca," Foss said. "It's a honey hole like you might find a whitetail deer corridor used by big bucks. Now we've taken bears off of this bait that weighed 300, 400, and 600 pounds-plus and I believe a near 700 pound bear is still out there."

"In all the years we have had a camera on this bait, we have never seen a sow or a sow with cubs on it. A big boar would kill the cubs, just like they will kill a smaller bear. I wouldn't have put Craig on this stand if I knew he would shoot a smaller bear. I wanted him to give this stand at least three days. This is like shooting a 200-plus inch buck. I don't think I'll ever match it. But Snaggle Tooth is still out there and he's even bigger than this. Maybe

"... I bait for the hunters who come to my camp. When they all leave, I'll hunt. When people talk about my success rate, it's not really mine. It's the hunters. I can get the bears coming in, but then it's up to the hunters."

we'll find out next year."

"Mike Foss...he's the man who made this happen," Cichanofsky said. "He's down to earth and tells you how it is. He's the perfect guide. As it got darker and darker I kept remembering his voice; patience...patience. I'm still numb. But patience paid off big."

Mike Foss begins baiting the first day that baiting is legal April 15 and intensives baiting over vast areas on public and private properties as the season approaches. Because of his work and his "client come first attitude", he enjoys a near 100 percent shot opportunity over the years. With his own bear harvest permit expected to be issued within the next two seasons, Foss was asked if he will save a stand

known to be frequented by a special bear for his own. He seemed surprised by the question.

"I could never do that," he said. "I don't think it would be right. I bait for the hunters who come to my camp. When they all leave,

I'll hunt. When people talk about my success rate, it's not really mine. It's the hunters. I can get the bears coming in, but then it's up to the hunters. Are they going to make the right decisions? Are they going to make the right shot? It's all up to the hunters. How are they going to perform?"

Contact Mike Foss and Northern Wisconsin Outfitters at 715-373-0344 or www.northernwisconsinoutfitters.com. In addition to Bear Scents LLC, Northern Wisconsin Outfitters is sponsored by Suzuki, Bear Hunting Magazine, Buck Knives, Lost Camo, Gamehide, Mathews Solocam, G5 Montec Broadheads, Bushnell Flashlights and Delta Targets. 

Wisconsin Hunters Score at Northern Wisconsin Outfitters



Mike Foss clients achieve a near 90 percent success rate. When his hard work is done, the guide hunts too. This 325-pound Black Bear was taken with bow and arrow.

In 2009, bear hunters Darren Selk of Jackson, Rob Johnson of West Bend, Dave Rondeau of Plymouth, Mark Black of Lake Geneva, Chris Abel of Menasha, John Kohls of Sheboygan, Al Jordan of Waukesha, Ryan Tearney of Germantown, Bob Lipstreuer of Burlington, Scott Pita and Kurt Rojemann of Dubuque, Iowa would reap the benefits of the team effort put forth by Northern Wisconsin Outfitters. By day four of the season, eight bears would be tagged with bow or firearm, and each hunter would have bears come to bait while on stands, offering the choice of shooting or not.

Selk bagged a 300 pound boar with a bow. Rob Johnson harvested a 150 pound sow with a bow. Dave Rondeau tagged a 184 pound sow with a rifle. Rojemann took a 140 pound boar with bow. Kohls tagged a 300 pound sow with a rifle. Jordan tagged a 258 pound boar with a rifle, 16 year old Ryan Tearney harvested a 140 pound boar with a tag donated by his father, Ron, and Pita tagged a 120 pound boar.

Northern Wisconsin Outfitters includes Owner/Guide Mike Foss, Guides Bill Kurtz, Nathaniel Doucette, Jake Macabee, and Gary Dressen and Camp Cook Chris Martens. 