

MIKE FOSS

DIARY OF A BEAR GUIDE*Zeroing in on the monster of Bayfield County*

SUZUKI
KINGQUAD 750 AXI 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 backcountry 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!

Finding the perfect ambush in our quest to tag Snaggle Tooth during the fast approaching September, 2008 Wisconsin black bear season was not an easy task. Despite his elusiveness since I first encountered this 500 pound monster seven years ago and his ability until recently to stay clear of the cuddeback cameras I had set across my baiting territory in Bayfield County, Snaggle Tooth likes to be near human activity. Like other bears, he is the home owner's worst nightmare when it comes to bird feeders. When it comes to hunting him, he knows that the smorgasbord of goodies we place several times weekly in the bait pits just doesn't fall from the sky. He will use his keen sense of smell to his greatest advantage. He will use his intelligence to find our stands.

It is how a bear learns to survive the seasons to become a very big, old bear. It is why he is almost never seen at a bait station being watched by a hunter on stand and when he is, most often it is only with a few minutes left during legal shooting hours. He comes upwind silently like a black ghost under cover of darkness. It is also why only the experienced, patient hunters who are willing to let average bears come and go knowing that the big bear may never show at all will be placed over the bait stations we have readied in our effort to take Snaggle Tooth.

To keep these big bears guessing, our hunters will use portable, climbing treestands. Using a "climber" offers distinct advantages: the bear is not aware of a stand prior to the season and we can easily change locations in response to changing wind directions. If a bruin is close by when the hunter is climbing, it also mimics a bear climbing a tree, possibly encouraging the nocturnal bear to visit early.

To fool any seasoned bear, we attempt to make the animal feel secure. Like a kid with his hand in the cookie jar, we want him to feel like he is getting away with something every time he visits a bait station. Snaggle Tooth has a wide range and we have set three baiting stations over two miles specifically targeting him. The stands have been prepared for one traditional archer, one hunter who will use a compound bow, and one using a 45-70 rifle. The stands have allowed us to get



The guide guesses right and captures Snaggle Tooth on Cuddeback camera one month before the September black bear season at bait station number one in Bayfield County



Mike Davis of Whitewater shooting a .44 magnum revolver handload helped put the 2007 Foss camp success rate at 88 percent. (Photo by Dick Ellis)

in, bait quickly, and get out. With the help of ATVs that will carry 15 hunters to their stands and haul out harvested bears, we are maintaining 23 bait stations total over 35 miles of public and private Bayfield County backcountry.

I have had an eerie feeling of impending success about one Snaggle Tooth stand in particular. It rests on a little knoll only 12 feet wide with a narrow finger that gently slopes downward into that tangled mess where a big bear can find relief from the heat of summer and feel secure for a fast escape. By mid-July, my sixth sense or lucky feeling was verified. We stood re-baiting a station just hours after the cuddeback camera had captured Snaggle Tooth sitting in the same spot, gorging himself on the pie filling and pastry we had left with his name on it.

He is incredible. The long tooth that earned him his nickname juts from the side of his jaw. The photos taken from about eight feet show a damaged nose probably sustained years before in


a brawl with a then-more dominant bear. Most impressive, he is all of 500 pounds and more; and a rare Wisconsin black bear indeed.

Seasoned bear guides know that daily baiting in a big bear's bedroom will send the senses to full alert. Eyes continuously scan the thick underbrush as you walk in, most often alone, with another pail of sweets that the bear has learned to claim as his own. A guide's hearing heightens ten-fold. Will that monster bear wearing a not-so-friendly attitude materialize in the tangled mass? Seeing Snaggle Tooth on camera precisely on the stand I am traveling to and knowing that he is near has magnified this hair-raising "bear mode."

Joe, my bear "apprentice" who is helping me prepare for a bear camp has no bear experience and many questions. Recently we slowly, quietly moved through the tangled forest carrying new bait. With a soft whisper I told Joe that we were almost to the Snaggle Tooth station. "Why are we whispering?" he asked with a puzzled look. "It's the natural thing to do in the woods," I said, saving the lecture about a hunter's stealth being imperative to success for later.

Ten steps later, I felt his heavy slap on my back as his yell of "Look at that!" shattered the silence and initiated my apparent heart attack. With thoughts of the monster bear on top of us, I grabbed for my bear spray but, heart pounding, followed Joe's pointing finger to the ground instead.

In one highly irritated breath I whispered, "Joe, don't you ever.... wow, what a nice set of antlers." Sometime last winter, a big buck felt secure on this knoll knowing he would not be bothered. He bedded down and lost the trophy rack that he had proudly displayed all fall. I had walked past those shed antlers on at least three occasions, but my focus had been up, looking for the perfect tree stand, not down.

Yes. I have a very good feeling... a lucky feeling... about Snaggle Tooth bait station number one. 

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