

As You Sow Months of bear baiting reaps huge harvest

By Dick Ellis

Like a dozen Wisconsin hunters encamped at Northern Wisconsin Outfitters (NWO) near Washburn, Eric McGuire of Wonder Lake, Illinois had applied for the black bear season for eight years before drawing a 2008 harvest permit. With his cousin, Sean Puccinelli of Forest Park, McGuire booked with NWO to hunt over Bayfield County bait sites that Professional Guide Mike Foss had maintained for months.

In May, Foss had begun to work 25 sites spread over 20 square miles of rugged Lake Superior country, building tree-stands, baiting two to three days per week with pie filling, sugar cones and cereal, and cutting logs to cap the meals from raids by scavengers like raccoons or fox.. These special meals were intended solely for bears, and with the baiting routine escalating to a daily chore in July, the hard work was paying off.

"We start slow in May just so the bears know it's there and work into a daily ritual as the season approaches to get the bears committed," said Foss on day two, September 4th in camp. "Baiting is hard, repetitious work. We still have lots of work to do but now it's fun work. We have a lot of bears coming to the bait stations. Some of them are enormous. We've seen them on our cuddeback cameras set



Sean Puccinelli of Forest Lake, Illinois turned to Northern Wisconsin Outfitters of Washburn when he drew a bear harvest tag after eight years of applying. He took this 466 pound boar on opening day, September 3 with a Marlin 45-70.

over the bait piles and have nicknames for them."

Indeed. Three of the stands were specifically set over two miles to target "Snaggle Tooth", a 500 pound brute so nicknamed because of a large tooth jutting sideways from the jaw. Snaggle Tooth also sports a mangled nose, a badge probably inflicted by a more dominant bear in a battle long ago. Missing half of an ear, the 400-plus pound "Holyfield" was hitting the

same stations. Foss would expect hunters holding vigil over those stations to be patient for an opportunity at one of the special bears of Bayfield County, and to let average bears pass.

"Bears this big are considered once-in-a-lifetime, trophy bears by hunters," Foss said. "People will pay \$3500 to \$5,000 for a chance at a bear like this in Canada or in other states."

"Mike made me promise that

if I hunted on that stand I would take either Snaggle Tooth or Holyfield," said McGuire, who chose a Reflex bow and arrows tipped with 1.5-inch cut Montec broadheads. "I have a climbing treestand and I practiced for a month in my yard, packing and unpacking, climbing and shooting from the stand. I was ready."

On stand at first light, he watched over the course of the day as three bears between a more average 100 and 150 pounds approached the bait pile at different times and fed. He "knew right away" when Holyfield entered the arena at 3:55 p.m., not only by the damaged ear, but by the enormous size.

"He walked right up to the bait like he owned the property," McGuire said. "I came to full draw right away. He gave me a broadside shot at 15 yards. The hit was a double-lung shot and the broadhead left a blood trail that we would have no trouble following. I waited 25 minutes, and took the stand down but I wasn't real comfortable following a bear that big alone that was hit with an arrow. I knew it was a good shot and then I second guessed myself...I hoped it was a good shot. I was 99 percent sure it was, but I wasn't going to track it alone."

In heavy cover, Holyfield had only traveled 35 yards from the hit. Foss and NWO guide Bill Kurtz

Wisconsin Hunters Score Big

Brothers Dave and John Bruring of Lacrosse were still waiting to see bear after day one but doubled on a 120 pound sow and a 120 pound boar on day two. Don Solberg of Dousman watched five bears over three hours on the bait but spooked a 300 pound bear before he could take a shot with the traditional recurve. He returns to try his luck later this month.

Paul Huba of Milwaukee shot a 186 pound sow with a special permit crossbow. The bear traveled about 40 yards from the bait after a heart and single lung shot. Ellen Schmidt of Friendship shot a 130 pound bear with a Browning 30-06 while her husband Wayne video-taped the hunt. Ellen had video-taped Wayne's successful bear hunt two seasons before.

"It was fun and exciting," she said. "I've shot deer and turkey but I can't describe this feeling. I go hunting with the guys a lot and love the outdoors. I love this camp. I was very comfortable being the only woman in camp and

not at all intimidated."

Dana Collins of Fitchburg is an avid white-tail bowhunter but first time bear hunter who passed up a shot on day one with his Hoyt because he was unsure of the bear's size. He also video taped the hunt himself. "At first I thought it wasn't big enough, he said. "It's hard to judge." Collins scored with the bow on a 160 pound sow on day two.

Jerry Post of St. Nazianz hunted with a 30-06 under the close watch of son-in-law Marv Mott of Manitowoc, who came along as an observer. Post had last taken a bear in Tipler, Wisconsin 40 years before just prior to a tour in Vietnam where he was wounded three times. He took a 130 pound boar.

"I've hunted bear three times in Canada and in Carolina with a lot of different guides," he said. "This is by far the best camp I've been to. What they tell you to expect here, you can pretty much bet it's going to happen."

Don Penza of Weston downed a 130 pound

bear with a 7 mm magnum at 76 yards as his son, Chris video taped. "This absolutely is a well run camp," he said. "Anyone can have bears hit the bait. These guys work hard for you and pattern the bears. That's why we get the opportunities. It was a very satisfying hunt."

Tim Myers and Curtis Kirschbaum came north all the way from Cassville. Myers tagged a 150 pound boar with bow and arrow. Kirschbaum downed a 250 pound sow with a .270 Winchester at 50 yards. On his first bear hunt, Kirschbaum initially let the big bear go due to the difficulty noted by many hunters of judging size. He also noted the difference in terrain from his home Grant County, comparing the big hills, rivers and train tracks that can help a hunter keep his bearings to the unending forests of Bayfield County.

Wade Crusan of Waukesha tagged a 130 pound sow with a rifle. With tag still unfilled after day two, Len Vetsch of Elk Mound will also return later in September to try again. *W*

led the recovery, and a Wisconsin black bear that would tip the scales at 412 pounds was ready for transport back to camp. By nightfall, seven of the 14 hunters also using special permit crossbow, firearms or bow and arrow would have filled tags, with none of the bears traveling more than 50 yards from the hit.

Sean Puccinelli, McGuire's cousin, filled his tag on a 465 pound monster that sent his heart to pounding many times before he settled down for a perfect shot with a Marlin 45-70. Puccinelli experienced no activity all day long on the bait until an average bear broke the ice at 3:25 p.m. The big boy showed up near early evening.

"The monster bear just showed up on the bait," he said. "He was no comparison to the bear I had been watching. For a solid hour he never gave me a shot so I had time for my heart to calm down. I scoped him a bunch of times. At six o'clock he stood up and gave me a 50 yard broadside shot. I hit him behind the shoulder. He went 40 yards."

By the conclusion of the first several days of the season, 12 of 14 hunters in the Mike Foss camp had filled their tags. The two



Seven Wisconsin black bears ranging from an average 150 pounds to well over 450 pounds were taken by hunters opening day, September 3, from the Northern Wisconsin Outfitters camp in Bayfield County.

hunters still waiting can return later in the season. Foss continues to work the baits and keep the bear returning specifically for that purpose.

A tired but extremely satisfied Mike Foss said that all of the pre-season work was well worth it, noting that 100 percent of the hunters in camp had shot opportunities. He said that hunters arriving at camp are welcomed with a Lake Superior fish fry prior to a

question and answer period to eliminate any uncertainties they may have, followed by a drawing for hunting gear donated by camp sponsors.

"We cover all kinds of questions like can they carry a hand gun or bear spray, can they get out of the stand without the guide or will they get lost, how to tell the size of a bear," Foss said. "Rules and regulations are a big topic. We let them know that the very second the day's hunt is done, that arrow comes off the string or the bullet comes out of the rifle. Rookie bear hunters often have fears or concerns. That's understandable and we address them too."

He noted that his hunt includes five days in the field but he extends that to eight days at no extra charge for unsuccessful hunters. He said too that the opening day success of seven bears was the highest ever at Northern Wisconsin Outfitters.

"If they still have not gotten a bear, they can come back again on my time Monday through Wednesday and stay in my home. We try to help them all fill their tags."

Contact Mike Foss and Northern Wisconsin Outfitters at 1-715-373-0344 or www.northernwisconsinoutfitters.com. *W*