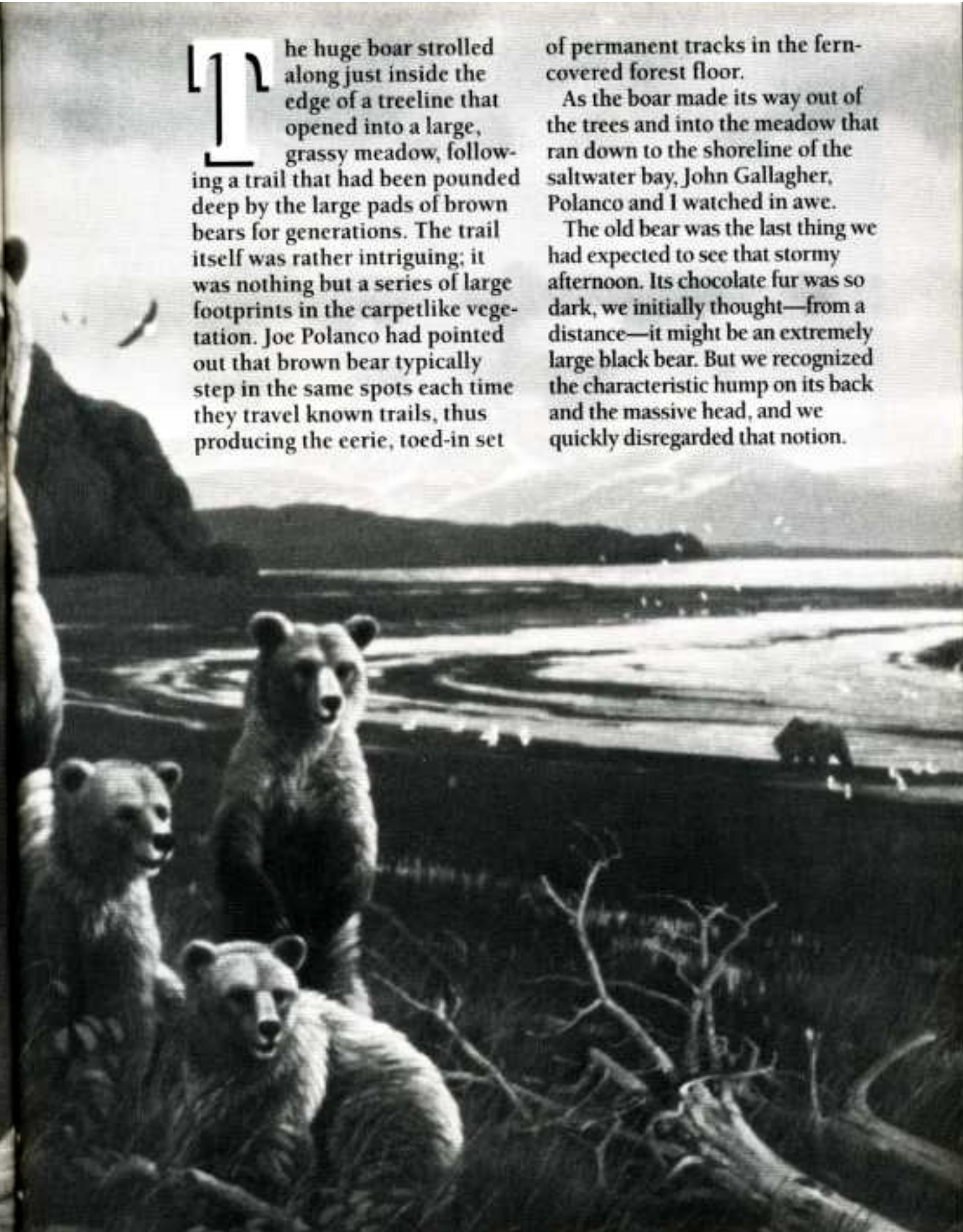


JUST ENOUGH GUN

Taking on Alaska's largest predator with a 7mm Remington Ultra Mag.

By Bart Skelton



The huge boar strolled along just inside the edge of a treeline that opened into a large, grassy meadow, following a trail that had been pounded deep by the large pads of brown bears for generations. The trail itself was rather intriguing; it was nothing but a series of large footprints in the carpetlike vegetation. Joe Polanco had pointed out that brown bear typically step in the same spots each time they travel known trails, thus producing the eerie, toed-in set

of permanent tracks in the fern-covered forest floor.

As the boar made its way out of the trees and into the meadow that ran down to the shoreline of the saltwater bay, John Gallagher, Polanco and I watched in awe.

The old bear was the last thing we had expected to see that stormy afternoon. Its chocolate fur was so dark, we initially thought—from a distance—it might be an extremely large black bear. But we recognized the characteristic hump on its back and the massive head, and we quickly disregarded that notion.

JUST ENOUGH GUN

The trip had been a long time in coming for me. But the wait had been worth it. Gallagher, an Alachua gunmaker, had been making arrangements with our outfitter, Polanco (Brown and Black Bear Hunts, Dept. GA, P.O. Box 240711, Anchorage, AK 99524; 907/337-0432), for some time. The months of planning paid off when Polanco met us in Haines, Alaska, in early October.

The hunt was originally going to entail traipsing around the mountains of Southeast Alaska's fjord country in pursuit of mountain goat. My Winchester Model 70 in .416 Remington Magnum would no doubt prove to be too heavy for such a grueling task, so I subsequently began a search for the perfect light rifle. A call to G&A's offices solved the problem.

A "Light" Rifle

It was suggested that I contact Lex Webernick (Rifles Inc., Dept. GA, 3580 Leal Rd., Pleasanton, TX 78064; 830/569-2055) and order one of his lightweight Stratas in 7mm Remington Ultra Mag. Though Webernick had just moved his operation from Cedar City, Utah, to Pleasanton, Texas, and was busy getting restarted, he was happy to

accommodate my request.

Webernick's rifles are truly unique and among the finest custom long-range sporting rifles available. Six models are offered: the Strata, built on the Remington 700; the Lightweight 70 built on a Winchester receiver; the Classic offered on both Model 70 and Model 700 actions; the Safari, which is based on the Model 70 Classic action; the Master Series long-range rifle; and finally its flagship Signature Series in .300 Remington Ultra Mag.

After the rifle was ordered, I had to decide what type of optics I'd need. I settled on a Weaver Grand Slam scope and had Webernick mount it to the Strata before he shipped it to me.

When the Strata came I was very impressed with it. Its sleek lines were easy on the eye, and its handmade stock and virtual weightlessness were intriguing. With the Weaver glass atop it, it weighed less than six pounds. Close examination revealed fine handwork. The hand-filing, hand-fitting and polishing were clearly evident. Its blueprinted

The Strata's brown camo stock is a Kevlar, graphite and boron laminate which, by itself, weighs a scant 11 ounces.



receiver had been substantially lightened, the bolt handle hollowed and the bolt fluted and lapped.

The brown camo stock—Webernick's own design—was a Kevlar, graphite and boron laminate, and it alone weighed only 11 ounces. The Strata also featured a hexagon bolt shroud manufactured of aluminum, and Webernick had milled out the excess metal in other areas of the receiver, which helps make it so light.

The Strata features a Decelerator recoil pad, and its 26-inch Lilja match-grade barrel was fitted with Webernick's Quiet Slimbrakes—an option I was thankful for. Among my first thoughts upon handling the rifle was that recoil would be pretty healthy. But that concern was secondary as the rifle just felt, well, right. The whole package balanced very well in my hands.

I'd previously received a shipment of 7mm Ultra Mag ammunition in 140-grain Partition configuration. At that time it was the only load Remington offered in that caliber. I was somewhat disappointed as I initially felt a 160-grain Partition might be more what I was looking for.



Next to bush planes, boats and rafts are the Alaskan hunter's best method of transportation. The author's hunting party glassed for bears and mountain goats from an inflatable.



Glacial rivers are a great starting point for tracking brown bears. Tracks signifying the size of bears in the area can be found in the soft sand.



Ozona Testfire

I later joined my old friend Penn Baggett at his digs near Ozona, Texas, to try out the rifle. He had just completed construction of a new concrete shooting bench and 200-yard range. The new bench was so perfectly built, any excuses we may have previously had about poor three-shot groups due to platform stability were quickly negated. Webernick's proof target fired with the rifle just prior to its shipment was quite impressive—less than a half-inch at 100 yards with the 140-grain Partition load. Baggett and I were unable to reproduce that tight of a group that day, though the sub-one-inch groups we were able to produce suited me fine.

My worries about the recoil from such a lightweight rifle were quickly allayed upon firing the Strata. Recoil was minimal, manageable, pleasant—though I would certainly recommend that bystanders stand a good distance behind the rifle and utilize good hearing protection. The Quiet Slimbrake effectively reduces felt recoil, but it does produce



Skelton started the day with a Rifles Inc. Strata chambered to 7mm Remington Ultra Mag in search of mountain goats. His eventful day ended with a close-range shot at this rather large brown bear. The 140-grain Nosler Partition proved to be plenty of bullet.

some muzzle blast, a point that should be taken into consideration by hunters.

My experience with the 7mm in any configuration has been quite limited. I've never owned a rifle chambered in 7mm, and though I've fired several, I've only hunted with the 7x57 Mauser. My lack of experience with the 7mm magnums hasn't been intentional, and I'm well-aware of their exceptional performance on game and that some consider them the best sporting rounds ever conceived. John Wootters has taken virtually every species of African plains game with a 7mm magnum. If it's good enough for him, it should be more than good enough for me.

The average factory velocity for the

7mm Ultra Mag is around 3,425 fps with the 140-grain Partition. That computes to more than 10 percent more energy than Remington's 7mm STW load, which previously held the Remington 7mm energy/velocity record. Since the cartridge headspaces on the shoulder instead of a belt, improved accuracy is feasible. And the case diameter is greatly increased, offering the possibility of heavier powder charges.

A few days before I was to fly to Alaska, Gallagher called with some interesting news. Polanco had called to advise that we might have the opportunity to hunt brown bear as well as goats. But this raised an important question: Would the 7mm Ultra Mag perform on brown bear? I decided to pack my Model 70 .416 Rem. Mag. after all.

Bear Country

When Polanco met us in Haines with his 32-foot sailboat, *Quintessence*, one of the first questions he asked us was, "What are you guys shooting?" He was well aware of Gallagher's gun-building skills. Gallagher was packing a beautifully made lightweight custom rifle of his own design in .308, plus a .338 Win. Mag. When the subject turned to my stuff, Polanco was a bit hesitant about the prospect of shooting brown bear with the 7mm Ultra Mag, much preferring that I carry the .416.

The following day found us sailing north up a long fjord, taking in the dramatic mountain country as the salt spray from the rough seas coated our gear.



Throughout his fairly strenuous hunt, the author was grateful for his rifle's light weight; the Rifles Inc. Strata he's carrying here weighs less than six pounds scoped.

JUST ENOUGH GUN

Fortunately, Polanco has learned from many years in Alaska that preparedness means survival, and he was equipped with enough waterproof, floating gun cases to go around, as well as other invaluable paraphernalia. The rest of our gear remained susceptible to the salt, though my rubber-coated Steiner 8x42 Predator binocular handled the trip perfectly.

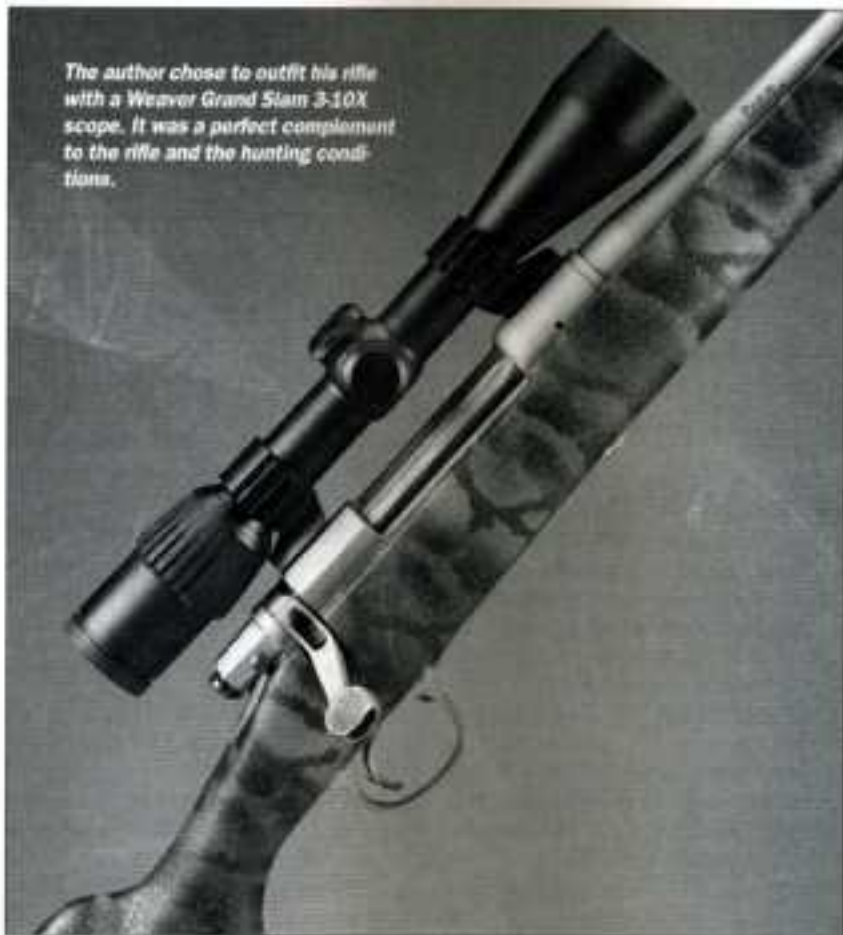
After anchoring in a remote bay, we set out in a rubber dinghy that evening and headed to shore to scout—me packing the .416. The scouting paid off, and though we saw no bear sign, we did spot a herd of goats grazing high on a mountainside across the wide, glacial river that flowed into the bay. It was clearly too late in the day to attempt stalking them, so we decided to try early the following morning.

Alaska weather is infamous. Many hunters often spend much more time waiting for it to clear than actually hunting. We were no different, and the following day found us rocking back and forth in the *Quintessence*, waiting out the wind and rain. A day later, the weather cleared enough to allow us to again take the dinghy up into the small bay. Our plans were to head as far as possible up the glacial river with the high tide, hopefully close to the mountain where we'd spotted the goats. I took the 7mm Ultra Mag, hoping for a shot.

But our plans were again foiled. The tide was weak, and we were unable to get upriver. Our only chance was to land the dinghy and walk, looking for a spot to cross. After several hours of hiking along a well-worn bear trail through thick brush, cranberry and black spruce, we were able to see the goats grazing just under the clouds on the steep, rocky mountain. But the river was deeper and wider there, and our expectations were faint. We had no choice but to head back and hope for a stronger tide the following morning.

We trudged back to the edge of the bay, noticing a good amount of bear sign along the way, including fresh tracks along the river's edge. It was the first time I'd seen brown bear tracks. Placing my

The author chose to outfit his rifle with a Weaver Grand Slam 3-10X scope. It was a perfect complement to the rifle and the hunting conditions.



Skinning a brown bear is no easy chore, especially when you're racing to make the tide for your return trip to the mothership.

hand over one, I realized just how big brown bears really are; the track was more than twice the size of my hand. I instantly became more wary of my surroundings, which I obviously should have been all along.

The tide was out, barring us from departing for the *Quintessence* till dusk, which was still hours away. So we attempted to make ourselves comfortable under a huge black spruce that had fallen along the shore, and we suffered

through a 40-knot wind and drizzle. It was a long wait with little to do but scan the distant treeline incessantly while trying to stay warm. As the light faded that evening and the tide started in, we continued to glass the area.

"There he is!" Gallagher said as our guide and I, a bit groggy from the cold and a bit startled, looked on.

I quickly picked up the dark animal inside the treeline. "Brown bear. Looks like he's headed toward us," Polanco said, grab-



Alaska's monster bears are formidable foes, generally requiring a magnum cartridge with a heavy-penetrating bullet. Shoot them poorly and you may end up dealing with the business end of their front paws.

PLENTY OF ULTRA-POWER

The performance of the 140-grain Nosler Partition from the Weibernick Strata has obviously been a hot point of conversation since the trip, and rightly so. If faced with the situation again, I'd still probably choose a heavier caliber, if possible. But there's no doubt the 7mm Ultra Mag can do the job on big game.

bing his massive .411 KDL rifle. "Let's go."

For the first time that day we were thankful for the powerful wind whipping off the water, enabling us to swing wide and get downwind of the bear. As we made our way through the rough, rocky terrain over large clumps of grass, it dawned on me that I might be under-gunned. I expressed my sentiments to Polanco, who unhesitatingly advised: "Just shoot him." He was well-armed with the backup .411 KDL.

The fast-paced saunter over the rough terrain normally wouldn't have had me breathing hard. I found myself stopping to get a look at the bear, still several hundred yards out, and trying to catch my breath. As we made our way closer, the bear stopped, raised its head and sniffed the air. We crouched down and watched.

"He may have smelled us," Polanco said. "If he stands up, start shooting and don't stop till you're out of ammo."

It wasn't until he made that statement

that the reality of the situation hit me. I had to stop and breathe deeply, attempting to calm my rushing adrenaline. My cold, clammy skin became moist with perspiration.

We raised up slowly and continued on, walking more cautiously, all of us with rifles at ready. I thought of my Freedom Arms .454 on my belt, knowing I couldn't readily get to it for all the rain gear I had on. A mistake? I wondered. Now less than 100 yards away, the bear walked slowly with his head down, eating grass. I thought he hadn't seen us, since he was quietly strolling away from us—or he just didn't care that we were there.

We dropped down and crawled 10 or 15 more yards, a difficult task when dressed in cumbersome cold-weather gear. We stopped behind a downed spruce about 65 yards from the bear and collected ourselves. I attempted to control my breathing.

"Whenever you're ready," Polanco whispered. "He's close enough now."

We looked over the top of the tree and saw the bear still grazing. When I stood up and raised the Strata to my shoulder, I had no clear shot; there was brush in front of the bear. So we slowly moved sideways until I had a perfect broadside view. I was surprised that the rifle was so steady as my nerves were adrenaline-charged. I looked at Polanco and nodded. We were ready.

The first shot struck the bear with a

tremendous thump. I knew instantly I'd hit it well. The bear jumped up on its hind legs, trying to run and biting back at the bullet hole in its shoulder. I fired twice more, each shot hitting him with an uncanny whack. It was clear the bear was instinctively headed for the shelter of the thick spruce forest several hundred yards away, but it never made it that far. It fell within 20 feet or so from where I first shot it. None of us had even noticed the roar of the Strata.

Polanco's excitement didn't show until we walked up on the bear. He immediately kicked at it while aiming the .411 at its head. I was pretty skeptical about walking right up and kicking at the old boy right away, but Polanco knew what he was doing.

"What a beautiful bear!" my guide exclaimed, the delight on his face unmistakable.

It was an old fellow with fur so dark it was almost black. I became elated as the significance of the event sank in. Along with the happiness of our success, I couldn't help feeling a bit of sorrow for the death of the impressive animal—something I experience often when hunting, though more so on this occasion.

We recovered the 140-grain Partition from the first shot. It had lodged in the bear's hide on the off shoulder. The bullet had performed beautifully, was mushroomed perfectly and was still significantly intact. (Sadly, we lost the bullet in the dark a short time later.)

We placed the hide and skull in a backpack and headed through the darkness back to the dinghy. Our arrival at the dinghy unveiled a problem. The three of us, our gear and the heavy bear would push the rubber raft to its weight limit. In addition, the storm was producing six-foot seas in the bay—returning to the *Quintessence* in the dark would be a tough proposition.

Tired, cold and hungry, we loaded the dinghy and headed into the rough seas, the small light on *Quintessence's* mast barely visible in the distance. As well as a hunter and experienced pilot, Polanco is an expert seaman who negotiated the rough seas with ease. Our saving grace was an M-6 Surefire flashlight I had along. Its powerful beam guided us across the bay in the pitch dark and helped us steer clear of large, protruding rocks along the shoreline.

Our belated arrival at the boat called for celebration and a recounting of the hunt. As we cleaned the salt spray off of our gear that evening, we were all thankful for having returned safely. It was an experience I'll never forget. ■