

Cruising for Sitkas

By

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Deer hunting is without a doubt my favorite outdoor pursuit. Perhaps it is because deer were the first big game animals I was able to hunt. Then again, it could be the varieties of deer that exist in so many different places. Either way, a good deer hunt is something I am always up to doing.

This was the case when I called Mark Galla from Alaska Peak and Seas in Wrangell, Alaska. Mark and his partner Marlin Benedict offer some of the best hunts I know of for Sitka Blacktail Deer as well as Brown/Black Bears. What makes the hunt really special is that camp consists of a 54-foot yacht aptly named, “The Bear Necessity.” Mark takes great pride in his boat, which is well equipped and maintained. Unlike many Sitka Blacktail hunts this one is fully guided. Using the yacht as a mobile camp allows one to hunt multiple locations in remote areas, inaccessible by other means. The yacht also gives people a chance to experience the beauty of Southern Alaska’s wilderness and wildlife from a very unique, “Ocean Based,” perspective.

I first hunted with Mark and Marlin three years ago and had a great trip, taking my best ever Sitka Blacktail in several attempts. When Mark told me he had openings during a prime November date I began quickly preparing for a return visit. Two friends who share my passion for deer hunting decided to join in the experience. Tom Haase from California and Jim Millis from Minnesota, both were in pursuit of their personal deer slam, which includes Sitka Blacktails. Jim needed a little arm twisting when I told him we would be on a boat, in the ocean, in Alaska, and he needed the best rain gear his Cabala’s Visa could buy!

We arrived in Wrangell on time, with all of our gear intact. Mark was there to greet us and quickly escorted us to the range to check the guns before nightfall. With the guns zeroed we grabbed a fine meal at, "The Hungry Beaver," and headed off to the boat harbor. We settled in for the night on the yacht, anxiously anticipating our morning departure. Jim reminded me that it was raining several times throughout the night, and I replied using my best "Forrest Gump" impersonation about stinging rain, sideways rain and upside down rain. Jim did not seem overly amused. "Its not like I didn't warn you," I said.

Mark and Marlin were on board early and got us underway. I stood out on the deck of the boat and took in the sites as we departed Wrangell Harbor. On our way out to sea a fur seal stopped along side to escort us briefly. Our first stop was on Zarembo Island at daybreak. As Mark was setting the anchor, a whale put on a show in the bay behind us. Tommy and I were excited as we donned our raingear in anticipation for the day's hunt. Jim still seemed un-amused and asked me what I had gotten him into now.

Mark told us he wanted to hunt Zarembo first and then we would move on to other areas as needed. We took a skiff to the shore and got into a Suburban Mark left on the island. We hunted Zarembo hard for a couple of days, but came up short on bucks.

Our next stop was several hours away on an island in the Sumner Strait. I remembered hunting this island previously and told Tommy about the unique interior terrain. Unlike Zarembo Island, this hunt was entirely on foot. The interiors of these islands resemble no place else I have ever hunted. The cover is dense and very wet. A cold rain forest is probably the best description. Deer trails weave in and out through the dense cover, up and over small earthen mounds and old growth forest. The use of a GPS and flagging tape is a must to keep from getting turned around. Within this maze are muskeg meadows creating vital habitat lined with stunted Sitka Spruce and other growth. It is on the edge of these meadows we had our best success locating game.

We had a good day on this island, but were rewarded with no bucks for the effort. All of us were glad to be back on the yacht at dark, getting a chance to get warm, dry and to recharge our batteries for the next day. Jim and Tommy both commented to me how much better the yacht was, than a static cabin or tent camp. I concurred wholeheartedly; the weather gave, "Roughing it" a whole new meaning. We moved on in the night to a remote side of Prince of Wales Island.

We were seeing indications of the rut in the form of rubs on each island we explored. Sitka Blacktails are normally very susceptible to calling and rattling, but these methods produced limited results until day four. Mark was doing rattling sequence on the edge of a muskeg when he spotted a buck coming into the horns. Tommy and I were together and had already determined he was to take the first opportunity. All of us were excited as Tommy picked up the buck in his scope and made a great shot with his .270.

The buck was a nice representative of the species, and Tommy's first Sitka. We took some hurried photos and tagged the buck. After field dressing the deer we cached him in a tree to finish our day's hunt. This is a multiple tag area for residents and non-residents alike, so we hoped to find another buck staking out this muskeg. We did locate other deer, but no takers, and packed Tommy's buck back to the beach to end the day.

On the fifth day our persistence really paid off. Jim was off hunting the other side of a bay from where Tom and I were. We entered a huge muskeg area and slowly worked through it, pausing often to call and rattle. We heard a distant single shot and knew Jim had located a buck. Mark turned on the radio to see what the news was. In short time Jim was hollering on the radio to us and had in fact taken a very nice buck.

Within minutes, we moved toward a tree lined edge we had been glassing and detected a buck in a clearing. We all knew he was a good buck and I knelt quickly and fired. My .350 Remington Magnum hit the mark and we had another buck for the boat. This was a great deer, very symmetrical, with excellent mass; I was thrilled. We took hurried photos and dressed the buck, again caching him in a tree.

We entered the same muskeg and began following the edge line, slow stalking and calling. Approximately 30 minutes later, we located another nice buck sauntering out to the call. Tommy made a fine neck shot on this buck to fill out his tags.

Packing two bucks back to the beach proved to be quite a rodeo, with Mark and Tommy bearing the worst of it. With the bucks on the beach, the ride on the skiff back to the yacht made all of us upbeat. That night we all told our stories and marveled at how quickly things came together, taking three bucks in less than two hours.

With two days to go I opted to go do some duck hunting with Tom in the tidal flats, while Jim went out for another buck. In short time Tom and I had several mallards, pintail and a Lesser Canada Goose in the bag. Mark rounded us up before the incoming tide got too high, or we would have been swimming to the skiff.

When we returned to the boat Jim and Marlin were back talking about a monster buck they saw. Jim had a marginal shot opportunity on him at one point and opted not to take it. Though he kicked himself for not taking the shot, all of us knew he made the right choice.

With visions of big bucks still lurking out there, we all were very satisfied with our hunt as it came to an end. We pulled anchor on the last morning and made way for Wrangell Harbor. On the way we were treated to the site of several pods of killer whales which kept us entertained, and feeling very fortunate to have this experience. We all agreed that this was far more than a hunt; it was also a grand adventure. I can think of few things better than, "Cruising for Sitkas."

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