

Growing Ontario bear population offers exciting hunting opportunities

ESPANOLA, Ontario, Canada - Combine an overabundance of black bears with an outfitter proficient at putting his hunters in front of animals, and Ontario bear hunting this fall is as close as it gets in the hunting world to a guaranteed, fair chase big-game hunt.

Ontario always has been a black bear factory, but recent political wrangling in the province have had the unintended effect of greatly increasing the population.

In 1999, the Ontario legislature cancelled the spring bear hunt, leaving only fall hunting to manage the black bear population. The move was intended to stop a perceived over-harvesting of sows with cubs.

But according to Greg Farrant of the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, an 81,000 member nonprofit organization, the result has been devastating to rural economies, as well as the bears it was meant to protect.

“From 1995 until 1998 when the spring hunt was ceased, Ontario residents reported 2600 nuisance problems with bears. After the ban, from 1999 until 2002, there were 12,426 calls about nuisance bears,” he said.

That is because the spring hunt was the most efficient way to cull the population. The population there was stable under the two season structure. Farrant said estimates now show the population to be growing by 4000 bears a year.

Compared to The United States’ most densely populated black bear states of Minnesota and Alaska, which boast around 35,000 animals each, Ontario has over 100,000 bears, and according to Farrant, no room for more.

“This ban has taken a respected big game animal, and made it the equivalent of vermin here,” Farrant said. “There are so many bears, now, police are actually having to kill more sows now than before the ban because of all the nuisance calls.”

Cheap and close

Because of the overpopulation of bears, hunting for them has never been more affordable, and closer than most Hoosier hunters might think. A nine hour drive from Steuben County, including crossing the bridge at Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., puts hunters right in the middle of the bear explosion.

The cost for a week of hunting over bait - including the use of a cabin, boat and motor as well as all licenses - is around \$1300 per person.

Because non-residents must hunt with an outfitter in Ontario, a group of hunters, mostly from Indiana, hooked up with well established bear outfitter Mike Piano for the Aug. 15 opener. Hunting a huge and exclusive area of wilderness near Espanola, Piano’s Mountain Cove Lodge has been one of the most respected and successful bear camps in Ontario for over 20 years.

Two months prior to season, Piano started baiting 24 spots, spacing them far enough apart to discourage a bear from hitting more than one bait. By Aug. 15, marauding bears were hitting all 24 spots.

While some western states no longer allow hunting bears over bait, Ontario hunters say it is by far the best way to kill a bear in their dense, jungle-like forests that are a mix of swamps and deciduous and coniferous trees.

“Allowing a bear to come to a bait before shooting it increases the chance of getting a better placed shot. The right type of bait station can also help identify the sex of the bear, so hunters can avoid shooting a

sow,” Piano said.

For that reason, Piano’s baits are mostly in buckets, hanging about six feet off the ground about 15 yards from the tree-stand. When a bear comes to the bait, not only is the shot high percentage because of the proximity, but patient hunters can also allow the animal to stand to access the hanging bait, at which time the hunter can identify the sex of the bear before shooting.

When I headed to one of Piano’s stands on Aug. 15, I had great expectations, even though I opted to make the hunt more challenging with a bow and arrow. I was shooting Mathews’ new Outback bow, which proved to be both deadly fast and accurate, but also a good choice for the densely foliated forest because it is so small and compact.

Three hours into the first day, I looked down, and there was a black bear walking under my tree. Despite the wall of vegetation I had just pushed and noisily stumbled through to get to the stand, the bear made no noise as he moved through the very same woods. As he proceeded to the bait, I drew and waited for a quartering away shot.

At only 12 yards, my arrow found it’s mark, and within seconds, the bear was dead only twenty yards from where I shot him.

An inspection of the bait station only a day after the kill revealed that another bear had already started hitting the spot.

Also in camp on opening week were Wally Cumberland of Rochester, Ind. and Matt Gast of Akron, Ind. Using rifles, both men killed bears within the first three days of hunting. Cumberland’s was a nice 200-pound animal; with Gast’s tipping the scale at over 250 pounds.

Every bear taken at Mountain Cove Lodge is skinned and fully butchered, with all edible meat either consumed in camp or frozen to take home. Even the trimmed fat from the bears is utilized by hunters and locals who use it to make soap and suet for birds.

Anyone interested in black bear hunting can contact Mike Piano at 1 (705) 866-7000, or view the Mountain Cove Lodge website at www.mountaincovelodge.net