

Back in the day

Bear in the hole

Finding a hibernating bear turns into a lifetime memory.

Stephen Lars Kalmon

Dad's hair on his nape stood on end as he cautiously peeked over the stump's top and brought his gun to port arms. His thumb was on the hammer, his finger in the trigger guard.

"Shhhh," he whispered loudly, "I can smell 'em." He sniffed loudly and peered around as if expecting an attack. "He can be anywhere and on us in a minute."

This day we had found some long black hairs in a nest of leaves in a hollow stump's bottom.

"Look there," he had whispered as he pointed to the find. "Bear's here! Get down, get down or he'll see you."

We crouched down, but I couldn't see anything to be alarmed about. "Stay down!" he rasped again. I did, and didn't know why.

Finally after a five-minute squinty-eyed search he said, "OK, must'a scared him off," as he felt the nest's circle for body warmth. Finding none, Dad's hope faded, his hair fell back in place and we hunted our way home.

My father's back was very familiar to me; how well I knew the breadth of his shoulders and his tracks in creek bottom mud as we leaped across. We had taken many hunts, with me in his footsteps.

Whether we were hunting deer, squirrels or rabbits, they became secondary to the search for bear sign in every hollow stump, bones left from the "white pine days" and blackened from fires of old; we checked each one thoroughly for bear sign. Every hollow log, too, was a possibility, and today had been a day when we came close to finding a bear at home.

Dad's anticipation never left me and since that time, whenever in the woods, I have searched every hollow log, stump and large tree for bear sign and always hoped to find a loaded den.

One day it happened.

During hunting season about 45 years ago I was on a drive through a flat forty of popple. A gentle storm had piled 6 to 7 inches of fluffy, swans-down snow on everything on top of a base of a foot or more. It was tough walking and snow from bushes

and alder brush cascaded down upon my shoulders. We drivers stopped often to hoot, but there was no shooting yet.

About halfway through I paused for a breather. Searching the scene, I discovered a black hole in a hump of snow at least 5 feet high and 10 feet across. It had been formed by a popple tree fallen to about a 45-degree angle that had pulled up the tall-grass sod around its roots. There was a black hole in its side. Hair standing up, chest frozen with excitement, breath rasping, I approached. I was going to look in that hole. Carefully I knelt there and slowly came closer to it, my face a foot away. I could see nothing, all was blackness. Closer and closer I went until my face was in the hole; everything was still black. Nothing. Disappointment filled me, then suddenly there was a long brown nose 6 inches from mine with a glittering green eye on each side!

Without thought I leapt backwards at least 40 feet, my .444 Marlin at port arms, my thumb on the hammer and my finger in the trigger guard. No bear was attacking me; the world was silent and the hole was just as it had been.

I did not notice my tracks as I plowed my way back to nature's igloo; maybe I *had* made the leap. Now I noticed there were front paw tracks just outside the entrance. It was as if the bear had reached out to test the snow just as we might stick a toe in the water before leaping in. In my excitement I had not noticed those tracks earlier. Peering with caution into the hole, I saw the bear, head barely discernible, in a curl and fast asleep.

When the deer drive was over without a shot being fired, the bear and his den created a lot of excitement in the gang. We all hiked back there and took quiet peeks. Throughout the winter my family and I would go to it and marvel at this wonder of nature; it was often spoken of at our supper table.



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In the middle of March I became concerned when the bear had torn away the front and top of his den. He lay there shivering and shaking as water dripped on him from the upper edges; he lay in water. Bare skin showed between clumped wet hair. I knew he was freezing to death. Any day now he would be dead.

Saddened, I went home and told the story to my kids and wife. She said, "Why don't you call the game warden and see what he says?" I did so, told him the story, and that the bear was dying.

"He is not dying," he said.

"Oh, yes, he is," I said, "He is so dying. His eyes are closed already. It won't be long now." I had seen a lot of animals die. I knew the signs.

"No, he is not dying. That is just his body waking up. His whole body, muscles and digestion are stimulated by this shivering."

"No, no, no. Nope, he is dying — and I want his hide. I found him!"

The warden's voice became gravelly and hoarse like he had trouble swallowing something.

Finally he was able to croak, "OK, OK, if it dies you can buy the skin." Man, he must have been in some kind of pain. Satisfied, I put down the phone.

Now some 45 years later, I have no bearskin rug.

What I do have are great memories I can share spiritually with Dad: images in full color of a large hibernating bear that bravely overcame the death to which, in my mind, I had sentenced him. ❧

Stephen Lars Kalmon was reared on a farm in Taylor County in the Chequamegon National Forest, where he has lived for 54 years. Except for a six-year hiatus, he is a lifelong resident of Taylor County. He was a freelance writer for daily and weekly newspapers, including the Marshfield News Herald where this story was originally printed in the 1980s.