

GUIDE AND ENTERTAINER TO
THE OUTDOOR CLAN

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HUNTING *and* CAMPING IN THE ALBERTA WILDERNESS

By WM. C. BARTLETT

IN SIX PARTS—PART VI



"There is a Big Wolf Out Here Waiting for Some One to Come Out and Feed Him."



ARRIVING at the specified point, I secured the horse and, pushing into the brush as directed, I descended into a shallow basin and up the opposite slope, through the worst tangle of vegetation I had ever tried to worm through.

The ground had been burnt over the year before, and the small standing timber, burnt off at the ground, had fallen in promiscuous heaps. A rank growth of pea-vines, poplar

sprouts and other forms of plant life had sprung up, and so concealed the brush below that it was like walking blind-folded through a continuous brush heap.

The face of the country presented a series of low ridges, alternating with shallow, basin-like depressions, which were generally traversed by a narrow, muskeg, fringed round with tall grass and dense willow growth.

While making my way through one of these swampy jungles, I came upon the still warm beds of a pair of moose and evident signs of their hurried flight.

Wondering what could have startled them, I crossed to the opposite side of the muskeg and there found the explanation: In the soft muck at the margin of the swamp was the fresh track of a huge bear.

A fine large willow grouse hopped upon a nearby limb and regarded me curiously. He was perfectly safe; I had no shells to waste on him, and he seemed to know it. I was too busy trying to cram more shells into my rifle than it would hold to even notice him, for those bear tracks were just beginning to fill with water.

My heart was going bump-bump against my ribs, my breath came in short, trembly jerks and a feeling of tenseness crept up my back-bone as I scanned the surrounding cover for some sign of the big gray "Monarch of the North Woods."

I had not been looking for bear, but as all indications pointed strongly to one being somewhere near, I decided to follow his tracks as long as they kept to the muskeg, where the ground was soft and the trail plain.

To this end, I cautiously proceeded up the margin of the swamp, stepping carefully to avoid dry twigs and with my rifle cocked and ready for action.

The trend of the muskeg was quartering to the wind, and I knew that as long as the bear followed its margin, stopping now and then to dig up a lily root, as his tracks indicated, that there would be a chance of coming into him before he winded me and made off. The possibility of his crossing the muskeg, thereby putting himself down wind from me, when I came opposite him, did not occur to me. Therefore, my tightly strung nerves nearly turned me wrong side out when there was a "woof-woof" and a crashing of brush from the other side of the muskeg and a big brown form plunged away through the willows like the Old Nick was hanging to his little stubby tail.

I threw my rifle to my shoulder and fired through the brush when he passed the most open place, then again as I got my parting glimpse of him as he crossed through the willows at the lower end of the muskeg.

Outside of a snort and a stumble at my last shot, he appeared none the worse for the bullets I sent after him and I could hear him topping timber for a full minute after my last shot; then he passed out of the burnt district into the big timber and, for all I did to stop him, might have been going yet.

I stood for some minutes, explaining to myself just how I would go about it to surprise and pot my departed bear, if Old Man Time would only back up about half an hour and give me another chance. Then, as I was starting to push my way through the fringing thicket to continue my still hunt for moose, the faint crack of the Trapper's rifle came to me over the timbered ridge to the west, and something told me that from now on there would be bear meat on the camp's bill of fare. My bear, when I last saw him, was hurrying in the direction from which the shot came.

The sound of the shots I fired I knew would start any moose or deer which might happen to be in the immediate neighborhood. I was greatly surprised, therefore, when, after threading my way through the brush for a considerable distance, I came out in a comparatively open space, traversed by a well-worn moose runway, and, peering through the bordering vista of poplar trunks and willow brush, I made out an indistinct dark shape, which could be nothing but a moose or deer.

The intervening veil of forest growth was just dense enough that I could not, with all my power of sight concentrated, make out the full outline of the animal or tell which end he wore his head on. Therefore, the chances of reaching a vital part with a bul-

let from my rifle was extremely improbable, not to mention the uncertainty of getting a soft-nose through the maze of brush without its "splitting" in its flight.

The magazine of my rifle was full of soft-nose shells, and to attempt to eject one of them and throw in one of steel, the only kind that would successfully reach the mark, through the obstructing brush, would make such a clatter that the moose, or whatever it was, would be off with the speed of a horse, and I would have another failure to my credit.

There was only one thing to do. Get nearer, where I would have an unobstructed shot, a move which I knew would be difficult to make without thoroughly alarming the already startled animal by the incautious bending of a bush or snapping of a dry twig as I made my way toward him over the difficult ground.

Crouching out of view, I removed my heavy coat, which might hinder my movements, and leaving it, with my cap, lying on the ground, I began to worm my slow way toward my unsuspecting quarry.

Flat on my stomach, with my rifle pushed ahead, I crawled and slid through clumps of thorny rose brier that scratched, slashed and stuck me full of holes, through tough tangles of vines that wound around my neck and tried to hang me; over sharp stones and through soft mud I slid, leaving a trail like a monster crocodile, as nearer and nearer I approached the doomed moose.

Turning and twisting, I squeezed through where the willow stems grew thick, and the wild grapevines hung in closely-woven tangles, and at last, blowing like a porpoise and sweating like the proverbial "nigger at 'lection," and with a trail of cuticle and Yankee dry goods marking my course, I reached a point where I felt confident I could secure a successful shot.

I lay for a while to regain my breath and give my nerves time to steady and then, carefully muffling the hammer, I cocked my rifle and cautiously raised myself until I could see over the low bushes and vines that grew between my place of concealment and my victim.

Higher and higher I raised my head, slowly and silently, like a man who expects to be shot at, until at last my eager eyes were glancing along my rifle barrel, the front sight lined on a huge moose? No! a huge bunch of wild rhubarb!

The broad, brown leaves were gently waving in the wind, to simulate the breathing of a moose, and the dry, gray stalks reared horn-like above.

On the topmost spike a pair of whiskey jacks bobbed up and down on their wind-swept perch, their black-capped heads muffled down in the gray coat collars, over which their little black eyes peered at me in a sad and solemn manner.

I glanced at them suspiciously, but could detect no sign of merriment or unseemly glee. Then, uncocking my rifle, I scraped the mud from what remained of my shirt, and sneaked back to where I had left my coat and cap and again resumed my still hunt for moose.

The Trapper had told me that when hunting for moose or deer in a hilly country to always look for them on the slope opposite that from which the wind came, especially if it was a time of day when they would be likely to be couched or bedded down.

Governed by this knowledge, I finished the ascent of each low ridge with extreme caution, pausing at the top to carefully scan the opposite brush-covered hillside for any sign of game.

I had about decided that a hoodoo followed me, when I made out the magnificent form of a great bull moose standing at graze, in a small cleared space on the opposite hillside.

I had gained considerable experience in moose stalking during the day, and I now

accepted the real thing like a veteran, without any of the nervous thrills which had chased up and down my backbone while trying for a shot at the clump of wild rhubarb, or the tense excitement under which I had labored while playing hide-and-seek with the bear.

The moose stood facing me with his great antlered head elevated, nosing the wind and nervously swinging his sensitive ears back and forth. He had heard, but not yet located me, and my chance for a successful shot depended upon his not doing so until he moved enough to give me a broadside shot at his shoulder. At last, as if undecided which way to go, he half turned, then paused and stood excitedly stamping the ground and swinging his great head from side to side, in a vain endeavor to locate the danger.

My chance had come. The distance was about 200 yards—a nice range for my .303. Without changing the sights, I threw my rifle to my shoulder, took careful aim for a heart shot, and fired.

The great creature plunged forward and fell to his knees; then recovered and started trotting diagonally down the slope. I threw in another soft-nose and again fired for the shoulder, and at the crack of the rifle he went down with a crash, rolled once over and then lay still.

I hurried over to where he lay, bled him, and then gave the signal agreed upon to bring the Trapper if a moose were killed.

In the course of an hour the Trapper, wearing a wide smile and smelling strongly of fresh bear meat, came up, following my trail. He congratulated me on my last shot—a bull's eye—and then told me about my bear, which he had just finished skinning before he started to join me.

He had heard my two shots and, thinking perhaps it was a moose or deer, had taken station in the section line west of me and waited for him to cross. The bear had come out on the line, about 100 yards distant, and was attempting to cross when the Trapper shot him.

It took a good part of the afternoon to skin and prepare my moose for the difficult task of getting the meat and hide into camp. Then the Trapper left me to guard, while he returned for my horse, on a lariat at the junction of the section line.

When he returned, we packed the two hind quarters across the saddle, then, leaving again to watch the meat, the Trapper rode into camp and returned with an extra horse. By loading both horses and walking ourselves, we were able to get all the moose meat and hide, besides the choice of the bear, with his skin, into camp that night.

Next day was Sunday, and the Trapper and I lounged all day in satisfied idleness. Late in the evening Bill rode in on one of the sorriest looking pieces of horseflesh I ever saw, and a few minutes later the Professor came limping along in his wake.

The horse was loaded to the guards, fore and aft, with a variety of supplies, Bill's head sticking out above and his long legs dangling below. After the animal was relieved of his load I led him away to a little open prairie and there staked him on a lariat to fill up on sun-cured buffalo grass, which is grain and grass combined to the horses of Alberta, and then returned to the Trapper's cabin, where we had all been invited to have supper together.

And such a repast as was there collected from the four parts of earth—bear rump boiled and moose steak broiled, fresh from the jungle and hills of the Moose Mountains, with cranberries on the side, fresh picked from the upland barrens east of camp; tender white-breasted grouse, from the adjacent willow thickets, baked and stuffed with onions from the sandy loam of Texas; bacon and condensed cream from Illinois; salmon from the rock-walled Columbia; coffee and tea from far-away Java and Japan, and,

lastly, a pipe of fragrant Virginia leaf, from our own fair State, to complete so grand a spread.

I started early the next morning on my return trip to Vermillion, riding the bony, sad-eyed cayuse that Bill had packed in on.

As I was about to start Bill presented me with a riding whip about the size of a pick handle, to be used, as he said, to scare my mount out of a walk. But, being a strong advocate of humanity toward dumb animals, I refused his gift, assuring him that my experienced horsemanship, coupled with kind persuasion, would be sufficient to urge my humble steed to any exertion. Half a mile out on the trail I brought my horse to a willing stand, dismounted and cut me a club as big again as the one Bill had pressed upon me. From that on a person viewing my outfit from a distance of half a mile might have detected a slight forward motion of my horse, accompanied by a violent up-and-down vertical movement of my own body.

At one time, as I came in sight of Deal's ranch, a vision of oats loomed up before my noble steed, and, forgetting himself, he allowed me to urge him into a gallop. I have, in my early ranch days in Nebraska, rode bucking bronchos that could buck jump as stiff as the worst, but I never suffered any more by them than I did by that beautiful cross between a camel and sulky hay-rake when he galloped.

He would bound into the air at every stride and my momentum would be so great at the end of the bound that I would continue going up, while he would return to the ground; then, by the time he had started up on another bound, I was ready to come down and we would meet in mid-air. The impact was terrific.

He had only gone through one or two contortions of this kind when I began to haul in slack on the reins and yell at him "Whoa!" But it was no use and he kept on until he came to a sliding stand in front of Mr. Deal's stable door.

It had begun to drizzle a fine rain soon after I crossed the Saskatchewan, a very unusual occurrence so late in the fall, so I stopped at Mr. Deal's long enough to partially dry myself and get something to eat, and then continued on about six miles, where I stopped for the night with an old Irishman, lately moved in with his family.

His house was a new sod affair, yet incomplete, the windows were devoid of sash or pane, and the floor was the hard-packed black earth.

He had not finished his stable yet, therefore I was compelled to tie my horse on the lee side of a hay rick, which stood about fifty yards from the house, after carefully covering him with a storm blanket, borrowed from my host.

After a substantial supper, in which baked wild duck, roasted potatoes (some my host raised) and bannock played a prominent part, I was getting ready to turn in when I heard my horse whinny nervously several times, as if things were not as they should be with him.

I asked for a lantern and, one being furnished, I opened the door and started down to the hay-rick to investigate.

Just as I stepped out I made out what I took to be a large dog standing at the corner of the house and well within the circle of light shed by the lantern.

I stepped back to the door and inquired of the old man if he had a dog and he said he had not; then, keeping one eye on the supposed canine, I asked him if his neighbors had any. "Ain't got any neighbors," was his answer. "Then," I said, "if there isn't any dogs around there is a big grey wolf out here, waiting for some one to come out and feed him."

I heard the old Irishman kick over a chair or two as he scrambled for his rifle, and then he rushed out with the gun in his hands and, blinking like an owl in the sun,

vainly tried to make out the form of the wolf, which, to me, my eyes being accustomed to the darkness, looked as big as a yearling calf.

The wolf, getting suspicious of the noise, had begun to edge away across a piece of back setting south of the house, when, fearing the old Irishman would not see him, I snatched the rifle, gave him the lantern and told him how to hold it on top of my head, then, throwing the rifle to my shoulder and aiming at the wolf in general, I let drive.

From all indicating sounds, the next twenty seconds were the busiest the wolf had ever spent, and in his hurry to visit some other neighborhood, he fairly burnt a hole in the night that you could see through.

We heard him crash into a wire fence which had been strung along the borders of a lake on the opposite side of the back setting, then a terrific splashing of water and quacking of waterfowl, as they rose wildly from the sedge at the margin of the lake, told us that his wolfship had not even

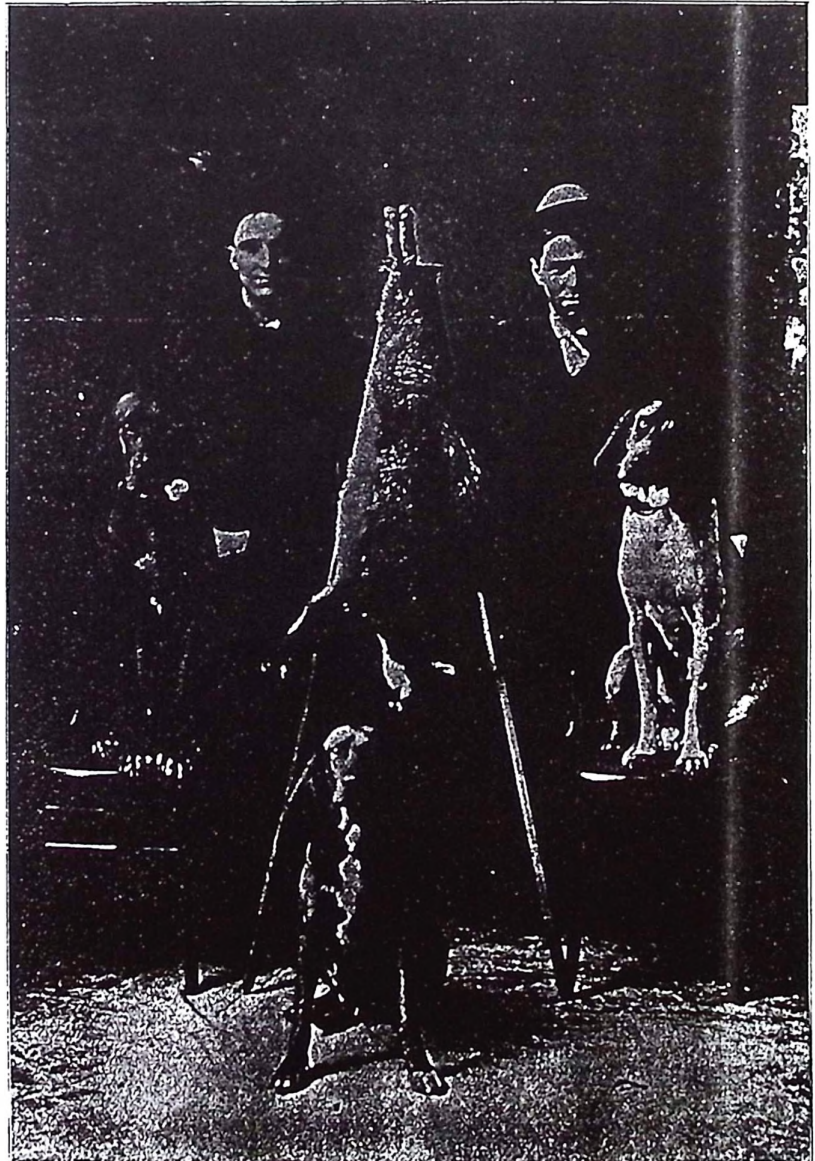
stopped for the lake. Short cuts were in order.

It stopped raining during the night and the next morning we took up the trail of the wolf, which had not been entirely washed out, and followed it to the rush bordered shore of the lake. We found him lying dead, half in and half out of the water, a bullet through his throat.

By the old man's steelyards he weighed just seventy-nine pounds. Pretty fair for a wolf, as the old man said, and not a very good night for them, either.

The sun came out and a beautiful Alberta day was drawing to a close when I drew rein, an entirely unnecessary thing to do, for my horse would have stopped himself, at the home of my old crow-bait, and I half-crawled, half-fell out of the saddle and slowly limped over to the hotel.

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