

An Introduction to Big Game Hunting in Alaska

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Where and When to Hunt

Alaska has 12 species of big game animals spread across 365,000,000 acres — an area one-fifth the size of the entire United States. Big game densities are generally much lower than you are probably used to in more southern states. Many big game species in Alaska make long movements between seasonal ranges. The key to successful big game hunting in Alaska is in doing your homework to determine both the best areas and times to hunt the species you are seeking.



For example, in many lowland areas moose are abundant all summer feeding in roadside ponds and sloughs, but begin moving up to less accessible higher elevations in early September, just when most areas open to fall moose hunting. The choice of hunting location in relation to moose movements at that particular time of year can make all the difference between coming home with a moose or not.

Caribou have even more pronounced seasonal movements. Caribou hunters traditionally experience feast or famine depending upon whether they are hunting where caribou are moving through, or in an area away from the herd's location. Doing your homework with local area biologists and air taxi operators can make the difference between success and failure.

How Long to Hunt

Alaska doesn't lend itself well to day hunts or short weekend hunts for most big game species. In my experience, it is better to plan and save up money and vacation time for one or two good 5-day or week long hunts a year. Given the uncertainty of Alaskan weather and animal movement patterns, any additional days you can spend in your hunt area can really increase your odds of success.

Hunting Essentials – Rifle, Optics and Cutlery

Selection of good basic hunting gear is of utmost importance. Don't buy junk, but rather save up until you can buy quality equipment. Your most basic requirement will be a good bolt-action rifle. I suggest choosing one with a weather resistant metal finish, a light synthetic stock, and a high quality weatherproof variable scope, say 2x7 or 1.5x5 power. I am a proponent of using one rifle and one cartridge loading for most big game hunting in Alaska. Over time the combination will become as familiar as a good friend and you will come to use it instinctively and with confidence. Personally, I like a dependable Mauser- type action chambered in .300 Winchester Magnum. I shoot premium quality 180 grain spirepoint bullets for everything from Sitka black-tailed deer to Alaska Peninsula brown bears. The 30-06 with 165 grain bullets would define my personal low end of calibers and the .338 magnum with 225 grain bullets the upper end for an all around Alaskan big game caliber and load.



Good binoculars are worth their weight in gold in Alaska. High quality lens are important to prevent eye strain because most successful hunters spend many hours every day methodically glassing. I have used a set of 10x40 armored binoculars for over ten years, but there are other brands of equal or greater quality. In addition, a high quality spotting scope and tripod are essential for sheep and brown bear hunting where judging sex, age and size of animals at long ranges is necessary.

After your animal is down, it must be dressed out. I prefer a folding knife for fine work and a sheath knife with a broad soft steel blade for skinning, removing quarters and boning out large cuts of meat. A diamond sharpening steel or good medium stone is a must. A good pack saw is handy for removing antlers and horns and sawing through ribs and other bones. Bring enough clean fabric game bags to keep meat clean and safe from blow flies.

Reaching Hunting Areas

Alaskan big game hunters have many choices of access to reach hunting areas. Although Alaska is vast, the state has fewer miles of roads than the state of Rhode Island. The road system is readily accessible from the larger cities of Anchorage and Fairbanks. While it is possible to hunt off the road system, there is a lot of competition for available big game and hunter success rates are generally low.

All terrain vehicles (ATVs) and four wheelers have become popular with many hunters resulting in crowded conditions on popular trail systems. Hunting success rates for hunters using ATVs are generally higher than for those using only highway vehicles, but are still relatively low. I believe this is



because many people spend more time running the machine than hunting on foot once they reach their hunting area.



Boats are another option along Alaska's river systems. Where access to launches is within easy reach of Anchorage or Fairbanks, there is a lot of competition for game among boat hunters. The farther you are willing to run from a launch site, the less crowding you are apt to find.

Chartering an aircraft for a drop-off hunt is what many consistently successful Alaska hunters prefer. The upfront cost puts off many new hunters, but in the long run the costs are reasonable given the solitude, high hunting success rates and the sheer adventure of the flights and landings themselves. Some of my most memorable hunts for sheep, bears, moose and caribou have been fly-in hunts. When you consider fuel and maintenance costs in addition to purchasing costs for highway vehicles, four wheelers or boats, fly-in hunts once or twice a year are quite a bargain for the serious hunter.

For a truly unique hunt, you may want to consider using a combination of transportation methods to get away from other hunters. A great combination is to fly into a river, float the river in an inflatable raft and then get picked up at a predetermined haulout point downstream. I've even flown into large lakes with a raft and small motor and hunted the shores for moose and brown bears. One advantage is the great fishing available in waters seldom visited by fishermen.

Making a Clean Kill

The culmination of a big game hunt is the kill itself. To be sure of a quick clean kill, your rifle should be sighted in properly before you leave home. Test fire your rifle after you reach camp to make sure the sights were not knocked off zero during transport. You also should practice shooting your rifle throughout the year at a local rifle range to keep your marksmanship skills sharp and to gain familiarity with your rifle and all its features. Practice shooting in all three positions, standing, kneeling and prone. All shots at big game should be made from a rest or from the prone position whenever possible for the most steady hold. Don't take an initial shot at a moving animal, be patient and wait for a good standing shot.

I sight my .300 Winchester Magnum to hit 3.5 inches high at 100 yards. At a little over 200 yards, it will hit about 6 inches high and at 330 yards it will hit only a few inches low. On most Alaskan big game animals, this allows me to hold at the center of the chest from the muzzle out to over 300 yards. By holding just behind the point of the front shoulder, the bullet will strike the vital spine, high lungs, mid lungs, or low lungs/heart area. You should determine point of impact for your own particular rifle, sight setting and load at various known ranges before going hunting.

I strongly recommend taking lung shots rather than head, neck or shoulder shots on big game. The vital target area is larger and the potential for wounding loss is lower compared to fancy neck or head shots. On meat animals, a fatal lung shot has the advantage of causing blood in the meat to bleed out into the chest cavity through the damaged lung tissue. Meat loss is limited to a little rib meat and, perhaps, a little meat from the rear of the shoulder blade. Meat quality is far superior with a lung shot. Head, neck or heart shot animals die with all the blood remaining in the blood vessels. Attempting to bleed your game by slicing the throat after the heart stops is a waste of time.



Except for big bears, there is no need to keep shooting at an animal after it has been well hit once in the lungs. An oldtimer once told me that "it doesn't matter whether a moose is shot well once or a dozen times, the beast will not die for a minute and 55 seconds." He was right. It seems to take almost two minutes for a lung shot moose to bleed out into the chest cavity and fall down. More shots just make more holes, a big mess, and wasted meat.

On big bears keep shooting until the bear is down and stays down. Big bears are nothing to mess around with trying for that "one shot kill" so popular in sporting magazines. Approach all downed big game cautiously from the rear with your rifle chambered and in a ready position. Stop well away from bears and moose and look to see if there is any regular movement of the chest due to breathing. If so, dispatch the animal humanely with a shot to the brain (or base of the neck on a trophy bear).

The Hunting Camp

Nothing can make or break an Alaska big game hunt more quickly than the quality of your camp. I suggest that new Alaskan hunters put together a backpack camp weighing 40 pounds or less, including tent, sleeping bag and pad, cooking gear and dried food for a week. Such a pack is suitable for fly-in, boat, backpack or ATV hunts where weight and bulk are important considerations. I recommend two-man hunting arrangements both for safety reasons and the ability to share a tent and cooking gear, leaving packing capacity to packout meat. I suggest the following camping basics:

Shelter

- 2-man, 3- or 4-season nylon tent/fly
- light nylon rain gear

Warmth

- layered clothing
- sleeping bag/pad

Food

- freeze-dried entrees
- bread
- sweets
- coffee, etc.
- salt/pepper

- extra socks

Cooking

- light white gas stove/fuel
- canteen/metal cup
- fork/spoon

Safety/Hygiene

- first-aid kit
- signal kit
- tooth brush/soap
- water filter or purification tablets
- mini flashlight/batteries

If possible, situate your hunting camp in a spot that will be protected from wind. In the mountains, I set up camp where I have a good vantage of the game country right from the tent, or at least close to a good vantage to maximize glassing, and hence hunting time.

Don't lose any sleep over bears at night. Don't set your camp on major game trails. Hang or cache meat and foodstuff about 30 yards in front of your tent and tie metal cups and eating utensils on it. If a bear comes by, you'll wake up to clanking and have plenty of time to avoid real problems. I keep my rifle and a good flashlight handy in the tent.

Miscellaneous Tips

While hunting in Alaska, I do not carry a live round in my rifle's chamber. I am far more concerned about an accidental gunshot wound hurting myself or my partner in a remote area than about bear protection. In most big game hunting situations in Alaska, there is ample time to chamber a cartridge after game is spotted and stalked.

Before hunting too far away from your vehicle or aircraft landing strip, stop to think about how far you are willing or able to carry harvested game. A bull moose will yield 350 to 750 pounds of mostly boned meat and will require four to eight round trips carrying approximately 100 pounds per trip. A big raw brown bear hide can weigh over 120 pounds, but it can be cut in half if necessary. Even a big bull caribou will yield 150-180 pounds of boned meat and a Dall sheep ram about 80 pounds plus the weight of the horns and cape.

If it will be necessary to make multiple trips to pack meat back to camp, take the time to pack all of the meat at least 200 yards away from the kill site and conceal it under a bush or spruce tree. Ravens and gray jays will soon find the kill and their commotion can draw in other scavengers like bears. Always carry your rifle when packing meat and be alert each time you return to the kill site and meat cache area in case a bear has moved in during your absence.

As a parting note, be sensitive to public perceptions of hunters and hunting. Hunt in a fair chase manner and hunt according to your own ethical code of conduct. I'd urge everyone to consider taking the Alaska Hunter Education course, it's a good one. Also, take advantage of the [Alaska Hunting Clinics](#) for the various popular species. Familiarize yourself with the *Alaska Hunting Regulations* and carry a copy with you afield. You'll be glad you did if you get weathered in for a day or two with nothing else to read.



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