**Christmas Letter 2007**

This year's first happening of note was when Lance Mackey of Fairbanks, AK won the 1049 mile Iditarod sled dog race in March. Coming off his 3rd in a row Yukon Quest victory (another 1000 mile race) he did what everyone said was impossible by winning the Iditarod running largely the same dogs in both races with only two weeks rest in between. This guy's poor, has a small kennel, had no big name sponsors and frequently had trouble making it to various races due to a menagerie of worn out dog trucks. When he was asked at the finish line how he thought he'd look driving that brand new silver Dodge turbo diesel he'd just won he said, "Hell, I'd be proud to drive her even if she was painted hot pink." Oh yeah, at the age of 36 he's also a cancer survivor. A great story.

Down on Kodiak in April John Kloosterman and I hooked up again. John hunted with me two years ago looking for a giant bear and we didn't score. Surely this time?

We packed on up to Ten Mile on the Zachar. It had been a cold winter and there was plenty of snow so we used snow shoes time to time. We saw several good sized bears but were plagued by bad weather and poor stalking scenarios. Also, John wasn't feeling well and wondered if he'd be able to make the long range stalk required up in that country, especially on snowshoes.

Ultimately, we decided to head down to the bay, and we finished his hunt along the Zachar Peninsula using the boat. There, two nights in a row, we had chances at two different 10 footers and managed to spook both bears at close range without getting a shot. Unbelievable!

On the 14th day John could have shot a very nice 9 1/2 footer, but he'd killed one that size 21 years ago with me, and he said, "I'd just be shooting him for shooting's sake, he's not what I want." I certainly respect that sentiment, so John's still dreaming his bear.

In May Kiche and Andy came down with two of our previous clients Bruce Pelletier and Jerry Mullins. They had hunted with us ten years ago down on the Dog Salmon. On that hunt Bruce had killed a very nice 9 footer with Andy, and Jerry had hunted fifteen days with Kiche and I without killing anything (lots of rubbed bears that year). In the ten year interim Bruce had a knee replaced on one side and a hip on the other. We decided I would hunt Bruce from the boat and Kiche and Andy would take Jerry up the river on a backpack hunt.

I was taking the three of them up to the head of the bay in the boat when I noticed a bear eating grass on the beach. He looked pretty big. We stalked to within 80 yards. This was about a 9 1/2 foot bear with an okay - but not great - hide. We agonized over this bear. He was hard to pass up, especially since Jerry hadn't gotten one last time. Finally Jerry said, "I want to have a hunt. I don't want to get my bear in the first hour."

Later that day at Two Mile Knob Andy spotted a ten footer high in the snow. The boys decided to do a little hunting from there before heading further up river. The next day they spotted another big bear down low, laying on top of a cliff, and after a short stalk found themselves in tight quarters. Kiche (who was still on the spotting knob) signaled that the bear was right below them. Andy blew his predator call and then broke a stick. Seconds later Jerry knocked down a ten footer as it plowed through alders at them from twenty yards away.

A few hours later as they were finishing up the skinning job Kiche looked up to see a 9 1/2 foot brown bear twenty yards above them. The wind was blowing their scent right at the bear and he didn't care which is unusual to say the least.

Andy snapped a few quick photos as the big guy huffed and popped his teeth trying to bluff them off the kill. The guys weren't able to drive him off completely. It was kind of a stand off until they were able to get away with the hide and skull. Jerry packed a lot of excitement into a two day hunt.

Back on the bay Bruce and I had seen a "huge" bear coming down a mountain towards the shore line. We got to watch him for a couple of hours, and it was a treat. All I told Bruce was, "He's over ten." Unfortunately, he wouldn't bed down and kept dropping lower and lower until he disappeared into lowland jungle brush where stalking is impossible. We looked for him for days and while we saw some other big ones we never saw the giant again. During this time we stalked one 9 footer to within range but decided to pass in hopes of getting a bigger one. In the back of my mind was the bear that had aggressively taken over Jerry's bear's carcass. I knew there was a good chance an even bigger bear might have taken over by now. None of us knew whether Bruce could backpack with an artificial knee and hip, but he was game to try. So on about the tenth day, with Jerry acting as packer, the three of us headed up to Two Mile Knob with Bruce humping about a 45 pound pack. By taking our time Bruce was able to do the packing and steep climbing necessary to this hunt. I hope his doctor doesn't read this.

Up on the glassing knob we immediately spotted a hulking bear laying on top of a black grave dug into the thick alder hillside. How to get him? The wind was from a bad direction. While we contemplated a good sized ivory clawed bear (that very well could have been the same bear that drove the boys off) showed up and the bear on the carcass got up and walked out to confront him. They were both big, but the bear in possession was the biggest, and all bowed up in anger he looked hell for stout. "Ivory claws" retreated without a fight. Everyone was hot to get after the big boy but I was able to hold things off for another day when a switch in wind direction gave us our best chance from the more open side.

As we slowly worked downhill through alders and gnarly birch trees towards the grave - hardly believing, even with all my experience, that it could be this thick - using the tops of a couple of cottonwood trees as a guide - I suddenly glimpsed a dark form coming, swaying and rocking with menace. He'd heard us. I looked up slope at Bruce and pointed. I'll never forget how Bruce's eyes got big when he saw that ten footer coming in. The bear was closing on 10 yards when I laid down, clutching my 375 to my chest, so Bruce could fire over the top of me. His shots rolled the bear down the mountain and out of sight. Our hearts were pounding.

Those guys had amazing hunts, killing two ten footers in close quarters, with Jerry getting in on both adventures. He said, "When I retire I'll be ready to work for you as a packer."

Before I knew it August was here. First up was Larry Stoewer, a farmer from Illinois. Larry had strained his hamstring working out this summer, and then weeks later, tweaked it again. Because we weren't sure how Larry would do with this injury I decided to use the jeep up the Boulder Creek Trail. My daughter, Kaasan, was packing.

Well, we saw a lot of sheep in Boulder which is the norm, but we also saw way more sheep hunters than I've seen in the past. After an opening day climb to the top of Puddingstone Hill we knew a couple of things: Larry could climb just fine and we spotted some nice looking rams across the Chickaloon River from us. So, we headed back out and went up the Chickaloon.

We saw the same group of rams through rain and fog as we climbed up into Doone Creek, but when we got to the head wall they were no where to be seen. In the following days we climbed three mountains looking for those four rams but never saw them again.

On about day nine, in an area we'd seen numerous smaller rams, we heard some distant gun shots. Shortly we spotted half a dozen rams headed our way, one of them a lightly wounded full curl. I asked Larry, "Have you ever shot a gift horse?"

Nobody followed the rams so after a couple of hours we made a stalk and Larry put the big ram down with a single shot and had the beautiful ram he'd dreamed about all his life.

Next up was Chance Whitney from Indiana who had killed a 9 1/2 foot brown bear with us last year. I had a tough two day pack up the Granite River planned for him. Both Kiche and Kaasan were packing, and since last year's floods had wiped out the only airstrip up there we expected to have the valley to ourselves. Wrong.

Late on the second day we came around the last corner into the head of the drainage and met two guys coming out. They didn't have anything, but when they said they were going into the next side valley down I knew we were in a bad position. It was a blow.

We had no real option but to continue on. We saw a couple of really nice rams - big and heavy - but they weren't quite full curl and we weren't able to age them. We saw some nice bull moose and a big grizzly, but after a couple more days of looking we decided to try Boulder Creek again.

The sheep hunters were gone out of Boulder, and while we saw about 150 sheep there, we wasted most of one day agonizing over a ram that was very, very close to full curl. In the end I chickened out. We came out of Boulder and hit some spots I knew of along the highway.

At Hick's Creek there were eleven rams, but the two biggest were 7/8's curl. Next we headed back into Alfred Creek, a tributary of Caribou Creek. Boy, we saw some nice rams in there, four solid 7/8's curls and another one almost full with a deep, thick horn. Soooo-close.

At the end of this hunt Chance confided to us he'd now made five hunts for white animals - three dall sheep and two mountain goat - without killing an animal. Ouch! Those statistics are hard to fathom. Of course Kiche, Kaasan and I felt even worse then.

My sheep hunts are cheap as sheep hunts go, because there's no flying and a fair bit of hiking involved. Usually I haven't been troubled much by other hunters, but this year was an exception, and I hope it's not a trend.

My last sheep hunt of the year was with Todd Muehleip from Illinois who had hunted sheep with us two years ago and gotten a real nice ram then. We headed up the Chickaloon to the area of Fourteen Mile Creek. We saw a few rams there but nothing big so we went over a mountain ridge and dropped into Terrace Creek.

The next day we were coming down the main cut in Terrace when I saw a single ram laying in a cliff surrounded by alders. Our range finder indicated he was 231 yards away. He was looking at us and his dark horns (often a sign of age) looked pretty big. I figured him for about 38 inches. One problem was, if we decided to not take him we'd surely spook him, so we'd not likely get a later chance at him.

After a short discussion Todd decided he would take the ram. When the ram stood up to leave Todd dropped him and he tumbled down next to the creek. He was a beauty with thick horns that carried their weight out into the tips. They measured 35 3/4 inches which makes my judgement skills look pretty suspect. The ram was 9 1/2 years old, fairly old in hunted sheep populations where a ram automatically becomes legal at age 8.

My next hunt was for moose. My client was Brad Erickson from Minnesota. Going along on his hunt as packer was my friend Butch MacDonald also from Minnesota.

Moose hunting was different this year. The bulls were not very vocal. Where I normally hear at least one bull grunting or racking his antlers each day, this year I heard antlers only twice and heard my first bull grunt on the last day! We were seeing lots of "piss pits" dug by bulls, but I use the audio sounds to home in on the action. The only answer I could come up with was "wolves". Early in the hunt we had wolves howling within 500 yards of us, and apparently the presence of wolves can cause bulls to go largely silent, even during the rut.

At any rate, we had one great opportunity at a real nice bull, but he got away by about the breadth of a moose hair. One small step and he'd have been dead. Instead, he turned away, and got away.

Then, on the last day, we had a mature bull and six cows come out into a meadow below our lookout. See photo sheet. The bull tore a pit into the black earth with his feet and then urinated into it; he got down on the ground and rolled back and forth. He stood back up and two cows raced over and rubbed their bodies along his in a sweeping caress. Inexplicably, the bull charged at the cows driving them yards away, whereupon the two cows went up on their hind legs, like stallions, striking at each others' head with their hooves. It was a wild, chaotic scene. In this area bulls have to have three brow tines to be legal, or have at least a 50" spread. This bull had a lot of antler, but only two brow tines on each side. The palm points went up instead of laying out. He was probably legal, but probably isn't really close enough. It's frustrating.

One interesting and unusual thing happened on this hunt. One day I was "talking moose" to a cow that was standing very close to us. I'd held up my moose scapula on one side of my head as one antler and my birchbark call on the other side for my other antler. I grunted softly at her and racked my "antlers" in a spruce tree beside me. After about 20 minutes she mostly just ignored us as she stripped alder leaves off limbs and ate highbush cranberry plants. When we turned to go she didn't bat an eye. I didn't want to spook her so I put up my "antlers" as we walked out of sight. We made a big detour around her and then headed about half a mile over to a bench we had planned to hunt that evening.

Imagine our surprise when minutes after arriving at our new location we see the same cow moose following us. Brad and I are standing right in plain sight as our "girl friend" pulls to a stop 30 yards away and begins stripping alder leaves again. We weren't sure which one of us she had eyes for. I had the antlers, but Brad was younger and prettier than me, and I did hear him whisper, "She sure has pretty lips".

The final trip of the year was for fall Kodiak bear. My client was repeat customer Howard Young of Justin, Texas. Howard had killed a 9' 2" bear with his bow six years ago on one of the coldest hunts I've ever done, and he wanted to try it again for an even bigger bear.

Kiche was packing, and also along was Hal Gaem from Texas Trophy Hunter, who was video taping the hunt. If Howard's first hunt was very cold, this one was very wet. We flew into Lake 629 and packed upriver from there. We had about two decent weather days early on before it all went into the toilet, so-to-speak.

We got rain, we got snow, then we got rain again. It was hard to keep stuff dry. To make things more confounding we saw more bears digging for roots up on the mountain sides than we saw fishing. The river was constantly on the verge of flooding so perhaps that was the reason.

But the brushy mountains were impossible to stalk with a bow so we kept looking to the river. We could have killed a 9 footer on the river on the 12th day. We were seeing some real big bear and we kept hoping some of them would show up on the river. We also needed a better wind.

Finally, on the 14th day, as we were getting ready to head back to camp, I spotted a big bear coming off the mountain half a mile upstream of us. Charge! Howard had said all along that he'd take a big bear with my 375 if he couldn't get him with his bow.

There was hardly any light left by the time we closed to within 200 yards. I happened to face down valley for a few seconds as I went around an obstacle and suddenly felt a hard breeze in my face. Oh, man! Howard just barely had time to get down on a rotted stump - for a rest - before that bear exploded up out of his bed like righteous lightening. Howard touched one off at the bear's retreating form, then knocked him down with a second nosler right up the exhaust pipe. Seven seconds later the bear was back up and chugging for the mountain. As he turned up the mountain he slowed down like he might be hurting and Howard knocked him down with his 3rd shot. We got over there and it was almost dark. At first we couldn't find him, then I noticed he was submerged in a creek. It was a job getting him up out of there, and it took all our combined strength. He was an old looking bear with worn teeth and one canine missing altogether.

The next morning we awoke to heavy rain and strong wind. We had to cross the river and it was rising fast. We barely made it. I worried that by the time we'd be done skinning the bear we'd be cut off from getting back to camp. Fortunately the rain eased back during the day as none of us were anxious to practice our highest level survival skills.

This bear had a beautiful black coat that squared out at 9 feet 8 inches. His skull measured 26 7/8". A terrific animal made all the more valuable by a long, tough, suffering kind of a hunt that none of us will forget. Howard's done two of these now.

We still had a rugged five mile trip back to Lake 629 with very heavy loads. When we got there we had our first really cold night of the trip and the next morning the lake was frozen. Fortunately Rolan was able to land in a thin strip of water along the south shore and then taxi around to break up the ice. We were out of food, tired and dirty, and ready for a change. My wife Donna came down and we hunted deer for a week. After last winter there were fewer deer, but we managed to get two does and a small buck. We saw a couple of big bucks too.

We are all doing fine here. It's been a warm winter so far. We have about a foot of hard, frozen snow - a solid base - now all we need is some powder.

My brown bear hunts are booked up through 2011. In the near term I plan to do one walk in sheep hunt per year. This could change through new information. It's also possible that I might do a fly in sheep hunt should interest and a situation present itself. I have one client who entered the winter drawing for Kodiak mountain goat. Odds of being drawn in my area DG475 have run about 75% and up the past two years. If you have an interest in this hunt let me know. I expect the Kodiak goat drawing to go to a registration hunt soon which will make things easier.

My moose hunt is booked for the next two years. This is a hunt I could easily expand into two hunts should I want to. I have virtually un-hunted territory to do another hunt in, however, there are logistic issues to work out, plus my prices don't reflect my having to hire another guide to guide one of them. Also, it's possible Chickaloon Village will get title to these lands which would make hunting this extended area a lot more expensive. We'll see.

We hope this winter finds all of our friends in good straits, or moving in a direction of improvement. As I get older I find myself appreciating some of the more mundane things in my life like eating wild, unadulterated blueberries off the bush, or watching sunlight brighten trees at the edge of day, a snowshoe hare that takes up residence between cabin and outhouse. There are many small things - that we take for granted or barely notice - that enrich our lives if we take the time to look. Catching and eating a fish out of a local stream or lake is a bigger thing.

So allow me - as a Christmas and New Year's wish - to get up on my soapbox for a minute. I think 49 of the 50 states have warnings against eating wild fish caught in their waters. These warnings vary in severity, but no matter what your politics are, it is just plain wrong that in many places you can't go out and catch a fish and feel good about eating it. A country that doesn't correct this will not last long, I think.

Have a wonderful Christmas and a great New Year.

The Braendels