**Christmas Letter 2006**

The year began with some uncertainty when all three of my spring brown bear hunters canceled their hunts in a three week period. When the dust settled I had three new clients and April 16th found me in Zachar Bay with Dr. Lance Warhold from Berlin, Massachusetts.

There was a low snow line after a strong winter and at Ten Mile on the Zachar River it was all snow. Lance and I used snowshoes every day to get up on our glassing knob. Right off we spotted four big bear scattered across a mile of hillside. Three looked to be in the 9 1/2 to 10 foot class, the fourth looked over 10 foot. All had beautiful hides. The largest bear dropped off the mountain into a cottonwood forest across the river from our camp and we never saw him again. Initially, for various reasons, we didn't try a stalk, but on the sixth day we went after one of the above bears only to abort half way up due to unsteady winds. Two days later we tried again with better winds and Lance knocked down a heck of a bear with a single chest shot out of his 338 Winchester. For Lance it was the culmination of a dream. The bear squared out at 9 feet 10 inches and measured 28 and 1/16 inches on the skull. It had a perfect hide.

In May my class A assistant guides son, Kiche, and Andy Hawk accompanied Lester Combs of Bargersville, Indiana up the Zachar River. They hunted up between Five Mile and Six Mile Bend, about half as far back as Lance and I had. They got by without snowshoes, and on the fourth day of his hunt Lester killed a real big, old looking bear with a single shot out of his 378 Weatherby. They got him at dark and siwashed the night up there before skinning him the next day. This bear had another perfect hide and squared out 10 feet 2 inches with a 29 inch skull.

Meanwhile, I was guiding Leroy's partner Chance Whitney of Greenwood, Indiana. I had been wanting to try a hunt on the bay ever since last spring when Kiche and I saw some real big bears along the coast. The first day was all wind driven rain and waves and we holed up in the cabin. The second day we got out and spotted sixteen bears including one monster that we tried to put a stalk on. We ended up retreating due to unreliable winds. The next day we saw him again and were blocked by another good sized bear that was on the beach below him. Before this second bear moved off the real big one went into thick brush. We never saw him again.

I was pretty amazed at the bears we observed during Chance's hunt. We saw one 10' class boar above the cabin, but he was headed up and over the mountain. We tried to catch up to another 10' class bear out towards Green Banks but he got into some low brushy hills first.

One day we had about six adult bears spread out on a hillside . A couple were in the 9 1/2 to 10 foot class and we were biding our time waiting for a stalking opportunity when the "Lazy Bay" (a landing craft that delivers supplies all around Kodiak Island) came grinding up the bay, its' big diesels belching noise and smoke, and pulls into the beach by a cabin right underneath our spread of bears! I couldn't believe it. He spooks the whole lot. Boats and planes around the bay area can be a drawback, but never-the-less we saw some real big bear there. Last fall the Zachar Bay Cannery owners killed the "butter bear" (so named for breaking into their walk in cooler and eating 50 pounds of butter in one sitting). He was aged at 28 years old and went 28" on the skull. He had probably spent his entire life around the bay area, and had a load of buck shot imbedded in his jaws to show for it.

Andy started hunting with us after he and Kiche and Lester got back to base and on the tenth day Chance killed a beautiful 9 foot 7 inch square bear with two shots out of his 300 Winchester. Chance got his bear right on the beach in a driving rain. I've not had many packs that easy. This was a younger boar with a 25 1/4 inch skull. The bigger bears we saw haunt my mind, and I'm looking forward to another chance next spring.

After the hunts I stayed down and was joined by my wife and daughter, and we worked on the cabin for a couple of weeks. Donna had retired from Matanuska Telephone Company in March and she and our daughter Kaasan went on a week long vacation via sailing ship down in the Caribbean . A trip they loved so completely I was a little surprised they made it back to cold, blustery Kodiak. Just kidding. But I will add that Donna is enjoying her retirement immensely.

Back up north in Chickaloon, at the end of May, we engaged summer with our usual frenzy of activities. The big project this year being a custom built log and window greenhouse to replace Donna's old crushed Swedish one. It was billed to handle hard winters, but it only took about eight Chickaloon winters to crush the life from it. My parents had given us a bunch of used windows in various sizes. The challenge was to build a structure using them when they varied in dimensions. The final product came out great, but it took a lot of head scratching, and most of my time leading up to the August sheep hunts to finish it.

Our first sheep hunt was with 62 year old Edward Schoenherr who lives most of the year at Glendive, Montana, but is at Neillsville, Wisconsin around the holidays. My daughter Kaasan was the packer and the three of us headed back into the Talkeetna Mtns. via jeep for the first twenty miles and then back packed from there an additional five miles. Going in was a nice day, thereafter it rained at least a part of every day.

We counted over a hundred sheep on Ed's hunt and also saw half a dozen big bull caribou. This area is closed to nonresident caribou hunting, but it's still enjoyable to watch these beautiful animals traversing vertical slopes and going just about anywhere the sheep do.

On August 11th, the second day of sheep season, Ed killed one heck of a ram that -score wise- was the biggest of my career. I've guided for longer horned rams, but what put this one in a special class was its' mass. Making it even more unusual, this area isn't noted for big based sheep. At any rate there were three rams, and in order to get a shot at the biggest one we had to expose ourselves to another real nice looking full curl who immediately jumped and ran taking the other two along. Ed had to shoot quickly and accurately which he did with a single shot to the back of the neck at about 120 yards. The ram's horns measured 40 1/2" on both sides with bases that went 14 1/2" and 14 3/4".

The ram fell down the back side of a mountain, but we got lucky when it hung up, inexplicably, in a rocky chute five hundred feet down instead of rolling 2500 feet into the bowl down below where a sow grizzly and two cubs were feeding on blueberries. If the sheep had rolled to momma we would have had compounded problems. As it was we only had to make a short, mean climb back to the top, which we managed in one trip.

Ed is living proof that a 62 year old guy can do a hunt of this effort.

We got back out to the highway just in time, just before the heavy rains fell that would have trapped us back in the mountains by high water. As it was the creeks and rivers around Chickaloon rose to their highest levels since August, 1971.

The rain affected our second sheep hunt with Jeff Lange of Cuba City, Wisconsin. Right off we couldn't go where I wanted to do to flooding on the Granite River. We headed up the Chickaloon instead and got stopped by a little creek that "ain't nothing" normally but stopped us cold the first day. We camped. By next morning it had dropped enough that I was able to get across - barely- and establish a fixed line to facilitate our crossing.

There were four of us initially with my daughter Kaasan and son Kiche both along as packers. Kaasan was hoping we'd get a ram early as she was starting College in a few days, but on the sixth day she had to walk out. The very next day Jeff killed a 32" ram above our camp on Doone Creek. We saw some other - likely bigger- rams on the other side of the Chickaloon, and a big looking single ram in the next drainage up on our side, but we couldn't wade the flooding river, and in the end "the bird in the hand" logic took over. Jeff killed his ram with a single shot at about 175 yards.

On September 14th Curt Lindner came up from New Martinsville, West Virginia to hunt moose. My moose hunting spot is about seven miles from our house and Curt and I took my farm tractor in as far as we could and then back packed up the mountain about a mile. On the way up we called in a small bull and heard another bull grunting that we didn't see.

The next morning we went up on a lookout and immediately heard several bulls grunt-ing on the mountain side above us. Before long we spotted a good sized bull in a small clearing about 400-500 yards away. I did some calling and scraping and over an hour or so was able to call him - along with two smaller bulls - into a meadow below our position. Curt had a perfect rest and laid the big guy down with two shots out of his 300 Winchester. After the big bull went down the two smaller bulls fought a skirmish below us which Curt recorded on his video camera. It was a quick hunt, but there was still plenty of packing to do. Curt's bull was a nice one for this area, measuring 55 inches.

I initially planned to pack the moose down to the tractor with our horses, but for various reasons, Curt and I decided it was less of a hassle to pack it down ourselves. Curt could handle 100 pound loads - his biggest weighed about 116 - and we got the bull and our spike camp down in four trips spread out over three days. It wasn't bad.

In October Kiche and I headed for Kodiak to hunt my mountain goat permit. We covered some ground, back packing clear to the head of the South River at the head of Uyak Bay, and at one point looking down at Barling Bay on the other side of the island. Overall we had pretty nice weather, but our timing was bad. At first we could only find nanny goats with, or without, kids. There were plenty of goats. When we finally did find billies we were down to one more hunting day, which would have been enough had a big storm not moved in with high winds, rain, and snow. We came off that mountain the next morning, wet and whipped, with our tails between our legs. So while I did get some fair photos of nannies on the trip, I didn't get my billy.

Kiche and I did have a couple of interesting experiences with bears on the goat hunt. On our way up river in the jet boat I sucked gravel into the intake grate and lost power. Seconds later I noticed a brown bear and cub walking fast - eyes fixated on us - looking like they were about to break into a run at us. They were 50 yards away and closing fast. With the engine racing, but not much power coming out, we limped upstream in a slow motion escape like you have in dreams. They followed us. At a deep hole in the river we pulled to the far bank, quickly cleared the rocks, and escaped upriver. It was kind of weird. You'd think the boat and motor would be intimidating all by themselves.

And on our last day, on our way down the mountain in heavy rain, we spotted a nine foot brown bear about 300 yards away. He saw us too and came swaggering on over in that big boar walk that says "I Am the Man". Yelling had no effect and when he started running at us at about 60 yards I fired a shot into the ground in front of him. He stopped for a second, then came forward again, and started pounding the ground stiff legged. We kept yelling as he crossed a creek in thick alders, and we climbed up on a rock for better visibility. He finally picked up our scent at about 30 yards and ran up the mountain the way we'd been coming down it. I'm not sure what the heck he was thinking, but he may have never seen a human before.

After the goat hunt Kiche and I took a father and son on a 15 day bear/deer combination hunt. The father, Ricky Davis, had killed a 9 foot 5 inch bear with us about eight years ago. This time he was hoping to get a deer. His son Max was hunting bear and said, "Any bear's okay as long as it's at least one inch bigger than Dads". Everyone laughed, but I came to believe he was pretty serious about that.

Opening day found us fourteen miles up the valley on a lookout above the Zachar River. We saw five bears that day, but four of them - including one in the 10 foot class - were high in goat country. That usually means a poor silver run, but when we traveled down to the river several days later there were plenty of salmon? We photographed the bear that's on this years' Christmas card that day. We watched him kill and eat five silvers. For what it's worth, I photographed last years' Christmas card goat on this same bend in the river. The bear in the photo is about 8 1/2 foot, maybe a little larger.

The next day Max and I stalked a 9 1/2 to 10 footer. We got to within 300 yards before losing him in the trees. Several days later we passed up two bears within shooting range that I judged to be 9 to 9 1/2 foot. We would come to regret that.

After nine days of hunting the upper river we began hunting our way out towards the bay. There were salmon and bears the whole way, but we couldn't get onto a big one. On day 13 we had an 8 1/2 footer (see photo sheet) fishing about 50 yards away from us. We saw big tracks frozen in the river mud, so we knew there were big ones around us, but the entire hunt was dominated by clear, cold weather with very cold nights, and cold slows the bear's activity level way down. I'm sure the cold was a contributing factor. Unfortunately we never had a tracking snow which would have given us another option. Some big bear fish only at night.

As we got down closer to the bay we began seeing some nice sitka deer bucks but didn't want to chance scaring any nearby bears by shooting.

In the end we looked back on a long, tough, cold hunt that stretched out over 16 days of great companionship. Even though Ricky and Max didn't get any animals, and were from the warmth of Florida, they were always upbeat and telling some funny story or other. I mean Ricky's brand new winter weight Cabela's sleeping bag zipper broke on about night three and became the endless butt of jokes and repair attempts. He could have gotten mad, but rolled with the punch instead, and that's a good mind set to have while hunting.

The plane that flew the Davis's out brought in Butch MacDonald, my brother Eric, and Eric's son Sean. We planned to do a little deer hunting, some relaxing, and put some flooring down in the cabin, and we got all that done.

The next morning we awoke to a snow storm - about 5-6 inches worth spread out over the day. Butch and I back packed a short ways above the head of the bay and camped so we wouldn't have to deal with tide issues. On the third day Butch killed a big sitka buck that scored 104 B@C points. A heck of a nice deer. Of course, while we were deer hunting we saw the very fresh tracks of a big brown bear. In life timing is everything. And I'm just about out of room so it's my time to go.

For some of you who go way back with me and knew my old pal and guiding partner Harold (Zeke) Schetzle (or may have read one or both of his books) I'm sorry to have to say he died in a diving accident while mining for gold up at Nome, Alaska on July 8th. He was as good and reliable a guy as you can find, and the hunting and guiding community lost a tireless advocate of "Fair Chase". He understood that on any given hunt the "journey" determined the hunt's legitimacy, and he never forgot that a heart beats in the chest of animals too.

We certainly hope the New Year brings warmth, peace, and prosperity to all of you. Have a good one!