

MINNESOTA BLACK BEAR

BEYOND THE SCORE

Keith Erhardt

Photos Courtesy of Author

On August 31, 2014, I packed everything I needed for a Minnesota black bear hunt into my station wagon. I had managed to draw a tag that year and was hoping I'd be lucky enough to have a successful hunt. The next morning, I finished loading my cameras, rifle, shotgun, pistol, bow and arrows. Excited as always, I was on my way bright and early the morning of September 1, hopeful my hunt would begin by 3 or 4 o'clock. It was tough being patient after running into road construction. I pulled into the quaint little motel that I frequent when hunting in the area, the Lake George Pines Motel, located in the small town of Lake George, Minnesota (just 26 miles south of Bemidji). I visited with Margie Bridgman, the motel owner, about the upcoming hunt and how excited I was to see my good friends, Dale and Jean Raven, who I would be hunting with.

Dale and his wife Jean are outfitters based out of Laporte, Minnesota, where Dale has been guiding since 2001. Dale is a true outdoorsman—a man in his 70s (though he hardly looks it), lives out in the woods off bear and deer meat and knows the woods better than just about anyone else. Dale hadn't managed to get a hunting license that year; instead, he was my guide for the trip. Dale chose a great location for our hunt. There were lots of beautiful old oaks, a lot of cover, plenty of water, and most importantly, a good amount of bear signs. For three weeks before the hunt, he baited our location every night and kept track of the activity. The bait was a hit. From the tracks and dung left behind, Dale told me he figured that two bears had been drawn to the location: a small- to average-sized adult and a bigger one.

By the time I reached the Ravens' home, I was running behind schedule. Not wanting to waste any time, it wasn't long before we were

headed out to the hunting stand. I was as hungry as the bears we were actively hunting, so I grabbed a bag of Fritos from my vehicle and tossed them into my backpack. Later, sitting in wait for my quarry, I wondered, "How on Earth did I think I would be able to eat these crunchy things in my tree stand when I need to be as quiet as a mouse?" After a short walk, Dale did the baiting and I crawled into the stand I would be using.

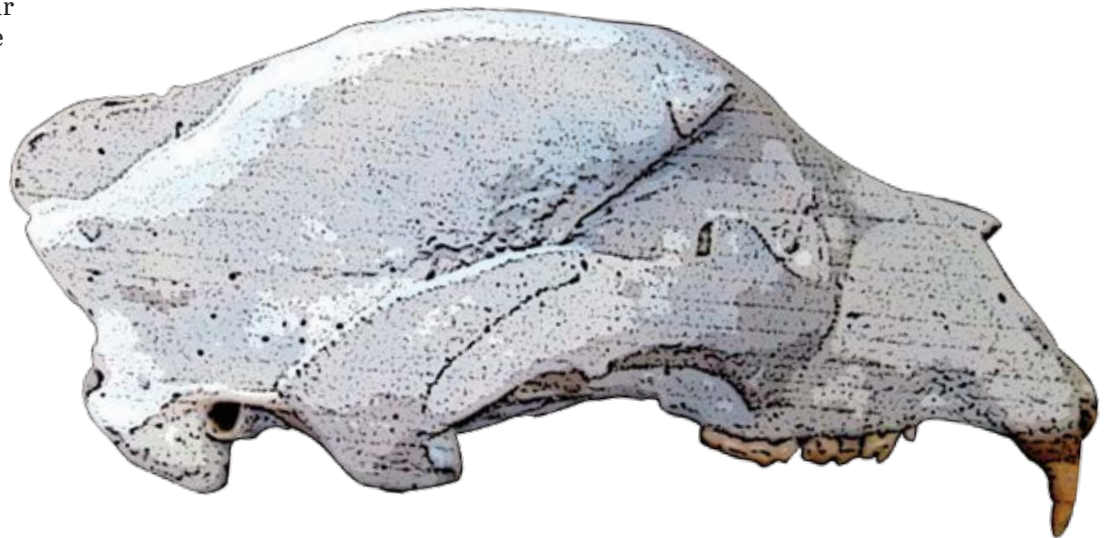
I took a good look at my surroundings and got settled. Dale checked in with me before he left—all was good. It rained lightly throughout the day (good for keeping the human scent down), but I didn't have to use my rain gear due to the thick brush above me. Unfortunately, the same thick cover prevented me from being able to use the bow I had brought along for the trip, so I prepared my shotgun for the hunt. I started to think about the Fritos in my backpack. I decided that since I'd entered the stand later than planned, maybe the bears already knew I was there and the night would be a wash. I placed the bag at the bottom of my backpack, and started to eat one chip at a time, slowly, as quietly as possible. I was prepared to stay in the stand for a half hour after sundown, but we'd lost some precious hunting time already.

After a while, I heard a noise—and then nothing; then another, the snapping of a twig or branch, followed again by silence. This went on for some time until,

finally, I could see black. It ambled between the trees, disappearing and then reappearing through the brush. It appeared to be circling around in front of me. For a few minutes, there was nothing. Then I could see three-quarters of the animal moving slowly towards me. I tried to be as still as possible, swallowing a half-chewed Frito, as he approached my ladder. I was 17 or 18 feet in the air, and I couldn't be sure if he had seen me or not. He seemed to be looking only halfway up, but I was quite sure he knew someone or something was up in the tree. Could he smell the Fritos I was eating? ("Of course he could smell them! He's a bear, Keith!" I told myself.)

After a few long minutes, he turned around. His back looked like a 3-year-old pig boar—wide, thick and long. But from my current position, it was hard to accurately tell just how large it was. I remembered what Dale had said about a small and a big bear getting into the bait and that he figured the big one was coming tonight. I'm always amazed at how well Dale knows the bears and their habits. Years of practice, I guess.

The bear casually walked away, making a large circle towards the bait. A pile of 4-foot-long logs, approximately 6 to 8 inches thick, were stacked on top. The bear lay down, facing me, snuffling at the logs with heavy breaths. Dale had filled the bait with donuts, trail mix, jelly rolls and bacon grease for plenty of



This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt strongly believed that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.



ABOVE: Brian A. Gross's state record black bear scores 22-5/16, only 1/16 over Keith's black bear.



"Keith," Duane said as we finally managed to get the massive animal into his workspace, "I really think you should get this guy measured. I think you've got a record-breaker." I'd never even thought to look into whether or not I'd set a record with this bear; I suppose I'd just been caught up in my own excitement. It would take some time for things to be verified, but I made sure to have my bear officially measured, just in case I came in close to any records.

TROPHY INFO

B&C SCORE: 22 ⁴/₁₆

HUNTER: Keith A. Erhardt

LOCATION

Hubbard Co., Minnesota – 2014

B&C RANKED SECOND IN THE STATE!

MINNESOTA BLACK BEAR

1. (tie) **B&C SCORE:** 22 ⁵/₁₆

HUNTER: Brian A. Gross

LOCATION: Hubbard Co., MN

YEAR: 2000

1. (tie) **B&C SCORE:** 22 ⁵/₁₆

HUNTER: Jason R. Wendberg

LOCATION: Isanti Co., MN

YEAR: 2013

3. **B&C SCORE:** 22 ⁴/₁₆

HUNTER: Keith A. Erhardt

LOCATION: Hubbard Co., MN

YEAR: 2014

4. (tie) **B&C SCORE:** 22 ³/₁₆

HUNTER: Duane C. Tieg

LOCATION: Mille Lacs Co., MN

YEAR: 2012

4. (tie) **B&C SCORE:** 22 ³/₁₆

HUNTER: Corey A. Gilbertson

LOCATION: Kanabec Co., MN

YEAR: 1996

4. (tie) **B&C SCORE:** 22 ³/₁₆

OWNER: Greg & Gary Kullhem

LOCATION: Aitkin Co., MN

YEAR: 1992

7. **B&C SCORE:** 22 ²/₁₆

HUNTER: Jerome P. Crimmins

LOCATION: Cass Co., MN

YEAR: 2004

8. (tie) **B&C SCORE:** 22

HUNTER: Joel J. Stang

LOCATION: Aitkin Co., MN

YEAR: 1995

8. (tie) **B&C SCORE:** 22

HUNTER: Darrin G. Stream

LOCATION: Pine Co., MN

YEAR: 1995

8. **B&C SCORE:** 22

HUNTER: Michael P. Haberman

LOCATION: Mille Lacs Co., MN

YEAR: 2000

scent—and it had drawn him in like a moth to flame. When I saw him next to that log pile, I knew he had to be the big one. He was as big as the logs were. Luckily, I already had my Browning shotgun prepared with a slug bullet. I lined up the shot, moving as slowly and quietly as I could. He seemed more interested in the bait, thankfully, and hardly noticed me at all. Nerves made my heart pound, blood thrumming in my ears. A few beats passed, and I pulled the trigger. The shot went over his head and into the top of his shoulders at the back of the neck.

With a startled roar, he took off in such a hurry that he ran over some small trees nearby. The thick brush made itself an obstacle yet again, and I quickly lost sight of him. I had no idea where he was headed. I could hear loud thrashing in the distance for a time, until silence finally fell in the woods again. I called for Dale, who arrived a short time later, and then climbed out of my stand to join him on the ground. “Did you get one?” he asked.

“I think so,” I replied. We started to look in the direction I’d seen him run, combing the brush for the sight of black fur and blood. We passed the small grove of trees and found him on the edge of a small clearing. I couldn’t believe his size. I’d gotten him! A thrill of excitement came over me, and I grinned towards Dale. “Is this the big one?” I asked Dale.

“Definitely,” Dale replied. “Can’t believe how big he is.” We took our first couple of pictures of this monster of a bear and then looked at each other with one last question on our minds: How are we going to get this animal out of these thick woods? Working together, we tried to drag him—and we couldn’t move him.

There was no way we could get a truck out there, so we retrieved Dale’s ATV and carefully entered the area. The brush was so thick, we were forced to cut down a few small trees and move some old logs to get through. We hooked up the bear to the ball hitch, and tried dragging it along behind it. After moving only a foot, the ATV pitched up onto its back

wheels. The bear was too heavy. Dale leaned onto the handlebars to try and compensate for its weight—and again, it pitched up. In the end, I had to stand on the grill of the ATV as we inched through the woods so it wouldn’t lift up and tip over. We moved old broken tree trunks out of the way and see-sawed our way through the brush until, finally, we saw the truck.

Well, we’d gotten him out of the woods. The next challenge? Getting him onto the truck. We hooked him up as close as we could to the back of the ATV and drove it directly into the box. It took all we had to push the second half of the monster bear into the bed. Relieved, we shut the tailgate behind him, and took a few minutes to celebrate. “I thought you lifted weights,” Dale said, laughing.

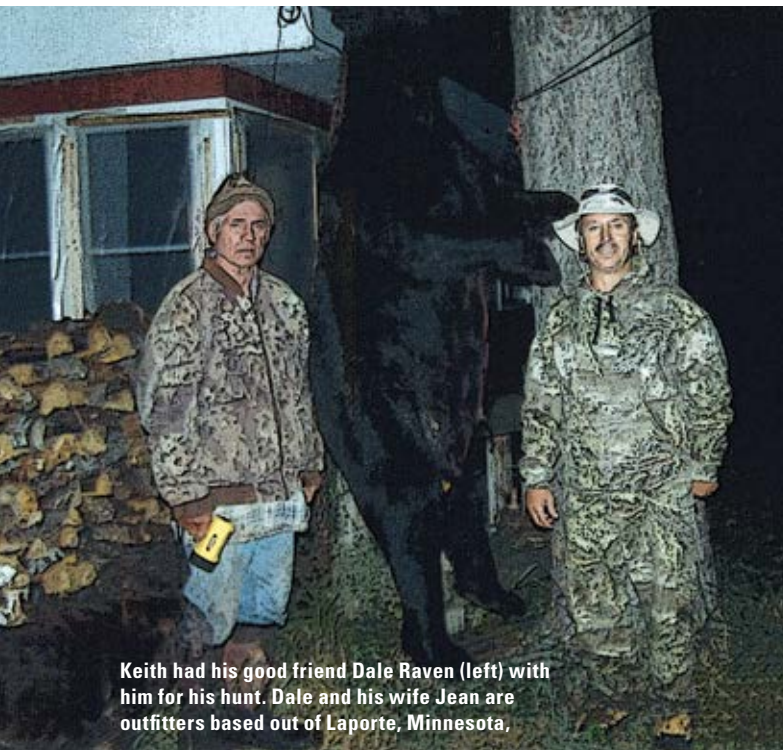
We weighed him at Dale’s place and he came to 550 pounds—the largest bear I’ve ever shot. We were exhausted after getting him out of the woods. We hung him up overnight. It was a frosty cold night, so we figured it would be fine to leave him out and skin him in the morning. After processing him the next morning, I had to run all over trying to find a tote big enough to get him packed in ice to keep him cool for the drive home. The largest one I could find still wasn’t big enough. I had to pack him in 60 pounds of ice and high-tail it home before it could all melt (which made for an exciting trip).

Now that I’d gotten Bearzilla home, I wanted to take him over to my good friend Duane’s place. Duane does wonders with his taxidermy, and I’ve worked with him for years, whether it’s been collecting wood for mounting his finished creations or providing pheasants for the business. Since he was close to home, I was glad he agreed to do it.

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We took the proper measurements, and it turned out that Duane was right. With a skull measurement of 22-4/16 inches, my bear measures as the third largest (ranked second) ever reported in Minnesota. What a great memory! ■



Keith had his good friend Dale Raven (left) with him for his hunt. Dale and his wife Jean are outfitters based out of Laporte, Minnesota.