**NIn Ridge Guides**  **Christmas Letter 2011 The Braendels**

 2011 is almost in the "Books", so to speak, a better year for some of us than others. If I had ultimate power I'd give everyone good health first, a thoughtful, even tempered disposition second, and an inquiring mind to make best use of the first two.

 We are all not the same, nor could - or should - we be, and despite our differences every group brings something to this world that's useful if presented with care. Politics is for cowards, let's bury our dead and hope 2012 is better than 2011.

 As of last May we are now on the web at NinRidgeGuides.webs.com. We also just bought a domain name NinRidgeKodiakBear.com. My wife deserves all the credit for the site's design and implementation, the first one she's ever done, and I'm impressed with her presentation. With Donna's recent tweaks we now come up on page "2" for someone typing in "Kodiak Brown Bear Hunting". For some reason typing in just "Brown Bear Hunting" doesn't bring us up at all? We've been told that a site's level of traffic, or hits, also effects your placement. We hope to get on the first page, so check us out if you get the time.

 In April we began hunting the mighty Kodiak bear. Our first client was Rich "The Grader Driver" Richardson from Williams, Minnesota. Every client is a story and its' always interesting to find out who someone is.

 Cold spring weather greeted us with many early morning readings in the upper teens to upper 20's which generally means slow moving bears. Before leaving the bay on a backpack trip up the river Kiche spotted our first bear, a big one, plowing through snow in a high saddle, but walking away into a hidden valley blocked from our view; So we continued with our original plan and hunted our way up to Ten Mile on the Zachar over four days, seeing a couple more bears along the way.

 At Ten Mile the sightings picked up. We saw 4 bears the first full day and 7 each of the next two days. We reluctantly passed up a good stalking opportunity on a 10 foot class bear on the 6th day due to his being rubbed heavily. We were seeing some big bear, but as always, they often weren't in a good stalking situation.

 One very dark bear we kept seeing we called the "Black Diamond" and Rich talked about this bear a lot. It's interesting how on a given hunt sometimes a hunter and a specific animal seem "destined".

 On the day Rich finally connected with the "Diamond" - but before we had seen him - another good sized boar had showed a little higher on the same mountain. This bear wasn't quite as big as the Diamond, but was full of spring joy as he wrestled alders and trees and slid down steep snow pitches like he was a sled. He bit off a two foot length of alder and repeatedly "threw it" with sideways slings of his head and then chased it down. Once he climbed up a young cottonwood tree and ripped it's top off. Another time he stood up on his hind legs and tried to scratch his back on alders that kept bending away; at that point he reached over his shoulder with a front paw and pulled the offending limbs against his back - the way a man would - so he could get a good scratch, something I've occasionally seen other large bears do. He was hilarious to watch, and his rambunctiousness ultimately made the Black Diamond get up and reveal himself to us. He even charged the Diamond once but retreated when the bigger bear walked towards him.

 Our stalk took us up through thick alders, salmon berry vines, and snow chocked ravines to an open grass slope where we sat down and tried to relocate our quarry. It took a while, but I finally spotted him in thick alders about 270 yards above us. We waited until he moved into lessor brush where Rich knocked him down three times with his 338 Winchester shooting off our stacked packs as a rest.

 Up close he didn't look black the way he always seemed in our binoculars, just a dark brown. He was an older bear that I estimated to be around 18-20 years old with a beautiful hide that later squared out at 9 feet 5 inches. The skull measured 26 3/8's inches.

 After 15 days with Rich we knew - without the tinniest bit of bravado - that he could drive a grader with finesse and was much in demand for paving projects where a high degree of skill is required. He told us he had a new Ford turbo diesel pickup with a plow that he used mostly to push snow, but his everyday rig was a 2 wheel drive Ford Ranger with about 170,000 miles that got upwards of 30 m.p.g. I told him most young guy's egos wouldn't stand for that. He just laughed. People often surprise you in some way.

 For May we welcomed two brothers from Massachusetts to our camp. Paul and Michel were

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both doctors and had some droll and disturbing stories concerning emergency room visits from our

 general public; the lesson we learned was, just because the human body has an orifice somewhere, doesn't mean you should put something into it!

 Now, well before their arrival, I had learned over the telephone that Paul was the lucky hunter and Michel the unlucky one. Both men were in complete agreement. So, with this important information in hand, I sent Michel up the river with Kiche and Andy while Paul and I teamed up to backpack into a smaller valley known locally as Little Zachar.

 I'm not sure exactly what happened, but apparently Paul was careless with his hunting luck, must have left it lying around where Michel could pick it up - or something - because right from the beginning they experienced role reversals.

 We set the tone for Paul's hunt the first day. After dropping the other group on the river at high tide we hunted near the head of the bay that evening and were rewarded when Paul spotted a 10 foot class bear dropping down out of the alders onto the beach and walking towards us at a ranged 700 yards. Problem was a sharp breeze was blowing from us to him. Most animals would never scent you from so far, but for a bear it's easier than eating hot dogs out of a cooler. I had just enough time to pick up my camera and zoom the lens to 26X for a couple of pictures (see photo sheet) before he smelled us and U turned.

 On the 4th day Paul heard an animal coming through thick brush on the back side of our glassing knob that he thought was a deer. He alerted me seconds before a sizable head appeared 10 yards below us. The bear looked into my eyes and spun away so fast - a big blur of black hair - that the whole episode seemed like a dream.

 Meanwhile, up at Ten Mile on the Zachar, the other guys had watched a 10 foot boar kill a beaver in a creek that water falls into a deep canyon. They had seen the bear go from relaxed vegetable grubber to agitated predator when he suddenly charged up a level run of the creek and grabbed what they thought was a log out of the water and tossed it pinwheeling into the alders.

 The wind was right so they made a stalk. Up close they tried both a deer call and a predator call without any reaction, then Andy broke a stick; the bear charged towards them and Michel rolled him over at 19 yards with two shots out of his 375 H&H. They still sounded super excited a day later on the satellite phone telling me about it. Kiche had caught everything on video.

 After killing the bear they found what was left of a beaver which the bear had buried. To get up to where the bear caught him the beaver had to scale a very steep slope. Interestingly enough, when they went back up to finish the skinning the next day they ran into another beaver traveling overland a good 3/8's of a mile from the nearest water - something you rarely see. Michel's bear squared out exactly 10 feet, and the skull measured 27 9/16's inches.

 Back at Little Zachar Paul and I were busy passing up 8 foot bears we could have likely taken and seeing 9-10 foot ones we couldn't catch up to. We watched a real big bear walk out and feed on fresh greens 400 yards from where we had been sitting two days earlier.

 One evening we saw about a 9 foot bear - groggy from hibernation - sleeping in rough cliffs above our spike camp. The next morning I expected him to be in the same place but when I looked there were 5 mountain goats bedded there. I'm wondering, what happened to the bear? when I notice he is sleeping in the same bed as yesterday about 30 feet from the nearest goat! I couldn't believe my eyes! For the longest time the goats seemed oblivious to the sleeping bear. After two hours, and several bed changes by the goats, with occasional sharp stares leveled at the bear blob that shifted it's shape slightly - time to time - the bear suddenly stands up unaware of the goats (see photo sheet).

 Now the goats get excited and plunge through a snow gully to get away. The bear doesn't notice. A few minutes later the bear excitedly sniffs one of the recently exited goat beds, walks quickly to another bed, sniffs it, and then plunges through the gully after the long departed goats, but at least looks kind of predatory. Fifteen minutes later he seemed to have forgotten his mission and was sacked out again. Maybe he thought it was all a dream.

 Days later we were planning a stalk on a big, black, 10 foot class bear when the next thing we know he's charging an equally big, but older looking bear, and driving him up the mountain. Up and up they climb - steadily - monsters of this great upland pitch, carrying our hopes away with them - spooking goats along the way - and then out of our sight over the mountain's shoulder. We both said something like, "Well, gosh dang it."

 Early on the 13th day I crawled out of our tent and saw a big Kodiak bear walking towards camp 80 yards away. A tiny breeze fluttered towards him. I couldn't even blurt out, "bear!"

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before he turned away; a ghost swallowed by the woods. That experience lasted only a few painful seconds, but recycled endlessly in our memories.

 There's an old blues song called "Born Under a Bad Sign" that goes "If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all" which kind of morphed into our theme song. We counted 28 different bears - a low count for a May hunt - which was probably due to generally cool weather throughout the spring.

 Paul had made a prior commitment to be back on a certain date and couldn't hunt the 15th day of his bear permit. Twice in the last 18 years we killed a bear on the 15th day so it was painful for me to have to give it up. Paul told me he had had the time of his life, backpack hunting for the first time, and enjoying all the bears, goats, deer, foxes, ottars and very many birds. He found a nice 26" skull and said he would definitely be back for another try at the bear.

 Summer was its' normal short, boisterous self where we Alaskans try not to waste a single daylight hour. It's a frantic pace, so we need our long, dark winters for rest. My wife, known locally and variously as either "The Bee Lady" (she's been keeping bee hives now through two cold summers) or "Super Chicken" (mid wife of countless chicks and tender of many organic egg layers), is kept "super" busy monitoring her workers and gardening. Man, I get tired just thinking about gardening.

 We have really enjoyed the wild honey comb and fresh eggs which go perfectly with vegetables from the garden, tomatoes from the hot house, and wild game from the woods and hills.

 My big summer project was building an 8' x 10' walk in cooler insulated with 4" of blue board. I used a post and beam construction for structural strength to allow for hanging two moose at once should that situation arise. The heart of the unit is an air conditioner, sized to the room, and a "Coolbot" device from a company "storeitcold.com". which allows an air conditioner to cool a room down to 34 degrees.

 I used an 18,000 BTU AC which was a little larger than called for in an 8 x 10 room, but I didn't insulate the floor which "Store It Cold" recommends for best efficiency. I can report that everything worked perfectly, and it's a big savings over a standard refrigeration unit. Store It Cold's website takes you through a complete understanding of the whole process from buying an AC to building your own cooler.

 I purposely didn't book a sheep hunter for this fall and in hindsight wish I had. I had thought I would book a goat hunter or two later in the season but that didn't happen so I ended up with a short year. After sheep season closed my daughter Kaasan and I did some post season scouting and found a couple of legal full curl rams and that reflects the on going recovery of the ram population in my area. I also urge anyone interested in a Chugach Mountains hunt for potentially larger rams to put in for DS260 1st choice (2 non resident permits) and DS265 (8 non resident permits) 2nd choice. You must sign a "guide - client agreement" with me at the time of application. The application period for drawing hunts ends December 31st. Cost of this 10 day hunt is reduced to $10,950.00 with packer for 2012.

 In August I took my niece's oldest son Austin from Ohio on a ten day backpack hunt on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. I still have this idea of killing a ram in every mountain range that contains sheep up here. Austin, who I hadn't seen in 5 or 6 years, was a wiry 14 year old, and as it turned out, quite a tough kid. He dreams a lot about hunting, and this was his first big wilderness trip, and I was counting on him to help pack out my ram.

 We took one of our pack dogs, Tahji, and backpacked ten map miles over a mountain and at times against a wicked mixture of head high vegetables: grass, fireweed, cow parsnip and sting nettles that you had to force your way blindly through while feeling for a trail with your feet.

 We saw a number of full curl rams, but they were across a deep gorge from us. It would require us to wade a river that didn't look particularly wade-able from above, and pack everything down and back up again. I've done over 100 Dall sheep hunts, and when I sat there contemplating the logistics of killing a distant ram, I thought - if I do - it will be the toughest sheep pack of my life. Overall, not an attractive idea.

 I did scheme up a plan for another hunt into this area, from a different launch point, that I "think" might get me to these rams a little easier. Hopefully, I'll find out next year.

 Austin and I had a great adventure during our ten days of back packing. We took numerous photos of black bears, caribou, sheep, goats and a grizzly. I tried hard not to count any animals more than once and our final tally was 1 grizzly, 3 moose (two of them bulls), 26 black bears, 31 mountain goats, at least a 100 Dall sheep, and 118 caribou. Not too bad.

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While Austin and I were on the trail Kiche and his friend, and sheep hunting partner, Darryl

Leskanic were hunting their favorite Wrangell Mountain valley. Each year they go in with the idea, maybe we'll both get a ram, and every time - after getting the first one - they either chicken out, or come to their senses. I've been there myself.

 This year Darryl got first crack and he got a dandy 38" x 14" ram at 40 yards with a neck shot. At least Austin and I got to eat sheep ribs when we got back.

 In September Mike "Many Hunts with us" Gleason came up again for another moose hunt. Most of you will recall that Mike got a 55" spread moose with us last year. He got it on the 4th day, and there was so much moose action leading up to the kill, and later while we made multiple trips packing the meat down, Mike brought a younger friend Brian Lowe to video tape this year's hunt. So, Mike had his videographer, and I had my new walk in cooler, and we were so sure of our need for both I guess we needed to be taken down a peg. "No moose for you". I don't have a good explanation why?

 It was cooler than last year so heat isn't an excuse. We saw plenty of cows, and way more calves than I'd ever seen up there before, but in nine days we only saw 6 bulls - none of them real large. We found plenty of bull sign - rubs and piss pits - but unlike a normal year we never heard a bull grunt, or horn trees and brush with his antlers. We were hunting exactly the same time frame. It was so unbelievably quiet compared to the last three seasons you couldn't hardly believe it.

 There were quite a few moon lit nights, we saw a big grizzly, and noticed several sets of large grizzly tracks on a couple of moose trails, but I doubt these observations explain it.

 We have two moose hunters booked for next year, and we plan to hunt at least one of them further back in, in new country. Despite everything I still have faith in my old spot.

 While we were moose hunting Kiche's sheep hunting partner Darryl and his Dad got a moose and gave us half of it which was a wonderful gift. So, we did get to use the cooler, and the coolbot controlled air conditioner kept it at a perfect 34 degrees.

 Our daughter Kaasan has taken two Dall rams on family hunts, but is determined to get a ram without the help of Dad or her brother. To that end she enlisted - or drafted - her cousin Jessica to go with her. Jessica has done quite a lot of hiking and light backpacking, but she was used to nice trails and two or three day trips, not a week long chug up steep mountains in dense vegetation with little or no trail to follow. We kidded her a little about her light weight boots as they were getting ready to leave. "You'll be barefoot and bloody in two miles." Sure enough she badly sprained her ankle on the way in. Kaasan showed her little mercy, leaving her in camp most days, while she searched for sheep. She saw 10 rams, including a big broomed one that she wanted to get, but had to acknowledge that her cousin was going to be doing well to get herself out and wouldn't be much help packing meat.

 The hunt enlightened both of them. For Kaasan it was valuable experience leading a hunt. For Jessie it was eye popping on many levels as it usually is for the first time sheep hunter. The spot they hunted is hard country, there is easier sheep terrain. Jessica said, "Next time I'll be prepared."

 We headed down to Kodiak October 15th. Because I didn't have any goat hunters I picked up a registration goat permit myself and got dropped off at the head of Uyak Bay (not in my guide area) for a short six day goat hunt while Kiche and Lauren stayed at the cabin in Zachar fishing, duck hunting, and deer hunting.

 The best four days in the month we were down there were the first four of my goat hunt. I backpacked in six miles and saw plenty of goats, but due to the nice weather and numerous brown bears feeding on roots up high, most of the goats were bedded on top of the rugged peaks hemming the upper valley.

 I wanted a goat as much for the meat as anything, and I worried about getting one out of there without losing some of it to a bear. I had my alpaca pack raft to float a heavy pack down the river, but I'd have to make two trips getting a goat off the mountain, down to where the raft would work, and that would entail leaving meat unattended for many hours at a time. I had my eye on an old billy sitting on a mountain summit above my highest camp, but in-between us was a large brown bear who's presence eventually sent the billy over the top. I could look around from this spot and see four bears with goats above them watching their every move. This time of year up in goat country bears often are digging for roots. One popular plant root is Eskimo Potato.

 I ran into a big blackmail buck back there that I don't believe knew what a human was. He

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acted barely interested while laying 130 yards from where I stood in plain sight, and at one point

laid his head on the ground and closed his eyes as I walked around trying to find a trail I'd been following. When I finally walked off he got up and followed me for several hundred yards. Pretty unsophisticated.

 My bear hunter this fall was Tony Fornengo, a very determined guy who has been through medical hell the past eight years. You wouldn't know it to look at him. At 47 he looks fit and trim with a commanding voice that you might expect from a logger, which he is, but eight years ago Tony couldn't climb a stairs without stopping to blow part way up; after a miss diagnose in which he was initially told to "get his affairs in order" new doctors took him in for open heart surgery which was successful. Then a few years later they took out a cancerous kidney. After a period of remission cancer came sneaking back around, and as Tony put it, "They really gutted me out the second time", which included his bladder, so they made him a new one that is inside instead of the more common bag on the outside. This allows for a more active life style, but is not without its' own difficulties.

 Tony wanted to do one of my backpack hunts if he could. The fall hunt is not an easy one for several reasons but requires winter camping skills and none of us knew whether it would work. Tony brought one of his sons, Chase, to help carry his load, and my son Kiche was co-guiding so we felt like we had the manpower.

 I'm happy to say it went much smoother than any of us expected. From my perspective it was seamless as Tony did great, and not just physically, but mentally as well. We only saw about half the bears we usually do, which was partly do to abysmal weather, but a cold, grinding, rainy hunt can wear the mind down a hundred little ways, yet Tony still resisted taking a couple of 8 foot bears that walked by.

 Did I mention rain? Rain was our daily companion along with occasional snow. When it was raining it was snowing just above us and on the morning of Nov. 5th we heard an enormous roar up in Goat Creek - the first avalanche in the fall I can remember on Kodiak.

 After ten days we didn't have anything to show except a lot of tent time and damp gear. On the one real nice day we'd had (the 6th), we saw 8 bears , including a 10 foot class one that we watched for several hours as he climbed up a nearby mountain and over its' top. It is always fun to watch a big bear at work, but disappointing to see one leaving your zone. That same day up river we saw an even bigger looking bear, but wind direction, distance and time prevented us from doing anything.

 The eleventh day dawned with steady rain but with a good wind direction to hunt what we call Big Bend. We got into position and put up our tarp for the umpteenth time.

 In the afternoon the sky brightened; the rain petered out, and we all felt an anticipation of something about to happen. First Kiche alerted us to a big sitka buck walking down the far side of the river, and there was talk of taking him. But just talk. A little later I spotted three goats in a low, rugged cut above our camp apparently driven down by deep snow (both Tony and Chase had goat tags in addition to deer). More talk, "Man, they are pretty low"

 I had this idle thought, Kiche spotted the deer, I spotted the goats, all we need now is for Tony to spot a bear. Thirty minutes later Kiche was off walking his feet warm and I was getting something out of my pack when Tony says, "Hey, what's that? Down there, in the water?" I spun around. Tony was looking through a screen of bushes.

 "Bear!" I said. I got him in my binoculars, and quickly added, "I think we'll be taking this one."

 The bear had come up our side of the river and a high bank prevented us from seeing him until he was past us. We quickly moved to protect our wind advantage which we were in danger of losing. With the high bank to hide us we sneaked to within about 35 yards. Tony hit him in the front shoulder with a 180 grain xp3 from his 300 Winchester Short Mag and the bear pirouetted up onto his hind legs and came back down facing us. His second shot went straight between the eyes and dropped him into the river.

 I had really wanted Tony to get a bear - of course I always want my clients to be successful, but Tony had hunted Alaska once before for bear and didn't get one, and there were all the health issues he had overcome, so there was extra purpose - and as each day went past I had felt a little more anxious of that happening.

 So a great, warm feeling of joy and satisfaction overtook us with smiles and tumbling words filling the air as we strained to roll the bear out of the water. And as I held onto one of his thick paws I felt sadness for the bear too - as I always do whenever we get the drop on one - for they

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are magnificent animals, and he had his own story that no man will ever know.

 The bear looked fairly old, at least 17, but possibly into his 20's, as there was a lot of wear on his molars, especially on one side, as if his jaws didn't press evenly side to side. His teeth were stained an unusually vivid green - the skull measured 27 1/16". The bear's hair was kind of short, which may have been age or condition related as he didn't seem quite as fat as he should have been either. We later squared the hide at 9 ½ feet.

 Back home in Wisconsin Tony and Chase eat black bear meat regularly - it's one of their favorites - so the next morning we all had brown bear backstrap for breakfast. I've generally found that it tastes pretty good in the field, but less so whenever I've brought it back home.

 One interesting and painful fact we learned from Tony and Chase was that the 1200 lb roll of horse quality hay we pay $140.00 t0 $160.00 for up here goes for $16.00 to $24.00 in Wisconsin. Unbelievable.

 When Rolan Ruess flew in to pick us up he hung his head when someone made a four letter comment about the weather. He couldn't remember as bad a stretch as we'd just been through. He said, "When a wind forecast of 30-35 starts looking good you know you've lost your perspective."

 Tony and Chase had one day left to try and get a couple of bucks, but when they were given a window to escape the "Rock's" weather they took it. Can't say I blame them.

 Kiche and I stayed a couple more days and bagged a couple of deer for meat, before closing the cabin up for the year.

 All Kodiak guides with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Refuge permits are re-competing this winter for those permits. Every ten years we do this, and it is a highly stressful experience. Our National Wildlife Refuges offer some of the best big game habitat in North America and therefor commercial use permits for big game hunting are highly sought after by the guiding industry. Those of you who have hunted with me recently will be hearing from them later this winter.

 I have one bear hunt open for next spring (May 2012). It is discounted $1000.00 down to $16,950.00 plus the standard $600.00 air fare to camp. I have goat hunt openings. They are discounted $500.00 down to $8450.00, plus the air fare. We are 100% on goat.

 2011 wasn't our best year hunting wise (in 2010 we were 100% on all our hunts), but for 17 straight seasons Nin Ridge Guides has never done less than 75% on bear in any year. During those same 17 seasons at least 50% of our bears - each and every year - went a minimum of 26 inches on the skull. In 2010 all four of our bears went at least 26 inches. I know of only one other guide on Kodiak who can boast a similar record; the rest aren't even close.

 Given the price of hunts people sometimes think they are "buying" an animal. This is not the case; you are buying a hunting adventure, and a lot of things - both good and bad - can happen. To be consistent over a long time is not easy. At the least we guarantee that you'll have an adventure.

 I took all the Christmas card photos; the winter wren, sometimes called the little brown wren, was taken in Zachar Bay. They are common on Kodiak and this fall I noticed a higher number than normal. They are a favorite bird of mine, so small and perky, they'll flitter around you looking you right in the eye like they somehow care about your life too. The other two photos were taken on the Kenai during my sheep hunt. Middle photo is my nephew Austin and my dog Tahji at our camp with Indian Glacier in the back ground. The goat photo was shot a few hundred yards below that camp and shows what struck me as an unusual group of mountain goats, a large nanny with kid and a large billy which you wouldn't expect to be together in August.

 In case anyone is interested, "Sporting Classics Magazine" is publishing a story of mine in their January/February issue called "Hard Luck Johnson", arguably the most remarkable hunt I've ever guided.

 As always we hope life is good for all of our friends out there. Life isn't easy, but it's definitely easier for some, than it is for others, and this Holiday Season we are sending our love out to all of you. Merry Christmas, and have the best kind of New Year.

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