

Lights, Camera, Alaskan Action!

As the floatplane glided across the dense forest from Ketchikan to the coastal town of Craig, Alaska, I followed its small shadow. I turned to my seatmate to comment on the breathtaking view, but I quickly realized by the way she clenched the back of her husband's seat she might not share my level of excitement. I didn't blame her.

My excitement had done nothing but skyrocket since Alan Lotton, of Sims Vibration Laboratory, invited me to hunt black bear on Prince of Wales Island. Alan assured me an adventure of a lifetime, and to add to my excitement, my spot and stalk hunt would be filmed for a TV show on the Outdoor Channel!

After weeks of shooting practice at the range and deliveries of gear from sponsors that would challenge my packing skills, I joined Alan and the crew during the last week of April on the Eldorado, a fifty-eight foot steel-hulled boat that had been refurbished into a floating hunt camp. Rick, the videographer, filmed Alan welcoming me at the dock and crewmember Jimmy who took us back to the Eldorado in the small skiff. On board, I met Captain Mike, the older brother of Steve Sims, president and owner of Sims Vibration Laboratory; Chris, a fellow hunter and Sims Lab employee; and Kevin, the cook.

The first order of business was Captain Mike's safety meeting where again the camera rolled as Chris and I practiced putting on the cumbersome, life-saving neoprene survival suits. Captain Mike had almost convinced us that we had to have to jump in the water to fully test the suits - until I caught Alan's sly wink.

Back in the galley, Kevin served a mouth-watering dinner of spaghetti and Dungeness crab, hauled in from the sea that afternoon. Soon, I crawled into my bunk where not even the boat's roaring engines kept me from falling asleep.

The next morning, I was awakened by the crew moving about as they readied the boat for our eight-hour voyage to the southeast part of Prince of Wales Island, our hunting destination. Captain Mike reminded us that our departure time was critical. We had to sail through a particularly challenging section called the Tlevak Narrows, and the changing tides made the window of opportunity for safe passage slim. While the crew loaded the skiff and refueled the Eldorado, Alan, Chris, Rick and I made a quick run to the local sporting goods store for our licenses and last minute supplies.

The day-long sail took us successfully down through the lush timber of the Tlevak Strait, into Cordova Bay and turned back north toward the South Prince of Wales Wilderness. Captain Mike piloted the Eldorado into the protected Klakas Inlet and dropped anchor in calm Max Cove.

The crew unloaded the skiff and we cruised the coves for bears before dinner. I was thrilled to spot two different bears feeding along the rocky beaches, but was unable to get close enough to either for a comfortable shot. "That's OK," Alan encouraged. "We've

got plenty of time, but that was a good trial run to go through to get the feel of what's going to take place."

A full moon hung over the Eldorado in the night air and we listened to the crew's favorite Seattle bands filled the night air. Rick and I filmed schools of tiny squid attracted to the boat's floodlights. They left inky trails when startled by my camera's flash

Once again, Kevin amazed us with steak and shitake mushroom caps filled with fresh crab. Back in my bunk, I set my alarm for 4:30 and within minutes was rocked to sleep by soothing waves, dreaming of bears.

The next morning, after a quick sound check of the camera microphones, we glassed the coves and inlets in earnest for bears. By mid-morning, the only creature we had spotted was a Sitka black-tailed doe, a stockier cousin of the mule deer. She stayed bedded down on the bank in the warm spring sun for a few pictures before slipping off into the thick forest.

As Jimmy guided the skiff slowly around a rocky outcropping, Alan suddenly snatched up the binoculars. "There's a bear," he whispered. "Up in that cove." Jimmy eased the boat toward shore, gently bumping the hull on the beach. Rick grabbed his camera, I grabbed my Remington 700 and Alan led us across the slippery kelp-covered rocks.

At first all I could see were the bear's feet as it rounded the tree-lined cove some two hundred yards away. I settled down into a rocky crevice, planting my rifle's barrel on a small stuffed knapsack to steady it. The bear appeared and ambled right towards us, lifting his nose occasionally to sniff the overhanging branches. All I heard Alan say was, "You're in control now. Take your time." At 75 yards, I put the crosshairs on the bear as it took one last step towards me before quartering away. The force of my .300 caliber bullet sent it bucking across the beach where it dropped into a heap.

"Bear down!" and "Nice shot, Beth!" shouted Chris and Jimmy. Alan slapped my shoulder. "Good job!"

"I did it! I knew I could do it," I gasped.

With a huge grin, Alan turned toward Rick's camera. "We're up here in Alaska with Beth Ann Amico on her first black bear hunt," he started. "And she didn't waste any time!"

"I have to ask you," he continued. "What did you think when he was coming straight at you? Did you wonder if he wasn't going to give you a broadside shot?"

Still gulping for air, I tried to find the words to describe my thoughts, but couldn't take my eyes off the bear.

Alan gave me a high-five. "Let's go see your bear! You lead the way."

Once across the rocks, we knelt down beside the fallen bear to continue the interview and take pictures. Again, I tried to answer Alan's questions, but all I really wanted was to soak in the enormity of the bear's head and paws, putting my hand across them for comparison.

Jimmy brought the skiff around and the four men loaded the bear onto the bow of the boat. In no time we were back at the Eldorado. We let Rick off so that he could film us pulling alongside the boat and hoisting the bear onto the deck with the hydraulic lift.

The video of the hunt was the crew's lunchtime entertainment. Everyone agreed that Rick did a great job capturing my reaction to the shot. Later, Kevin skinned the bear and gave me the bullet he found buried in its butter-colored fat.

The remainder of my week on the Eldorado was equally amazing. I fished for blaze orange goldeneye rockfish, caught and release lingcod and went sightseeing. Our trip back to Craig was filled with sightings of more bears, eagles, seals and orcas. We filmed some additional scenes, or b-roll as it's called, thanking Steve Sims, the many sponsors, and wrapping up the trip.

And all too soon it was over. Hundreds of photos and a small silver bear charm from the airport gift shop were the only tangible evidence of my adventure until a few weeks later, when I received copies of the raw video.

After couple of months had passed, my bear's skull and hide arrived for my taxidermist to turn into a rug and the episode titled "Bear Island" aired on the Outdoor Channel. I was even a celebrity one day when the local pharmacist recognized me from the show.

It truly was an adventure of a lifetime, just as Allan had promised, and the images of my first black bear will be with me forever.