

Bear Hunting

A Longtime Blue Ridge Tradition



The Blue Ridge Mountains are home to an abundance of wildlife, the black bear notwithstanding. The men who live here carry on the tradition of “the hunt” just as their ancestors before them. Not only did hunting serve as a means of providing meat for the family table, but the challenge of pitting oneself against a large wild animal and the harsh elements of nature was instinctively in their blood. Today’s men who hunt black bear aren’t as hard pressed to bring home meat like their forefathers but the challenge of the hunt remains as keen as ever.

Bear hunting is the largest group-participation sport in the mountains. While deer, squirrel, and bird hunters

Boyd Coffey with two of his bear dogs

seem to enjoy the solitary aspect of the sport, bear hunters thrive on each other’s friendships, gearing up year after year for the activity that bonds them together like a tight weld. The men are a tough lot, seemingly oblivious to foul winter weather, blistered feet, and frozen hands. They are easily recognized by the dozen or more Bluetick, Redbone, Plot, Black and Tan, and Walker hounds they keep in their backyards.

Around the middle of November, talk is high around woodstoves at country stores about how many bears will be taken and how big they’ll be, according to the year’s mast supply. Mast is a general term for nature’s food supply, and that supply varies from year to year. Some years the woods are abundant with acorns, walnuts, and hickory nuts. Other years,

the nuts are scarce, and bears have to forage more to put on the fat needed to get them through winter hibernation.

In our area, there are a multitude of hunt clubs and individuals who hunt together season after season. Wherever these men congregate, the names of old-time bear hunters are sure to pop up in conversation. Men like Maxie Campbell; Raymond Allen; Pete Falls; Wicky Stevens; Romey Fitzgerald; Ryland Jordan; Daniel Lawhorne; Ezra, Aubrey and Elmer Carr; Icem Lawhorne; Wallace and Boyd Coffey; Curly Terrell; Clarence Campbell; and Floyd Weeks will always be remembered as the hardcore hunters who were out there no matter the weather. You could always count on them to be in on the chase. Boyd Coffey of Love always said that you had to be part dog to be a good bear hunter. He enjoyed being in the woods, watching and listening to his dogs, and enjoying the companionship of other men. He and his group mostly hunted Cedar Cliffs and Big Levels on the west side of the mountain and to the east, Davis Creek, Wintergreen, Three Ridges, and the Priest.



A successful bear/deer hunt with the Boyd Coffey Group at Love

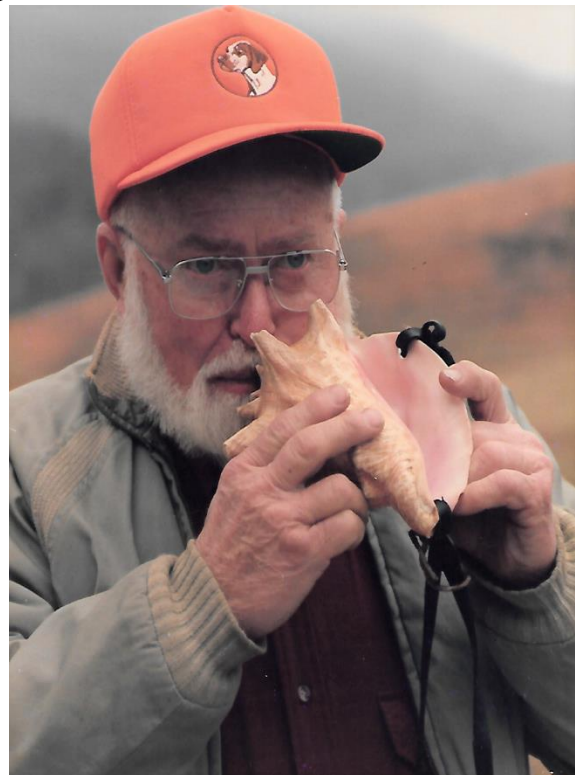
A man who owns a good pack of hunting dogs is many times the “driver,” the one who turns the track dog loose and, when a bear is struck, is responsible for letting the other dogs off their tethers. He follows the dogs, hoping they will drive the bear up a tree or else run him by the other men who are on tree stands. Usually, a bear follows a predictable route through a certain area every year. If a bear is taken, whoever made the kill gets to keep the

hide, and the meat is divided among the men. The full weight of the bear is not just meat alone, since the hide, bone, and entrails make up a lot of the total body weight.

A good bear dog is essential to the hunt. Blue/and Redticks, Walkers, Plotts, and Redbones are some of the best breeds, but, for some reason, a cross-breed of the different types seem to work even better. One man said that a Redbone/Airdale cross was the best bear dog he ever owned.

A big part of the sport is rounding up the dogs after the hunt. If the hunt takes place in your own vicinity, usually the dogs will find their way back home. The animals seem to know instructively that they will be picked up alongside the road when the chase is over, so they will make their way out of the woods to a road and simply hang around until their owners pick them up. Boyd Coffey used a conch-shell horn that his dad, Wallace, gave him to call in his dogs after the hunt was over. He said that his dogs always came back to the sound of the horn if they were within hearing distance.

On an average chase, drivers will walk upwards of fifteen to twenty miles through the mountains. It is not a sport for the weak or fainthearted. I was invited to bear hunt with Boyd Coffey so I could write an article for the *Backroads* newspaper, and I could not believe what was involved physically. I found out from firsthand experience how hard it was to crawl on your hands and knees through an “Ivy” thicket or climb hand over fist up the side of a rocky slope in zero-degree weather. All this while lugging a backpack filled with drinking water and your dinner, along with a loaded rifle. Let me tell you, the men who hunt bear don't have a lot of insomnia problems after a day's hunt! I've had to smile at certain comments I've heard from non-hunters over the years concerning how unfair it is to hunt bears with dogs.



Boyd blowing his conch shell horn

Let me assure you that the bear definitely has the advantage over the dogs. Not only does the bruin know the rough territory like the back of his hand...er, paw, but physically the bear outweighs the average bear dog four to one and isn't timid about using those teeth and razor-sharp claw on a dog that ventures too close. Many's the animal that bears the scars of a hunt or loses its life in the process. Boyd was a dear friend and I knew him better than all the other hunters at that time. Here's what he said in 1984 when I interviewed him.

“I guess bear hunting got in my blood around 1946, after I came back from service. My daddy was a serious bear hunter from way back, and I guess it was bound to happen that I would be, too. All the old-time hunters would congregate up at our house, and Daddy knew all of them well. Back then, there were no hunting clubs; just men with a strong desire to get out in the woods and turn their dogs loose for the chase. You just picked a bunch of men to go with, and you went!

I grew up around the hardcore bear hunters like Raymond Alle, Clarence Campbell, Floyd Weeks, Pete Falls, Jesse Bridge, Maxie Campbell, and Curly Terrell. These were the true bear hunters. There was none of this turning over and going back to sleep if the weather was bad. They would be there no matter what. You could always count on them. I always liked being in the woods come hunting season. There is just something about being out there that sharpens the senses and makes you feel alive. Watching and listening for the dogs and enjoying the companionship of the other men have a lot to do with it, I guess.

We would get up at four o'clock in the morning and load the dogs, then drive to where we had planned to hunt for the day. Sometimes we'd hunt near Cedar Cliffs on the west side of the Blue Ridge and near where Wintergreen Ski Resort is now located over on the east side of the ridge. They ruined a lot of the good bear hunting when the resort was built over in Nelson County. That mountain up by Pryor's Camp and Black Rock fairly teemed with bears back then.

I've had upwards to eighteen grown hunting dogs at home at one time, not including the puppies. When I hunt, I carry the conch shell horn my daddy gave me to call my dogs back if they get lost. They always come back if they can hear the horn, but there are always a few I have to go back and call the next day. I once had a dog that found his way back home from Davis Creek three different times.

The photographs below are of two separate hunts from years ago. The first one, taken in 1957, shows a bear killed by Jesse Bridge that weighed 385 pounds. When we started out that morning, there was a fine mist coming down. As the day wore on, the mist turned to raw sleet. I was driving the old panel truck and had to stop and put chains on it. Even so, I ended up tearing the bumper off and putting several good dents in the fender before we ever got the bear out. It was taken over at Black Rock in Wintergreen. The other photo was taken in 1949. Maphis Campbell killed the bear, at it weighed over 500 pounds. The men and all the dogs are lined up in front of the News Virginian office of Main Street in Waynesboro.”

On an average chase, the drivers will walk many miles through the mountains. I've had much younger men completely give out on me. I had two fellas pestering me to go bear hunting, so I said, 'Come on down, we can always use young blood on a hunt.' They came from Winchester and were rip and ready for anything. We walked and walked that day. They were supposed to stay for two days over at our hunting camp on Reed's Gap, when I went over to check on them that night, they had packed up and were gone! I never saw them until the next July. One of them came up to me and thanked me for both hunts—the first and the last!

I can honestly say that I've enjoyed hunting bear through the years, but since I've become a Christian, I've enjoyed it even more. Now I can truly appreciate the beauty of God's creation instead of taking it for granted. I always try to thank Him for the forest and the animals, and especially my health as I go out to hunt. God changed my life, and I give Him all the credit for that miracle.”



**1957 bear hunting party l/r: Wallace, Sam, Boyd, Roger Coffey, Jesse Bridge
unknown child, Howard Brydge and Lowell Hewitt**

Another close neighbor, Jesse Bridge, was also a long-time bear hunter and I interviewed him in January of 1987. He had taken a nice sized bruin near the upper Sherando Lake area on the last day of bear season and, like Boyd Coffey, he had quite a bit to say about how he first got interested.

“I was introduced to the rugged sport by Wallace Coffey, a good friend and close neighbor. Wallace was an old-time bear hunter and he kept one of finest packs of good hounds that anyone can remember. He used the dogs for both bear and racoon. Many people aren’t aware that the two animals are closely related and their scents are about identical (at least to the dog’s noses).

Bear and coon hunters have the advantage of keeping their dogs in top condition and primed for the hunt because of the length of both seasons. They have the advantage by running the same dogs on two separate game animals, whereas, say, bird hunters can only use their dogs for quail or grouse which is a shorter season.”

Jess belongs to the Back Creek Bear Hunters Association, which has upwards to forty members at this writing (1987) but the day he got his bear, he was shooting over dogs which belonged to the Blue Ridge Coon and Bear Club members. These two area groups are closely linked in their hunting territories and also their friendships.

I asked about overall changes in bear hunting in the last 20 years and Jess said there were many.

“We used to have a whole extra week before deer season came in, in which to hunt bear but then the laws changed and that week was taken away. Also, there aren’t as many old-time hunters who walk the mountains like they used to. Men like Clyde Fitzgerald, Wallace Coffey, Raymond Allen, Maphis Campbell, Maxie Campbell, and old Mr. Rittenour were the ones who could really

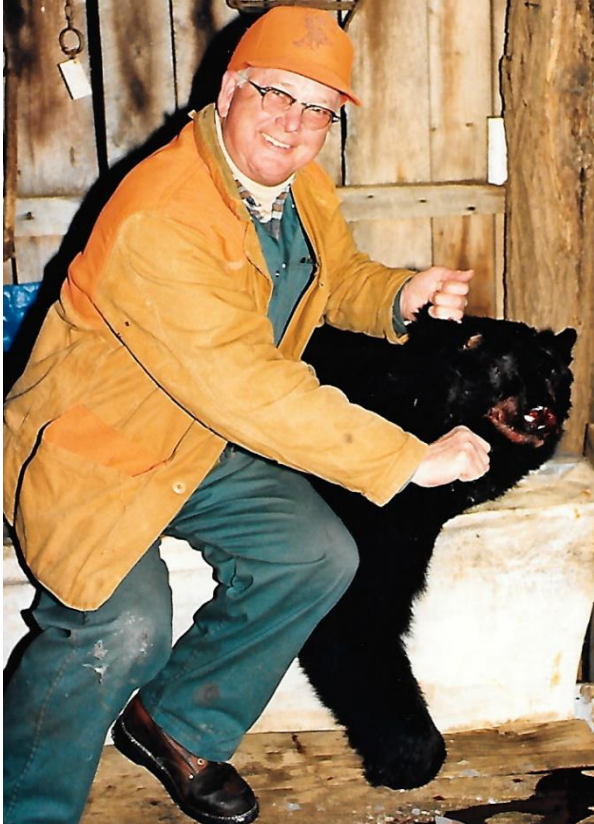
walk these hills and give a good chase behind the dogs. But I think the sport is a lot more exciting for the men who hunt nowadays than it was say in year's past. Two-way radios both in trucks and walkie talkies have put hunters closer in touch with each other so the men who are sitting on stands or in vehicles know what's going on. It used to be pretty boring just sitting there all day wondering where the dogs were and if anyone one getting anything. Now all you have to do is turn on your radio and listen to what's going on. It keeps things moving and helps break up the day.

“Another time saving device is the invention of the three and four wheelers. There was a time when a man would kill a bear and have to walk out of the mountains to get more men and then walk back in to carry it out. Sometimes this would take two days and if the weather turned warm there was the danger of the meat spoiling or other animals messing up the hide.”

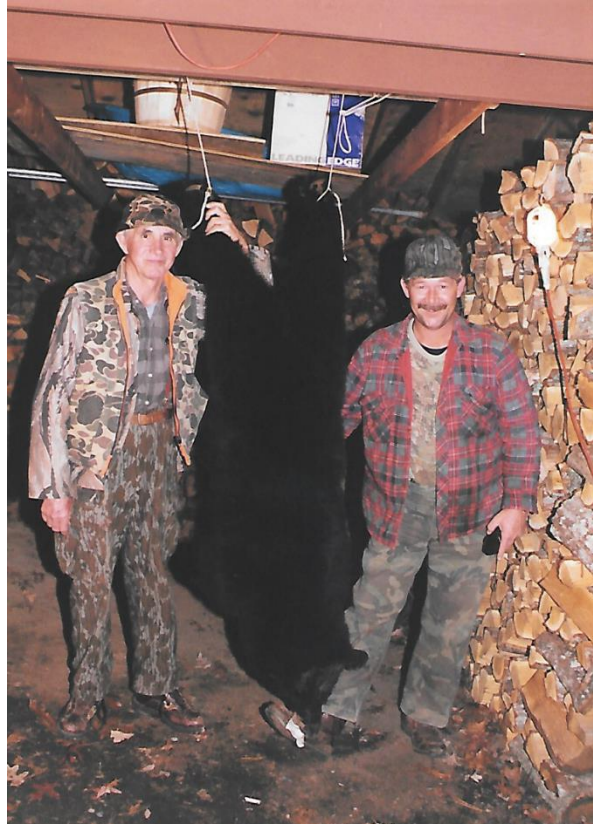
The hardest task of bear hunting according to Jess is trying to round up all the dogs after a day's hunt. Like Boyd Coffey, Jesse says, “We spend more time looking for the dogs than we ever do looking for the bears,” he says with a hearty laugh!



Another successful hunt with Jesse Bridge and his complete hunting party, 1987



Jesse Bridge with the large bear he took



Ed Coiner and son Eric with a nice one



*Everett Allen, Cecil Boggs, Elmer Ray Lunsford, Bill Sensabaugh,
(kneeling) Roger Allen, D. F. Wright*



Allen hunting party with a nice sized bruin that Steve Henderson (left bottom) took



Jackie Lowery with the 552-pound bear he got



Jackie Lowery with the complete bear hunting party



Top, l/r: Alton Lewis, Maphis Campbell, Charlie Campbell, Bottom: Charlie Robinson, Maxie Campbell, Haywood Campbell, Luther McGann, & Pete Falls. Maphis Campbell killed the 501 lb. bear in 1949



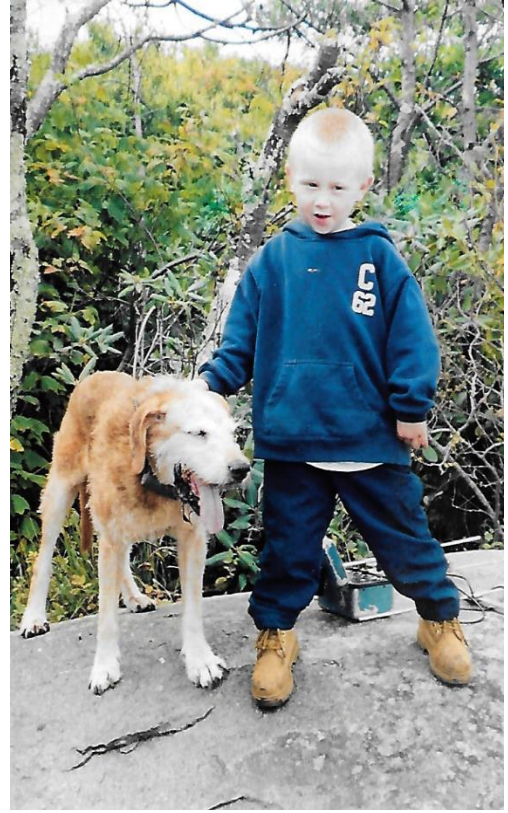
Dennis and Raymond Allen with a huge bear in front of the News Virginian office



Tyro hunters: l/r kneeling, Daniel Lawhorne, Austin Fitzgerald, 2nd row: Wicky Stevens, Glen Fitzgerald, David Newton. Top row: James Lewis and Warren Mays, Danny Stevens, John Henry Fitzgerald and Junior Evans.



Danny Stevens hunting party, Tyro



Thomas Massie & "K.T."



A group of "Junior Bear Hunters" from Tyro



Bear hunters from the Wintergreen, Beech Grove, and Crawford Mountain areas.
380-pound bear was taken on Spruce Creek by Frankie Truslow (bottom right)
who used a .308 Savage rifle to bring the big bruin down

Down through the years, newer techniques and equipment have replaced much of the old ways of hunting bears, but as long as there are hearty mountain men, the tradition of bear hunting will never cease to exist here in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.