

It is a Rainforest After All, August 8-14, 2008

Dennis Neil and I watched as the plane disappeared over the distant ridge. All fell silent. We had been dropped in a no-named lake in Southeast Alaska where we planned to hunt Sitka Blacktail in the alpine. The weather had been abysmal during the summer, raining way more than normal. This had left the alpine ridges shrouded in clouds and fog. We now had window of opportunity, a couple of days of scattered clouds before the next front arrived. The lake we had landed on was small. The experienced pilot we had chartered had to step taxi around the lake to take off. We could find no sign that anyone else had ever camped there. We scoured the adjacent forest and finally found a suitable camp site. We took off to find a route to the alpine above, flagging as we went. We made it about half way to our intended destination before we had to return. The next morning, we packed up, hung the supplies we were leaving, and headed up the mountain. Several times we dropped our packs and scouted a suitable route ahead. By late morning we began to break into scattered muskeg openings and alpine meadows. We found increasing deer sign as we climbed. Finding a suitable campsite, we set up and stowed our gear. We split up for a late afternoon and evening hunt. I climbed beyond where we had explored, crossing what would be come known as the "Slide of Death" and found the alpine meadows we were looking for. Deer sign was everywhere. I encountered several small bucks but nothing of the caliber I hoped for. It was a magnificent evening, the sun warming the mountain slopes. We met up and made plans for the morning. I explained to Dennis that I had planned some excitement into the next morning's outing. I told him about the interesting route I had selected which crossed the "Slide of Death" and the alpine meadows beyond with deer numbers beyond his imagining. At dawn we awoke to sea fog. Sea fog so thick you could cut it. Visibility was 10 feet. By noon the fog lifted enough to begin our climb to the alpine meadows above. Within a short time we had negotiated the terrain and were entering the upper meadows. We had not gone more than 40 yards when a doe rose from her bed. With one more step I could see a great buck in his bed at 50 yards. As I brought my Hawken to my shoulder and aimed another great buck rose to the right. I fired, killing the velvet horned buck in his bed. Dennis walked up and we soon had two great bucks on the ground. My buck was heavy 5 x 4 with a huge body. Dennis' buck was a mature, wide 4 x 2. We boned out the deer and hung them in the shade. We then continued to explore our hard-earned meadows seeing several more deer. Sand Hill Cranes feeding in the upper meadows greeted us with their unique shrill cries as we disturbed their afternoon. Re-crossing the "Slide of Death" with full packs increased the difficulty level. We were both glad to have that portion of the route behind us. We returned to camp, built a rack for the meat above a small stream to keep it cool. Dawn was beautiful, the fog lie well below us engulfing the lower slopes and the ocean beyond. Deer could be seen feeding on distant ridges, deer for future trips. We returned to the lake by mid afternoon, found a great place to make camp and hang the meat. We built a fire and roasted venison ribs, celebrating our great fortune. It was Saturday night. We woke to rain, as my hunting partner from Missouri put it, it was a "Toad Strangler"; the kind of rain that really challenges one's gear, intestinal fortitude, and forces one to contemplate why exactly we put ourselves in these situations. This was the first of four days of such rain. The first day we managed to start a fire. Despite our best efforts that was our last. The lake level rose 18 inches flooding to the forest edge. By Wednesday we began to ration food so that we could make the climb back up the mountain, beyond where we took the bucks, into a neighboring valley to the opposite shore where we might be picked up by a passing fisherman or crew boat. We had decided that if the weather did not break by Saturday we would make the trek. We were sick that we might lose the meat despite our best efforts. Wednesday afternoon we thought we heard a plane beyond our cloud filled basin; we later found out that the pilot had tried to get to us. Thursday afternoon the storm broke and the skies became partly cloudy. We remained vigilant at camp and cleared a section of the flooded shore for a plane if it came. Anyone who has waited for a long overdue plane knows the situation. As could have been scripted, late in the evening when we had given up hope of flying out on this day, suddenly the basin was filled with the roar of a Cessna 185. As fog rolled into the basin and weather worsened, we broke camp and loaded the plane. The pilot began shuttling us and our gear to a larger lake from where we could take off with everything. From that lake we flew to where he had cashed fuel, refueled the plane, and began our trip home. Through the four days Dennis and I discussed most all topics and relied on humor a lot. We got the meat home, dried off, and cooled down, losing none. The buck I shot will score high in the Longhunter Records. Most importantly this was one of many great adventures shared by friends in a truly wild place; I can not wait to go back.



