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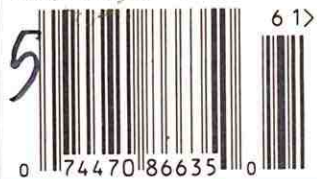
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TRACKING THE GREAT BEAR

The Biggest Bear by Jim Halfpenny Ph.D.

Sleep came quickly that night near timberline, southeast of Yellowstone National Park. It had been a hard day on the trail, and the evening's campfire stories drifted into a competition of my-bear-is-bigger-than-your's stories. The stories were spurred on by the giant grizzly tracks we had found on a snow cornice. I was so tired I didn't even pitch a tent; I just crawled into the sleeping bag late at night.

Somewhere in the darkest portion of the night, when even watchdogs sleep, a scraping noise woke me. It sounded like a small mammal at my pack. I rolled over, throwing back my bag cover, and crouched on my knees. There, six feet from me and face-to-face, was the unmistakable muzzle of a LARGE bear—dark around the nose and light colored on the cheeks. From what I could see of its muzzle, the rest of the bear was huge! I froze. It froze. We watched each other—not breathing—not moving.

To make a long story short, after a 30-minute stalemate I inched my hand to my flashlight. Reasoning that it is usually black bears that have light colored muzzles and not grizzlies, I flashed the light in his face, and yelled at the top of my lungs. Light revealed the giant bear to be my sleeping bag stuff sack with its dark handle draped over my ice ax. By then the others were awake, and I wasn't about to hear the end of it.

Those of us with a scientific bent take the question of which bear

is biggest quite seriously. It isn't that big of a problem; all we should have to do is weigh them. Well, not all that many bears have been weighed, but certainly there are estimates in bear stories. But remember, according to Adolph Murie, "a bear story is like a fish story: the teller feels he has considerable latitude so far as accuracy is concerned. He eyes his audience, and if they show the least bit of detachment, the figures for distance, size, and weight are generously manipulated."

Should we then trust the experienced, bear-hunting guide who assures his generous client that the bear he just shot weighs a 1,000 pounds? Murie also noted, "a bear a long distance from a scale always weighs most."

Average male weights gleaned from studies kept honest by good scales show interior grizzlies (Yellowstone 539 pounds [dumps open] and 425 pounds [dumps closed], Jasper 436 pounds, and North Slope Alaska 539 pounds) are smaller than coastal browns (Alaskan Peninsula at 856 pounds and Kodiak Island at 686 pounds). But their white cousin, the polar bear, averages biggest of all at 1,150 pounds in some populations. Mature male brown bears range from 900 to 1,800 pounds while mature male polar bears range from 1,150 to 1,550 pounds. The bottom line: the average male polar bear weighs more than the average brown bear.

But which bear has obtained the greatest size? What is the

extreme, the record weight? According to Gary Brown (*Great Bear Almanac*, 1993) the heaviest recorded polar bear was 2,210 pounds, but the heaviest brown bear was 2,500+ pounds. Now did they really weigh that brown bear?

Other huge behemoths are worth note. David Day (*Doomsday Book of Animals*, 1981) relates stories of Russian hunters on the Kamchatkan peninsula killing bears weighing 1,435 and 1,507 pounds. Since the last of these reports dates from the 1920s, it is thought that these bears might have been the last of a short-haired, black-colored brown bear. Fossils indicate that larger bears roamed at the end of the Ice Age. Bjorn Kurten (*Cave Bear Story*, 1976) thought the cave bears of Europe averaged 1,000 pounds. But they were no match for the extinct, giant short-faced bears of North America estimated to average 1,345 pounds with the record weight at 2,200 pounds.

Big bears have gripped our imaginations since the beginning of time. By what criteria should we judge their size? While weight, skull, pelt and track size have always been good indicators, ferocity may be better. A 350-pound female grizzly protecting her cubs may be the biggest bear of all.



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