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Bad News Bear Hunters

How can there be a "thrill of the chase" when there's no chase?

By Ted Williams

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If animal rights outfits were to design a scheme for depicting hunters as stupid, lazy, and cruel, they couldn't come up with anything more effective than bearbaiting, which is legal and passionately defended by game managers and radical right-to-hunt groups in Alaska, Arkansas, Idaho, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Utah, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and most of Canada.

Here's how it works: Your guide or outfitter festoons the woods with garbage, then plants you (often in a folding chair) a few yards from a bait site that's being "hit." When the bear shows up, you "harvest" it. "Our primary bait is bread, doughnuts, buns, and pastries, to which we add liquid sugar or corn syrup," explains Wisconsin bear guide Gilbert Arndt, who goes through about thirty 55-gallon drums of bait a season. Alberta guide Kevin Wilson prefers sacks of cream-filled cookies, decaying beaver carcasses, rotting fish guts, and "grease poured around the base of the bait barrel, particularly the kind discarded by restaurants that use deep fryers." Prepackaged commercial bear bait such as "Wildlife Buffet's" and "Smelly Beaver" and "Jelly Bean" is also available. "Stop digging in the dumpsters for your bear bait," shouts one ad. "Wildlife Buffet's Bear Bait will bring the bear and hold them there. . . . Don't leave home without it!"

Once hooked on garbage, bears learn to seek it around human dwellings and campsites. If they don't get shot at the bait site, they may get shot on either side of a door. As the U.S. Forest Service accurately puts it in its brochures: "A fed bear is a dead bear" and "Once [bears] become accustomed to dining on human garbage they realize humans are great sources of 'food.' This leads to human-bear conflicts, and bears always lose." If you want to watch or photograph bears on land managed by the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management, you might get busted if you put out food for them. In states where baiting is legal, you can feed bears only if you're trying to kill them.

In Alaska humans face increased danger from grizzlies conditioned to bait set out for black bears. In the spring of 2005 Alaskans were even allowed to target grizzlies with bait as part of a predator-control program that includes the aerial shooting of wolves and is aimed at increasing moose-hunting opportunities. As the state's Department of Fish and Game explains, "Some people have an interest in helping with wildlife management and want to do their share."

With bearbaiting there's scarcely any middle ground between two positions: "Hell yes!" and "Hell no!" Having been briefed by his Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Maine Governor John Baldacci proclaimed that without baiting, his state would be unable to "control the growth of the bear population so the population pressure doesn't force bears into areas with high human populations." But shortly before leaving office, Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura had this to say: "Going out there and putting jelly doughnuts down, and Yogi comes up and sits there and thinks he's found the mother lode for five days in a row—and then you backshoot him from a tree? . . . That ain't sport—that's an assassination."

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Bearbaiting isn't a biological issue; as a result of short hunting seasons and strict bag limits, black bears have made a dramatic comeback in the past few decades and are doing well throughout their range. So why should Audubon devote precious space to the topic? First, the hunter's image is very much our business because, as we've consistently reported, hunting is the only means by which native ecosystems can be saved from irruptions of wild ungulates. Second, there's much more at stake here than just the hunter's image. Bearbaiting diminishes the public's respect for wild things and wild places. It's a cheap shortcut not far removed from canned hunts (shooting animals inside enclosures). A fair-chase hunter is invested in natural habitat and will defend it when it's threatened. A bait hunter may not be invested in much of anything other than a job he has to get back to fast—before he has time to learn what bears are or how bears live or even to go bear hunting.

I am an ardent hunter (though not of big game), and for 14 years I was a part-time employee of the ardently pro-hunting Gray's Sporting Journal—a literate, lavishly illustrated celebration of fair chase. In June 1981, when bearbaiting was just catching on in Maine, Gray's dispatched me to Jackman, a tiny settlement tucked into purple mountains along the Maine–Quebec border, to cover the spring bear hunt. Bearbaiting was no different then, except that, at least in Maine, it's now permitted only in fall (so nursing cubs aren't orphaned) and it has become big business. These days the state licenses about 6,000 nonresident bear hunters a year for \$156 each. Corporate landholders sell about 10,000 bait sites to guides for as much as \$100 per site, per season; as part of the deal they run the outfitters' competition, including private bear hunters, out of the woods. Finally, guides charge something like \$1,500 per hunt. The clients haven't changed, though. They're still largely from out of state, often from large cities. Usually they have only a few days to hunt. They don't have time to track bears, to find and identify their natural foods, to learn about or even see bear habitat.

I was armed only with a Nikon, but my fellow sportsmen toted high-powered rifles, bowie knives, and immense, gleaming handguns. Some had Pancho Villa–style bandoliers draped across their chests. Before we were driven to the baits, Jack, our outfitter, sat us down for a safety lecture. He held up an enormous pair of skivvies, placing his index finger through a hole at the center of a stiff, black circle the size of a frying pan. The previous owner had drilled the hole when he'd been practicing his quick draw. "I think I shot myself in the ass," he'd intoned as he stood in the gravel road, wide-eyed and swaying. He had.

I shared a bait station with George, 18, of Paeonian Springs, Virginia. Together we watched garbage for five hours and 16 minutes, during which time we heard one red squirrel (which George identified as a circling bear) and saw and/or fed at least 750,000 blackflies. The animal rights folks ask if baiting is fair to bears. A better question might be: Is it fair to guys like George? George had saved his money and answered an ad for "bear hunting in Maine." But he hadn't hunted, and what he'd seen of Maine was mostly a black spruce supporting an onion bag full of rotten meat.

Put such questions to managers from bearbaiting states and, invariably, they'll offer an irrelevant truth followed by a superstition. The irrelevant truth is that black bears are stable or increasing throughout their range; the superstition—dispelled by the 17 bear-hunting states that have outlawed baiting—is that baiting is an "indispensable tool" for keeping bear populations in check, especially where the woods are "too thick" for efficient bear hunting. Never is there a suggestion that the hunting might be more efficient if hunters acquired better skills.

Tom Beck, Colorado's bear biologist until he retired three years ago, told me this: "What aggravates me most is that wildlife professionals accept the hunters' claim that bears can't be hunted without bait. Every [bearbaiting] state says its woods are 'too thick.' I don't believe anyone who says you can't hunt bears in the fall when they're on berries or nuts. You can predict where they're going to be, and if you're a woodsman, all you have to do is scout those places. After we banned baiting, it took only two years for our hunters to get to

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the point where they were killing more bears than they were before. They learned how to do it. There was this large pool of hunters convinced—mostly by the outfitters—that you had to hunt with bait or hounds. These guys didn't want to spend the money on hounds, and they were opposed to using bait. When they learned the truth, the number of bear hunters skyrocketed." From 1989 through 1991 (the year before Colorado outlawed baiting) an average of 6,460 hunters killed an average of 471 bears. From 2002 through 2004 an average of 11,472 hunters killed an average of 656 bears.

It's true that when baiting is outlawed, the kill rate per hunter declines. But all this means is that more hunters can participate without harming a population. "Why should the kill rate [quantity], rather than the quality of the hunt, be the measure of success?" Beck asks. "How fulfilling is it to shoot a bear with its head in a barrel of jelly-filled doughnuts?"

In the mid-1990s Beck and I did business with Outdoor Life magazine because of its new editor, Steve Byers. Periodically, and always briefly, the big hook-and-bullet magazines get religion and hire smart, tough editors who understand the real threats to fish and wildlife and dare to challenge readers to thought and action even if it means offering them facts they don't want to know. "You don't lose readers by pissing them off," Byers used to tell me. "You lose readers by boring them."

Through a mutual friend and publisher I urged Beck to submit a piece on bearbaiting to the newly reformed Outdoor Life. He did; Byers loved it and scheduled it for the September 1996 issue. But the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance (then called the Wildlife Legislative Fund of America) got wind of the article and, although it hadn't read it, prognosticated that it contained dangerous and seditious opinions. Accordingly, the group fired off mass mailings, warning the faithful about another foot-in-the-door plot by the vile and ubiquitous anti-hunters ("antis"), who wouldn't rest until they'd outlawed all hunting and fishing. In the hot breeze from alleged subscribers, the magazine's owner, Times Mirror, folded like a paper parasol; and on July 24—at virtually the last possible instant—Byers received an order to kill Beck's piece. Byers and his assistant, Will Bourne (later hired by Audubon), quit in disgust. When the big metro newspapers reported the reason for their departure, Times Mirror folded again, rescheduling Beck's piece—but this time alongside an obsequious defense of baiting.

According to the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance, the National Rifle Association (NRA), and the Safari Club International, the effort to ban bearbaiting is entirely the work of the antis. The truth is that it's mostly the work of ethical, enlightened hunters smart enough to know they have a major image problem and that bearbaiting is making it lots worse.

Just after Colorado had banned bearbaiting, Bill Montoya, then director of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, admonished the Sportsmen's Alliance for reporting that the recent closure of his state's baitless spring bear hunt was also the work of the antis. "The article is a great disservice to the sportsmen of our state and to all of your readers," he wrote. "None of your imaginary 'antis' were present or heard from. . . ."

Your article, however, has done more for the cause of the 'antis' than any adjustments we could have made to the bear season. Without their saying a word or lifting a finger, you have given them complete credit for eliminating a season when in fact they were not involved. . . . We have observed the groups you purport to oppose, using demagoguery to increase membership and raise funds, but are very disappointed that [the Sportsmen's Alliance] apparently is using the same tactics of paranoid disinformation."

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In 2003 the Sportsmen's Alliance was at it again, along with the NRA and the Safari Club. Together these self-proclaimed defenders of hunting torpedoed legislation that would have banned bearbaiting on federal lands. The Don't Feed the Bears Bill (HR 1472), introduced by U.S. Representatives Elton Gallegly (R-CA) and Jim Moran (D-VA), had wide bipartisan support. Almost half the House had signed on as cosponsors. No one had thoughts about banning any sort of fair-chase hunting; supporters merely wanted to end the ridiculous and dangerous double standard that allows only bear hunters to feed the bears.

The bill was being pushed by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), which, unlike other anti-hunting groups, is politically astute enough to understand that it has zero chance of stopping fair chase. So it targets only the worst abuses, such as wolf and grizzly control in Alaska, canned hunts, and bearbaiting. Ironically, this strategy continuously puts it squarely in the camp of enlightened hunters worried about the declining image of their sport. "We have not pushed legislation to ban deer hunting in any state, for as long as I can remember," says Wayne Pacelle, the HSUS's president and CEO. "It's all about these extreme practices. The bill was looking like it was inevitable. Then the NRA, the Sportsmen's Alliance, and the Safari Club got involved. In all the years I've worked in politics and with Congress, I've never seen a grosser example of mass timidity." Chastened by all the shrill talk about anti-hunting plots, cosponsors started pulling their names off the bill; eventually the House voted it down, 255 to 163.

The HSUS's involvement in last year's Maine bearbaiting referendum, which would also have banned bear trapping and hounding, was a strategic mistake. Maine hunters are paranoid enough about people from "outa-state," but mention "outa-state antis" and all rational conversation ceases. If the HSUS hadn't shown up in the flesh, the Sportsmen's Alliance of Maine (SAM) would have claimed it was directing the effort from away. SAM organized the opposition, which called itself Maine's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Council.

The referendum's principal sponsor, Maine Citizens for Fair Bear Hunting, was poorly organized. So were the sportsmen who backed the referendum, including the 600-member Hunters for Fair Bear Hunting. The environmental community remained mostly silent, explaining that it has to pick its battles and that this wasn't a smart one to jump into; bears, after all, are doing splendidly in Maine. But national hunter-support groups—legitimate ones committed to improving the hunter's image—were nowhere to be seen. One of the most effective of these, the Izaak Walton League of America, has a new chapter in Maine, but it declined to get involved on grounds that its membership was ambivalent.

The Conservation Council's effort, on the other hand, was brilliant and effective—and utterly duplicitous. SAM openly discussed what the pro-baiting strategy had to be: 1) vilification of black bears and 2) whipping up paranoia about outside plots to ban all hunting and fishing. One of the council's TV ads, which invited viewers to "please join Maine's bear biologists and vote no on 2," featured the state's respected bear biologist, Jennifer Vashon, expressing her honest opinion that baiting is "one of the most effective methods we have to control bears and minimize conflicts with people." According to the council, however, these "conflicts" included bear sightings, two of which were grist for other ads: "A bear was shot by police in South Portland" (after residents had complained they had seen it); and, as a part-time animal-control agent grimly recounted, "One elementary school [in Bridgton] had to cancel recess because there was a huge black bear in the area." The same agent reported: "In Standish a teenager was attacked by a black bear. Fortunately, he survived, but he was lucky." (So lucky, in fact, that he didn't require medical attention.) "For safety and science vote no on Question 2," concluded the ad.

"We're lucky there hasn't been a tragedy yet," proclaimed another ad. "Children should be kept inside for safety." In what we're told is "an actual audio recording," a woman with a fishwife voice alternately whispers and shrieks: "Look at that bear. He's running; he's running! The bear is coming this way. How close is he, John, how close is he? Oh my God! He's gonna get the babies, John. He's going right for one. Oh no! Oh God!

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Oh my God! Oh noooooo! He's dragging the baby. Oh my God! Oh my God! Did you see that bear take that baby?" Eventually we learn that "the baby" is a moose. Yet the ad concluded with: "Vote no on Question 2. Don't take any chances." Despite all this, the council saw fit to air the following warning by former Maine bear biologist Craig McLaughlin: "These outsiders want you to vote on emotion, not on the facts."

Printed promos offered more of the same. "People look at a couple ads and articles in the paper and they don't pay much attention," sighs guide and hunter Cecil Gray, one of the founders of Hunters for Fair Bear Hunting. "But 20 or 30, and everywhere you look more rumors and lies—that's different. We didn't have a chance."

The smartest thing SAM and its allies did was hire Chris Potholm, founder and CEO of the Potholm Group, a polling and strategic-advice company based in Brunswick, Maine. Potholm has a national reputation for winning against impossible odds—talking Nevadans into purchasing conservation land, for instance. I asked him how he was able to pull this off. "Backers of the referendum were ahead two to one," he told me. "When I first looked at the numbers and had a meeting with SAM, I said, 'Guys, I don't know if we can do this, but take six months and try to change it on the ground.' So SAM went out and did the best ground game I've ever seen in 30 years of this stuff. . . . The Fish and Wildlife people did not want to get involved. It was Governor John Baldacci who told them they could appear in the TV commercials. He was under a lot of pressure to stay out of it, and I give him tremendous credit for standing up to the liberal Democratic base. SAM really worked the northern part of the state. They basically said, 'We're all in this together. This is just the opening wedge. If they ban this, they'll try something else. This is a national effort.' We got all the fishing people, all the northern tourist people, the economic-development people, bow hunters, snowmobilers. . . . The referendum wound up losing 53 percent to 47. Without the ground game and the good television, we would not have won."

But just what did SAM really win in Maine? And what did the NRA, the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance, and the Safari Club win in Washington, D.C.? Memberships maybe, but mostly horrid national press and the most graphic case study possible for anti-hunting outfits to depict all hunters as troglodytes. Radical right-to-hunt groups need antis as much as the antis need them. And both sides need bearbaiting.

What You Can Do

If you live in a state that permits bearbaiting (see opening paragraph), talk to your elected officials about introducing legislation to end it. On the federal level, encourage your legislators to end the double standard on public land by introducing a bill similar to the Don't Feed the Bears Act.