**Christmas 2012**

 For us 2012 was a year of changes, not always comfortable ones, but a necessary and unavoidable part of life. As someone who is contemplative by nature I try to take a measured navigation through life at my own comfortable pace. I'm not someone who relishes balancing five issues, a telephone and a computer at once, and this year it seemed there was always something happening on top of other things happening.

 The year began with me re-competing for my guide area in the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge. Most guides who operate on any of Alaska's Refuges were re-competing for areas early in the year. Our prospectuses had to be in by the end of February. I was on pace to get applications in for five areas when a very controversial issue came to a boil in February that I feel very strongly about – Bear Snaring. It started several years ago with black bear snaring and wide open hunting seasons on grizzly/brown bears (sometimes with no closed season) (sometimes with a two bear limit) and was morphing into grizzly/brown bear snaring along with proposed same day aerial hunting of grizzlies and even the aerial shooting of sows and cubs in northwest Alaska all in the name of producing more moose for hunters, and protecting a stagnated muskox population. The Game Board which rules on changes in hunting rules and regulations up here was meeting the first week of March to decide the fait of a host of changes detrimental to the bear. I simply had no choice but drop what I was doing and fight for the bears I love. It was more important to me than even my Refuge Prospectuses. I hasten to add that none of the above proposals concerned Kodiak or the Alaska Peninsula.

 We managed to fight off some of the worst proposals, but there is still plenty to be unhappy about. If I have room I'll include my Compass piece to the Anchorage Daily News that along with several other Compass pieces around that time galvanized opposition to these crazy ideas.

 In April I began hunting for Kodiak bear with my first client Preston Moon and his side kick In Bong Lee a professional photographer. Preston had hunted with my guide Andy Hawk down in Dog Salmon some years back and after several failed stalks on big boars they ended up taking an old 8 ½ foot female; now he wanted a big boar to go with the big sow which would form a nice diorama.

 Kodiak had experienced another cold and snowy winter, and on April 15th not many bears were out and about; that first day we were greeted with a hard northeaster pounding rain, and we spent the day holed up in our cabin telling stories. On day two the wind had moderated enough to launch our boat and get up the bay where we planned to back pack up to Ten Mile on the Zachar. It was still raining and all the streams were running high and dirty. I knew we'd have trouble wading the Zachar so we changed plans and packed into Little Zachar instead. During several wet, cold days up the smaller valley we saw two bears, neither of which was real large, and 9 winter killed - or bear killed – deer. We found many deer hair and bone chip “donuts” left behind by winter bears taking advantage of dead and dieing deer. Despite their struggles we saw a fair number of live deer too. We also counted 38 nannies and kids in two groups along with about 8 billies. There were 13 of last year's kids among the 38, again showing the goat's toughness during a harsh winter relative to the deer's. On Kodiak it takes a lot to kill a goat.

 The snowshoe hares had done a lot of barking on young cottonwood, willows and birch and you get a good idea of how deep the snow was by the height of the nibbling. Hares also nip off the ends of salmon berry bushes. Starving deer like to peel the bark of elderberry bushes and we saw a lot of that as well.

 By the 19th the streams had dropped enough that I decided to try the Zachar again and we were able to get up to Six Mile Bend after a long, tiring hike.

 The next day I spotted our first real big bear. I felt sure he was at least 9 ½ feet, but more likely in the 10 foot category. Long and tall with a fine hide he wagged the big bear walk that informs all others that “I am the man”. We watched him off and on for several hours as he moved about. During this time I spotted another large looking bear a mile further up the valley. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get a good look at this bear before he got into thick alders, and despite an extra day's effort we didn't see him again.

 Late in the day the first bear laid down just inside a brush patch with open country on the upriver side. We tried a stalk, but after getting across the river and into the woods on the other side the wind became too variable for my liking and we pulled off. I thought there was a good chance he'd be there in the morning, and with another cold 20 degree night in the offing I felt he wood sleep in until the sun warmed him at mid day. He was still there as it got dark, but in the morning he was gone having left during the night. The big bear's moves are very hard to decipher.

 On the 22nd we packed on up to Ten Mile. All along the way we noticed freshly fallen cottonwood trees with their crowns laying upstream indicating hellish winter winds out of the northwest. In one spot 25-30 big cottonwoods had crashed down in about 200 yards. It would take some crazy, big wind to do that, and along with high piling water these elements worry and tear and shape these valleys in violent ways.

 We had only seen a few bear trails tacking across the blindingly white mountains that lined the upper Zachar Valley so it seemed like very few bears were moving, but we did see two adult males on our first full day at Ten Mile. One was in a very steep, dangerous canyon with heavily loaded snow slopes and looked between 9 and 9 ½ feet. The other bear looked larger but disappeared before I could get a good look at him.

 The next day began cloudy with a little snow spitting down but turned sunny and warm in the afternoon. It was really slow until Preston spotted a big bear running in the brush on the mountain across from us. I quickly got on the spot and saw that there were two big bears running, one chasing the other. The bear up front was rubbed pretty good and actually looked like the bigger bear (hide size wise) as he was longer bodied than the one he was running from, but the chaser just jiggled with bulk. He was short, but wide, and deep through the middle, and he drove the other bear up against a drop off and lashed out with his paws and teeth until the other bear understood who was boss. Then he came back down to where we'd first seen him and disappeared behind cottonwood trees and alders. I figured he was defending a deer or goat carcass.

 We decided to try a stalk. Half way there the good wind died and the remaining breezes went a little squirrelly so we stopped our attack for a good hour hoping that we'd pick up some down drafts at dark. During our wait swarms of mosquitos materialized and attacked us with vigor which was surprising given the time of year and cold nights we were having. Finally a down valley breeze developed and we continued on.

 It was getting dark when we got into the area where we'd seen the bear disappear. Then, suddenly, there he was about 125 yards from us walking away through the alders. I blew my deer call, and a few minutes later a predator call. The bear didn't seem to pay attention to either, though he eventually came walking back to where I'd first seen him and laid down. We still weren't sure if we were going to take him; he was big, but was he big enough? It was quickly getting too dark to see. I whispered, “Lets stalk right up on him, if he spooks, so be it, but we can't get a decent look with him laying down.”

 “Tell me not to shoot if he isn't big enough”, Preston said as we started towards him. In Bong was back behind filming us with his cameras. We snuck up until Preston's range finding binoculars read 38 yards, and still the bear wouldn't get up. He knew something was there, but I believe he thought we were that other bear poking around. Finally he stood up and I said, “He looks big.”

 “Boom!”, Preston's custom 340 Weatherby exploded.

 The bear stumbled off his feet, regained them briefly, and went back down as Preston fired an insurance round. What an impressive animal! As beautifully colored a big bear as you'll ever see and with a perfect hide to boot. He showed significant wear on his teeth and I estimated him to be at least 20 years old. The skull measured 27 ½ “ to easily make Boone and Crockett's minimum of 26 inches. The hide squared out about 9 feet 5 inches. Laying on the ground the bear looked like an easy 10 footer. His girth was unusually large and he was so heavy that we had to gut him out before the three of us could roll him over; even gutted we struggled to roll him. Despite his somewhat modest hide measurement he was one of the heaviest spring bears I can remember - no matter the hide size.

 Two days later I was fleshing the hide to get it as light as possible for the 10 mile pack downriver as In Bong Lee roasted brown bear back strap over a fire seasoning it with a Korean sauce that smelled like barbecue, and after awhile I couldn't stand the odors any longer; I just had to wash my hands and eat bear. The three of us told a lot of stories on this trip. Preston loves to hunt and has a great attention to detail, and his 340 Weatherby built by New England Custom Guns on a model 70 Winchester classic action grouped well under an inch with 250 grain noslers. It was built for distance shooting. I told Preston early in the hunt, “You'll probably get him point blank”.

 I was impressed with In Bong's photography. About the only time he took his cameras off was when he went to bed. The entire hunt he had these two heavy cameras around his neck, ready for any eventuality, and he filmed eagles and swans in close flight while always ready to capture a conversation between Preston and I. In addition to the cameras, he also carried a heavy pack.

 For May we had our normal two clients booked and Kiche and Andy came down to help with the hunt. My hunter was repeat client Ed Schowenerr 68 years young who had taken a heck of a big dall ram with me six years ago on the Chickaloon River. Ed was sporting two thousand dollar knee braces on each leg to keep his knees happy so back packing really wasn't an option.

 Meanwhile, our second client was taking a doctor's proscribed medication, and it turns out the doctor didn't want the guy going off on a two week bear hunt to Alaska. This medication has side affects, one of which is difficulty sleeping, and in order for it to work properly his doctor wanted to be able to adjust the medication up or down depending on a dose's affect which is hard to do when the patient is in Alaska. After two days in camp – and only one actual day of bear hunting – he had to head back home. He hadn't been able to sleep for four days at that point and was exhausted. It was unfortunate for everyone concerned, but especially for our client who had dreamed of this hunt for years. We are hoping we can get him back up here sometime in the future.

 Kiche headed back with the client as his job at Fish and Game was waiting; Andy stayed down to help me guide Ed. I decided to hunt the tidal flat at the head of the bay, and we established a spike camp on the Zachar River at the highest tidal action point so that we wouldn't have to deal with the tide every day. Boy, we saw some big bear. I'd hunted the tide flat before, but not with the dedication we put to it this time. I was surprised at the number of big bear we saw. There were three 10 foot class bears. One of these was rubbed pretty good, but we were able to stalk the other two. The one we named Methuselah was white clawed and slow moving, with a massive looking head laced with scars. God, once I saw him I didn't want to see any others. The same day we first saw Methuselah skirt the beach on a slow ponderous stroll that took him up into thick mountain brush we saw the 10 footer with a perfect hide come out, and I almost couldn't make the stalk I so badly wanted to get the old bear. I had to slap myself and say, “Don't be an idiot, you can't not go after this bear.”

 All these bigger bears seem to have time clocks in their heads telling them how long it's safe to eat grass before heading up the mountain. Compounding the short time frame is the fact that they don't come out until late, and on many days that nice steady wind that was blowing all day long dies out into a variable, untrustworthy breeze that tends to waffle all over the tide flat at dark.

 Ed, Andy and I tried to get to Mr. Big as darkness closed the day down. At about 350 yards from the bear we needed to wade the Zachar River and couldn't. The river was running high from snow melt which forced us to go upstream searching for a crossing. By the time we found one and got across the bear was gone.

 On another day Methuselah came out and we launched immediately in the middle of a snow storm. We were hoping the poor visibility would keep him out there longer, but just as we were getting to about the 400 yard mark we glimpsed him climbing the mountain above the beach. Agh!

 One night we closed to within 100 yards or so of about a 9 footer, but it was basically too dark to see, and as the bear climbed up off the beach into alders he just disappeared due to the lack of light.

 We kept seeing another big bear that we never could get a good look at. This bear was very shy and never showed up until it was nearly dark, and even then he wouldn't come out onto the grass flat, but preferred to stay inside the cottonwoods that edged the grass. Each bear has a little different habit, and I'm sure much of this is learned.

 On the 14th day of Ed's permit, after four unsuccessful stalks and umpteen snow squalls; in fading light as we were getting set to hike back to camp, a bear came walking down the valley and crossed the river 250 yards in front of us heading out onto the grass flat. The bear was very light colored and blended into last year's tan grass, and in the poor light didn't look that large to me. Andy was watching the flat on the other side of our sizable spotting knob. Ed and I discussed what to do? Time was getting short; Ed wouldn't likely get back up here if he didn't get a bear on this trip. Two kayakers had come up into the river mouth that morning and gone hiking into bear bedding areas during the day likely disturbing some bears. We had one day left, what to do? Reluctantly, we both thought this could be his last chance.

 I blew my deer bleat call and the bear turned towards us until he was about 150 yards out. Ed was prone aiming his 7mm Remington mag, trying to pivot on the rifle's bipod as he followed the moving bear and got into an increasingly more contorted position, and when he fired I had to inform him, “You missed”. I knew from his sheep hunt that he was pretty handy with a rifle, and he quickly jerked the gun up and reset the bipod legs as the bear headed back toward's the river. His second shot dropped the bear instantly; as quick a kill as you'll ever see on one of these big boys.

 It was interesting to us that Andy, 300 yards away and over the hill, did not hear the shots. Hard to believe. When we finally found the bear in the grass we were very happy to see that he was much larger than we had thought. He was rubbed some, we knew that already, but would make a good life sized mount. Ed was a happy man and Andy – who didn't even know we had a bear – might have been the happiest of all. He was definitely the most surprised. The bear squared out at 9 feet 4” with a skull that went 26 2/16 inches.

 Summer was a big blur. A family I'd know since childhood wanted to sell their 77 and 1/2 acres of homestead that abutted our home – closely – on two sides in Chickaloon. All sumer and into winter one of my brother's and I tried to come up with a way to buy the land. It took some creativity, but in the end we succeeded.

 A coal company from Australia who bid on a coal lease from the State of Alaska on the mighty Castle Mountain that looms over Chickaloon began exploratory drilling and trenching just off the old mine road. Almost everyone who calls Chickaloon home lives within five miles of the lease, many of my neighbor's lands abuts the lease. They have security people running up to us every time one of us wants to use the old road to go up the mountain and it recently struck me, “We no longer own our beloved mountain, Riversdale Minerals of Australia does”. That, I can tell you, is a shocking feeling. If they find enough coal they plan to mine it and truck it to Port Mckenzie and ship it to China.

 Part of the lease includes a good portion of my moose hunting area; exploration threatens to open it with access trails that will ruin the hunting. I challenged the State of Alaska by asking for a hearing as someone who's business would be harmed by their action of issuing the exploration permit. A good number of my clients wrote letters attesting to their fine experiences hunting with me on the lease when they hunted moose. At the end of my hearing a lawyer for the State came up to me and said I'd given a very strong presentation, but they still haven't made a ruling on it, perhaps because the area in question wouldn't be explored until stages II or III which would come next year or later. For now my moose hunting spot is still intact, and I thank all of you who wrote letters in support of my hearing.

 August came around and I didn't have a sheep hunter so I took a 14 year old friend of our family, who had never been hunting, with me down to the Kenai Peninsula. I was hunting the same rams I'd seen the last two years from across a rugged gorge, but this time I elected to fly into Green Lake on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and attack them from the south instead of the north.

 It was no easy trip, but easier than what I had contemplated the past two years. We hiked six up and down miles skirting along Tustamina Glacier through some real annoying willow and dwarf birch brush that tangled your feet up with maddening frequency. There would always be open wet tundra stretches, but in between them you had to deal with the brush, and ferocious mosquitos. Normally the mosquitos are pretty much gone by sheep season, but we had had a wet summer and on the Kenai there were many drifts of snow that hadn't melted all the way, so all the wetness had produced a bumper crop.

 After the first six miles we crossed Indian Creek and then climbed up over a sizable mountain and worked our way down into a large sheep bowl on the other side. All this took us 3 ½ days. It should have taken three but someone, uh, lost the tent out of their pack on the way up the mountain, and we had to go back down to retrieve it.

 My partner Ian Erie was doing great on his first big backpack trip. Ian had had a cold when the trip started and experienced some breathing difficulty climbing over the mountain. Part way up he asked me if he'd mentioned his as-ma attacks when he was younger. I said, “Noooo”. I got a little worried. I told him if he had an as-ma attack we'd have to call in a rescue with the satellite phone or use the 406 e-pirb. Fortunately, it was just the effects of a head cold that made him think of the as-ma.

 On opening day, August 10th,we were up at 4 a.m. There were 11 rams in two closely associated groups, 7 of them were legal full curls - a pretty sight. As it happened the group with the biggest ram was the furthest away and went over a ridge out of sight. I thought the big guy would go about 38-39 inches. I had planned to wait for a chance to get him when around noon two of the other legal rams came walking by at 170 yards. Ian thought I should take one of them since I had complained that morning that I'd caught his cold and wasn't feeling that chipper. I hemmed and hawed. Two Birds in hand versus 5 others in the bush. The bigger ram was about 37 inches. I decided to take him which turned into the right decision. A half hour later two hunters walked up to talk to us. Yowsa!

 We knew they hadn't come in our way. Turns out they had packed in along the historic Emma Lake Trail and then used an old cable to cross the bigger fork of Indian Creek. They said the trip was “Hell on earth”, and they didn't want to pack a ram out the way they'd come in, in fact, they didn't want to walk back that route even without a sheep. Still, if I hadn't taken the ram I'm betting they would have.

 My ram was a little skinny and measured 36 7/8's inches at 10 ½ years old. He was missing several molars on the top and bottom jaws, and I doubt he'd have been around for another year. Still, he was very tasty, and the thing Ian liked best about the trip was eating sheep ribs roasted over a willow fire. I crave them myself.

 It took us 3 long, hard days to pack back to the lake. One unusual thing you don't normally have is big snow patches all along the way, so every night we were able to lay the meat out on snow. Despite getting home 5 days after killing the ram, I didn't have to trim the meat at all, a first. Ian was a great companion who learned he could carry a heavy load and he helped us packing out moose in September.

 On the second to last day, on one of my satellite calls home, I found out my mother had passed away. It wasn't unexpected as she had been in poor health for several years and had told us repeatedly that she wanted to go, still there always is a little shock. As I thought about our lives that night I realized I'd been hunting sheep for 50 years, beginning when I was 14, and Mom had worried about me on every one of them. In some weird way it felt apropos that Mom passed while I was sheep hunting. A few of you who go way back with me met her years ago; she was a proud, meticulous person and a positive force in and often negative world. She hated that people had to take care of her at the end. Mom honestly and truly believed everyone has some good in them.

 While Ian and I were out Kiche and his friend Darryl were hunting the Wrangell Mountains again on a 12 mile pack in that netted Kiche a real nice ram and more delicious meat for the freezer.

 My daughter Kaasan did another ladies only sheep hunt taking a fellow employee of the Palmer Fish and Game along and introducing her to the physical abuse of the Talkeetna Mountains. They saw 16 rams, 5 of which were nibbling at the full curl mark. Kaasan's so careful that when she does kill a ram it will be “over” full curl. During the hunt she fell in a rocky chute, and as she put it, “It was either going to be my knee, or my rifle”. The knee troubled her for at least the next six weeks.

 In September our two moose hunters arrived. Kiche was guiding long time client Jerry Mullins of Shirley, Maine while I took out new client, Dr. George Stark of Boulder, Colorado. One thing we all got to experience was the wettest moose season I can ever remember. It rained every day and the rivers and creeks got up and exerted some muscle. There were numerous hunters stranded by flooding and one guy drowned trying to cross high water. Fortunately my moose hunting area doesn't require crossing big streams, as the Chickaloon got high enough that it prevented passage on the old horse trail.

 George told me right off he was going to shoot the first legal moose we saw. I said, “You don't mean a spike/fork?”

 “Oh yeah, I'd shoot one of those...I'm a meat hunter most of the time...sure...I'd take a big one too, but I'd be happy taking a meat moose.” He wasn't kidding. George had some things back home that needed his attention and felt that he shouldn't really be taking this time off. He's a hospice doctor, which is kind of a new field, working with end of life patients, tough, but important work.

 On our way packing up the mountain we found fresh bull rubs and a couple of piss pits, always a good sign. The second day we could hear a big bull wracking his antlers within a 100 yards of us, but never got a glimpse of him in the thick timber. We passed one small bull with too many points on his antlers to be legal. On the third day we still hunted up on a big looking bull that was laying down only showing the end of his nose and 4 brow tines on the left antler with at least 3 brow tines on the right. George was ready to shoot, but when the bull stood up he disappeared behind thick spruce branches. Soon it was pouring rain again. Rain gear can only do so much when you are walking through wet grass and forcing yourself against leafed bushes. At some point you get wet around the edges.

 On the morning of the fourth day we could hear several cow moose moaning in a forest across a muskeg bog from our lookout. I told George, “There's got to be a big bull in there.”

 I had great anticipation for the evening, or following days, that we'd see a big bull come out of those trees with his cows, but as luck had it a spike/fork – having heard the calls too – came walking in from the south heading for the action and entered the muskeg opening. George lined up on him and took the bull down with a bullet through the heart out of his 330 Dakota. We had moose meat!

 Kaasan and Ian came up the next day to help George and I pack his moose down. I can say I've never had a hunter shoot a spike/fork before, and it just shows that if you do something long enough you'll always be experiencing something new. George and I had a really good time together and I've never seen a hunter any happier than he was with his moose.

 Meanwhile Kiche and Jerry worked a mountain side we'd never hunted before. It was steep country and wet. They hunted high at first and saw huge amounts of fresh sign but no moose. Once they realized the moose had dropped down to some lower benches for the rut they got into them. As with us they put in a lot of camp time because of the persistent rain. They stalked two bulls and some cows to within 40 yards one day and Kiche thought the bigger one was about 52”, but he only had two brow tines to a side. With the Chickaloon River starting to cut off the trail to where they were hunting - and with us done - they moved camp back down river. Had they waited one more day they would have been trapped upstream until the river dropped many days later.

 The next day they saw a bull chasing a cow across the mountain in front of them. They couldn't tell his spread from the side, but Kiche commented, “He's 4 by 2 on brown tines...he's legal.”

 “That's all I need to hear,” Jerry said, and two shots from his 300 Winchester put him down. The antlers spread 45” and it was an unusually heavy and well developed rack for that size. He's about as big a 45” bull as you'll ever see. Jerry felt fortunate to get him and told us repeatedly that he wanted to come back and hunt this country again for moose, hopefully under dryer conditions.

 I wasn't able to book a Kodiak goat hunt or brown bear hunt for this fall, a first (for bear) and kind of shocking. I'm hoping things pick up in 2013. Because of the general slowness I talked to Cabela's Outdoor Adventures this summer and they are now representing my guiding business for Kodiak bear, goat, sheep, and deer. I've been trying hard to get my web site to come up on the first page for a year now, when someone types in Kodiak bear hunting, Kodiak big game guides etc. and in the last month that has happened; perhaps as a consequence, I'm suddenly receiving calls. Ironically, I've just booked my fall Kodiak bear hunt for 2013. I also have a fall hunt booked for 2015. Several people are looking at spring 2013 so things are looking up. I also have a temporary price reduction on bear hunts which doesn't hurt either. I have some clients putting in for two Chugach Mountains dall sheep drawing hunts. The chances of drawing are low, but should you get lucky, there's a good likelyhood of taking a big ram. The drawing deadline has been moved up to December 17th so it doesn't mesh well with my Christmas letter. A guide-client agreement is required to be signed at the date of application for sheep hunts. I have a lot more information on my web site at – ninridgeguides.webs.com – including my latest prices etc.

 About three weeks ago we received the results of our re-compete for areas on the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge. Nothing seems to stay the same for me. Ten years ago I was angry that I didn't get my Dog Salmon area back, well, now I have it back. It was and is a great hunting area for bear, goat and deer, but I have land and a cabin in Zachar Bay which makes running your business so much easier and cheaper. I'm not happy about it, especially since the guy who got it isn't someone I respect. He talks, talks, and talks some more, and says more things than anyone else can think of. Some of the things he says the Refuge really seems to like, “We are extremely careful when we wade the Zachar River so that our feet don't disturb the spawning gravel” and “We always schedule boat runs to the head of the bay during the middle part of the day so we don't disturb resident hunters”, problem is, the bay goes dry at low tide so the tide determines when you make runs to the head of the bay. He says he'll have metal boxes and an electric fence up the river to protect deer meat from bears. These things are heavy and can't be part of any ordinary backpack hunt, but, you get the picture, I can't write something that I know in my heart is a lie, so, I'm not as competitive as some. Incidentally, anytime you are wading the Zachar, safety is the only consideration.

 Well, I'm out of time, I've got to get this to the printers. We hope everything is good with all our friends out there, and that 2013 is even better. We are still here, and healthy, in case you want to do a little Alaskan hunting.

 Have a fine holiday season and new year.