**Christmas Letter 2005**

As most of you know from last years' newsletter I'm now guiding for brown bear, goat, and deer in Zachar Bay. This was a win-win situation for me. My parents have owned land in Zachar Bay for twenty years so the natural procession of things called for a cabin on said land to base my Kodiak hunts out of.

Long time friend and client Butch MacDonald (MacDonalds' Home Improvement) from Hackensach, Minnesota offered his considerable expertise in the planning and determination of materials, and as foreman of the building project. I spent a good portion of the winter trying to put it all together into a coherent plan. The main impediment and complication being the remoteness of Zachar Bay from anywhere. Ultimately, the materials - 22,000 lbs. worth - were motored around the Island in a large landing craft called the "Lazy Bay" and deposited on the beach where they were hand carried up to the building site.

Prior to the building project we ran our three spring brown bear hunts starting with the mid April trip. John Kloosterman from Tucson, Arizona was my first client. John has killed a couple of Kodiak bears (8 1/2' and 9 1/2') so this was a hunt for something in the "huge" category. Before we even left base camp we saw a 9 1/2 footer on the beach 500 yards from where our cabin now sits. All day prior to seeing this bear large whales were feeding, blowing, and even breaching in the bay, sometimes within 100 yards of shore. Mountain goats stood in the cliffs across the bay and we watched deer and fox walking the beach by camp. Altogether it seemed like a good omen.

John and I back packed some ten miles up the Zachar River and spent the whole 15 days back there. The snow line was up quite high due to a mild winter which means the bears don't always drop down out of the high, hanging valleys like they do on a heavy snow winter. Bear hunting is always easier on snowy springs. Early on we saw a couple of real big bears that were rubbed all to heck. We also saw a 10' class bear with a great hide that we actually "passed" on. I can't believe I said that. John had asked, "How does an 11 footer look different than him?"

"Well, he'd be taller and longer", I'd answered. Our luck kind of went down hill from there. We saw plenty of bears, and stalked three big ones in the 10 foot class, but it seemed like every time we zigged the bear would zag. We just couldn't get together. One monster, that I thought might be well over 10 foot, spent a week sleeping in a hole he'd dug into the snow in an avalanche chute and was still there the day we had to head back out to the bay. In the end John said it best, "We lacked that one ingredient every successful hunt requires which is for something to go our way." We had seen 40 different bears.

On April 30th John headed back to the fast life, and our two May clients arrived. Jeff Lange of Cuba City, Wisconsin was hunting with my guide Andy Hawk, and one of our previous clients Chad Vaassen was packing for them. The three of them headed up the Zachar River to try their luck up there. Meanwhile, Kiche and I took our client Darrel Gusa from Kellogg, Minnesota up Little Zachar River.

On the evening of the 3rd day Darrel knocked down a 10 footer at 80 yards right at dark. He used a 375 H@H with 300 grain Nosler Federal factory loads. We thought he'd killed him with one shot, but after a couple of minutes the bear fought to get up and Darrel gave him three more for sure. This bear was the 17th we'd seen that day though many of them were sow and cub combinations. He was an old looking boar with three of his four canines broken off and lots of wear showing on his other teeth. He had a beautiful hide and we were thrilled, but Darrel felt a little cheated that his hunt was over so fast. After what I'd been through with John I was ready for an easy one. The skull went Boone @ Crockett at 28 3/8".

While the three of us were kicked back in comfort by the 5th day Andy, Jeff and Chad were finding out for themselves that the upper Zachar River wasn't our "lucky spot" in spring 2005. They saw many bears, and big ones too, but they wouldn't stay still. Then heavy continuous rain for 53 hours straight fattened the Zachar River into flood and they couldn't wade it for several days. Just when it became wadeable again more rain started so they moved down to within two miles of the bay where a spotting knob and the best bear habitat are both on the same side of the river. There they stalked a huge bear that got away from them at the last minute when he caught their scent. #&#&!!!

We were seeing lots of bears right from base camp so they came down to the bay for the last day and ended up climbing the mountain across from camp where a boar was following a sow, and got him. He squared out at 8 1/2 feet and had a perfect hide. Interestingly enough, we had to chase the sow off him. She had already started burying him by the time we covered the two hundred intervening yards from where Jeff had shot from! And she was reluctant to give him up. The preying mantis comes to mind.

The day Jeff got his bear the cabin building project began. The Lazy Bay had arrived with materials a few days earlier and my two brothers Arthur and Eric along with Butch had made it in and the project was cruising. We also owed big thanks to Andy, Jeff, and Chad who helped Kiche carry most of the lumber up to the building site before their plane arrived on May 17th. Every thing was going great and we were putting up the roof joists when Butch stepped on a patch of air unsupported by plywood. There was a terrible crash followed closely by pain commiserate with dislocated shoulders and a broken leg. Within an hour we had a medivac flight in to pick Butch up.

It was a blow. Fortunately Butch has made a very good recovery that included shoulder surgery to repair some of the damage. With my two brothers' knowledge of building along with Kiches' and my help we were able to finish what Butch started. By finish I mean we got a roof on and the doors and windows in.

Kiche and I got back home just in time to watch Kaasan graduate from High School. She did so with honors and scholarships, and we were all very proud of her, not only for her accomplishments, but also for the way she comports herself in life.

The rest of the summer was a blur of forget-able projects. As I didn't have a sheep hunter for the opener Kiche, Kaasan and I did an exploratory sheep hunt in a place I'd never hunted but had seen some rams five years ago. There are not many sheep in this little cluster of mountains, and they are easily accessible by Alaskan standards, so our expectations weren't high. We were hoping they were under the radar, so to speak.

It was hot and dry. As things played out two other hunting parties had position on us on opening day. They were between us and the only legal rams we'd seen. These other two parties had opted for the light, fast, lightening strike to the top, whereas we packed up enough supplies to last a week . With the unusually warm temperatures there were "millions" of biting flies and all sorts of aggressive insect life at 5000 feet. All night there was a steady hum of tiny wings beating. And you needed to drink gallons of water. We had packed six gallons up out of a high basin to our ridge-line camp.

At any rate, by noon of opening day, the other two parties were eating their lips and in full desperate retreat for water, and we had the mountains to ourselves. The rams we were after were in some very gnarly cliffs way below our camp, but late on the second day they came up to the top and Kaasan nailed the biggest one at about 80 yards shooting her moms' 6mm and 95 grain nosler handloads. Her second shot dropped the ram instantly and he went catapulting out of sight off the vertical rim way down into a steep pitch of willows. The fall knocked one horn off its' core and broke the other horn four inches from the tip, though it was still attached. The ram was much bigger than we had expected to find. He measured 39" X 14" and 40" X 14" and green scored 165 B@ C. It was Kaasans' second sheep, and I might add, it is delicious eating. It's not too likely I'd ever take a client there as chances for success are too iffy with such low sheep numbers.

On August 19th my sheep hunter Todd Muehleip from Galena, Illinois arrived and the next day we took off into the Talkeetna Mountains. We had four horses, two mountain bikes and Kiche and Kaasan for support. Nothing came easy for us. We spent eleven days in the Boulder Creek drainage and counted 215 sheep. But, we had a hard time finding full curl rams. This was partly due to the sheep having been moved around some by hunters the first week of the season, and partly due to the fact that the overall numbers of mature rams in the population have been slowly increasing since the killer winter of 99/00 which killed most of the mature rams, and half the sheep population overall. We saw large numbers of younger rams, and some very nice looking 7/8's curl rams that will be legal this coming fall. About the time we were running out of food we found three full curl rams together. On our first attempt at a stalk we got to within about 500 yards. The next day we got to within 300 yards in fog and rain. Todd was laying down across his pack ready to shoot when fog settled over the rams. When the fog lifted an hour later the rams were gone! Before this hunt ever started there had been talk of dismal hunting success on recent outings, the "If I didn't have bad luck I wouldn't have any luck at all" kind. I could tell at this point we were dealing with some seriously bad "mo-jo".

The day after fog got to the rams we - very reluctantly - had to head back out as we were out of food, clouds obscured the mountains, and it was raining again.

Once we got out we had another day of rain and fog before we could start looking for rams along the highway. Finally, we found a real nice full curl ram near Hicks Creek. It took a couple more days of maneuvering, and one missed opportunity, before Todd brought this ram to earth. It was one of those weird hunts, where at the end of it, you feel more relieved than happy. The ram measured 36 1/2" X 12 1/2".

After the sheep hunt Kiche and Kaasan flew in to Kelly Lake in the Alphabet Hills to hunt moose and caribou. Overlapping that hunt Mike Gleason came up from Berlin, Massachusetts to hunt moose in the mountains behind my house. This hunt was a trial run to see if a trophy moose hunt could be viable in this area. We saw plenty of bulls - eleven in six days - but only one was likely over 50". We passed on him because he was too iffy and he didn't have the three brow tines which would have made him legal for sure. On day six Mike knocked down an old looking bull, whose rack was in decline, with one 180 grain nosler out of his trusty 30/06. He spread 48" with five brow tines on each side. The rack had heavy bases, and while not large, looked cool. Meanwhile Kaasan had gotten her first moose, a 51 1/2" bull with two shots from her brothers' 270.

The day after Mike killed his moose I hiked up the mountain to get our camp. I didn't take my rifle. As I walked along I became aware of a bull moose in front of me hiding behind a tree. I could see that his rack was still in velvet. Suddenly he came around the tree and charged! Just like that. Startled, I dove behind a birch tree - barely in time - my heart pounding in my chest. For long minutes the bulls' nose was eighteen inches from mine, his eyes flashing wildly. Twice he tried to come around the tree after me! At some point I realized he couldn't get around the tree fast enough to get me and I began to calm down. I took off my empty pack and threw it around the tree at him and he sent it careening away with a flick of his antlers. It was a bizarre experience; very unusual.

There were things wrong with him. His left fore leg quivered whenever he tried to put weight on it, his front hooves were about a foot long and shaped like bananas, he was skinny and old looking, and he should have been long out of velvet. In retrospect I think he felt vulnerable; he knew he couldn't run away, so he attacked. He was cornered by his condition. When he finally moved off he was slow and wobbly, limping noticeably.

In late September Kiche and I headed for Kodiak to guide Bob Griego of Paradise Valley, Arizona on a Zachar River goat hunt. We flew in to a lake known locally as Lake 629 in the upper Zachar valley to begin our hunt. We found the going better than expect-ed as we packed the four and a half miles into a valley we are calling "Goat Creek".

There are two forks to Goat Creek, and we named the first fork the "No Goat Fork". It rained every day. Once we got out of the No Goat Fork our fortunes changed. Goats were everywhere, though some were in very steep, unget-able terrain. At least half a dozen billies were scattered along a hunt-able slope above our camp. After days of bat-tling wetness we launched an attack in the rain that used fast moving cloud banks for cover. Wind kept the clouds moving and breaking periodically and we were able to get up underneath four billies to within 300 yards of them. There wasn't much difference in size between them. A fifth billy about a mile away seemed to show the biggest horns but we went for the sure thing. Bob used his 7mm Remington Mag. and two shots to put the nearest goat down. It went 10" on the long side by 5 3/4" around the bases. One tip was broken and it measured 9 1/2" on that side. He scored 49 1/4" B@C. A very nice goat.

The small photo of the big billy looking down at us on the photo sheet was taken by Bob with his high powered digital camera while we were skinning his goat. I doubt these goats had ever seen a human before. They were still there when we packed up to leave. This is still a drawing hunt (Nov. 1st - Dec. 6th application period) though they doubled the number of permits in the Zachar goat area for 2006 which should result in close to a 100% chance of getting drawn.

We had ten days between the goat hunt and the fall bear hunt. Donna and Kaasan flew down and we managed to get our new cabin wired, insulated, and all the interior plywood installed. There's still plenty to do but now it's warm and comfortable. We had planned to do a little deer hunting and fishing, but ended up working long and hard every day just to reach our objectives.

Brad Nelson of Crosslake, Minnesota was hunting brown bear with us this fall. My daughter had never done a bear hunt and she was our packer. All I can say is the "Energizer Bunny" has got nothing on Kaasan. She had already packed some heavy loads this fall, one we weighed went 105 pounds, another one out at Kelley Lake she said was heavier than that, so I knew she could do the job.

We started out by flying to Lake 629. From there we packed four miles further up valley, staying up on the mountain side away from the river. The word was there were lots of salmon and berries this year and the bears were fat and happy. That certainly seemed to be the case as the bears seemed nonchalant about fishing, even though there were lots of silvers. It was cold too which slows the activity level down. We saw almost as many bears up on the mountains as we did on the river, although most of the real big boars were walking the river.

After watching from afar for a few days we got a wind - actually a lack of wind - that allowed us to stake out a looping bend of the river. The first day two middle sized bears came by. The following day, as lazy snow flurries fell, we watched the antics of eagles and ravens swooping, calling, arguing? Up and down the river. Tired silver salmon tore the water in territorial disputes. Little brown wrens darted through the branches showing their bright curiosity. They often perch only feet away and look right at you, like they cared what you thought. In the afternoon we watched a hawk owl swoop down and nail a fat vole 50 yards out from our position. Pushups were our anecdote for shivering. Just when it seemed we wouldn't see a bear that day, right on the edge of dark, a big boy came walking from upriver. We were ready - more than ready. On he came, huge, dark, powerful. I was tingling and feeling sad for the great bear all at once.

Brad was behind a 300 Remington Ultra Mag loaded with 180 grain nosler bullets. At about 50-60 yards Brad fired and water exploded off the bears' hide right where the lungs reside. The bear roared off the near cut bank and disappeared down into the water. As he came up out of the water on the far side gravel bar Brad hit him again. Then he shot twice more and the big bear lay still.

Man! He was colossal. Heavy. I wished we could have weighed him. We had to use ropes to roll him. Skinning him I thought he would square out in the 10 1/2 foot class - or bigger. He actually squared 10' 3", but I would put him in the running for the heaviest bear I've ever guided for. His skull measured 27 11/16's inches.

The next day while we were skinning him - an all day job - a mountain goat came walking down the river! We were sure surprised. He wasn't looking for fish. It was apparently a pilgrimage from the mountains on one side to the mountains on the other side. Goats have a brave attitude; they walk with an edge; they probably can't outrun a bear, but should the bear catch one there is going to be a fight. You have to admire that in any creature. Anyway, now you all know where our Christmas card came from.

The weather had been cold and Lake 629 was frozen solid when we got back to it. Altogether we had a fourteen mile back packing trip to reach the bay with another two miles along the bay shore line to reach the cabin. Kaasan packed that bear hide thirteen of those fourteen miles. Brad and I were amazed. Of course all three of us had heavy loads and there were "many" rest stops made over several days travel. We ran into three single bears along the way, but they took off when they got our scent, or saw us.

We had a great time on a great adventure. A big snow storm moved in when we wanted to leave which delayed us by two days. We were all tired of Mountain House and Brad shot a spike buck, which we enjoyed immensely, during our storm bound days.

Overall, we had a good year. Kiche started working part-time for the State Dep. Of Fish and Game in their fisheries division. Kaasan plans on going to college next year, her scholarships allow her to take one year off. Donna is going to retire from drafting this coming March. She can't hardly wait. As for me, well, it is well known that guides hunt until they die. There ain't no retirement. Ha!

I plan to do one moose hunt each fall, and I have that booked for next year already. I'm looking for one or two sheep hunters for next fall. I have both brown bear hunts open in May 2007 which would be a great hunt for two friends who want to come at the same time.

I'm out of room. Here's wishing the best to all our friends out there,

MERRY CHRISTMAS and HAPPY NEW YEAR !