

# Priceless!

BY ANDRE VAN HILTEN

The spring season in Alberta is truly a magical time of year. It is the season when new life is evident all around. Life slowly creeps into the country from the hearty crocus that boldly brings the first color to the drab landscape, to the newly-open buds on poplar trees that cast a green hue across the hillsides. While listening to the robin sing his heart out from a wind-battered spruce tree, I raise my binoculars to my eyes to get a closer look at a cow moose across the draw from me. Upon closer inspection with the spotting scope, two feeble calves, only hours old, instinctively try to nurse from their patient mother. There is no place I would rather be right now. A wave of appreciation comes over me and I feel so fortunate to be able to experience nature's true beauty firsthand.

Glassing and stalking black bears in the foothills of southwestern Alberta is more than just a hunt. It's an experience that leaves a hunter with many vivid memories aside from a successful harvest of a bruin. From soaking up the heat of the afternoon sun or shivering through a spring snow squall, to the adrenaline rush of spotting a bear working his way up the creek bottom below, Nature is showing her best.

By my side were good friends Kent Green and his son, Chris. For the past several falls, both have bowhunted mule deer with Willow Creek Outfitters. After bear hunting for the past two springs on his own with me, Kent convinced Chris to join us this time for his first bear hunt. For me, guiding Kent and Chris is a pleasure; we have a deep friendship forged from many days spent in the field on past hunts.

It was day five of our eight-day hunt and neither Kent nor Chris had filled their tags. We had been hampered by weather, but had seen a number of bears, missed a shot, and failed stalks on two different colored bears. We decided to move to a different valley for the last few hours of the day to a place that had consistently produced bears for a number of my clients in the past.

As the sun loomed closer to the horizon of the Rockies to the west, we decided to make our way slowly out on an old road that would take us to the truck. Rounding a bend we could see

through the poplar trees a lush patch of green grass. Those are the places that are like magnets for bears to feed during the early spring. Seemingly out of nowhere, the coal-colored form of a bear appeared in the opening! I was sizing it up when movement in the willows surrounding the grassy opening caught my eye. A cinnamon boar fed his way along, intent on getting his fill of the tender grass shoots.

Without hesitation, Chris and I slipped into position on the fence line and got set up on the shooting sticks. Moments later, the cinnamon boar emerged in the opening, 150 yards away from us. After a quick check to see if the bear's hide had any rubbed spots, I gave Chris the thumbs up and he took the shot. The boar collapsed and Chris had his first bear! We could not believe how fast it happened, and at that moment, there wasn't a father more proud of his son than Kent.

For the last day of the hunt, it would be just Kent and me, as Chris had to leave early. I left it up to Kent to where he wanted to hunt that day and without hesitation he chose the same valley where Chris had taken his bear. I was more than good with that as I always have a positive feeling going to a place where we have had success in the past.

We made it only 300 yards from the truck when we got to our first vantage point. It was early afternoon, so we decided to hang out for a while and glass a drainage that stretched out below us. We had been glassing for a matter of minutes when we spotted a black bear up the valley. Instantly recognizing the bulky frame and swaggering gait of a mature boar, a surge of excitement came over us. The big boar seemed intent on being somewhere, somewhere only he knew, leaving us guessing which way he would head.

He crossed the valley, moving through pockets of willow and not wanting to be in the open more than he had to. Once he reached the far side of the drainage, he would have to continue up the other side and over into the next valley to the east, or turn down and

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Chris Green (L) and outfitter Andre van Hilten (R) with Chris' big cinnamon boar.







Kent Green (L) and outfitter Andre van Hilten (R) with Kent's hard earned trophy black bear.

follow the creek that meandered below us. We were hoping for the latter as it was our only chance to intercept him.

As soon as the boar committed to heading downstream, we made our play. If we could drop into the creek bottom and get to a small stand of trees, we would be within shooting distance. We arrived at our destination a little winded, and intently scanned the hillside before us. The bear was in a large stand of poplars that tapered down into an open field 100 yards ahead of us. We soon picked him up, threading his way through the trees as if he was on a

string. When he reached the last of the cover, he hesitated and, as if on cue, Kent did his part and completed his quest for a giant black bear. The hunt could not have been scripted any better — hunting to the last day and connecting on two great bears.

The following year, Kent and Chris returned with their friend, Jason. It was Jason's first bear hunt and the Greens were eager to show him how exciting the hunt really was. For three days we pursued a monster black boar that was courting a sow, but to no avail, so we decided to change things and check out some different country. The move turned out to be a good one in a big way.

We just happened to stumble into a big cinnamon bear on our way back to the truck one evening. Chris and I moved quickly to close the distance as neither of us felt comfortable setting up where we were — it would have been a 400-yard shot. We focused on the bear's body posture as he fed, and moved in single file, gaining ground only when he was facing away from us. At 150 yards, I felt we were pushing our luck and that we should play our hand before our quarry evaporated into the trees. With a perfect broadside shot, Chris took another awesome, colored bear.

Kent and Chris have put in their time in the field with Willow Creek Outfitters. Both were greatly rewarded with big bears and the trophies were just the icing on the cake. The true prize for all was the whole experience the hunts provided. Being able to enjoy and appreciate nature and great friendships, like the Visa credit card commercial says, is priceless. 🐻



Shadow cast by evening sun of hunter glassing for bears.