

THE BRIDGE RIVER BEAR ASSAULT

Hunting Black Bear with
BC Trophy Mountain Outfitters

by Joe Gray Taylor, Jr



“Joe, that is a really, really big bear,” whispered Todd Christie, my guide with BC Trophy Mountain Outfitters.

He and I had hunted together successfully twice before; once for black bear and once for mule deer. Through both binoculars and the spotting scope, the old boar looked truly enormous to me. But for Todd to be impressed – well, that placed the big bear in a different category altogether.

Unfortunately, the bear in question was grazing on spring grass over a kilometer away, on the far side of the largely-dry Carpenter Reservoir, with the flooding Bridge River roaring down the lake bed between us. We needed to make a plan. Moreover, it was late morning, and the old boar was already drifting back toward the wood line to bed. Whatever we did would have to be that afternoon and evening, or the next day.

I had arrived at Kevan Bracewell’s unique ranch for an early May black bear hunt nearly a week before. I was accompanied by an old friend, Rick Bennett, who was experiencing British Columbia, black bear hunting, and the incredible Chilcotin Mountains for the first time. The drive up the mighty Fraser gorge and the equally-beautiful Bridge River drainage were as lovely as I remembered and seeing them through the eyes of a first-time visitor was especially rewarding. Rick is an old retired fighter pilot, so it is typically difficult for things vertical to impress him. Yet, even his eyes widened a bit as the van crept along a couple of slides with drops of hundreds of feet to the ribbon of water below.

After a day of hunting, he commented, “You know Joe, they’re right – if you get tired up here, you can just sort of lean against it.” We both did a lot of leaning.

Kevan is a product of the Canadian west. His mother, Gerry Bracewell, was British Columbia’s first woman to become a licensed hunting guide. She helped create the concept of the destination ranch for mountain hunting, and Kevin took the concept a step farther in the Chilcotin. Today, he hosts an array of international sportsmen seeking Canada’s incredible richness of mountain game. Because of the way he works within his territory to protect, manage, and develop a truly integrated approach to sustaining British Columbia’s wilderness, each of those hunters comes away with a uniquely-deep appreciation of this ecosystem. His commitment also assures an ideal destination for spring bear.

But for the moment, my concerns were more immediate.

“You know Joe, there is a boat back at the ranch,” Todd said, as much to himself as he did me as we hiked back to the truck for the drive back to camp. Crossing to the other side of the reservoir by vehicle was not an option to reach this bear. No road or trail would get us closer than 20 kilometers to where we had last seen him. Our only option would be an amphibious assault across the Bridge River and lake basin. And frankly, as a 30-year Army veteran and old Airborne Ranger, I found the idea of reliving a small boat operation more than just a little intriguing.

For summer guests who wished to fish the area lakes, the ranch kept a diminutive 12-foot aluminum skiff. Designed with oars in mind, we quickly concluded that trying to launch into the fast current and get oars into action would be more complicated than practical. Instead, we opted for a sturdy canoe paddle and one of the oars to serve as combination paddle and push pole. A couple of life preservers, rifle, and pack rounded out our equipment.

I had brought along my favorite “bear rifle,” a Sako Model 85 Arctos in 9.3x62. Though a bigger caliber than absolutely necessary for black bear, the Swift A-Frame bullets it loves are decisive on anything hit in the right place (more about that in a bit). The Leica scope it carries is extremely bright, and easily separates a dark animal like a black bear from the darkest background on a late afternoon hunt.

By three in the afternoon, we had loaded our landing craft into the back of the truck and pulled out for the drive back to our initial vantage point.

Upon stepping out onto the bench for a clear view, we immediately spotted the big boar grazing along the shoreline not two hundred meters from where we had last seen him in the late morning. From where we stood, the range finder said almost two kilometers in straight line to the bruin. However, we would have to carry the boat down a pretty good grade to get to the reservoir basin, then several hundred meters to the river, launch, and finally negotiate a meaningful stalk to get within shooting range. Our original, and perhaps wisest plan, was to tote the boat to the water’s edge, and leave it for an early morning try the next day. And yet, the bear was there, the wind was perfect, and we probably had just enough good light before the sun slipped behind the mountains plunging the river valley in early dusk.

Todd looked over at the boat, looked up at the sun, and then back out toward the bear. “Well, what do you think, Joe?”

We were there, the bear was there, and we had a chance of rain in the forecast.



“Come on Todd. Let’s go shoot that bear!”

The initial plunge down to the lake basin was less difficult than it had originally looked. The boat seemed to assume it was actually a toboggan, and pretty much slid itself several hundred meters to level ground. We helped it avoid the worst rocks and managed to keep from being run over by our single-minded craft. After reaching the lake bed, with neither us nor the boat any worse for wear, we had a moment to contemplate that the trip back up would likely prove a bit more demanding. But no need to think of that now.

Rifle, pack, oar, and paddle went into the boat. I grabbed the rear, Todd lifted the front, and out we marched across the lake bed to what looked like a relatively quiet spot in a curve on the river. Fortunately, our bear was so far away, there was no chance of him seeing our strange procession as we angled in his direction.

The lake bottom was solid, but we could see that it would be fairly treacherous and muddy at the river’s edge. Rubber boots would have likely been a wise addition to our equipment list, but we were now committed.

The river in the middle of the reservoir basin was no small obstacle. At the point we chose to cross, it was approximately 60 meters wide, probably five to six feet deep at mid-point, and flowing with the sort of current everything does in that part of the world. We edged the boat about a third of the way into the river, and Todd scrambled into the front with the oar. I shoved us out at a downstream angle, and with a final, muddy push we were afloat. Neither of us tried to pay too

much attention to the mere four inches of freeboard on either side as we paddled frantically for the far bank.

We both stroked with all the power we could muster, and the oar proved ideal in Todd’s hands to both keep us pointed in the right direction and to avoid snags. I was free to power stroke as hard as I could with the paddle to maintain our momentum across the current. We were both acutely aware that any loud bang against our aluminum assault craft could send our quarry dashing for the nearby tree line. I could sense the shades of those tough old NCO Instructors at the US Army Ranger School critically watching our every effort. After what seemed to be a very long time and enormous amount of work we ground against the far bank. I suspect the actual crossing took little more than five minutes, however seemingly endless at the time.

The bear was feeding away from us approximately five-hundred meters from our landing point. We had about 200 meters of open basin to cover before a rise in the lakeshore would shield our approach. I quietly worked the action of the Sako, insured it was on safe, and then we eased up to our place of concealment.

Edging over the low crest, I saw I could make my way unseen to a stump which, while kneeling, would make a steady rest. Todd was right behind me and whispered, “185 yards” as he watched the big boar through his range finder. I took a few moments to settle my breathing and placed the cross hairs low in bear’s chest – in hindsight, a bit too low for that range and that bullet – and fired.

The bear was standing almost broadside on a steep embankment which marked the normal shoreline when the reservoir was full. It was this band of soil which nurtured some of the spring's first grass. At the shot, the bear tumbled, bawling down the slope. As I stood, I chambered another round, making ready should I have to make sure he was down.

"He's up!" yelled Todd. Absolutely the last thing I wanted to hear.

I ran forward about 30 feet where I had a clear view of the big boar, now racing up the embankment toward the tree line. The first shot had broken his foreleg, passing through the thick hair just below his chest. I kicked myself for deliberately taking the low chest shot as I swung through him as he ran. The first follow-up shot went approximately a foot in front of his nose. The next missed forward by an inch, and the third centered him, dropping him in his tracks. Not the best shooting I had ever done, but then again, a running bear at nearly 200 yards isn't the easiest target.

For most inexperienced bear hunters, all bears look large when alive. And no other game animal seems to shrink so much upon approach. However, this one simply grew bigger as we walked towards him.

It was all we could do to push him up onto the log he had fallen against to take a picture or two as the sun began to dip below the mountain tops. Obviously, we had no means to weigh him on the far side of the river, and it would have taken half a dozen men and a much larger boat to get him back across. If there was ever a candidate for a wilderness black bear to push the four-hundred-pound mark, this was one.

We quickly set to work skinning him. Neither Todd nor I relished the idea of spending the night on the far shore with a bear carcass in grizzly country.

With dusk approaching, we were able to stuff all the hide but the head into Todd's large pack. We covered the carcass and would return to bone out the meat early the next morning. With my guide staggering under the cape's weight, and me carrying the remainder of our gear, we stumbled down to our trusty landing craft.

Probably because we had done it once, the trip back across the river seemed marginally less frantic. Though, I could not help but notice that our little skiff was sitting significantly lower in the water.

The hike back up out of the reservoir basin is one both of us would likely as soon forget. We finally hit upon a system where I walked

directly behind Todd, cradling the bear's head in my arms while he pushed on with the balance of the cape still in the pack. With darkness falling, we left the boat at the river's edge for the meat recovery early in the morning; a task we successfully accomplished with far less drama than our initial amphibious assault the evening before.

The next evening, my friend Rick also took a fine bear, and with mine in the salt, Todd and I were free to accompany him and his guide on that hunt. We celebrated a truly incredible forty-eight hours. It was the perfect conclusion to our week in British Columbia.

Two days later I was aboard a flight climbing out of Vancouver. As I stared out the window at the vast coastal mountain ranges of British Columbia, I felt such gratitude that there were still a few remaining places like the Pacific Northwest where hunter, hiker, and camper could experience some measure of what was once the immensity of the North American wilderness. It was also comforting to know that far-sighted Canadians like Kevan Bracewell were doing all in their power to assure new generations would embrace the ethics of stewardship to protect that eco-system for future generations.

I already was planning my return.

Joe Gray Taylor, Jr. is a former U.S. Army Major General and retired Defense Industry executive. He has hunted Canada, Africa, and South America numerous times. He and his lovely wife Nancy make their home on a small ranch in Texas with their four Vizslas.



EDITOR'S NOTE:

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