

MIKE FOSS

DIARY OF A BEAR GUIDE

The Hunt for the monster of Bayfield County



SUZUKI
KINGQUAD 750AXI
4x4

Wisconsin guide Mike Foss chooses the Suzuki King Quad 750 AXI 4x4 Camo ATV when guiding clients for black bear and whitetail deer in rugged Bayfield County.

Beginning in May, Foss baits several times a week for bear clients spread over 20 square miles of tough back-country near Washburn, and twice daily as the September season approaches. He needs a machine as tough as the country. For endless chores from scouting to tree stand placement, to hunter transport and retrieval of tagged game, Foss depends on the King Quad 750.

"I'll take my Suzuki," Foss said. "I also manage wildlife food plots including spraying herbicides, tillage, seeding, and fertilizing, and I transport ice fishing clients far out on Lake Superior. I need a reliable machine because Wisconsin hunters rely on me. I need the best."

Mike Foss works hard for his clients 12 months a year. Hard enough that his black bear clients enjoy a success rate of 88 percent and his deer hunters know from history that a buck for the record book is always a distinct possibility.

His Suzuki works as hard as he does.

 **SUZUKI**
Way of Life!

While driving the dusty back roads toward my Washburn home on a hot July afternoon in 2002, I was stunned by the size of the black bear just off the gravel before me. He sat there in a sun-streaked ditch panting, the saliva dripping heavily from his mouth, while I scrambled like any veteran hunter who knows he has only fleeting moments to react and make the perfect "shot."

My hand frantically searched for the camera that would capture a true trophy forever. In 20 years as a bear and deer guide in Wisconsin's Lake Superior country with many animals tagged in to 400-pound-plus class, I had never seen a bigger bear. My double take at the first glimpse of the monster led to my foot moving to ease the rambling truck to a stop. I cringed and willed any screech of brake or tire that would send him into the brush to remain silent. I threw the truck in reverse and backed to where I could shoot him at just a few paces. My hand grasped at nothing. The camera had been left at home. I stared. He stared back.

"Look at the size of that bear," I said aloud but in a whisper that serves as a voice each time a hunter's breath is knocked out by a close encounter with a special deer or bear.

He was huge, a 500 pound black bear just a few yards away, worked into a lather in the heat of the black bear summer breeding season. His boldness and lack of caution told me that a hot sow was surely in the area. His very look told me that not only would he earn his reward somewhere in the forest on this day, regardless of the length of the chase, but also that something was just not right with Mr. Big. So close that I could scrutinize him until he decided to leave, it hit me; a tooth almost two inches in length protruded sideways from his lower left jaw. Apparently, an old injury had healed long ago and was causing the old boar no pain.

Eventually, he lumbered across the road behind my truck and down a barbed wire fence. When he found an opening large enough to squeeze through, he was gone, but not forever. My first encounter with one of

Wisconsin's most impressive black bears had only begun in that Bayfield County ditch. Almost immediately, like other Wisconsin hunters who learn to look again for a very special and identifiable animal after just one encounter,

game and trigger with motion. I set off to find out where the trail led and most of all, to find the monster bear that was making it.

For two miles I followed that trail until I came to what I now call the



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. Follow his 2008 quest for the 500-pound Snaggle Tooth.


the boar was baptized with a nickname. Six years later, Snaggle Tooth has been able to outwit many hunters in the area and remains alive.

I have made written record of the sightings of Snaggle Tooth from reliable, veteran hunters in the area, and even the not-so credible rumors of a huge bear frequenting this back road or that clear-cut. Each spring, many Cuddeback trail cameras are also set to capture black bear and whitetail activity as a major part of my scouting that includes shed hunting and the search for bear sign like territorial scratching trees. After countless hours of field work, I was finally rewarded with the discovery of the core area used by Snaggle Tooth.

Shed hunting in 2007 among the vast acreage of land open to the public, I came upon the unmistakable trail trampled and worn deep by a bear: not just any bear, but a huge bear. The next day I loaded the backpack with the cameras, which are set on trails frequented by

Bear's Den: a one-acre area so thick that an intruder to The Den cannot see 10 yards through the vegetation. The trail led on to a clump of small pine trees, branches hanging low to the ground. With heart pounding, I looked inside that clump of trees. There was his bed, a lair I could tell he had used many times. The impression in the ground told me so.

I could not wait to set up the Cuddebacks. One week later, a huge bear recorded by the camera was the reward for a search already years in the making. Closer inspection to his jaw confirmed an abnormality worthy of a hunter's nickname. After too long of a separation, I was looking again at Snaggle Tooth.

Shivers ran up and down my spine. The puzzle was coming together. It's time. Now ...the real hunt begins. 

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