



North American Hunting Expedition 2009

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Room 2069
Expedition Headquarters
Anchorage Hilton
22nd September
Noon

By 6.30am I am already up; this day has started early.

After breakfast I look in the foyer to see who's there. And who is that bearded young man with the care-worn face, tapping the screen of his iPhone?

Andy Morrison, no less!

The organizer of my first ten days in Alaska, whom I first met nearly two months ago at Anchorage Airport!

We greet each other with genuine pleasure. It's really good to see this guy again; we share many happy memories from those first few days! The discovery of the Széchenyi camp, the erection of the memorial plaque, the panning for gold, the rafting and sailing, and who knows how many other activities that we did together. He was the organizer, I was the client, but our relationship was always excellent.

He waved me off at Talkeetna; that's where we last said goodbye to each other. From there the train took me to Fairbanks, where I was hoping to take a hot-air balloon ride, all organized for me by Andy. However, the balloon company had cheated Andy, and the ride never happened.

Later, while I was wandering around the US and Canada, we exchanged several emails and agreed that I would take an exciting helicopter flight this morning to make up for the ballooning fiasco. At the time I forgot to ask when and where we would go, as I wasn't really interested. If Andy says that it is going to be good fun, I believe him.

His battered minibus is waiting outside the Hilton, and inside is an older hunter called David Bailey, also a client of Cabela's; he is also going to be shown Alaska by Andy.

After a 30mins. drive and a bit of searching we find Alyeska Helicopters' base. Here Andy hands us over to Corey Konik; our lives are going to be in his hands.

Or his in ours...

Because - and no mistake, this is absolutely true! - we are going to pilot the helicopter!

Actually fly it; not just laze about as passengers, but steer it and pilot it and fly it on our own! The fact that, so far in my life, I have only ever been in a helicopter two times - and both of them here in Alaska - and that I have absolutely no idea what to do, apparently doesn't bother anybody.

Corey is a 31 year- old flying instructor and, according to his theory, you don't have to know how to fly a helicopter as long as you have a feel for it. And so he says we needn't begin with the theory, but can start with the actual flying. That's fine by me, I've always been interested in the practical side of things. I leave philosophy to others.

He takes us through the controls.

This only lasts 10mins. - it takes over two years to train a Soyuz pilot... - but I quickly pick up what makes this dragonfly work. Once we are airborne, I have to concentrate on just two things: I must only steer the machine with gentle movements and I must never move the middle lever - which I will use to go forwards or backwards, and left or right - suddenly forward, as it could make the helicopter unstable.

I can't say that I really learnt the physics and mechanics of the machine in that 10mins, but Corey reckons it's enough for my first flight.

I don't know what type of helicopter it is, but it's quite small. R22 is on the side. It must be the little one's name. Every control has a duplicate, just like those cars people learn to drive in.

We take off.

I have my hands on the levers, but right now Corey is the pilot. There is no training ground or deserted area for flying; immediately we start flying over over a railway track and houses. Corey is still holding the controls, but now it is my turn...

It is extremely sensitive.

That is my first impression. The middle lever only has to be moved a fraction for the machine to react at once. If you move it a quarter of an inch, it is too much for it. I attempt gentle, measured movements. As Corey said, you don't need to move your hands, just flex your muscles. After 10mins. I begin to get the feel of it. We follow the track - that's what I was instructed to do - then we go over a valley. I must keep the speed at a constant 60mph, which is not easy. If I increase the speed, then I must make the machine rise, using a lever on my left side rather like the hand-brake in a car, or else we will start to descend. The combination of these two levers determines the dragonfly's direction. I am constantly making corrections: I am unable to fly 1ft. in a straight line. There are also two pedals to control the rear rotor, but I'm not using these yet. Then Corey asks me if I want a photo. Of couse I do, but in order to take it he has to use both hands ... I'm flying solo!

I'm flying solo in a helicopter in Alaska!

After just 10mins. instructions.

It is a fantastic, unforgettable sensation, which I've never felt before! I steer the machine for several minutes, getting better and better. Meandering carefully over the valley, I slow down, I speed up, concentrating intently all the time. I'm getting on well, watching the ground and choosing the landmarks we fly to myself. After 30mins. I feel completely exhausted; I can't remember when I last had to concentrate so hard. The gusts of wind are especially tiring: I always feel we are just about to crash. Corey intervenes on those occasions. Then I ask him to take back control, and I will relax and look at the landscape.

The wonderful Alaskan landscape.

The sky is clear and from our small glass box we can see for miles. We land back at the base and it turns out that I still have 10mins. flying time left, so we take off again. I ask Corey to take the 'copter out over the sea and fly as low as possible. I love the speed! This is the easy way to climb mountains! What will take me a whole, exhausting day, wearing a rucksack, takes only 5 - 10mins. in this machine.





We turn again towards the base; there is a train travelling in the same direction. Here is my challenge: to catch up with the train! I speed up to 80mph. and we are flying barely higher than the trees!

On the first flight of my life!

It feels unbelievable!

This machine is not as skittish as I thought. If it is treated gently, it will behave gently. It doesn't want to crash. We're starting to become friends, but even so, the landing maneuver is beyond me. During our second landing I leave my hand on the lever and can feel just how much a part of the machine Corey is. We land as softly as a feather.

Now it's David's turn, and Andy and I set off back to Anchorage. My rapture is still bubbling away! It was a fantastic thing to do! So much better than flying over Fairbanks in some tatty old balloon. In front of the hotel I say goodbye to Andy once more, but this time forever. There's not a doubt that if I'm ever in Alaska again, he will be my organizer.

Yolanda is on reception in the hotel.

My plane doesn't leave until the afternoon, so I ask her if I can stay in my room until 3.00pm. I will try and get an hour's sleep; it's an exhausting job flying a helicopter.

Room 206
Best Western Hotel
Valdez
22nd September
Afternoon

I planned to leave the Hilton at 3.30pm, but I am already down in the foyer by 3.00.

I pop in to the office of Salmon Berry Tours. Up until now they've either been closed whenever I passed, or I haven't had the time to go in, but now I see Candice there. She's very busy with clients, but I only need a moment of her time. I thank her for posting my first package - which has arrived safely in Hungary - and for the day she was my personal guide around Anchorage. I say my farewell to her. I say goodbye to Candice and to Anchorage.

I buy an ice-cream in the hotel and walk down to the nearby monument. I go up the hill, and down below me I can see the Alaska Railroad Station down below. So many things have happened since I took that bus from there - the trains weren't running that day. Those were the very first

days of my expedition, and now I'm more than 3/4 of the way through it. There's a lot more behind me than ahead. It is hard to be cheerful at this moment.

I've taken to this city.

I've walked through its streets a lot, so I've seen most of its shops, exhibitions and museums. All my shopping might have seemed unnecessary to a stranger, but I know that it wasn't. The supplies of clothes and equipment that I've bought here will last me for years. And whenever I wear them back home - for hunting, or just in the street - I will always be reminded of Anchorage. It is the Big Apple of the North!

I stay in my little watch tower for a while looking at the harbor traffic, a view I have seen many times from my hotel window. But now I must slowly start getting ready to go as my plane will be leaving soon. I walk back to the hotel and say goodbye to Yolanda. She's just finished her shift and is out of uniform, in her own clothes. She has been the kindest and most helpful receptionist I have ever met. I say goodbye to the others behind the desk and then drop in to the bar. It is not yet open, I can't have a farewell beer, so I just get in a taxi and head for the airport. The driver wants to chat, but I don't feel like it. I'm leaving Anchorage.

Why should I be cheerful?

I find my way around the airport easily, as I've already been here a couple of times. I get on the Era Aviation plane to Valdez; that is where my hunting and other adventures will continue. After flying for only 30-40mins. on the shabby plane we land on the wet runway. If I was a newcomer to Alaska, I would certainly consider this to be bad weather. But now I'm an old hand, and don't give it a second thought.

This amazing city has chosen a slogan which, though it might not sound particularly modest, is very true and appropriate:

Switzerland: the Valdez of Europe.

Anyone who's been here and seen these mountains and the incomparable panorama will agree with me that the motto is no exaggeration.

Valdez has never been a tourist paradise.

Before the TAPS was built, it was only a simple little fishing village, but since then it has turned into a real oil city. Where there is oil, there is money, and both have contributed to the development of Valdez. This city of 4454 inhabitants is the final stop of the TAPS and the massive tankers leave Valdez harbor first into Prince William Sound, and then on to the rest of the world. That oil does not only bring money is shown by the Exxon Valdez catastrophe, which at present is the greatest oil pollution disaster not only in Alaska, but the entire world. The city will never forget the memory of that terrible event.

The 211,000 ton oil tanker sailed out of Valdez on the 24th March 1989. The official pilot boat guided the tanker steadily out of Valdez harbor and set it on its course. The giant ship started its voyage on the correct bearings, but a little later Capt. Joseph Hazelwood spotted an iceberg, which might possibly have broken off from the Columbia Glacier. He requested permission to make a minor course adjustment, which he received. But he failed to ensure that his subordinates carried out his orders. The Duty Officer actually made the situation worse by not properly communicating with the helmsman, who ended the maneuver too early, even though it had been started too late. They were still trying to steer the ship when it struck a reef, causing a huge gash in its side.

The oil started to pour out.

In a very short time over 10.8 million gallons had leaked into the sea.

500 sq.mi. of ocean were covered by thick coating of oil.

The pollution extended 1300 mi. along the Alaskan shore.

The size of the spill, the badly organized rescue operation, the rough weather, technical problems and pointless professional and theoretical arguments, all delayed the start of the clean up. It took the outstanding efforts of 10,000 people and \$5bn to try and control the oil. But it was only partially successful. Only 20% of the entire cargo was stopped from leaking, and the disaster cost the lives of over 250,000 sea birds. Their nesting areas were destroyed and their world suffered irreparable damage. 2500 very, very rare sea-otters, billions of herring and salmon, all paid with their lives for this act of negligence. Bird rescuers found 250 falcons which had lost their feathers because of the toxins. Ten years after the disaster the bird life had still not recovered and, according to estimations, will not for another seventy. Many local people have been suffering from symptoms of pollution since it happened. The ship still sails, but under the name of Dong Fang Ocean, and various rules have been tightened. For example, now only double-hulled tankers are allowed to carry oil. This year (2009) there will be a series of events to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the tragedy.

Wherever you go in Alaska you will see memorials to the gold rush.

This includes Valdez, as well.

During the gold rush Valdez was the start of the pan-American trail. The route crossing the glacier and ice-field north-east of the town was just the start for the wanderers, whose next station, and place of rest, was the Copper River. To me, this route is the most puzzling thing about the gold rush. The mouth of the Copper River can easily be reached from Cordova, in the Gulf of Alaska; it is only just over 18mi. by sea. It would have been an obvious choice for prospectors, even in the very beginning, to have taken the easier and safer sea route rather than

climbing the dangerous glacier. I can't understand why they chose to travel over this merciless, ice-covered land and then join up with the Copper River later. Having studied the history of the gold-rush I think it is probable that somebody just happened to pick this trail and the others followed blindly. Another possibility is that as river travel was very expensive only the well-heeled fortune hunter could afford it; even so, they never used the Copper River but instead chose to sail up the Yukon River as far as Dawson. It was a convenient solution and people didn't have to walk a step though, according to records, such a journey took more than 314 days because of the Yukon freezing over.

Whatever the real reason was, it is a fact that in the winter of 1897-98 3500 people set out over the much-feared Valdez Glacier, driven by the belief that lying on the ground, just beyond the ice-fields, were nuggets of gold the size of birds eggs. According to the literature I've seen, first they had to walk 18.5mi. to get to the top of the glacier and then descend another 9.25mi. to the Copper River. My own map measurements only partially confirm these distances.

During the gold rush W. R. Abercrombie, a captain in the 2nd Infantry Regiment of the US army and a well-known expert on glaciers, was a highly-respected man in the Valdez area; on his death a mountain to the east of the glacier was named after him.

The greatest difficulty of this route was the fact that, due to its southern location, the ice only became solid enough to walk on at night. So the prospectors were forced to make their way in total darkness over one of the most dangerous glaciers, parts of which, even today, no sane mountaineers would attempt unless it was daylight and they were harnessed and roped together. If they managed to successfully negotiate the glacier, they then came to the Kluteena Valley and river, and finally, after several more rivers, the aspiring prospectors were able to continue on to the Klondike.

Providing they managed to survive the Kluteena River.

Today this fast-running mountain river, with its many rapids, is considered perfect for difficult white-water rafting, but 100 years ago to those wanderers it was an uncrossable, wet hell. One in four people were shipwrecked, with the water washing away not only their equipment but their hopes as well. It was an almost impossible challenge to climb back over the glacier without equipment or warm clothing and make it back to Valdez, the place from which these mad people had originally set out on their mad adventure. Some members of the groups crossing and re-crossing the glacier went insane. Many thought they had seen the "Ice Demon", a frightful monster that attacked them, trying to push them into crevasses in the ice. Out of the 3500 that attempted the crossing only 200 managed to get across the Kluteena; just 5% of the original

number actually made it to the Klondike. The total amount spent by these prospectors in making a never-to-be-finished overland trek came to \$3.7m.

I am staying at the Best Western where, after looking at several rooms, I finally end up in Room 206. I've carted my bags between three rooms, each numbingly cold. The receptionist comes with me to try and find one with a more pleasant climate. I might just have to get out my sleeping bag.

I have such fond memories of the Anchorage Hilton and its staff, who were so kind and friendly, that the Best Western has a really tough act to follow if they want to impress me. So perhaps I'd better not be too ready to criticize as I'm certain to be biased. From my room I can see the harbor; beneath my window a coastguard vessel is moored and on its bow, with its barrel sticking out, stands a huge machine gun under a canvas cover.

I hope I'll survive the night here.

Somehow.

On board the Ruffinit
23rd September
Noon

I slept awkwardly on that damned bed last night and now I can hardly move my thigh. It is not good news just before a mountain hunt.

At 8.30am, after a very poor breakfast, I am waiting in the foyer. I'm not alone; there will be two of us on this hunt. My companion is an elderly gentleman from Texas, with a Santa Claus beard. His name is R. Smith, but we don't say much to each other after introducing ourselves.

The door opens and someone comes in... Greg Jennen!

Yes, it is the legendary Alaskan mountain guide himself, with whom I shot the Dall sheep a while back in Brooks Range. My expedition started with that hunt and once again I am returning to the wilds of Alaska with Greg.

We plan to hunt mountain goat and black bear.

The name American Mountain Goat (*Oreamnos americanus*) is slightly misleading. This animal is not in fact a real goat. It belongs to the goral family, which are more ancient creatures than ordinary goats. Luckily this does not affect the way it looks: I think it is the most beautiful animal in the world. Mountain goats originally arrived here from Asia, crossing the frozen Bering Sea about 600,000 years ago, which means that it is now indigenous to North America. They are

about 40ins. high and weigh up to 220lbs., so we shall be dealing with a plucky, muscular animal. Its fur is usually white but variations of a vanilla hue do occur. It has large hooves and their tough soles make them ideal for clambering over rocky surfaces. Both male and female have short horns. They are of similar length in both sexes, but those of the female are straighter. During a fight males wisely try to avoid head contact as the skin on their muzzles is rather thin, and their skulls are not strong. Instead they push against each other's legs with their sharp horns, occasionally stabbing an opponent's abdomen. Such injuries are often fatal. Females only use their horns when defending their position within the group.

The mountain goat is an exceptionally strong and tough animal, which has adapted well to the harsh conditions of its habitat. It moves confidently over the rocks and can swim so well that even big lakes don't give it any problems. Its sight is unbeatably acute: it can spot small movements from great distances. Its senses of smell and hearing are adequate, but not as keen as its sight. It usually feeds at night and is most active in the early morning and at dusk: these are the best times to hunt it. It is found mainly in the southern territories of Alaska though it has also been introduced in other places, such as the famous Kodiak Island. When assessing a trophy, it is the horns' length and diameter at the base that are measured. The world record was shot in British Columbia in November 1991.

Hunting for mountain goat is a real treat. Its eyes are at least as good as any mountain sheep's, but hunters must also cope with a more difficult terrain when stalking it. Interestingly, local hunters have found that there's a better chance of shooting it from above as the mountain goat tends to pay less attention to that direction. We'll see.

The hunt will start off by boat. When I was in Brooks Range I questioned Greg about this boat, whereupon he became a little indignant and corrected me, saying "It's not a boat, it's a yacht."

Well, I'm not so sure.

When I hear the word "yacht", I immediately think of something glistening and highly polished, anchored off Monte Carlo, equipped with a bar, jacuzzi and helipad. Greg's boat, sorry, I mean yacht, is far from this. It is almost certainly older than I am; the question is, how much? It has three cabins; the first is for Greg and Randy (I shot my first caribou with him) and the remaining two for Russel and me. My cabin could not be any smaller. I can't even stretch out my legs, I'm always bumping into some sloping cupboard. Its only decor is a small photograph of a Bald Eagle. I put my bags on the lower bunk while trying to work out how two people could possibly fit into such a small space. But I don't want to sound as if I'm complaining because there really isn't any reason to do so. My accomodation is dry and, hopefully the rain won't come in - the old



rubber insulation around the skylight has completely perished - but there are no draughts or bad smells. There is no need for anything more. There is also a toilet and shower on board which I'm relieved to hear. The largest space on board is over the cabins and functions as kitchen and dining room, communal room and bridge. I spend most of my time here as there's always someone to talk with. A huge map is glued to the tabletop and we are shown exactly where we are. We are given some sheets of paper telling how to determine the sex of a mountain goat. They remind me a little of the magazines from my distant childhood. They had drawings like this, where you had to try and spot the differences between the two pictures. I've been studying the drawings for 10mins. and I think that anyone who can tell which is the male must be a genius. We all stand in a line behind Greg's captain's chair and commence doing what is the basis of every hunt: endless scanning through binoculars. It is not the same in Hungary where just a couple of minutes is usually enough time to find and assess the game - even without binoculars. Here you must watch the mountains, sometimes for hours, if you want to find a goat.

The essence of our tactics is to spot some game from the boat. Then we will get into two special dinghies - we are towing them at the moment - and make our way to the foot of the mountain, which runs right down to the seashore. After mooring we will climb the mountain, I will shoot the goat, and then we'll return to the yacht. Often you must spend one or two nights on the mountain because the goats live in such inaccessible places that a single day is hardly ever enough. The worst surprise is the unexpected appearance of fog, as then you will have to spend yet another day on the mountain. But once we've left we are not going to come back without a goat.

One of the most beautiful parts of Alaska, and one of its greatest attractions, is Prince William Sound. It is in the vast Gulf of Alaska, to the north of the Kenai Peninsula, criss-crossed by the busy sea lanes leading out of Valdez Bay. This where we are sailing at present. The coastline is deeply indented with fjords and there are many islands in the coastal waters, big and small, and mostly uninhabited.



There is some confusion as to how the sound got its name.

Captain Cook, the famous navigator and explorer, was sailing in these waters in 1778 and named it Sandwich Bay, after Lord Sandwich. This lord became the father of all sandwiches after asking his servant, one day while out hunting, to place the meat between two pieces of bread to make it easier to handle. This was the world's first sandwich, a Great Invention; no-one really questioned why we'd had to wait so many centuries for it to be thought up. But now this snack will immortalize the name of Lord Sandwich throughout the world until the end of time.

But apparently Cook's cartographer rebelled against his captain's order, arbitrarily decided that he would not put Sandwich's name on the map, and instead put Prince William's, for whom he had greater respect. And that is how the bay came to be called Prince William Sound. The prince justified the honor by becoming king on 26th June 1830, and thus part of Great Britain's history as William IV.



It was this bay that was so devastated by the Exxon Valdez disaster. We pass the site of the tragedy, though now there are no traces of it.

Just then an enormous tanker, the Alaskan Legend, approaches us. On its superstructure, in letters over one storey high, is a sign saying "No Smoking": an indication that it certainly isn't carrying potatoes!

23rd September
Afternoon

By 3.00pm we have reached our mooring.

We will be setting off on our hunts from here, but first we have to test the two guns. That is not an easy operation here. Trees grow right down to the water's edge, bending over the shoreline, with jungle-like thickets between them. There is no clear view for 300ft., not even 30ft. So we must place the target close to shore, standing in the water, and we take aim from an island 363ft. away.

We get into two boats and, after testing our guns, we part company. I remain with Randy, which I'm perfectly happy about. In Brooks Range we got very used to each other. He knows of a nice little spot, not far away, which is good for black bear. This is where the bears come when they want to have fish for dinner. But for some reason there aren't a lot of fish about this year, which won't improve our chances; but we go and try anyway.

Mooring is a real pain.

I get out first and Randy passes me the guns and equipment. As there is nowhere to safely tie up the motorboat Randy goes back out to sea a short distance. In the boat is a kayak, ready for use, and its moment has now come. Randy comes back in it, we pull it up onto the shore, and then go to our hide to await the bear. As I sit down I suddenly realise what has been missing from my hunts so far.

The forest!

Since I've been in America I haven't seen one forest!

I've been in the mountains, on the tundra and on the prairie, but never once in a forest. This is unusual for me as I am a forest hunter. But just how unusual, I am only now beginning to realise. Our hide is exactly like a Hungarian one. Except that we sit on the floor. And are waiting for baribal instead of boar.

It's 9.00pm and we still haven't seen a bear; and my feet, in the unlined rubber boots I have borrowed, have become so frozen that we return to the boat. In this biting cold it is very comforting to see the cosy lights of the yacht flickering in the distance.

This boat is now our home.

At dinner guides and clients sit down together. We have roast meat with two garnishes and a salad. (The reserves of cans of coke seem inexhaustible.) The meal finishes with ice cream. We could not ask for better fare. Dinner passes in a pleasant atmosphere and general harmony.

There are some people who judge a hunt's merits by how spartan the conditions are: the more so, the better. I hold a different opinion. I suffer enough while preparing for hunting, as well as during my ruthless trainings throughout the year. I consider the training period to be a part of the hunt as those months will determine how well I will be able to perform while hunting. I don't believe deliberately seeking discomfort and ordeals will make me a better hunter. When I get home I have no inclination to start boasting on internet forums or in hunting magazines about how much I have had to go through for the sake of a successful hunt. I always try to find the best accommodation and food according to my circumstances. I don't confuse my hunting with the training given to some elite corps of mountain soldier. Suffering is not my goal. I will put up anything that the hunt requires, but I won't accept more than is necessary. I'm quite happy to sleep in a tent, but if there's a good hotel nearby, then I'll go there.

That's what makes me feel good.

And the pupose of this trip is to make me feel good.

On board the Ruffinit
24th September
Morning

While we were bear stalking yesterday Randy saw some mountain goats through his spotting scope.

In all, he counted eight males. (How he managed to determine their sex from that distance, I've no idea.) The weather report coming over the walkie-talkie promises good conditions so the guides have decided that today we will try to get to the mountain and the goats.

After a long, relaxing sleep I join the others at 8.00am in the middle room on the second floor of the yacht. I woke to the smell of bacon frying. As I did most of my packing yesterday I'm free to go and look for my breakfast.



„Goat Hunting Spike Camp
24th September
Evening

"Alaska wants to kill you. It will try in a thousand different ways!" (Greg Jennen)

Based on yesterday's experiences Greg has decided that the whole group will set out for the hunting grounds in one boat. We climb into one of the motorboats. Unfortunately the weather forecast deceived us. The clouds have come down and are pouring out their heavenly blessing in great abundance. We had already put on our Gore-Tex clothes while on the yacht, and in the boat we pull our hoods tight. With heads lowered we endure the rain being thrown in our faces by the wind as we go towards the shore. I can see in advance that this is not going to be an easy day.

We find the place where we landed yesterday to stalk bears. The landing procedure is the same and is done in several stages. Greg has also brought an inflatable dinghy with him.

It turns out that the small bay that we saw on our stalk yesterday is actually a separate lake. It is fresh water; it seems that these bears don't like sea fish. The lake is not connected to the sea despite being only 300ft. from the shore. But its shores reach right up to the foot of the mountain where the goats live. This is why Greg has brought along the inflatable. It is much easier to get to the mountain using that than by walking through the thickets along the shore. Randy is rowing ahead of us in the same kayak that he used yesterday after anchoring the motorboat. He carried the one-man kayak over the strip of land separating the lake from the sea on his head.

We start across the lake.

This boat trip will always be one of my fondest memories. The water in the lake is unbelievably clear and on the bottom, several feet below, I can clearly see rotting tree trunks and occasionally a dead fish. I ask Greg why they aren't floating on the surface but he doesn't know.

All the different types of vegetation found in the taiga are ranged along the shore, in every possible shade of green and brown. It is a typical northern forest, with no signs of human intrusion or influence. Moss hanging from branches, trees uprooted by storms, pines... the best part of a nature film brought to life right in front of my eyes. It is so Alaskan, so exactly like what I've been waiting to see that I can't get enough of it. I'd be happy to land right here so that I could examine each tree, touch the lichen and smell the scent of the bushes, but Greg promises me that I'll still be able to do all that later.

This lake is linked to another one by a 300ft channel. We go along it, rowing against the current; Greg is having to work harder... an oar strikes the bottom and, with a soft crack, it breaks. We

struggle on much more slowly, using just one oar, but at least it gives me time to enjoy the scenery.

By the time we reach the opposite bank the rain has become much heavier. After getting out of the boat Greg points to a ridge, or saddle, where we will set up our camp. It is right above us. We are just about to leave when we have an unpleasant surprise: Greg has left his boots behind on the yacht. He is only wearing knee-length rubber boots, and though they are suitable for a lot of things, mountain climbing isn't one of them. There is no alternative; he must return in the kayak to the motorboat, and then to the ship to collect them. This is bad news because the delay means that the one-day hunt that we'd hoped for, especially considering the weather, is now impossible. We are definitely going to have to spend a night here.

While we wait for Greg, we watch the rain and the landscape. The moment he gets back we grab our climbing irons. Yes, we're going to need them, even though there isn't any ice or snow. The ever-wet moss and grass make the mountainside, steep as a wall, so slippery that without our crampons we wouldn't get anywhere. I am using small ones as they are lightest. Slovak mountaineers refer to this type of miniature climbing iron as macski. It is not really suitable for climbing on ice but it keeps your boots steady on frozen ground.

It is the beginning of a brutal struggle.

We are faced with a series of obstacles out of which just one would be one too many. I won't forget this climb as long as I live. Because it is, quite literally, a climb. We are fighting Alaska with our hands and feet, tooth and nail.

We must get through undergrowth so dense, even a bulldozer would be defeated. We have to climb over fallen trees that are rotting away. We clamber through thickets higher than our waists, we can't tell where we are stepping. The bushes tear at our clothes, their branches clutch at our legs. Everything is wet and thorns stick into us.

And it is raining.

It gets colder and colder.

We mount the slopes.

My situation is worst as my climbing irons don't have hooks on their tips. I can't get a proper grip on the moss. I slip, grab at something, and even through my gloves I can feel the thorns. I fall, I get up and go on. I am soaked by the rain from above and by the bushes from below.

The wind is getting stronger.

Every 300ft. we must cross a creek or stream. No path, no bridge. We have to wade through. We grasp at the bushes overhanging the banks to try and keep our balance. Then we come to a

creek that has no place to ford. We try but we fail. We sink up to our knees in icy water. It is squelching in my boots.

We keep on climbing.

Clenching our jaws and baring our teeth, dripping wet.

R. is hindering me more and more. He is not used to this sort of struggle and we are constantly having to wait for him. During these forced rests our clothes, wet by the rain from outside and our sweat from inside, almost freeze to our bodies.

We still can't find anywhere to cross, we can only go higher by following the creek. I take two steps and lose my footing: a rock has rolled from under my climbing irons... I fall down flat, into the icy water.

There is no going back. It's too late for a change of mind. We keep on climbing. The worst is the sliding back. I go a couple of feet, the ground slips beneath my boots, and back I slide. The bushes hit my eyes. While I slip, the wet mud underneath my feet gets into my face. It happens at least four times. We are fighting to climb each inch. Our boots sink deep into wet moss.

The weather is getting worse and worse. The rain is pouring down. This is ice-cold Alaskan rain, which gets everywhere. And it is aided by its good friend, the wind. The pair of them are torturing us four hunters. And the plants, the gradient, the rocks and the mud, all are helping them. And the cold.

The cold, which is getting even colder; I've never felt such cold before. The cold is the final straw. It is the cold which magically changes the rain to ice. It is the cold which chills the creeks, the wind, and our bodies. I hate this cold.

During one break I have a dreadful suspicion... I open my rucksack. And yes: for the first time in my life I have not packed my sleeping bag in a plastic bag. Despite all my mountain hiking, I forgot this basic rule. Any experienced mountain hiker knows that there is no such thing as a waterproof rucksack, it's just advertising jargon. This was a fatal mistake indeed! Because you can endure the cold all day, the wet clothes, the water squelching in your boots and the wind snatching every bit of heat from your body. But if your body can't get warm at night, being fit is no help at all. It is a direct route to hypothermia (very low body temperature). To make things worse, my sleeping bag isn't even warm enough for these conditions anyway. I wrote to Petra, Greg's wife, saying I would like to borrow a liner, which will increase the survival-range of any sleeping bag. She promised me one, but her instructions must have got lost because there wasn't one on board the yacht. So here I am, in soaking clothes and with a sleeping bag which is not only not

warm enough, but is completely sodden! And the temperature keeps dropping! This could be a serious problem. A very serious problem.

I tell Greg. He says I should keep going. We'll manage somehow.

So we keep on climbing.

We come to the end of the thickets; there are no woody plants growing beyond here. It might have made our progress easier but, unfortunately, it doesn't: now there's nothing to hold on to. There are some parts, rises and small peaks, where we just can't get any higher because of the slippery ground. Several times Greg has to go forward using his ice-pick; it is the only way he can determine our route. He will either succeed or fail. We wait behind, turning our backs to the wind, staring at the wet grass from under the peaks of our hoods. If Greg can't find a suitable route straight away we must just keep waiting until he does.

It is still pouring with rain.

We have to shout to be heard; our words are snatched away by the wind. When I ask Greg his opinion about the weather, the mountain and our general situation he replies: - *Bad. Very bad.*

Above us is a flight path coming from Anchorage. We can often hear the engine-roar of the long-distance passenger jets. The passengers sitting in business class are probably sipping their first glass of champagne after take-off. They will be looking out of the window with dismay: - *Oh, honey, what a shame it's so overcast! We can't see the beautiful landscape!*

They won't guess that thousands of feet below them, in that beautiful landscape, there are four - or rather 3.5 - hunters waging a war against Alaska at that very moment.

And their chances aren't looking too good.

R. can't keep going. He is relieved of his bags, one by one. Now the only thing he has to carry is himself, but he can't even do that. He keeps mentioning his age, which is starting to get irritating.

There are several people much older than he is successfully hunting in the mountains, and there are countless others who run marathons at his age. The truth is that he is unfit; he has not been to any trainings. He can't deny the fact. To make it worse, he is also unprepared mentally. Even on the gentlest slopes he has to stop and rest. He always waits to be helped, looking for sympathy from one of us. I'm sorry to have to write this, but R. is not a worthy fellow-hunter. It is a major disappointment because his gun and equipment all suggest great experience.

Greg, who is the most experienced mountain guide in Alaska, has his own method for dealing with these situations. He starts to hum the theme tune from Stallone's Rocky to himself, trying to borrow some of Rocky's strength. The rest of us have learnt his secret too, so now the famous tune can be heard issuing from all the exhausted throats of the ragged line of hunters.

We descend into a small ravine... a stone slips from beneath my foot, I lose my balance... I get to the bottom on my back, bouncing along on my rucksack. I even roll over once, adding to my

already countless bruises. In my rucksack I can hear either my gun, or the rifle scope, bashing against the rocks. If this doesn't ruin the gun's settings, nothing will. I remain lying on my back for a couple of seconds, trying to pull myself together. Greg looks back, but as neither my arms or legs seem to be broken, he goes on. This expedition is pure hell.

We finally reach the saddle.

Well, I've been to quite a few mountain camps in my time, but I've never seen anything as miserable as this. There's just enough room to pitch two tents, but the ground is completely waterlogged. The water drains into here from the two peaks either side of the saddle. We sink up to our ankles in the muddy ground; we have to put up our tents in this marsh. But it is the only level piece of ground around; the camp must be here or nowhere. The tents are small, barely big enough for two people. There will be no space for our guns; we'll have to leave them outside in the rain, along with our rucksacks.

We start to make camp.

While we do it, I discuss my fall with Randy, and my worries that the settings on my gun will have altered. He has brought his .325 caliber WSM rifle along, which I have seen already at Brooks Range. On it he has a tactical Leupold rifle scope, developed for long range precision shooting, with a reticle and ballistic compensator turret made specially for him. The gradations on the turret have been made specifically to function on Randy's gun. When he placed his order, he sent the company his own data on the bullet's speed, with the height above sea-level and temperature at the time, rather than relying on the information supplied by the gun makers. So when he measures distance, he doesn't need to count the clicks on the turret, he simply adjusts it until the indicator reaches the figure shown on the engraved side of the distance recorder. The manufacturers have done a good job and the bullet always strikes where the turret says it will. I like this professional attitude, it shows that Randy takes his shooting seriously. So we agree that I can use it for a shot at my goat - if we can manage to find one. If I miss with the first shot and the goat - or as it is called here, a billy - changes its position, I will then choose which gun to continue with. I will have to decide if the fault lies with me, or my gun's settings. I've no doubt that Randy's Kimber is accurately set, but, unfortunately, what is accurate to within a hair's breadth for one hunter might not be so precise for another. But we can't come up with a better solution; to try and reset my Blaser under these extreme conditions would be impossible. We're just pleased to be alive.

R. is about to die. Shivering, I take off my wet clothes. I inflate my mattress and climb into my dripping sleeping bag. What on earth am I doing here?

It is very cold.



On Board the Ruffinit
25th September

I haven't slept a minute.

Around midnight I started shivering so badly I began to worry about my future. I don't see how things can get any worse than this. We won't be able to last through another night. Especially me, as I have really blown it with the sleeping bag. But I am far from being the weakest link. If everyone is going to stay here, then I shall too, even though it is endangering our lives. I'm not the only one; no-one else has any dry clothes either. Fatal hypothermia threatens us all; conditions are perfect for it: cold, wind, rain, wet clothes and the impossibility of getting warm and dry.

The situation is getting very serious.

We have to work something out as no goat is worth being carried off the mountain in a body bag. As a last resort I unfolded my survival foil during the night. It helped a little, but my wet feet just wouldn't get warm. I put my wet socks on my stomach; according to old arctic explorers, they will dry during the night. Every 10mins. I shift in my sleeping bag, praying that, at some point in my life, I will feel warm again.

I am awfully cold.

I've never been so cold before.

Everything is wet. Outside the wind is howling. What will it be like in the morning? What will it feel like when I have to leave the relative comfort of this sanctuary? I don't have a single dry item of clothing left. R. can't sleep much either, though he has a warmer sleeping bag than I have. What is going to happen to us? And how will the hunt end?

Slowly, it gets light. I'm not going to move until I've got a really good reason for doing so. It was hard to muster this tiny bit of warmth, and I'm not going to lose it.

At 8.00am Greg puts his head in and says: - Come out quickly and quietly.

I leap out of my sleeping bag - it is so cold! - and step into my wet, rock-hard boots, which crackle with ice. I'm afraid that they'll freeze to my feet.

There is a goat above the camp, not more than 900ft. away. We can see it quite plainly from here.

Greg says it is a billy.

He decides R. should have a go.

This is what I was expecting; we discussed it yesterday. R. can't climb any more mountains. He'll try for the goat that is nearest.

That's the way it is.

I once read that, in war, the best trained soldiers have the lowest chances of survival. The better troops can fight, the more dangerous the place to which they will be sent. Hunting is like that. Whoever has trained and prepared well, will be given the most difficult game. And whoever looks for pity, and can't manage the fight, will only have to move a couple of feet from the tent.

I quite understand Greg's reasons. He must get a goat for everyone, his good name depends on it. And R. will either shoot this goat, or nothing at all. He staggers from the tent, examining his gun: he is always tampering with it.

They set up a rucksack for him, and show him where the goat is. R. lies down, I put on my ear-defenders. Meanwhile Greg asks me if I managed to get any sleep and if I have any dry clothes. The answer is no to both questions. It's not very reassuring to see that all his clothes are wet, too; he doesn't seem to be in very good shape. R.'s gun has a compensator so it is even louder than normal guns - I heard it while we were testing them - and Greg puts on ear-defenders as well...

He takes a while to aim...Bang!

Nothing.

The goat is lying down - the poor thing is probably trying to get some sleep in this awful weather; it doesn't even wake up. The noise of battle might be giving it bad dreams. R. tries again... the goat gets up. It must have worked out something is going on because it moves off nervously. A third shot... it strikes above it. A fourth... it is a definite hit, we can see its convulsions but it wasn't a clean shot. If a goat has been shot properly by a bullet from a .3000 WSM, it isn't going anywhere.

Greg lets Randy shoot... the shot lands above it. Meanwhile, R. is busy reloading ... Randy has a second try... again it strikes above it. He's shooting in the right direction, but all his shots land 8 - 12ins. higher than they should. I think the problem is that when taking aim, he is only taking the "real" distance into consideration, not the distance measured horizontally. Ballistics, however, aren't affected by how much higher above us the target is because, as the bullet drops in flight, all that counts is the distance horizontally. That's why wise old chamoix hunters say that when shooting uphill, or down, you always have to aim a little low as, irrespective of how far the chamois is, from a ballistic point of view, it is as if the target was nearer. This is what Ottó always told me, too. Randy, of course, is an experienced shooter who, after his second mistake realises what is causing his shots to go high. With his third shot - R. is still fiddling with his gun - the goat falls. It tumbles down for at least 60ft. and is quite dead by the time it stops.

R. is looking at his gun, shaking his head, but no-one is interested. He just doesn't fit in. There are no congratulations. When men go off to the mountains they form a team. It is quite normal that there are clients and guides; that difference never disappears. There are jobs which must

only be done by the guides, and the clients don't have to help because they are the clients. But the guides have to know that they can rely on their hunters. And R. cannot be relied on.

We are not going to collect the goat.

We all agree that we have to return to the boat today, and time is running out. If I don't bag anything today we can still come back, and there should be enough time for another try. On the ship our clothes will dry out in a day, and my plane isn't leaving until the 30th. Though the best thing would be if we didn't have to come back up here. So now we must try and find a goat for me, but where we are going to find one in the next 4-5hrs. - if I shoot any later, there'll be no time to get back - I don't know. If I get my billy soon, there will be still time to collect the game already bagged. As I have already said, our camp is on a saddle. At either end of it there is a peak - that's what makes it a saddle... R.'s goat was standing halfway up one of the peaks. Before the first shot we had seen two more goats on the opposite peak, but all the shooting has been too much for them. And now there is no trace of them.

We have just one chance left.

We must climb the peak.

We just have to hope that we will find at least one on the other side. We put on our climbing irons and set off to the mountain...

And, there on that mountain, Hell was waiting for us.

Alaska had decided that it would not let us have any more goats. No-one can imagine what the conditions on that mountain were like. I don't think I'm really able to describe them: the blasting wind is stronger than ever. It is not just raining, it is pouring. The terrain is merciless. We have to study the elevation in front of us to work out where to start climbing. The cold is terrible. The rain soon turns to sleet. My hands are numb with cold, even the skin on them is beginning to wrinkle. And my gloves are still wet from yesterday. I don't have a dry pocket; there is nowhere to put my hands to warm them up. How can I shoot like this?

We start our climb.

The climbing irons on our boots are useless. We are constantly sliding backwards, but here there are no thickets every few feet to stop us. Whoever starts slipping here, will slide all the way down to the sea. We have to consider every single step. Greg is always telling me exactly where to put my feet, but I can't hear anything he says. If I'm more than a couple of feet away from him, the storm drowns out everything he says. The wind is so strong that we have to move on all fours: we cannot stand up. It presses our wet clothes against our bodies. We are on a very steep climb, but I'm still not sweating. This is a bad sign. Once, when I looked down, the landscape started moving in front of my eyes.

I am staggeringly cold.

Greg comes up to me and says something, but I can't tell what. I try to focus on his mouth but I can't see it properly. Randy is behind me, I glance back at him... his color doesn't look too good. All three of us are shivering. I'm hungry but I don't want to eat. I'm thirsty but I don't want a drink. The ground beneath our feet is one continuous stream and our boots sink into it. I drop my flask into the water; I must drink something! But after a couple of gulps I feel sick. I fall down and the water from the mountain runs into my clothes. I try to stand up but my climbing irons won't grip, so I fall again. I get on all fours and continue by crawling on my stomach. Part of one of my fingernails comes off. The icy rain is running down my neck. Every stone is covered with moss and each one is more slippery than the last.

There's not a goat in sight.

I can't tell where we are heading. What makes us think there are going to be goats, or any living creature, up here? The mountain is never going to end. We shall be climbing it for the rest of our lives. After each rise we see another, even higher. The wind almost blows us down into a chasm. I can't feel my hands at all.

I can hardly believe it, but we have finally reached the top. I lie down on the wet rocks and wait to see what's going to happen. Greg crawls forward... he signals with his hand for me to stay put. He creeps back to us.

There is a goat here.

At the moment it is 1350ft. away, but by using the ground cover we should be able to get closer. This is my only chance. If I don't shoot this, we won't be able to look for another. There will be no time. Then, either I will go home without a goat, or - weather permitting - we will have to come up here again. We don't even want to think about that. We creep towards the billy under the cover of a ridge.

Randy crawls up to me.

How will we get back to the camp, I ask - how will we get back to the ship?

Don't worry about that now, he replies, it's not your job. Your job is to shoot the goat. Understand? Yes - I answer.

So? - he asks.

I must shoot this goat!

Then shoot it! - he says, pointing at the rucksack.

I crawl forward and Greg keeps his eyes on the billy. He asks if I can see it. It would be hard not to see that white coat against all the dark gray rocks. I pass my gun forward and he slides it onto the rucksack. I crawl up beside him. I take off the front lens cap. The back one was lost a long time ago and I remove some grass from the lens. This gun has been out all night in the pouring

rain, half-submerged in water. I also had a bad fall while I was carrying it...

696ft.

Not far.

It wouldn't be a difficult shot for a relaxed hunter in good mental and physical condition, who is shooting in fine weather with an accurate gun on a proper gun rest. But for me, right here and now, it is almost impossible. But here I am. It's why we're all here. It's why we're putting up with this cold. I must do my best. The wind has dropped a little, but I can't tell where it's coming from... The goat is shielded by a pine tree. Its white coat glimmers through the branches. It starts to move; now it is a clear target, but it keeps on moving... It has stopped...

The Blaser has fired...

The goat collapses, as if struck by lightning, and starts to slide towards a chasm that is over 300ft. deep... worried shouts - it mustn't fall in there, as we'd never be able to reach it today... it is stopped by a mountain pine at the very edge of the drop.

Now we can celebrate, and I put down my gun. It is a very good little gun! It can still hit its target, even in these awful conditions. It hasn't lost its settings, and it didn't give a damn about the weather! It spat the SST exactly where it had to go. Hugs all round and general euphoria. But our celebrations don't last for long. It has not got one degree warmer and the goat is in a place that will be very hard to reach. Greg and Randy go off to check out the possibilities and I remain where I made the shot.

It takes them 15min. to get there.

But what are they doing?

Have they gone insane?

They are crawling towards the goat!

I'm no mountaineer, but even I know you shouldn't go out on that ledge. Not without ropes and harness! Especially in this weather! I am shivering with cold and nerves. The goat should be left where it is! I don't want anyone to go onto that ledge on my behalf. We can say that I missed it. The birds will demolish it in a few days. No-one will ever know. No damn goat is worth the life of a human being!

They go even further out onto the ledge. Beneath them is a bottomless abyss. And then the goat solves the entire problem. A huge blast of wind comes, suddenly shifting the goat's center of gravity, and, inch by inch, it slowly turns towards the chasm until it topples in and falls to the bottom, bouncing against the rock wall several times as it goes. I give a huge sigh. Greg and Randy come back. We start our descent to the camp. There's no chance of getting to the goat today. We just have to accept it. There is still tomorrow; it can be found then. Now we

should just scam, and right away! But this descent... I haven't done many things more dangerous than this in my life. 80% of all mountaineering accidents take place during descents. Exhaustion and lack of concentration always go together, so I really try to keep focused. I carefully plan every step, always picking the safest path, even if it is the longest. I have my goat. No-one is going to remove it from its current position before tomorrow. The task at the moment is to get back safely to camp.

There will be enough time to deal with anything else later.

Greg goes on ahead to show us the way.

According to the rules of mountaineering, Randy is bringing up the rear. We have to make several detours as what was more or less a safe path on the way up, is not, on the way down.

It is 2.00pm when we reach camp.

The guides go to get the first billy, and I lie down in my tent. Before they leave, they give both of us a packet of Mountain House freeze-dried food, and a Jetboil camp stove. I'm not feeling at all hungry, but Greg won't take any arguments: we're not going to leave until both packets have been eaten. That's a good enough reason for me to force it down my throat. As it's not worth getting out of my wet clothes into a damp sleeping bag only for 11/2 - 2hrs., I keep them on, and just wrap my survival foil around me. I lie on my back and hang my boots with their climbing irons outside the tent entrance and wait for the two guides to return.

This was not a bright move.

I didn't notice that my legs were pressing down the front of the tent, letting the water running down the mountain seep slowly in. I finally realise when the water has risen over the inflatable mattress. I feel an entirely new type of cold on my back, which rouses my suspicions... our tent is practically submerged.

I cautiously tell R. the bad news. And, to his credit, he stays calm. We check out the damage. On the one hand, nothing has managed to evade the water; on the other, it doesn't really make any difference to us. All of our clothes, which were already dripping wet, have just got even wetter. Greg and Randy return with the goat. They have already skinned it and put it in bags. R. hit it twice; one shot was a meat shot, in a back leg, and the other was an entrail shot in front of its thigh. Randy hit it precisely, in the shoulder.

We start dismantling the camp.

Greg and Randy have to carry the skin, meat and trophy. According to custom, the one who bagged it, must also help to carry it. It was like that at Brooks Range, in Canada, and should be the same here. But, knowing R.'s attitude so far, there's a fat chance of that happening. So I have to help out. Greg throws a bag of garbage and one of the tents beside my rucksack. I tie them on.

Next stop, the yacht! We begin the descent.

Each level has its own difficulties. There is one danger, however, that is common to all of them: sliding. Without our climbing irons we wouldn't be able to move. There is the danger of broken ankles with every step. When we get to the thicket level, the job begins to get a little easier. We turn our backs to the chasm and use the branches as climbing ropes, descending like that. Every step we must force our climbing irons firmly into the earth. The water surges around our feet. But in one place I make a mistake. The wet earth rips from underneath my climbing irons, I fall on my backside, and start to slide down quickly. I can't slow down, my heavy rucksack is pushing me on. Hearing my yell Greg looks back, forces his climbing irons and ice axe into the ground, and, just as I slide past, jumps on me.

I stop.

6ft. from a small boulder.

Beyond which is a 60ft. crevass.

I'm puffing heavily; Greg was in exactly the right place. It takes a while for the adrenalin to leave my blood.

This is why you should only go up in the mountains with the right people. With people who don't just look on helplessly, or yell uselessly, but, in a fraction of a second, can assess the situation and act. I wouldn't have survived if it wasn't for him.

Twilight is getting near, and we are still a long way from the lake shore where we left the inflatable and the kayak. We always have to wait for R. Not just now and then, but all the time. We aren't making any progress, we have to stand around in this miserable forest, cold and wet, as R. is always wanting to rest. Why he needs to rest so much, I have no idea as, when we were struggling up the mountain, he was lying in his sleeping bag.

I can't make him out.

I usually feel that someone who is weaker than his companions deserves to be helped. That is the right thing to do.

But it gets really annoying if they start to take advantage. All three of us put R. in this category. We have never seen him even sweat. He never gets out of breath. If a group member is doing his best not to hinder his companions, then the others won't feel any antagonism towards him. I'm certain of that, I've seen it happen many times. There are even cases where people, who might have been physically weak, but were mentally strong, and resolutely struggled on, have become the favorites of the group.

Up in the mountains everyone appreciates it if the others are determined and make an effort. The end result is not important: it is your attitude that counts to your companions. And this is where R. fails. Sometimes I feel that he is just taking us all for a ride. As it is now, he doesn't have to carry anything but his own bag, and he can't even do that - at least he pretends that he can't. Randy has even taken his sleeping bag, but it hasn't made much difference. We could have reached the boat ages ago. We can't keep up a good pace, we can't make much progress, we are cold and fed up. We have to sit here on the wet ground, waiting for R. to catch up and announce, in a tragic voice, how old he is.

Once I was in a base camp on Mt. Everest with a man called Tibi. Among the younger members of the group I was the only one who wanted to undertake the last stretch from Gorak Shep shelter, and to their shame, apart from the sherpa, the only man prepared to accompany me was Tibi, the oldest member of the group. Tibi was three years older than R. and I could hardly keep up with him. Honestly, I really had to make an effort not to be left behind. Fitness can easily be maintained over the age of 60, but that is not R.'s problem. Today is not about physical ability. 50% of a man's ability to function in the mountains depends on his state of mind. I've also had some difficult moments, and today can't have been a picnic for Greg and Randy, either. But I've made it.

I might have needed a few words of encouragement now and then but, even so, I've made it. I never tried to slyly dump my problems onto the others, and I'm very unhappy that this is exactly what R. has been doing. He must have many good points but if he knows that he can't handle tough situations - it can be, we're not all the same - then what is he doing on a goat hunt? What did he expect to happen here? Just to sit in a comfortable hide and have the goat wander up to him? And then a cheerful sing-song around the campfire in the evening?

I can see that Greg's patience is also wearing thin. He resorts to a method that often works when up in the mountains with a team member like this: he will not allow any more time for rests. We won't even give him a chance to sit down and bore us with his moaning. As soon as he reaches us Greg sets off. This method is working, we are starting to move faster. Over the last stretch I feel that if I sit down once more on something wet, I will freeze there, and never get up again, so I ask Greg to let me go on ahead. We will meet on the shore of the lake. So that's what I do, and I get down 10min. before Greg. We wait for R. and Randy. But they don't appear. Now we are really getting angry. It is obvious that it isn't Randy who can't keep up. We try and guess what might have happened.

Randy finally arrives. He is carrying two bags! He has taken R.'s bag, though it was practically empty as R. had already given us most of the contents. R. has nothing to do now but walk along

flat ground, but he's not even capable of doing that. I say nothing, it's not up to me to deal with the situation. Finally - I can hardly believe my eyes - he appears.

We get into the boats.

We have no replacement for the broken oar, so it is decided that Randy will tow us with the kayak. It doesn't really work, so we separate. Greg rows with one oar and we stare at the landscape.

It is still pouring with rain.

We moor on the strip of land between the lake and the sea, and start loading the equipment into the motorboat. The Ruffinit is only moments away! There is only one more ordeal left: Greg drives the boat fast and the wind starts to freeze our clothes to us. I'm almost in a state of hypothermia. It is after 8.00pm when we get on board.

The longest 36hrs.

That's a short time for anyone spending it in the comfort of their own home, but it seemed almost endless when hunting goat in the Alaskan mountains, struggling through 11/2 days with no sleep and frozen to the bone. Alaska has thrown its worst at us. The vegetation: dead, uprooted trees, slippery moss and thorny bushes. Sometimes all at the same time. The mountain and terrain: steep inclines, loose rocks and boggy, marshy ground. The weather: fog, wind, rain and cold. Alaska did not yield its goats willingly. But, eventually, we won!

Now comes the nicest moment of the day... I get on deck and go inside and the warmth hits me in the chest! Lovely, dry warmth and Bob's welcoming smile, too! There's no wind in here, and the rain can only patter vainly on the roof: it can't get in. With every step I take, I leave a huge puddle of water behind me. Bob - the cook, guard and crew, all in one - can hardly keep up with his mop. I go down to my cabin and start to peel off my clothes. Without a doubt, I am soaked to my skin. Everything I'm wearing, down to my underpants, is wet. I stand under the small shower and let the warm water gush over me... there is no better cure for a frozen body! I wash the cuts on my palm, which I got while grabbing at bushes. After 15min. I'm a new man.

Tonight I really love my little cabin. It has its own heating and I can regulate the amount of heat coming in by opening the vents. I open every one wide.

Bob is cooking lasagne for dinner.

So that is how my goat hunt went. After bagging my Dall sheep, when I asked Greg about goat hunting, he said: the goat hunt starts where the sheep hunt ends.

I didn't believe him. But it's true.



On Board the Ruffinit
26th September

The main job today is to find the goat I shot yesterday.

We are discussing it over breakfast when Greg makes an unwelcome announcement: I can't go with them, I have to stay on the yacht!

I must stay here while the guides do all the hard work! Just like some novice! What's going on here? Is this some canned hunt in Africa, or are we still in Alaska? What do they think I am? Some over-sensitive boy, who they don't dare take back into the wilderness? It is very good of them not to offer to shoot my bear for me on their way back. Then I wouldn't need to leave the boat at all! My boots need never get dirty again!

I give them my opinion. Randy is on my side, but Greg is adamant. He remains obstinate: I must stay here, and that's it. Seeing how disappointed I am, he explains his decision.

I don't have any more dry clothes, while they have lots. Boots are a particular problem as there are only two drying racks, and their boots have been on them all night. The goat fell into a place where even he has never been. They have hunted bear in the area, but have not been in that chasm. They will be faster on their own, and I must accept it. Even though I love the mountains, I can't compete with their mountaineering skills. If I go, there will be a risk that we will have to spend the night there. Greg wouldn't mind, but thinks the terrain could be unsafe. He's sure the route to it is definitely dangerous, even though he's only seen it from where I fired the shot, and the place where the goat fell. He's also led several expeditions in the area; I haven't been there once. My mountain goat hunt is not the time to start exploring, especially as I have other hunts coming up for which I must be in top physical condition.

It was this latter argument that finally convinced me. There's always a chance of broken bone when you're up in the mountains. Particularly in a place considered to be dangerous. And that would be just what I need.

So, a little sadly, at 11.00am I watch them retrace our route in the motorboat. I return to my cabin for a nap.

By 4.00pm the weather has brightened up.

Just my luck! If we went hunting tomorrow I could probably go in short sleeves and sunbathe on the mountain afterwards. We could have some target practice up there too. I'd get a suntan and my clothes would stay dry. I would scold myself for only bringing rainwear instead of my shorts. And sun-lotion.

But then the hunt would not have been as memorable as it is. Even though I haven't yet seen the trophy, I know it will certainly be, to me, my most valuable. I already know who I'm going to give it to (A.T.). I've kept the cartridge case as well, and will glue it to the mount.

In Alaska good weather should always be taken advantage of, because it never lasts for long. I collect my clothes from my cabin and lay them out on deck to dry. No matter how warm it is in the cabin, they'll never dry there. The cabin's volume is so tiny that there is nowhere for the water to evaporate. I open the cabin skylight and, like some tank commander, I survey the wide world. The fresh air drives out the smell of drying socks.



I have been very lucky with Greg and Randy. That I owe my goat to them, there is no doubt. Yesterday morning, when I stepped out my tent in that hell-hole, I couldn't believe that I'd ever shoot a goat here. And while we were working our way towards the peak I was sure that the climb was merely to prove to me, the client, that they, the guides, were doing all that they could. Which is why I felt that the whole climb was a waste of time. My chance of success looked about zero. But here, in my diary, I am able to apologize for my lack of faith.

The bottom line is that they are the most accomplished guides I have met on this trip. They don't leave a thing to chance. Anyone who goes hunting with them but fails to bag anything can return home secure in the knowledge that the reason was that there was nothing to bag. Because if there is only a 1% chance of a bag, then these two will find it. Also, there is only one other outfitter who, like Greg, has a permit to shoot in this goat paradise; it means he's almost guaranteed a 100% success rate for his clients.

I'm pleased with my Blaser. The night it spent out in the pouring rain was almost equivalent to it lying for the same period at the bottom of a lake. It is exactly the right sort of gun to have here, not some fancy, engraved work of art. I must also praise my Zeiss sight. The complicated, sensitive electronics have worked perfectly, and no water at all got into it.

During my free time I give the gun a clean. To be honest, that night outside has left some traces. The bolt head and the gun chamber are covered in a light layer of rust, but it comes off very easily, even with a finger. The barrel also has some corrosion. I can see tiny pin-heads of rust. I remove the barrel, dismantle the zárdugattyú and oil it. It will get a more thorough examination and a complete service when I'm back home.

I'm in such a good mood - maybe it's the sunshine, maybe it's the goat - that I even look at R. in a different light. When we talk here on the ship, in civilised conditions, I see a pleasant, educated man opposite me. I would be delighted to meet him anytime. On this hunting trip he took on too much, and I think he knows that as well. But he might be a very pleasant companion on an African safari. He is a patient man, as was proved by his restraint when I flooded the tent.

26th September
Evening

The search party returns just after 8.30pm.

They have my goat!

The weather has affected it somewhat, its fur is matted and it looks as if it's got a bit of a hangover: but I've got it! It is a very good trophy, larger than average. My shot struck it exactly in the middle of the shoulder, so it's no surprise it collapsed at once. Despite the bullet's rapid expansion, it still managed to travel deep into the body. I think Hornady could be right when they claim that, in the SST, they have managed to combine rapid expansion with depth of impact. The birds had started to peck at the skin around the bullet hole, but I don't care: I hadn't planned to donate it to a museum. I look at the horns with satisfaction, and the usual trophy photos are taken on board the Ruffinit, with everyone wearing jeans.

After doing the paperwork, Bob starts on dinner. Randy is indulging in his favorite pastime: watching DVD's. I am writing my diary.

The evening passes with everyone in a good mood.

Successful hunters and proficient guides spending their time together.



On Board the Ruffinit
27th September
Morning

To continue my thoughts of yesterday about bullets: I must state that in this part of the world Barnes -X and other homogeneous bullets have a very bad reputation. Greg and his team consider this type of bullet to be completely unsuitable for mountain hunts. In their information brochure, sent out before the hunt starts, they ask hunters not to bring ammunition with them that uses these bullets.

This opinion is definitely backed up by experience. Bullets of this structure will not expand, but behave like their full-shelled companions. At least, those are the results suggested by the game

species and hunting conditions found here. In their time, Greg and his fellow hunters have seen a lot of mountain game bagged; they've had ample opportunity to observe the effects and practical killing power of the various types of bullets used by different hunters. When judging bullets it seems a good idea to ignore the claims of those people referred to by László Kovács as back-room experts; they, unfortunately, have too much influence over hunting journalism and literature. It is very hard to define what makes a good bullet.

One camp holds that the best caliber and bullet is one that will pass straight through the animal and out the other side. Their main argument is for the copious bleeding caused by both the exit wound and the entrance wound - which makes it easier to track the animal and hastens its death - and the bilateral shock effect. The other camp thinks that the best caliber and bullet is one that stays in the animal's body, passing on its entire kinetic energy to the neighboring tissues.

I don't belong to either camp.

I just try and shoot accurately, which is why I am a frequent visitor to the rifle range. The result is that it's not often hard to find an animal after I've shot it, though, as I've already written, there have been one or two exceptions. In my opinion it is the accuracy of the shot that counts. If the bullet hits the right spot, its type and brand generally won't matter. We must not forget that Inuits shoot polar bears with .222 Remington, and they rarely need two shots! If I had to say what I thought made an excellent bullet I'd say it's one that stops just under the skin on the opposite side to the entry wound. This is as close to both of the above views as it is possible to be.

A hunt can be a success with any kind of bullet.

The SST is a good all-round cartridge because it expands immediately on contact - I have seen this many times myself - but also has the capacity for deep penetration. This latter quality is not as pronounced as it is with a stronger-structured bullet, but it is still effective. Based on my current experiences, which are still on-going, I will use three different types of bullet in my .300 caliber Winchester Magnum;

- Hornady SST Interlock: the "Expedition Cartridge". When shooting over great distances in open spaces - every hunt on this trip has been under these conditions - it is unrivalled. When fired accurately, it killed the musk ox with one shot, proving its good impact depth. It expands well when hitting entrails, which is very important in North America. The vast shooting distances and the innumerable difficult shots - while lying down, while the game is running, or just on the spur of the moment - all increase the risk that the animal will only be wounded. It's no surprise that this bullet is sold by Hornady, a 100% American manufacturer. They are perfectly aware of what hunters over here need. Accurate bullets.
- RWS Evolution: if I keep using this caliber when I'm back in Hungary - I feel it might be unnecessarily powerful for a Hungarian hunt - this is the cartridge I will put in my magazine. Over

covered ground it travels much more accurately than the SST, which is inclined to expand as it flies.

- Norma Oryx (13gm. version): When I'm hunting specifically for brown bear or grizzly this is what I use. Its bigger mass and blunter nose obviously suggest a greater killing power, and it is absolutely essential on a bear hunt, which could turn dangerous. I think the same killing power will be achieved as with either of the previous two bullets, but a little extra insurance can't do any harm, particularly if you don't lose any of the other advantages. Oryx has the lowest BC value, and consequently flies more slowly, but at a bear hunt this is not of great importance.
- The guides think that, for a mountain hunt, you should only need enough bullets to fully load your gun twice. With my gun that means eight cartridges. So far, that has always sufficed for me - apart from the crazy day I spent bagging the Mad Fox, when there just weren't enough.
- If, by any chance, I lost my job, then I could certainly become a meteorologist in Alaska. My summer forecasts would go like this: "Changeable, windy weather, probability of rain 80%". For at least five days of the week I would have a public grateful for my precise predictions. The few hours of sunshine yesterday have long gone, and the weather has returned to normal. The only change is that it has returned with the hunter's arch-enemy: fog. In fog you can't see the goats, you can't find your way back to camp, you can't even see the end of your nose. However unlikely it might sound, we have actually been lucky with the weather. We could be up in the mountains, stuck in our tents, waiting for it to lift. But, instead, I'm now sitting here in the main room of the yacht, eating grapes and waiting for my latest hot breakfast, being cooked by Bob. As I sit here I've got one eye on a real rarity: a cartridge for a Lazzeroni Caliber 7.82 Warbird. It was left here by another goat hunter. It's got a lot of gunpowder in it! It must kick like a horse. I have my other eye on the TV: Greg has just put Rambo 2 on the DVD player.
- Now, as we have our goats, and the boys have even managed to find them, and have rested and celebrated enough, we might as well get on with the black bear hunt. Especially as, though there is still quite enough time to bag this particular species, the days are passing. Yesterday, I arranged with Andy that there would be no more relaxing, and today we will start stalking the baribals.

27th September
Evening

It has been decided that I will hunt with Greg.

We will scour the nearby beaches and bays of Prince William Sound, searching for a black bear. To do this, we will take a small boat that we haven't used yet. Its engine is a little bigger and its body more streamlined, so we can get around faster in it. Before leaving, we fill up the huge gas tank - we don't want to have to swim home. Randy warns me to put on all the warm clothes I've got, as the boat is very fast and the wind will be very cold. Accordingly, I dress up like the Michelin man and get into the boat looking decidedly bloated. Greg switches on the ignition and we leave the mother ship behind.





We soon reach the icy bays of the Sound. The sea here is always full of icebergs, large and small. Greg slaloms between them; I feel as if I'm sitting in a motorboat simulator. There is a lot of ice around, and we can see many seals and sea-otters.

Yes, sea-otters!

It is so good to see how this creature, almost driven to extinction, has started to return to the area. Before the arrival of the white man the population was estimated to be between 150,000 - 300,000; but, by 1911, only 1000 - 2000 remained. Today they are completely protected and have no fear of us. We can get within 15ft. and they still don't swim away. Lying on their backs in the water, they stare at us with curiosity. There are large colonies of them: I can see at least 100.

They have taken back almost 2/3 of their original habitat. Nowadays, the main danger for them comes from oil-tanker accidents, and certain fishermen and shell-fish farmers, who drive them from their protected waters, and sometimes kill them, ignoring the law.

The motorboat is perfect for exploring the vicinity. It is fast enough for us to get round a lot of places quickly, but not so fast that we don't feel close to nature. I just wish it wasn't so cold on board.

One after the other we investigate the bays where the bears are supposed to be, but we don't see any. Twice Greg even gets out to go into the forest and look for fish in the rivers. Because whoever is looking for bears, must find the fish first. Where there are fish, there are bears.

But there aren't any fish anywhere.

That's what's worrying us.

Nobody knows where the fish have gone.

At this time, in a normal year, they should be swarming at the river mouths but, right now, we can't see one. The fish are the only thing that will tempt the bears out of the forest. If there are no fish, then they'll stay in the mountains, nibbling on the blueberries instead. We do spot a couple of grazing bears, but they are too far away, and too high up. We both get out of the boat. The river we're on is very shallow, so for the last couple of feet Greg has to drag the motorboat by hand. We begin our stalk by going a couple of hundred feet into the forest, but, even though we can see for quite a long way, there's nothing moving at all. Greg says that, by now, we should have seen at least 10 - 12 bears.

But there hasn't been one.

We sit down to discuss the situation.

My guide explains that this method of hunting is never a question of luck. If the bears have come down, then virtually anyone should be capable of shooting one; the only problem would be picking one the right size. But if the baribals stay up in the mountains, we can sail around, or sit

about, all day, every day, until next summer, and we still won't see one. I'll be very lucky if I get a bear here this year.

That's the way it is.

And even if I do shoot a bear, it's almost certain to be malnourished after subsisting on a meagre plant diet, and has probably only come down to the river out of sheer desperation. The two hunters who were here before me also had a tough search before they found any; but they did at least manage to see one or two a day. But the situation is even worse than it was then. Of course, we can stay and give it a try, but our chances are lower than ever.



I must decide.

My main reason for coming here was for the goat: the bear that I have already bagged, if all has gone according to plan, should be waiting to be shipped home. R. doesn't even have a permit for a bear: basically, this is a goat hunt. Greg offers me a refund for the bear - that's very fair. I say that I'll decide tomorrow, and think it over in the meantime.

Greg suddenly develops a bit of a health problem and we have to rush back to the mother ship. After 1/2hr. warming up on the boat - my feet, frozen in the rubber boots I borrowed from Bob, are starting to defrost - Randy and I sail over to an island 1200ft. away. We stay there stalking until dusk has gone. We have an interesting conversation about the best bullets for bear; he also tells me many entertaining stories about his life as a guide, and the hunters he has guided. He can't understand why people pay "*a ton of money*", his very words, and then turn up for a brown bear hunt incapable of shooting accurately. This spring one of his clients, comfortably set up for the shot, which was just 150ft. could only manage to hit a bear the size of a tractor in its paw. These are not pleasant situations for Greg and Randy, as it is they who have to go into the undergrowth after it. Randy's *back-up gun* is a .375 caliber Ruger. This is the one he has brought with him today. He is using an open sight, best for any spur-of-the-moment shots. The front sight has been fitted with a phosphorescent green prism, as, at dusk in a rainy forest, it will show a target more clearly.

But there are no bears to be seen.

On Board the Ruffinit
28th September
Morning

Randy comes to wake me up at 8.00am. We have to go and collect the inflatable we used for crossing the lake during the goat hunt, and left behind on the shore. We shan't be needing it again; we will weigh anchor today, and return to Valdez. According to the weather forecast, a big storm is approaching. There is virtually no chance of a successful hunt, and we don't want to spend the winter here. Once more Randy warns me to put on everything I've got as it is again very cold. Still, I take my Blaser from the gun rack, as you never know what fate has in store for you.

We get into the motorboat and head for the lake. There is a thin layer of ice forming over the water in the Sound. The icebergs, which it took us 15mins. to reach yesterday, are now much closer to the ship.

Even though it is still only September, in south Alaska winter has set in.

Thick fog blankets the water. The mountain peaks are shrouded in cloud. If we'd set out two days later than we actually did, I don't think we would have come back with a goat. I'd rather not imagine what the weather is like up there right now; the very thought makes me start to shiver.

We proceed through the mist slowly.

The sea-otters are in a good mood today. They don't seem bothered about swimming in all the ice. They are so unafraid, I feel I could almost stroke them. There are definitely two species in the world that I would never hunt, even if there were millions of them around. One is the wolf, and the other the otter. I just don't understand; how can anyone shoot an otter?



Again, we moore on the strip of land separating the lake from the sea.

We won't be staying long, so we don't have to worry about securing the boat too thoroughly, and don't have to go through all the complicated landing maneuvers we did last time. We walk to the lake's shore and collect the inflatable.

When we get back to the motorboat, Randy takes out the Ruger that I was admiring yesterday. He agrees with me that, for hunting grizzly, the .30caliber group is big enough. But in this area,



hunting for big brown bears, a bullet with a bigger diameter is preferable. The bear has to be shot the moment it steps out of the forest onto the shore, where it is going to catch fish. If the shot is off-target, or the gun is too small, then the bear might well escape back into the forest, which will be a real headache for the hunters. Randy says that, sometimes, the Alaskan Brown Bear has amazing powers of survival. This spring Greg had to shoot a bear, wounded by a client, five times with his .375; each shot was on target, and yet they still had to go and search for it in the forest. When they eventually found it, they could see bullet tracks that were, according to Randy, big enough to fit a hot dog into.

I'd like to try out his gun. We pick a distant rock; I place the Ruger firmly against my shoulder, and fire. I was a bit wary of the recoil - which is why I aimed low - but it wasn't that bad at all, even though it is a light, plastic-butted gun. With my second shot I was braver, and knock the rock over. This gun has no kick, it just gives a lazy shove.

If I do come back to Alaska to hunt grizzly and brown bear, I will certainly use Greg's team again. I don't have the time, patience, or money, to waste hunting with bad organizers. After all our hunts together, Randy and I have got to know each other's ways, and I honestly hope that it will be he who takes the photograph of me when I have bagged my first brown bear. Until then I have plenty of time to decide what caliber, and type of ammunition I will bring with me.

Back on the ship, using a satellite phone, we call up Petra to ask her, with Jenn, to organize my departure and hotel reservations.

28th September
Early Afternoon

The Ruffinit weighs anchor at 10.00am. We begin the journey back.

After 1/2hr. Randy speeds off in one of the motorboats. He is going ahead in the fast boat, to check the ice. We need exact information on the ice and its movement because the Ruffinit is no ice-breaker. Even a small chunk could damage its hull, which would be a bit of a disaster. He soon comes back with the news that the ice has now blocked our route.

For the time being, we cannot sail back to Valdez. We drop anchor.

And hold a Council of Elders.

At the moment we are lying up off the south-west shore of Long Bay. There are only two ways back: one goes to the west of Glacier Island; it is longer, but there will be less ice. The other passes to the east of Glacier Island. Looking at the map explains everything. The ice is coming from the Columbia Glacier, which is to the east of Long Bay. Consequently, it is obvious that the



eastern passage will be icier. After breaking loose from the glacier, the path of these blocks of ice is determined by the winds and currents; depending on the temperature, they do sometimes melt. At the moment, both routes are blocked.

We can only hope that a couple of hours of waiting will be long enough for the wind to scatter the ice. Then we'll set off.

We spend the time chatting. The subject, of course, is guns. We debate the differences of the various calibers, relating our experiences and opinions, and browse the catalogues on the boat. I agree entirely with Randy that you can never have too many guns. Flicking through the brochures I easily find 8 - 10 guns that I'd happily purchase, without feeling I was overdoing it. You can always find a reason to buy a new gun.

At 1.30pm Randy is going off on another scouting patrol, and this time he asks me to go with him. I'm wearing my everyday clothes, so I get into the boat in a pair of jeans. The weather has improved a lot since the morning; the temperature has risen above freezing, but it's still quite chilly. First we check the western passage: Randy shakes his head. He doesn't like what he's seeing. We are just able to maneuver through the ice-floes in our motorboat, but anything larger would not be able to. The eastern route is even icier: it is not even worth considering an attempt. We can't find a way through.

We return to the mother ship and wait.

28th September
Evening

We make another reconnaissance trip at 4.00pm.

Randy starts with the western route, bravely steering the motorboat among the floes. The large chunks bang loudly against the aluminum hull. I'm worried that we'll spring a leak, just like the Titanic.

Ice is deceptive.

You might see what looks like a small piece floating on the surface; you would think the boat could easily push it aside. But, beneath the surface, it could be the size of a house. That is the real danger of ice. We keep searching for a channel between the bergs, a path that, right now, is clear. It has to be wide enough for the yacht to get through. But, here in the west, we can't see any chance of a passage. We take a look at the eastern route, just to be sure, but the bergs are even more numerous there. Large ice-floes are floating everywhere...

Today, neither route is navigable.



We have to accept the fact that there is nothing we can do.

We return to the Ruffinit around 5.00pm. I had just got undressed when Randy has a bright idea: if we are stuck here, we might as well go for a hunt in the nearby area. I've packed all my hunting clothes and ammunition, ready to be put on the plane. But, within 5mins. I've emptied my bag - they are all at the bottom, of course - and soon report on deck, ready for hunting duties. Yet again, for the third time today, we set off in the motorboat.

We get to a small bay, where, because the water is so shallow, we can't reach the shore. For the final 300ft. we get out and, wearing our rubber boots, drag the boat along until it is beached. Randy throws out the anchor because when the tide comes in, the water will rise and the boat could drift off. He puts the one-person canoe on his shoulder; if the tide is high, he will have to use it to get out to the motorboat. We walk 1500 - 1800ft. to the nearest hide; we'll spend most of the evening here.

Alaska leaves an indelible memory in the mind of every hunter and nature-lover. It is a wilderness in which we are merely guests. Modern civilization has not interfered here. If a tree falls over, it remains where it is until it rots. There are no paths. We just go whichever way seems easiest. If a hunter is lucky, he might come across a well-worn trail made by some game animal. In this part of the world that would count as a freeway, and be remembered appreciatively. Tangled branches, thick, dark-green moss growing over everything, undergrowth the height of a man, dead trees - which then become homes for other plant species - water constantly dripping from high above us, and many, many streams: together they all create an impression beyond anything I've ever experienced before.

It is good to be sitting here in the hide.

Now it is really freezing. The frozen grass and sedge crackle beneath our boots when we stand up. My boots are still unlined; I'm wearing two thick pairs of socks, but the rubber continues to leech out all the heat. My feet are cold, so I start to wriggle my toes. We talk in low voices. This is probably my final Alaskan hunt for this trip.

As my feet have now become completely numb, we decide to do some stalking around the area. We go along a bear track, and Randy points out places where baribals have been shot in recent years. We don't go far; dusk is falling, and we still have to get back to the boat. The tide is in, so Randy's canoe has proved essential. As he rows towards the motorboat, I turn and look back at Alaska.

A final glance at the true home of authentic hunting.

On the boat we have boiled ham for dinner. Then we watch a DVD of Night at the Museum, I've

never seen such an idiotic film in my life, and by half-way through we've all fallen asleep...
We are prisoners of the ice.



On Board the Ruffinit
29th September
Morning

At 7.45am. I'm woken by the engine's roar.

Greg has decided that we have to leave. The wind is strong, which, for once, pleases everyone. The wind will be the key to our escape. We leave Long Bay and head for the western route. The ice has cleared a lot since yesterday. As we approach the danger zone, Greg slows completely, almost to a standstill. With his binoculars glued to his eyes, he studies the movement of the ice. We start to weave our way between the ice-floes. On the bridge the crew lines up

behind the wheel... there are loud knocks against the hull... in 15mins. we are through the first section of the ice. A brief respite: there is another stretch to come. A quick breakfast; because we are so close to Valdez, and the general commotion, it is just oatmeal.

The dark spots on the radar screen are getting nearer again. I go out on deck to get a better view, and can feel the cold breath of the ice. Once again we are surrounded by ice. We have almost stopped... but, even so, we can't avoid a small collision. Greg's face looks grave... very stealthily we creep onward... another 15mins. meandering around, and...

We've made it!

We are through. There is no ice ahead of us, the way is clear!

The captain opens up the throttle, and the intrepid Ruffunit ploughs through the waves! Soon my goat hunt will be over. So far, this has been the hunt that I've enjoyed the most. After the difficult and punishing climb, I managed to bag my goat with a single, good shot. I was hunting with exceptionally capable people, who managed to embody all the positive traits required in Alaskan hunting guides: a sense of humor, expertise, physical prowess, and helpfulness. It's easier to battle mountains and the forces of nature when you're in a good mood, and able to have a laugh. I couldn't have done it without them. But - as Randy says - that's what they are there for.

When looking for the best hunters, you won't find them among paying clients.

I have the utmost respect for professional hunters. They are the ones who have always done their best to help me be successful, to get my trophies, and primarily to give me the experiences that I've been dreaming of. I've learnt a lot, an awful lot, from these professionals, both in America and Hungary.

And hunting from a boat has been so charming, just like something out of a novel; it was an adventure that was absolutely new to me. It is a fitting end to my Alaskan hunts, and I'm sad to be moving on. Because it is only my Alaskan hunt that is over.

The trip will continue.

On Board the Ruffinit
Anchored in Valdez Harbor
29th September
Evening

Greg loves rock music, and there is a sound system on board the yacht. So, at 1.30pm, we sail into Valdez harbor to the deafening beat of Megadeth. The Ruffinit glides to its reserved mooring and the engine stops.

We have arrived.



I will sleep on the boat tonight, and intend to leave Valdez tomorrow. A day earlier than my original departure date. I will reach the location for my next hunt after three changes of planes, over 11/2 days: I wouldn't mind having an extra night in Denver. I call Jenn from on board, and ask her about my flights and hotel reservations.



R. has left the ship. I was far away at the time, walking on the quay, so I couldn't say goodbye to him. With Randy and Bob I head for a slightly down-market hotel nearby, which has one redeeming feature: for \$5.00 anyone can get a hot shower. They even provide shampoo, soap and towels. It is real bliss! After the tiny shower-room on the Ruffinit, it feels wonderful to stand under this jet of water, with it streaming down on to me.

In the afternoon we go and have hamburgers at the Totem Inn. I manage to buy some beer, though only after a little difficulty, as I've left my passport on the ship. The boys take their clothes to be washed at the local laundromat; I have enough clean clothes left for the moment. In the evening I sadly pack my bags.

The Ruffinit is silent: for it, this year's hunting season is over. Now, our electricity is coming via a thick cable, so there's no need for the generator to rumble away. Tomorrow, many, many miles from here, I shall be sleeping in a proper bed. It is bound to be warm there, and, if it rains, I will be able to watch it from my hotel window. I hope there'll be a jacuzzi there. If there is, I shall sink into it and reminisce nostalgically about the Goat Hunt Spike Camp, the climbs in the rain, that freezing night, and my small cabin on the Ruffinit.

Alaska...

Room 1130
Hilton Garden Inn
Downtown Denver
Colorado
USA
30th September

At 7.00am I leave the first cabin on the right on the Ruffinit.

I look around the small space for the last time, already knowing that I will never forget it. The Ruffinit might not have a helipad, but it was better to get back to than any grand yacht. The evening chats, watching the movies, the smell of food cooking, the long journeys in the motorboats - after which I always returned half-frozen - the endless joking, and the hunt - not for goats, but for the last can of coke: we had to ransack the entire ship - all have left an indelible memory. It was perhaps in the tent with the Inuits where I last felt so good. That is the point of hunting, and why it is worth coming to Alaska. These were the days I was looking forward to, the experiences that turned out to be even better than I could have imagined. And, besides all of that, there, outside the bridge, lies my beautiful goat-horn trophy; it is the icing on the cake. In future I must only ever go hunting with people like this!

We arrive at the little airport so early that it has not yet opened. We sit in the Chevrolet pickup, listening to rock music.

The time for my leaving Alaska is rapidly approaching.

I look out of the window, still dark before dawn, at the constant drizzle of rain.

What am I going to miss about this place?

The unclimable mountains, the north wind freezing our clothes to our bodies? The impenetrable undergrowth, with thorns that can rip even the toughest clothes to pieces? The clear, icy creeks, whose waters got into my boots so often? The fog, the cold, or the fact that you sometimes don't see the sun for weeks?



The ankle-breaking rocks, with their thick, wet covering of moss, so slippery that it was impossible to walk on them without falling over? The rain? Sometimes dripping, sometimes heavy, sometimes torrential; making it impractical to use binoculars, making you feel depressed, and making everything sodden with its cold touch? The unpredictable flights, the rockfalls on the railtracks, or the fact that you simply cannot plan more than one day ahead?

I don't know why this country is so appealing!

What is it about it that has captured the hearts of so many hunters?

If someone asked me, right now, what it is that I love about Alaska, I couldn't give a definite answer. Nevertheless, as I watch the Alaskan dawn, I can feel my heart breaking.

Have I really got to know Alaska?

Can anyone really know all about a country? I don't even know Hungary. Certainly, I've spent many, many days in this wonderful state. I can't even count the number of towns and settlements I have been to. I have met so many Alaskans and, with a few exceptions, they have all been amazing people. Never before have I come across that strong desire to help, which is so characteristic of them. It's not hard to make new friends here. I have not found such open-hearted, affable people in any other country.

I love Alaska.

I have taken to it so much that I am having to rewrite all my future plans. I must come back here to hunt. For the time being, I'm not going to Australia; I shan't be going to Africa for a while, and for the next couple of years mountain game in Asia has nothing to fear from me. But brown bears, grizzlies and black bears should watch out. There is no doubt that they will be bagged. The question simply is: when. I, of course, shall do my best, and, with Greg as my guide, success will be guaranteed. The two of us make a dangerous team. No, sorry, I mean the three of us, as I cannot praise Randy too highly, either. And, if I include my Blaser, as well - what caliber barrel I'll use has not yet been decided - then, those bears will have every reason to be worried. But, unfortunately, it will not be this season. They can relax for now.

My plane journey is made easier by the fact that Randy will be flying with me as far as Seattle. He's going back to his family in Montana, to catch up with his civilian work. After leaving Valdez, and negotiating Anchorage Airport with only a small fight - the computers of Alaska Airways couldn't understand that I'm travelling today, not tomorrow - we get to Seattle and, surprise, have a hamburger in the airport restaurant.

Our conversation is all about hunting brown bears.

For a safe bear hunt the co-operation required between hunter and guide should be closer than usual (yet another reason to go with Greg and Randy). After the bear has been favorably assessed and chosen - generally done from the boat - then the exciting part, the stalking, starts. When the guide and hunter get within range, the hunter must wait patiently until the guide has also got himself into a comfortable position to shoot, then he aims at the brown bear and prepares to fire.

According to Greg's house rules, the client must fire a second shot, immediately after the first. If the guide does not hear the lock - because, obviously, he is looking at the bear through his

reticle, not at the hunter - then he will shoot. If the client keeps shooting until he empties his gun, or the bear tries to attack them, then the guide will fire again. There's no time to reload, as they have to prevent the bear escaping from the sandy shore into the undergrowth. That is why Randy has suggested using bigger bullets, with a larger caliber, which will kill faster. In Brooks Range there is both the time and the opportunity to watch the bear for a longer period - there is very little plant cover for them there - but the South Alaskan coast is a more difficult place.

The world record Alaskan Brown Bear is on display at Anchorage Airport. I can tell you, it's no teddy bear. It is as big as a Volkswagen Golf and its head is the size of the average fridge.

Randy says that, although the biggest bears are found on Kodiak Island, we should remember two things.

One is, that the average body and skull size of the bears found on the South Alaskan coast is no different to those on Kodiak Island. The other is, that hunters should know that on Kodiak Island the hunt starts from the tent. The hunter must shoot the first bear he sees. Hunts there take a minimum of ten days, but there are outfitters who, to ensure victory, organize hunts lasting two weeks. When hunting under those conditions, there will almost always be a chance of a shot, but there is less of an opportunity to be selective.

Hunting from a boat is not the least bit unethical. The most important proof of this is that it is a standard, legal method of hunting. And what is legal in Alaska must be ethical, as it is a true hunting country. The law forbids any dubious or unsporting methods, and these regulations have been devised by local people, who know all the problems, and their solutions, that can crop up here. When I left Hungary, I was slightly apprehensive about the prospect of shooting piles of goats from the comfort of the boat. As it turned out, I have never before struggled as hard as I did to bag that goat, up on the mountain peak.

The conclusion of our conversation is that I am going to shoot my first brown bear with Greg's team. It is not quite two weeks since I had to hunt grizzly with two certifiable lunatics, and I really don't want to go through that again. Greg and his team have given me a first class time when hunting Dall sheep, caribou and goat; I have no reason to change from them. And if, in the future, I feel like bagging one more brown bear, then Kodiak Island will always be waiting; I'm sure it's not going to drift away.

In Seattle I say goodbye to Randy, and get on the plane to Denver.

Denver Airport has the most advanced luggage handling and tracking system in the world. I haven't switched airlines, so I have every reason to hope that, at the end of my last complicated journey before I return to Hungary, one that involves many changes, my luggage will arrive safely. When I arrive, I'm in no mood to try and find out, for the 100th time, where to collect my



gun, and which carousel to stand in front of, so I hire a porter to do it all for me and sit on his trolley, awaiting any developments. It was a good idea; he collects all my bags, and I slowly realise that one trolley is not going to be big enough. This is Denver's new airport; the old one was too close to the city center, and, because of noise levels and environmental taxes, its maintenance became too expensive. This new, shiny, gleaming, ultra-modern one is 18.5mi. from the city.

It is past 11.00pm when I get to my hotel.