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ON THE COVER
Pennsylvanian Brian Kelly is really looking forward to his next Alaska trip this year with his wife. It will be the salmon angler's first visit to the Last Frontier since a cancer diagnosis. Now cancer-free, Kelly says, "I finally feel that clock ticking in my head: How many trips do I have left? After defeating cancer, it is time to find out." (BRIAN KELLY)

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



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CANCER-FREE, FISHING-FULFILLED

Shortly after a great Southeast Alaska salmon trip, Brian Kelly was diagnosed with prostate cancer, leading him to reflect on all his Last Frontier fishing adventures while receiving treatment. Now cancer-free and planning his return, Kelly shares what stands out the most.



(BRIAN KELLY)

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FEATURES

28 MARCH MADNESS IN HOMER

After a Covid cancellation and a weather-delayed event the last couple years, it's full speed ahead for March 23 and the popular Homer Winter King Salmon Tournament. Now in its 30th year, this event offers Alaskans an opportunity to break out the fishing gear after a long winter and try their luck for big kings and bigger prizes. We chatted with Brad Anderson of the Homer Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Center for a preview.

35 HOT ACTION IN COLD BAY

One of Scott Haugen's favorite 49th state destinations is Cold Bay, near the western end of the Alaska Peninsula. It's home to one of the most productive waterfowl hunting spots in the state and features some outstanding salmon fishing. Tag along with Haugen, who provides details for planning a Cold Bay trip.

53 GOTTA HAVE HEART

Bjorn Dihle and his wife Mary Catharine are sharing their love of Southeast Alaska's flora and fauna with their young sons. Hunting deer will soon turn into a generational tradition within the family, and where you find Panhandle blacktails, you'll find them feeding on deer heart plants, which are edible for humans as well. Find out how both the region's wildlife and vegetation have impacted Bjorn and his family.

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EDITOR'S NOTE



The editor had a memorable day fishing for snapper and other species off the coast of Belize. It may be a long way from Alaska, but he found a lot of similarities between this tiny Central American country and the massive Last Frontier. (CHRIS COCOLES)

HOPKINS, Belize—In theory, I was about as far away from Alaska as one can get and still be in North America.

Despite a weirdly mild winter in the state compared to some freezing conditions throughout the Lower 48, you wouldn't expect Feb. 4 high temperatures in the 90s in Anchorage, Seward or Ketchikan. But here my family and I were just off the plane and sweating through a Belize Zoo walkthrough for our first stop of the trip.

Still, as the week moved along, I could start to see some parallels between the two places. There seems to be a lot more open space and forested wilderness than people in this small Central American nation. Google tells me Alaska's population of roughly 732,000 nearly doubles Belize's 400,000 or so. I guess I should mention that Belize is slightly larger than Massachusetts, and another internet search suggests you

could fit 62 Massachusetts in Alaska! But like the Last Frontier, we discovered that it doesn't take long to leave a town in Belize and feel like you're all alone with the green fields and forested

hilltops. Example: On a guided ATV ride to a refreshing swimming spot below a waterfall, we had the entire place to ourselves. Many Alaska visitors probably have had similar intimate moments.



A colorful and feisty porgy was part of the haul caught in the shallow waters of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, which is 14 miles off Hopkins, a quaint beach town with friendly locals, great rum and cold beer, plus delicious seafood. (CHRIS COCOLES)



“Water is my therapy. I just feel good on the water,” says Medz, a guide who grew up fishing the waters of Belize. (CHRIS COCOLES)

have had similar intimate moments.

And did I mention the sea and how much it means to both Alaskans and Belizeans? I learned that during a guided Caribbean Sea fishing trip with cousins Medz and Jeff, who work for a tour company called Get To Know Belize Adventures (gettoknowbelizeadventures.com). When Medz picked me up at our hotel in the beach community of Hopkins, he was instantly excited that I had, in his words, “Good energy, man.” (He pro-

nounced the last word like mon.)

Medz was a bit bummed that a group of three who I signed up to join on their charter objected to sharing the boat with anyone else, and they abruptly canceled earlier that morning.

As it turned out, Medz, a father of four who himself was the oldest of 11 siblings, and his younger cousin Jeff were just as stoked to get out on the water as I was. Growing up around Hopkins – a popular destination for travelers who

prefer a more authentic Belize vacation than fancy locales known for touristy amenities – the guys were almost destined to fish these gorgeous blue waters of the Caribbean from an early age.

“Water is my therapy. I just feel good on the water,” Medz would tell me when we returned to Mangrove Marina on the Sittee River.

Our day was full of good laughs, gorgeous “50 shades of blue” water views, and a nice haul of snapper and a porgy we caught (Medz and Jeff outfished me by simply dropping down a hand line baited with the herring they’d netted back at the dock).

I managed to land a few feisty fish working the live bait just 14 feet down around the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef around 14 miles off Hopkins. The reef stretches up and down the coasts of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras.

The best was yet to come, though. Medz and Jeff took me to a private island known as Bread and Butter Caye (pronounced like key), owned by a Minnesota man who has access agreements with local tour guides. The caye was as close to a *Gilligan’s Island* experience as I’ve ever had, except this spot has an outdoor kitchen, picnic tables, restrooms and a natural mini-aquarium near the dock, where we watched sting-



The view from Bread and Butter Caye makes it easy to see why the locals describe the waters here as “50 shades of blue.” (CHRIS COCOLES)



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Like Alaska, the local bounty makes for quite an epic shore lunch on a private island. (CHRIS COCOLES)

in the crystal clear water. I admired the scene while Medz cleaned our catch.

As I explored the small island, Medz and Jeff whipped up an epic lunch of grilled snapper, a to-die-for fish dish flavored with coconut and curry, lobster tail from a crustacean they'd caught the previous day, ceviche, rice and beans, and banana bread for dessert. My family and I had many great meals in Belize, but this was my favorite. I was envisioning catching a few rainbows or silvers from a pristine Alaskan river and then cooking up the bounty back at camp.

And when we said our goodbyes at the mainland dock, I told Medz and Jeff how much I love telling and editing stories about those of us who love the outdoors. Whether it's Central America or the 49th state, we're not that different from each other. **-Chris Cocoles**



Meeting the people of Belize like Medz and his cousin Jeff (right) was just as memorable as the beaches and natural beauty of this tiny but vibrant nation. (CHRIS COCOLES)

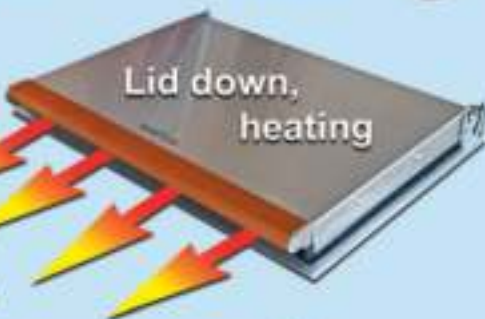
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COMING TOGETHER TO KEEP ROADLESS TONGASS INTACT

A consortium of Native Alaskan organizations, Southeast Alaska businesses and conservation groups and others came together to reinforce the outcry to keep America's largest public forest land mostly untouched.

Like many natural resources caught in the middle of this modern era's heavily partisan politics, changing White House residents have seesawed back and forth on how to manage Alaska's 17-million-acre Tongass National Forest.

During former President Donald Trump's time in Washington, his administration repealed Roadless Rule protections with the intention of reopening sections of the Tongass for large-scale logging and other projects. But Trump's successor, Joe Biden, restored those mandates to prevent such operations from occurring on the forest's 9.37 million roadless acres.

Now, with what is expected to be another hotly contested presidential election this fall, almost certainly a Trump-Biden rematch, there is a sense of urgency to keep the Tongass as wild as possible, especially with Alaska Governor Mike Dunleavy also supporting the idea of opening up the Tongass to logging. In 2023, he tweeted his displeasure with the Biden administration's decision, calling the ruling "a huge loss for Alaskans."

"I'm outraged the Dunleavy administration is trying to open up more logging in the country's largest forest carbon sink in the midst of the climate and extinction crises," said Cooper Freeman, Alaska representative for the Center for Biological Diversity. "Protecting more than half the Tongass is one of the best ways we can preserve this irreplaceable old-growth forest for future generations. We'll do everything we can to make sure the spectacular Tongass is protected."

And that might be tricky given that Dunleavy and a GOP-led White House would likely seek the same management approach for the Tongass.

"When the Roadless Rule was reinstated last January on the Tongass National Forest by the U.S. Forest Service, the decision was widely celebrated by Tribal Nations in Southeast Alaska, across Alaska and nationally," the aforementioned coalition stated in a recent joint press release. "The reinstatement decision recognized the need to preserve the Tongass' roadless areas to protect cultural uses, enhance carbon storage, and conserve biodiversity, and noted strong and



As the 2024 presidential election inches closer, many Alaska organizations have joined forces to reiterate the importance of maintaining Roadless Rule protections for the Tongass National Forest, America's largest. (REYNA ABREU-VIGIL/USFS)



TWEET OF THE MONTH



Four reasons and about 800 Boone and Crockett points worth of why big game hunters head north for a shot at a bull of a lifetime!



Perhaps this moose at Anchorage's Costco just needed a bulk package of paper towels or craved the still undefeated champion in \$1.50 hot dog and soda lunch values! (SCREENSHOT VIA X)

uniform support for the rule among Southeast Alaska Tribal Nations.”

The disparate groups behind this statement include the Ketchikan Indian Community, commercial fishing group Alaska Longline Fishermen’s Association, Alaska Wilderness League, and Defenders of Wildlife, among others.

“Attempts to roll back these protections disregard [area tribes’] undying efforts and pose significant threats to the communities that depend on this sustainable forest, as well as the wildlife and sacred old-growth forest now protected from harmful development,” said Karlin Itchoak of The Wilderness Society. “We stand in solidarity with local Alaska Native leaders in demanding that the Roadless Rule holds firm and the voices of Southeast Alaska are heard to ensure that the Tongass rainforest is protected for the preservation of culture and future generations to come.”

THEY SAID IT

“Mr. McDonald and Mr. Brumwell’s actions are an affront to law-abiding hunters and Alaskan subsistence living. Hunting must be done legally and in accordance with regulations. My office will continue to work with our wildlife law enforcement partners to ensure that hunting rules and regulations are followed by resident and nonresident hunters.”

—S. Lane Tucker, U.S. Attorney for the District of Alaska, on a plea bargain that saw two men stripped of hunting privileges for four years and fined for taking a bull moose inside Denali National Park.

NOTABLE NUMBER

12

A bill in Alaska’s legislature would require sportsmen to live in Alaska through most if not all 12 months of the year to be eligible to buy a resident hunting or fishing license. House Bill 201 essentially would align qualifying for those licenses with being able to receive dividends from the Permanent Fund, news reports state.

FROM THE ASJ ARCHIVES -
MARCH 2019

WHY STEELHEAD ANGLERS NEED TO UP THEIR A GAME



“I have learned that you will only get a finite number of chances (bites) when you are fishing, so it’s imperative that you make the most out of your limited opportunities,” Tony Ensalaco writes about Alaska steelhead fishing. (TONY ENSALACO)

Steelie anglers will fish at a high level from start to finish and will be the most persistent people on the river. This is something that I try to preach to anyone who fishes with me.

I have learned that you will only get a finite number of chances (bites) when you are fishing, so it’s imperative that you make the most out of your limited opportunities. This means being dialed in from your very first cast until you put away your rods in the vehicle.

It’s a poor excuse to miss a fish because you weren’t “ready.” One of my biggest steelhead that I have ever landed in Alaska was a massive fall-run male that weighed well over 20 pounds. It was hooked within the first minute of the first day of a trip. Talk about an icebreaker.

This happened so fast that I really don’t remember much of the fight, but I do recall that my buddy Danny Kozlow and I were ready from the moment we dropped the boat in. The fish was holding in the first hole that was located within 200 yards below the boat launch.

If Danny and I weren’t both on point that morning, we would have probably passed by that hole without dropping a bait through it. You never know when you’re going to encounter that fish of a lifetime, so you need to be at your best as soon as you step into the river.

Good steelheaders do everything with a purpose. They know that when things are going well, you stick with it. When something stops working, they won’t hesitate to search for something that does work.

It sounds like a no-brainer, but it’s surprising to see so many anglers refuse to follow this simple rule. For example, I have fished with a few guys who would get off to a hot start using a bobber and jig. For no apparent reason, they would then pick up a spinner rod and start chucking hardware for the next three hours.

Why would anyone do that? Of course, there are anglers who only want to fish a certain way. They’ll refuse to make any necessary changes when the fishing slows down. These guys are content to grind out the day until whatever they are doing hopefully starts to work for them again. **-Tony Ensalaco**

OUTDOOR CALENDAR

Several spring brown bear hunting seasons open on March 15, including in game management units in the Southeast Mainland, Petersburg/Wrangell and the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. (LISA HUPP/USFWS)

- March 2** Scheduled ceremonial start of Iditarod sled dog race, downtown Anchorage (iditarod.com)
- March 15** Spring brown bear season opens in Game Management Unit 1 (Southeast Mainland)
- March 15** Resident spring brown bear hunting season opens in GMU 3 (Petersburg/Wrangell)
- March 15** Spring brown bear season opens in GMU 4 (Admiralty-Baranof-Chichagof Islands)
- March 15** Nonresident antlerless moose season ends in GMU 18 (Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta)
- March 16** Early resident caribou season opens in GMU 26A (Arctic Slope)
- March 23** 30th Annual Homer Winter King Salmon Tournament (homerwinterking.com)
- March 31** Wolf season ends in GMU 2 (Prince of Wales Island)
- April 1** Spring brown bear season opens in GMU 6D (Montague Island; North Gulf Coast)
- April 1** Spring brown bear season opens in GMU 8 (Kodiak/Shelikof)
- April 5-7** Great Alaska Sportsman Show, Dena'ina Civic and Convention Center, Anchorage (greatalaskasportsmanshow.com)
- April 12-14** Mat-Su Outdoorsman Show, Menard Center, Wasilla (matsuoutdoorsmanshow.com)
- April 19-21** Fairbanks Outdoor Show, Carlson Center (fairbanksevents.com/fairbanksoutdoorshow.html)
- April 30** Last day of wolf season in numerous units

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A TIME FOR REFLECTION

CANCER DIAGNOSIS, SUCCESSFUL TREATMENT LEAVES ANGLER NOSTALGIC FOR ALASKA, AND READY TO RETURN



BY BRIAN KELLY

It had been two weeks since undergoing a radical prostatectomy to remove a cancerous tumor that had decided to take up residence in my body.

The process leading up to the operation included a series of tests, results, discussions and decisions that presented a rollercoaster of emotions for my wife and I. No one ever wants to hear a doctor utter the words, “You have cancer.”

That news came after I had just completed my 14th trip to Alaska and finally scratched salt-bright kings off my list (*Alaska Sporting Journal*, August 2023). My mind definitely started to wander as I tried to make sense of all the information that was being thrown at me during the many doctor visits and from the medical opinions I received.

My wife and I have been together for 10 years, married for six, have three kids between us, and I had just turned 51 in the fall. I wasn’t ready to wave the white flag; not by any stretch. Fortunately, we caught this early. My family doc had been checking my PSA levels in my annual blood work for years, and in January 2023, that number had spiked. I was not experiencing any symptoms, which is why prostate cancer is often referred to as a silent killer.

After jumping in an MRI tube the day after getting back from Juneau, a tumor was revealed in my prostate gland and a follow-up biopsy showed that this little annoyance was indeed cancerous.



Brian Kelly's memories of chrome-bright Alaska salmon and the state's towering mountains like Denali (left) have been on his mind during treatment for prostate cancer. "This situation offered me a chance to pause and reflect on all of the marvelous experiences Alaska has given me over the years," he writes. (BRIAN KELLY)

My head began to spin after meeting with local specialists and getting all their opinions on how to treat this disease. All options were on the table – from radiation to surgery to just monitoring the tumor since we'd caught it in the early stages.

I have never been one to dwell on the past, as I am usually onto plans for the next trip. But this situation offered me a chance to pause and reflect on all of the marvelous experiences Alaska has given me over the years.

THE FIRST ALASKA IMAGE that pops into my head are the mountains. They are like none other – iconic Denali and Redoubt, the scenic Chugach Range – and they all

have a special place in my heart.

I tell folks here in Pennsylvania that we don't have mountains in the northeast; rather, large rolling hills with trees all the way to the top. Alaska has real mountains – the tall, rocky, craggy kind with snowy tops and glaciers that seem to go on forever.

Denali can be a challenge to lay eyes on in person; well, that is if you spend clear-skied mornings on the river chasing silvers instead of sightseeing!

I spent quite a few years fishing in the Mat-Su Valley without a glimpse of the state's most famous mountain, as it has an annoying habit of getting socked in with afternoon clouds.

It wasn't until a fly-out trip to the

more remote west side of the Mat-Su that I was able to see Denali in all its glory. The camp was located south of the park, along the headwaters of the Kichatna River.

The weather the first couple days of our trip was filled with the usual gloomy conditions that often roll into Southcentral Alaska in late summer and keep the mountains out of view. But a high-pressure system arrived one morning, and on the boat ride back to camp, there it was: Denali. Our guide was gracious enough to stop the boat midriver so we could all get pictures. That image is so firmly ingrained in my brain that I am surprised it didn't show up on my CT scan!



Hiking to Exit Glacier in Kenai Fjords National Park is a must-do excursion for traveling anglers, says the author. (BRIAN KELLY)

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ALONG WITH THE BEAUTIFUL mountains are the majestic glaciers that come pouring out of them. There was one flight up to Anchorage that will always stand out. As we flew over Wrangell-St. Elias National Park on a clear day, it was astonishing to see how far the glaciers stretched out around Mount Fairweather and Mount Logan. I truly never realized how immense these glaciers were until getting a bird's-eye view.

But the real treat is being able to hike up to the point where the glacier ends at the land or sea. The famous Mendenhall Glacier outside of Juneau is a popular tourist destination and was the first glacier I ever witnessed in person back on my very first trip to Alaska, in 2007. It was awe-inspiring then and I still enjoy

the view now, as I often like to drive the road out on Douglas Island and enjoy a cigar after a day on the water.

The other glacier that is a must-see for traveling anglers in Alaska has got to be the Exit Glacier outside of Seward. This behemoth is located in the Kenai Fjords National Park and gives visitors the opportunity to take a short hike up to the edge of the glacier, which is what I opted for a few years ago, or take the longer hike up onto the Harding Icefield, which is on my future to-do list.

I HAVE, OF COURSE, a plethora of fond memories of all the fish over the years and they became another place that my mind has wandered to throughout

this cancer journey. I can proudly say that I have landed all five Pacific salmon members of the genus *Oncorhynchus*, and not just landed them all, but in both their chrome and sea-lice-laden versions.

Each member of this remarkable family of fishes holds a special place in my fishy little heart – even pinks! This oft-maligned member of the salmon crew does get a bad rap for being an easy target, as they will hit just about anything in sight.

But there was one special pink that I latched into back in 2016. My fishing partner and I were fishing the lower Kenai that year in search of fresh silvers, and as my spinner swung in the current, it was smashed by what I initially thought was a nice coho for the grill. It turned out



"It was awe-inspiring then and I still enjoy the view now," says Kelly of Mendenhall Glacier just outside of Juneau. He likes to light up a cigar after the day's salmon fishing is done and take in the scene. (BRIAN KELLY)

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to be an oversized hen humpy that my partner and I both figured to be around 10 pounds, a trophy for pinks!

2016 was the year of the warm water “blob” in the Gulf of Alaska, when several line-class world records were caught that summer, due in large part to the elevated water temperatures that apparently put the fish into a feeding frenzy.

Chums are another among the species that don’t get as much respect as the kings, silvers or reds, but they can bend a rod just as well as their highly regarded kin.

On one of our trips to the Mat-Su Valley, the chum run was strong and we kept landing chrome chums with sea lice while twitching jigs. And believe it or not, when they are dime-bright, chums do make great table fare!

But of the bunch, silvers are my favorite. Their inquisitive nature makes them a true pleasure to fish for, as they will hit just about any type of presentation – just not all at once. They do require a bit of patience to determine what specific presentation fires them up on that certain day, time and tide.

In 2019, our crew was in Juneau for a week chasing salt silvers in the Gastineau Channel. The run timing was perfect, as the numbers of fish were building every day. The weather wasn’t ideal – bright sun and warm temps – but we all knew the bite would explode with a weather change; and it did.

A large low-pressure system rolled in from the Gulf of Alaska, bringing much-needed rain, wind and cooler temps. The first morning of this change was a bite that I will cherish for the rest of my life. It was a fish per cast for the entire incoming tide; if you lost one during the fight, you just kept working the jig and another bite would soon follow. I have never been so exhausted from fighting big, mean silvers. That’s why I keep going back to Alaska!

AFTER DR. RUBEN OLIVARES from the Cleveland Clinic laid out all my treatment options, it became apparent that surgery would be the best route to treat the prostate cancer. This has proven to be the correct action to take, as I can proudly report that I am cancer-free!

A post-surgical report showed



Catching limits of salmon with friends and bringing the meat back to the Lower 48 has been an experience to cherish again and again. (BRIAN KELLY)

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Cancer-free, Kelly looks forward to joining his wife in Ketchikan this summer. "It seems like yesterday when I was 38 years old and on my way to Anchorage for the first time," he writes. "I finally feel that clock ticking in my head: How many trips do I have left?" Here's hoping for a lot more. (BRIAN KELLY)

that the cancer was indeed confined to just the tumor; the prostate gland, surrounding tissue and lymph nodes all came back clear, as did my full CT scan. No more tumors to deal with, just annual blood work to further check PSA levels, as there is a small chance cancer cells could reappear in the area where the prostate gland was removed. If that's the case down the road, low-level radiation will handle the issue.

But for now, it is time to heal up and get ready for the next trip. My wife and I are planning to visit Ketchikan this summer, a place that has been on my to-do list for some time. I would like to meet and interview artist Ray Troll; I have several prints of his, as well as many, many T-shirts collected over the years of traveling to Alaska.

It seems like yesterday when I was 38 years old and on my way to Anchorage for the first time. I finally feel that clock ticking in my head: How many trips do I have left?

Well, after defeating cancer, it is time to find out. See you in the water again, Alaska! **ASJ**


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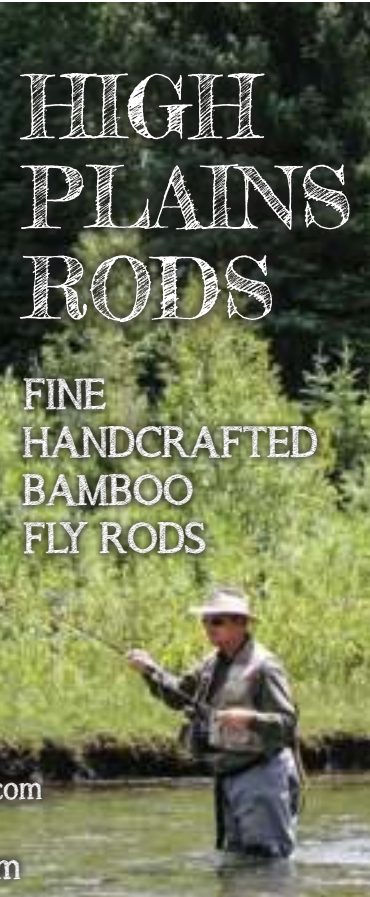
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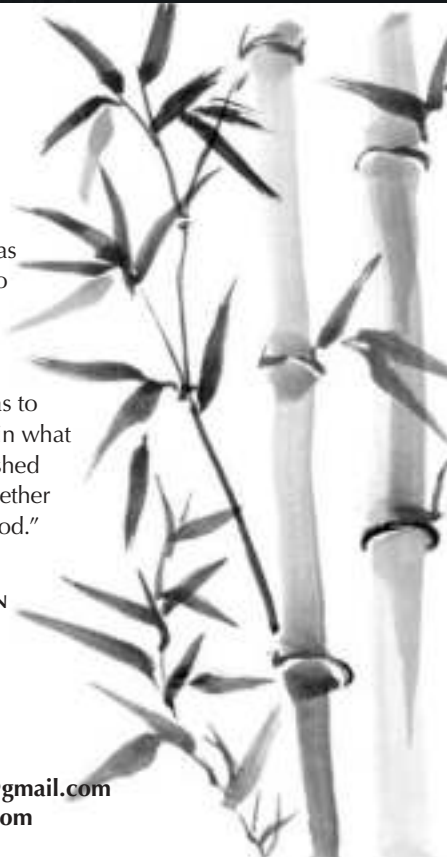


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HELLO, HOMER

MARCH 23RD'S WINTER KING SALMON TOURNAMENT IS KICKOFF TO PORT'S FISHING SEASON

BY CHRIS COCOLES

After a difficult stretch that included one cancellation and restrictions during the Covid pandemic, plus weather-related postponements the last two years and some other shuffling of dates, the Homer Winter King Salmon Tournament is happy to move ahead in 2024.

This year's event is set for March 23, and tournament organizers with the Homer Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center hope the last few years of adversity are behind them (though Alaska's always unpredictable weather may have other plans).

"We are absolutely full-speed ahead for this year and going forward. During 2021 and 2022, we shifted to an April timeframe, but our anglers spoke out very clearly that our traditional timeframe of March is better," says Brad Anderson, executive director of the Homer Chamber. "This will be our 30th annual tournament, and it has grown to become the signature fishing event in Alaska and the West Coast."

Have you kissed your prized salmon catch?
Excitement is building for the Homer
Winter King Salmon Tournament, set for
Saturday, March 23. (NOAH DOUGLAS VISUALS)



2023 winner Gail Bilyeu's 26-plus-pound king yielded a total of over \$62,000 in combined prize money and side bet earnings. (LB PHOTOGRAPHY)

SETTLING ON MARCH MADNESS

As this signature Kenai Peninsula event hits 30 years old this month, it's evolved both in terms of finding the right time to hold it and adapting to its popularity within the port of Homer, where Kachemak Bay meets Cook Inlet.

"Early on, this actually took place in February. But that made it too difficult for most people to get their boats out of the snow and fish," says Anderson, who added that a brief foray in the other direction with an April start seemed to also miss the mark in terms of the timing of catching kings in and around Homer.

The third weekend in March - weather permitting, of course - seems to be the perfect time for optimal fishing success and the transition from winter to spring.

A recent shift in location also proved beneficial.

"In 2021, we moved the event area to its new much larger space by the Deep Water Dock in the Homer Harbor. This gives us the ability to create more of an event for anglers and spectators," Anderson says.

"March is still a time when many of our seasonal businesses have not opened yet, but our restaurants, hotels, marine shops and retail outlets work hard to make it an enjoyable experience for those traveling down to Homer."

MARKETING THE CONTEST

Anderson says that as Covid unfolded, the state's gaming laws changed, providing nonprofits like the Homer Chamber of Commerce the chance to create more tournament elements - especially the always popular side bets between boats - and present them on the event's website

(homerwinterking.com).

"So registering and adding side tournaments is much easier and can all be done anytime up to the morning of the tournament," he adds. "For the side tournaments, we have a live feed that shows what teams have entered each category and what that pool of money looks like to help with deciding what works best for their team."

The side bets add a whole level of competition to the excitement of the event.

While the biggest fish prize continues to be lucrative, the side bets can really earn the lucky angler some big bucks. Last year's champion Gail Bilyeu - his winning king weighed 26.12 pounds - earned \$62,036 in cash, a tally that combines the base award and all the side pots, the latter of which represented over \$38,000 of his total winnings.

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the tournament champion won more money from the side tourneys than the registration pool because each of those teams entered the maximum of five side tourney categories," Anderson says. "The amounts ranged from \$32,000 to \$46,000. Combined with their registration pool winnings, the total payouts were \$53,500 to \$87,000. That makes for some very happy champions and their teammates."

CABIN FEVER CURE

In Alaska, winters can be long, cold and dark, which is hardly a breaking news shocker, but as the promise of summer, long days and great fishing nears, this March tournament is somewhat of a conduit between the end of winter and literally brighter days ahead.

"This really is that symbolic event that puts winter in the background and to get excited about all the outdoor adventures ahead. As March is a quieter time in Homer, this tournament greatly boosts our economy," Anderson says, "It also allows us to show off harbor facilities, some of the best in Alaska. We have these 'winter kings' in our ocean waters year-round, so it also gives us a chance for people to understand our fishing waters better."

"This really is that symbolic event that puts winter in the background and to get excited about all the outdoor adventures ahead," says Brad Anderson, executive director of the Homer Chamber of Commerce, who adds the tourney boosts the local economy and is a chance to show off the harbor facilities, "some of the best in Alaska." (NOAH DOUGLAS VISUALS)

Anderson has heard positive vibes from the fishing savants around Homer that there should be some nice fish for the taking come March 23.

And as recent tournaments have shown, just about anyone can score that big Chinook that means a profitable payday with the \$150 registration fee per angler and side pots at stake.

"In 2019, we had our first female champion (Shayna Perry), who walked away with \$72,998," Anderson says. "Then, when we came back in 2021, (after the Covid cancellation), we had our youngest champion, 10-year-old Andrew Marley. His winnings were \$87,027, which his father quickly put into a college fund."

LENDING A HAND

Anderson is thrilled about the folks at local businesses who have volunteered their time to assist the Homer Chamber with the tournament, citing Ulmer's Drug & Hardware, Coal Point Seafood and the UPS Store for helping to grow the derby.

"Because this tournament has generated a lot of attention in the boating world, Honda Marine is joining us this year to sponsor our event area and show off some of their new engines. That allowed us to hire a very popular

band, Blackwater Railroad, to help our beer garden really come alive," Anderson says. "It takes over 50 volunteers to make this happen, and thankfully, we have a great group of chamber board members, business members, volunteer hosts and students who love helping with the tournament."

To celebrate its 30th anniversary, the tournament has added an early registration drawing to win a Honda generator. Local craft beer company Grace Ridge Brewing will also introduce a new beer to coincide with the event, and there's even a new trophy designed by Bay Welding.

"We will also have a kickoff party on Friday night at Alice's Champagne Palace. We have also put out a new document on our Tournament Weather Parameters so people can better understand what criteria our committee looks at to make sure it is safe for boaters," Anderson says. "People can follow along on what is happening with the weather so they can decide earlier when to head down to Homer." **ASJ**

Editor's note: For more information and to register, see homerwinterking.com. You can also call the Homer Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center at (907) 235-7740 or email info@homer.alaska.org.





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ACTUALLY, THE ACTION IS HOT HERE

**SOME OF ALASKA'S
BEST WATERFOWL
HUNTING AND FISHING
ADVENTURES CAN BE
HAD OUT OF COLD BAY**

BY SCOTT HAUGEN

When the words Alaska and hunting are mentioned, your mind typically envisions big game. But Alaska is home to some of the world's best waterfowl hunting, with ducks and geese representing two of the most underutilized opportunities this great state has to offer.

If you want to get into hunting, gearing up and heading out for waterfowl is one of the best ways to do it.

There's no doubt that reaching areas where prime duck and goose hunting exists isn't easy or cheap, but neither is accessing most of Alaska's big game opportunities. Bottom line: Whether or not you hunt waterfowl simply comes down to your personal choice. But knowing what's out there might just convince you to pick up the shotgun this fall and hit the marsh, and nowhere is this more true than Cold Bay, Alaska.

I'VE BEEN FORTUNATE TO waterfowl hunt much of Alaska – from Barrow to the Panhandle and many places in between. While many destinations are species-specific hunts, there's one place that has it all, and that's Cold Bay, near where the west end of the Alaska Peninsula meets the Aleutian Islands.

One September, my dad Jerry Haugen and I traveled to Cold Bay to hunt with good friend and outfitter Jeff Was-



Author Scott Haugen and good friend Jeff Wasley in fall 2018 with a day's limit of puddle ducks, Canada geese and black brant. Early-season waterfowl hunting doesn't get any better than this and Cold Bay is the place to be. (SCOTT HAUGEN)

ley (fourflywaysoutfitters.com, 608-385-4580). If you really want to learn the ropes of waterfowl hunting, booking a guided trip greatly flattens the learning curve. Here, you'll learn about everything from playing the tides to decoy setups to calling, field care and much more.

I've been fortunate to hunt with many avid waterfowlers over the years, and Wasley is among the best of the best. A former waterfowl biologist, Wasley's passion for duck hunting is contagious. His knowledge of the birds he hunts and the land where he makes his living is unmatched.

Even throughout the Lower 48, Wasley is regarded as one of the best wa-

terfowl outfitters in the country, and tops when it comes to Alaska. Wasley is one of the best, safest boat captains I've been with. He's a licensed outfitter who can take clients hunting via boat on Izembek Lagoon, north of the little town of Cold Bay. This opens up a great deal of remote access, where you never see another hunter.

I'd hunted with Wasley in Cold Bay in fall and winter, and in January on Saint Paul Island for king eiders. Each time that Wasley shared stories of the early-season duck and goose hunting on Izembek Lagoon, it made me want to go more. Then one of his clients shared a video with me, one they'd taken on a

prior early September hunt with Wasley. That's when I decided to go for real.

THE DAY DAD AND I arrived in Cold Bay in September, we'd planned on taking it easy. But when Wasley picked us up at the little airport, he informed us the brant decoys and two-man layout boat were loaded and ready to go.

"We have a perfect tide this afternoon and I want to get you guys into this one place," Wasley shared.

It was the second week of September and Wasley had kicked off the season with a bang, as all of his hunters hit their possession limits of ducks and geese during the first week of the season.

One of the great joys of traveling, hunting and fishing throughout Alaska is the element of surprise. Haugen wasn't expecting to find these old glass floats, but he did, over 100 of them. (SCOTT HAUGEN)





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Haugen has fished coho in many parts of Alaska, and this limit taken from a small stream near Cold Bay is one of the best size averages he's ever seen. (SCOTT HAUGEN)

Alaska has the earliest general waterfowl season in the country, which begins September 1. "The number of brant in the lagoon right now is incredible; the most I've seen this early in the season, and more keep coming every day," Wasley told us with a smile.

I love hunting Pacific black brant because they decoy unlike any goose I've seen. They're also my favorite to eat of all waterfowl.

Soon, we had three strings of brant decoys out and Dad and I were laying side by side in the roomy layout boat. Once the tide shifted, wave after wave of brant started moving our direction to feed on the eel grass, which was now exposed throughout the lagoon. The horizon was black with flocks of the little geese - their sound deafening as they approached. Shooting our three brant each happened quickly. Unfortunately, that was the last year the brant limit was at three birds; today, it's two brant per person per day.

Before we knew it we were back at camp, feasting on fresh grilled brant for dinner. "This is incredible, the best-eating birds I've ever had," my grinning dad, a waterfowl hunter of nearly 70 years, said. This was his first brant hunt in Alaska, though he'd hunted them in California and Oregon.

The following morning, the tide was right to hit the shoreline. After hopping into Wasley's boat, we headed across Izembek Lagoon and arrived at a secluded creek mouth about 7 miles to the south. There, we set out duck, brant and Canada goose decoys.

A biologist from the national wildlife refuge there joined us that day and in only a few hours we all had our limits of ducks, brant and geese. Wasley also hunted, a luxury for a guide. A four-person limit of eight ducks, six Canada geese and three brant each is a lot of action and some great fowl for a meal. Early-season waterfowl in this part of Alaska is delicious, about as good as it gets, thanks to the highly nutritious diet of the birds.

ONE MORNING LATER, WE put down the shotguns and grabbed the fishing gear. We headed to a little stream in search of coho, and we were not disappointed.



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Scan To Join



For the author's father, Jerry Haugen, a solo hike along a small stream catching Dolly Varden on little beads was one of the biggest highlights of the trip. (SCOTT HAUGEN)



Catching a five-coho limit was both easy and fun. Dad, Wasley and I caught the hard-fighting salmon on flies, lures, plugs and more. Everything we tried caught fish.

I've been fortunate to fish for coho all over Alaska during the past 34 years, and this was the largest size average I'd ever seen. Our haul was also some of the tastiest coho I've ever had, as they were less than 300 yards from the ocean and had just entered into the small stream.

That afternoon, we continued fishing. This time we hiked to a small, crystal clear stream and caught and released numerous Dolly Varden on beads. My dad has fished all over Alaska with me, and if you were to ask him today what his favorite fishing has been, he'd tell you about this Dolly adventure. Dad went off on his own and caught over 30 of the char, including a handful of big ones in their captivating spawning colors.

We also saw plenty of brown bears on this trip, 11 in all. If there's one animal that epitomizes Alaska, it's a giant brown bear, and Cold Bay is home to some of the biggest in the world.

ANOTHER DAY FOUND DAD, Wasley and I heading to a different place in the lagoon in search of ducks and geese. As Wasley motored across the bay, he suddenly throttled down. "Do you smell that?" he asked. Then he slammed on the throttle, got us up on step and we quickly scooted toward the open ocean. The stronger the smell grew, the more curious my mind became. I figured it was a dead whale. "Walrus; lots of walrus!" Wasley shouted over the roar of the motor.

Soon, we were silently drifting by more than 100 walrus that had hauled out onto a sandy island. Of all my years of living in and traveling throughout Alaska, this was the first time I'd laid eyes on a pod of walrus. The big-toothed pinnipeds were mesmerizing to watch. It was a moment I didn't want to end, and certainly one Dad nor I will ever forget.

Our morning culminated with more limits of ducks, geese and brant, all of which aggressively dumped into the decoys spread along a shallow shoreline. It was the best waterfowl hunting Dad and I had ever experienced, and perhaps the most "Alaskan" adventure we could ask for, given all that we'd encountered. But

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The Haugens show off three-bird brant limits taken from a two-man layout boat on Izembek Lagoon. The limit has since dropped to two, but hunting is still great. (SCOTT HAUGEN)

it wasn't over.

Before heading to the boat ramp, Wasley took us to an island near the open sea. "You guys hike around that direction and I'll meet ya' over there in an hour," Wasley pointed out.

I knew exactly what we were doing, but Dad was at a loss. In a short time we found our first glass float, then another, then another. Because it was early in the fall, big storms had yet to uncover many floats. The first time Wasley did this to me was on a mid-November day after a massive storm. I found over 100 glass floats that day. It was beachcombing like I'd never before experienced.

THE FISHING, HUNTING, WILDLIFE viewing and beachcombing made this Cold Bay adventure one that Dad and I will forever cherish. If you want to experience what this special part of Alaska is truly all about, all you have to do is go. **ASJ**

Editor's note: To order signed copies of Scott Haugen's many popular hunting & fishing books, visit scotthaugen.com. Follow his adventures on Instagram and Facebook.

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Leupold's new BX-4 rangefinding binoculars are among author Scott Haugen's top gear choices for 2024 big game seasons, based on his extensive field-testing. "They were downright impressive in low light and heavy shadows, and even on flat, bright terrain," he writes. (SCOTT HAUGEN)



TOP 2024 BIG GAME HUNTING GEAR PICKS

SKIP SUMMER'S SPECULATIVE PRODUCT ROLLOUTS AND GO WITH THESE FIELD-TESTED WINNERS

BY SCOTT HAUGEN

Alaska is still locked in winter, meaning now is a great time to start thinking ahead to hunting seasons later this year. This is my 24th year as a full-time freelance writer, and one thing that's always boggled my mind is how magazines wait until summer to talk about the latest and greatest hunting gear.

It makes more sense to me to talk gear after having recently come off a season; that way, information can be shared about gear that's actually been used on multiple hunts. I like writing about gear I've thoroughly used, not speculating about what new gear should do. In that vein, here is some of the top big game

equipment I used the past two years, gear I'll keep using for many hunts to come.

SITKA APEX PACK

I used Sitka's Apex Pack on multiple hunts last fall, from pronghorn in the desert to deer, elk and bear. I like packs that are streamlined, lightweight, stay

From
FIELD
To **FIRE**



A Nigerian beef dish known as suya can be adapted to lend fascinating flavors to Alaskan caribou or moose meat, says Tiffany Haugen. (TIFFANY HAUGEN)



- ¼ cup minced onion
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic or 2 teaspoons granulated garlic
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger or 2 teaspoons powdered ginger
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- ½ teaspoon cloves
- ½ teaspoon nutmeg
- ½ teaspoon red chili flakes
- Bamboo or metal skewers

AFRICAN FLAVORS, MEET ALASKAN BIG GAME

BY TIFFANY HAUGEN

When Scott and I lived in Point Lay, located on the North Slope, from 1990 to 1993, the only big game we got was caribou. We ate it pretty much every day.

While caribou is one of the most healthy big game meats on the planet, its lean nature found me continually experimenting with different ways to prepare it.

Early-season caribou was the most tender, and we tried stocking up on this meat before winter set in. But sometimes we had to shoot a caribou in late winter or early spring, and some of that meat was tough. Still, I figured out ways to make it work and to this day, I still use some of those recipes on all kinds of big game.

This is one recipe I wish I would have had during our time in the Arctic. Today, I'm regularly inspired by YouTuber Beryl

Shereshewsky, who highlights cuisines from around the world. I made this traditional Nigerian beef dish, called suya, with elk and caribou. It can be made into kabobs or prepared and served over a bed of rice. Incredible flavors saturate the wild game left to marinate in these unique but easy-to-obtain seasonings.

I've also made suya using moose and blacktail deer and it turned out delicious. With spring around the corner, now is a good time to make sure none of that great-eating big game meat gets shoved to the back of the freezer, where it can go overlooked, and this is one recipe you'll love.

- 1½ pounds caribou (or any big game)
- ½ cup powdered or creamy peanut butter
- ¼ cup olive or canola oil

Slice caribou sirloin or backstrap into long, thin strips. In a large bowl, mix peanut butter, oil, onion, tomato paste, garlic, ginger and spices until thoroughly combined. Add meat to peanut butter mixture and massage until all pieces are evenly coated. Marinate in the refrigerator for four to 12 hours.

Thread meat strips onto skewers and let sit at room temperature 15 to 20 minutes. Grill skewers on a medium-hot grill three to five minutes per side or bake on a baking sheet in a preheated, 400-degree oven for 10 to 12 minutes. Suya can also be pan-fried in a large skillet on medium-high heat in a few tablespoons of oil and served on a bed of rice.



*Editor's note: For signed copies of Tiffany's popular book *Cooking Big Game* and other best-selling titles, visit tiffanyhaugen.com.*

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Sharpening a variety of knives is made easier by this Work Sharp Rolling Knife Sharpener. Says Haugen, "Not only does this sharpener work on high-end kitchen knives, but on all our hunting and butchering knives, bird blades and fish filleting knives of all lengths, shapes and sizes." (SCOTT HAUGEN)

close to the body no matter how loaded they are, and offer multiple compression straps to keep loads solid and ergonomic. Sitka's Apex pack does all this.

A few of its great design features include well-designed compartment sizing and placement, ample water bladder space and low-profile top. I've logged over 50 hours with this pack and have zero complaints. I enjoy how comfortable it is and how simple it is to handle and manage in so many situations.

Info: \$249; sitkagear.com

WORK SHARP ROLLING KNIFE SHARPENER

Tiffany, my wife of 33 years, helps with all the butchering in our house. She was a full-time wild game cook and cookbook author for nearly 20 years. Her lineup of Shun knives would leave any knife connoisseur in awe. Once a year she

sent these fine blades to the factory for sharpening, but that changed once she got her hands on the Work Sharp Rolling Knife Sharpener.

Not only does this sharpener work on high-end kitchen knives, but on all our hunting and butchering knives, bird blades and fish filleting knives of all lengths, shapes and sizes. It comes with three sharpening abrasives and a four-sharpening-angle magnetic block. It is compact and could be the best all-around sharpener Work Sharp has created.

Info: \$149; worksharptools.com

BENCHMADE KNIVES

If you're looking for a lightweight, streamlined, very diverse big game knife, keep reading. Benchmade's Taggedout (\$375) and fixed-blade Altitude (\$300) are simply amazing. Years ago, I used to

help a learning knife company design hunting knives, and I wish these would have been ones I could put my name on. I field-dressed, skinned and broke down two elk and a deer and then caped another deer with the Taggedout before the blade needed a quick touch-up.

The carbon fiber handle makes for easy gripping with bloody and wet hands, and the lightweight yet sturdy performance of this tool is simply top-notch. If you're a fixed-blade minimalist, the Altitude is a must-have. Once you hold these knives, they'll grab your attention, and once you use them you'll get over the price point.

Info: benchmade.com

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From
FIELD
To **FIRE**



Sitka makes some of the most durable gear for the harshest of Alaska conditions. The Apex pack is no exception. "I've logged over 50 hours with this pack and have zero complaints," the author states. (SCOTT HAUGEN)

I can say without hesitation, their new EuroLight Hunter boots are simply superb. Tough, very low-profile and for the incredible lightweight features, they offer phenomenal ankle and foot support.

Other features include 9-inch waxed nubuck leather uppers that perform well in a range of conditions and aren't restrictive on calves or ankles. A Gore-Tex waterproof and breathable liner keeps water out but allows perspiration vapor to escape. The multidirectional lug construction offered exceptional traction and dexterity in the wide range of rocky habitats I wore them in. A pair weighs only 3 pounds (uninsulated), and they come insulated and in women's styles.

Info: From \$295; meindusa.com

LEUPOLD BX-4 RANGE HD TBR/W

Downright impressive in low light and heavy shadows, and even on flat, bright terrain, Leupold's new BX-4 rangefinding binoculars instantly impressed me. I used them in the Roosevelt elk rainforests of the Pacific Northwest, sage country habitat for Rocky Mountain elk, and

dozens of hunts in between.

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Info: \$1,599; leupold.com **ASJ**

Editor's note: Author Scott Haugen has been on hundreds of big game hunts around the world. To order signed copies of his books or his best-selling instructional DVD, Field Dressing, Skinning & Caping Big Game, visit scotthaugen.com.

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THE HEART OF THE MATTER

A SOUTHEAST ALASKA FAMILY'S CONNECTION TO A SPECIAL PLANT THAT FEEDS THE AREA'S DEER

BY BJORN DIHLE

I've always associated the plant called deer heart with my times hunting Sitka blacktails in the high country of Southeast Alaska, which is something I've done pretty much every August since I was a kid.

A deer heart is a small, fragile plant that consists of a single heart-shaped leaf attached to a stem that usually doesn't grow much higher than 6 inches. Deer heart grows from sea level, where it's most tender and nutritious early in the summer, to mountaintops, where it's best eaten late in the season. Deer follow it and other vegetation up mountains as summer advances. By mid-September, when deer heart is all but dead in the high country, deer descend to lower elevations for better browse.

DURING A HUNT LAST August, I came upon a deer I'd shot lying on a deer heart-covered bench, with semi-pulverized pieces of the plant in its mouth. There was an ethereal slant to the evening light, the sort that illuminates subtle, hard-to-see details of the landscape. I was surrounded everywhere by deer heart, except where there were cliffs, rocky faces and the occasional clump of stunted mountain hemlock. I am frequently caught off



A Sitka blacktail buck standing in a patch of vegetation known as deer heart brings a smile to the face of author Bjorn Dihle, whose family has a special connection to both the animals and edible plants around their Southeast Alaska home. (BJORN DIHLE)



The Dihle boys, Theron and Shiras, pick berries amid a sea of deer heart. (BJORN DIHLE)

guard by how something as seemingly simple as shifting light can reveal in an instant how miraculous the world is.

I plucked a heart-shaped leaf and stuck it in my mouth. It's peppery, like arugula, but has an aftertaste that oscillates between good and a little strong. I'd never thought a lot about deer heart, other than using how much it's been browsed on as a gauge for where to hunt deer, and to try not to slip on it when it's raining.

I looked from the fields of deer heart to the dead animal, wondering why it's so easy to become preoccupied with certain things while being blind to so much. I thanked and apologized to the deer, then

sliced my knife through the hide along the backbone from the base of the skull to the tail. I cut one side of quarters free, peeled off a backstrap and, before removing a side of ribs, severed the heart and laid it upon its namesake plant.

It was dark by the time I hung my heavy game bags from a branch of a mountain hemlock. During the night, I listened as the wind made the tent shudder and bushes crackle. I thought about brown bears. I'd washed off the deer's blood the best I could and peed and spat around the tent, but I still smelled "delicious."

Years before, I'd left a trail camera on

a salmon stream that had a high number of bears fishing on it a few miles from where I was hunting. As an experiment, I peed in front of where the camera was pointed to see how animals would react. I returned a few days later and found that most of the images showed bears running away, looking terrified. A young bear even dropped the salmon it was carrying in its rush to get away.

One large bear, however, behaved differently. It came during the night and, instead of fleeing, crawled like a cat toward the camera. I imagined that animal crawling toward my tent and thought about becoming meat.

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AT HOME, I ORGANIZED the deer meat in trays divided by roasts, steak and scraps I'd grind into burgers. I trimmed the bones; later, I'd render broth from them. My two young sons - one a toddler and the other 3½ years old - "helped" by sawing on meat with butter knives and dropping pieces of burger meat into the grinder. I sliced a heart thin and doused it with sesame oil and Montreal steak seasoning.

When it was done, we snacked as I wrapped meat in freezer paper. Some people do not like the taste or texture of heart. It's always the first part of the animal I eat, which is in large part because it does not freeze well. It's also delicious and, more than that, evocative of much of what I love about life in Southeast Alaska.

Three years prior, my wife and I gave our older son his first solid food. We wanted our kids' first tastes of food to be something we loved and that came from the streams and forests where we live. First we mashed up blueberries, then we tried coho salmon. It had not gone over well. Not long after, I brought a deer home and fed our son small bits of fried heart. He devoured them.

Now that we had a couple of deer, as well as a good supply of salmon in the freezer, it was time to go berry picking. When the next sunny day came, we headed to one of our favorite blueberry patches in the mountains. I carried our toddler in a backpack. As we hiked a trail to a field of deer heart, his brother



Butchering a deer is something Bjorn and his wife Mary Catharine have taught their sons. One of young Shiras's first tastes of Alaska's bounty was pieces of deer heart from an animal his parents had harvested. (BJORN DIHLE)



demanded - and constantly added details to - a story about dragons from his mother.

Though it was only the third week of August, most of the plants were showing the first signs of brown. After placing the boys on drier ground where they could play and pick berries, my wife and I set to filling our buckets.

Food gathering, whether hunting or berry picking, is probably the most meditative activity I know. For a while

I picked alone, my thoughts quieting as I focused on filling my bucket. Occasionally, the boys would punch or bite each other and scream and cry. Other times they giggled as they wrestled and popped blueberries into each other's mouths. When I checked on them, they were taking turns smashing blueberries on each other's heads, both of their smiling faces stained purplish red, sitting amidst deer heart.

The pickings were pretty good and



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An actual deer's heart sits amongst deer heart and blueberries, all important to the author and his family. "Some people do not like the taste or texture of a deer's heart. It's always the first part of the animal I eat," he writes, adding that doing so is "evocative of much of what I love about life in Southeast Alaska." (BJORN DIHLE)

after a couple hours we had a few gallons. I joined the boys and their mother on a small plateau covered in deer heart and fringed with bushes heavily laden with blueberries. The light on the mountains had that same ethereal quality, revealing cracks and fissures worn by time in rocky faces and millions of deer hearts surrounding us.

It was hard to walk away from something so good. I placed my younger son in his backpack and before leaving searched for a tender-looking deer heart. Near where a deer had been browsing, I plucked a leaf and then placed it in my mouth. I slowly chewed, its enigmatic taste engulfing my taste buds, as I followed my wife and older son down the mountain. **ASJ**

Editor's note: This story originally appeared in Edible Alaska and is reprinted with permission from the author. Bjorn Dihle is a lifelong Southeast Alaskan. His most recent book is A Shape in the Dark: Living and Dying with Brown Bears. Order it at amazon.com/Shape-Dark-Living-Dying-Brown/dp/1680513095.

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