

# Big Ice, Big White

## The Thrills and Chills of an Arctic Hunt

By Jack Keslar



*Ice as tall as two-story buildings as far as you can see.*

The last time Bruce and I headed to Tuktoyaktok, Northwest Territories, in May 2003, we had grizzly bears on the mind. That was a great hunt, especially since we each bagged a big grizzly. While my partner Bruce was busy saving the reindeer herd from other grizzlies, I took an 8' 3" square beauty.

We also made a lot of Eskimo friends, and now that we were once again on our way to Tuktoyaktok, they were awaiting the return of the "TWO BIG BEAR HUNTERS." They meant that literally, since Bruce and I are rather large in stature compared to the Eskimos – each over 6'4". The Eskimo are a people of honor, trustworthy and true, nothing fake about them. I was happy to find out that they had missed us as much as we had missed them.

We were to be reunited under the great Northern Lights for an incredible adventure in search of the King of the Ice Bears. This trip was truly a lifelong dream of mine, two years in the planning. We were about to go where not many men have traveled for the hunt of a lifetime – literally, since you are allowed to shoot only one polar

# Bears

## Hunt



bear in your lifetime. And, now we were on our way.

We arrived in great condition, in Inuvik, NWT. In the airport I recognized James Pokiak, my guide, immediately and visa versa. He was smiling because Lenny, the guide who had helped me get my grizzly, had told him I was a “little larger than most.”

We met James’ son Jacob who would be Bruce’s guide. Alvin Silastiak and Darl Taylor would join us to assist James and Jacob. Our teams were set.

We drove the frozen Mackenzie River (the Ice Road) to Tuk. We stayed with James and his family for two days and nights while we prepared for the

hunt. Their hospitality made us feel like members of the family.

Lenny and Luga, the guides we had come to know so well on our 2003 grizzly hunt, had done some scouting prior to our arrival. Lenny’s report was very encouraging because they had found some huge tracks – supposedly the largest they had ever seen, and that is saying something since these guys have been hunting polar bear since they were very young.

The only problem they could see was that the Big White Bear was heading way out onto the ice. In fact, twice as far as the Anderson River Delta which is approximately 130 miles from Tuk, which meant the ride to Base Camp was going to be twice as far as originally planned.

There was talk of flying to Base Camp, but I wanted to get the full effect of what a hunt like this is all about. I wanted to do it the way the REAL Great White Bear Hunters had done! I wanted no part of flying.

I started talking to Bruce to pump him up for the long snowmobile ride. We were ready to go as far north as necessary to find the Great White Bears. We knew that meant going further north than either of us had been in our entire hunting lives.

James said that if we were up to the challenge, he’d take us as far north as he had ever been, the idea being the further north we went, the bigger the bears we would find.

Alvin and Darl prepared the sleds down to the smallest detail for a 12- to 14-day hunt on the ice. Finally, everything was ready, but the weather was so

windy and bitter cold at -35° that we decided to wait a day and see what happened. Good decision since the next day was a sunny -15° and calm.

Our destination was Baillie Island about 200 miles northeast of Tuk. With all the gear and people, it was a two-day trip. We had 17 dogs for the hunt plus enough fuel, food and supplies to last six men 20 days. Every man pulled a load behind his Ski-Doo, and they were BIG loads, so it was slow going.

The report was once we got to Baillie Island, the Ocean of Ice, it was going to be very bad. Big and bad! We were prepared for the worst. We camped overnight on Mason Point, then headed for Baillie Island. Baillie or bust!

That afternoon we arrived on Baillie to find Big Ice. The sight was incredible! We spent an entire day cutting through the ice. James and Jacob went out to see if they could get us closer to young ice and open water because that’s where polar bears live and feed. We moved Base Camp about a mile further out onto the ice and then settled in for the night.

The next day I accompanied James, Jacob and Darl as we chopped our way to young ice and open water, finally reaching it at about 1 p.m. in the afternoon. Once we had found open water and young ice, we saw signs of bear life everywhere, paw prints and so on.

Knowing that we had found a great spot for this hunt, we all breathed a huge sigh of relief. We returned to Base Camp, about five miles from the open water and young ice, to rest and prepare for the morning hunt.

It was a viciously bitter cold morn-

*Since there’s no highway connecting Inuvik to Tuktoyaktok, we literally drove the Mackenzie River “Interstate.”*



*The dogs are howling as Bruce Mathews leaves Base Camp for open water.*



ing at around  $-50^{\circ}$ . Dogsled time – I had eight dogs in my team and Bruce had nine. What a feeling! The dogs were even excited because they knew they were going out to hunt.

I was overcome with the excitement myself. The feeling is similar to the way an athlete feels just before the Big Game – your heart is pumping, adrenaline rushing. It's game time, baby. Every inch of your body is electrified. It had been so long since I'd had that feeling I'd almost forgotten how incredible it is!

Of course, it was different this time. We were on the Beaufort Sea, a playing field of frozen ice 15 feet thick, and my team was eight dogs, James, Darl and myself. The goal was open water five miles away, and the opposing team was the Great White Bear, with big claws and teeth, probably outweighing all of us combined!

Then, BOOM – we're off. Dogs howling, James yelling orders and me hanging on for the ride of my life. Cutting behind giant 10-foot towers of ice, dogs not missing a beat and running with all the strength they had like there was no tomorrow. We made the young ice in about an hour.

Once we arrived, we settled the dogs down and tied them off. Now they had eight to 10 hours to rest for the trek back to Base Camp. We started glassing (with binoculars). James and I found the highest point in the area, which became my spot for the hunt.

Bruce's team arrived about 15 minutes after we did. He found a place a quarter mile to the left of my perch. We put on our white camouflage, took position and waited.

There were fresh tracks and signs everywhere. Seals – the polar bear's number-one food source – were popping up all around us. Find their food, find the bears. It wasn't long before we spotted our first bear – the first polar bear I had ever seen in his natural environment. He was magnificent!

The only problem was he was a half-mile away across the open water, and we couldn't get to him. It would take him two days to hunt his way around to where we were. Nevertheless, watching him in his own undisturbed environment was one of the biggest thrills of my life. A memory that will last me a lifetime.

I watched him swimming in water

pockets for about two hours with an outside temperature of  $-35^{\circ}$ . I couldn't imagine being in that water for two seconds, let alone two hours.

I was interrupted when Darl spotted a bear on our side of the ice flow heading straight in my direction. For the first time in my big-game career, I started shaking uncontrollably. We all ducked behind the ice because, unlike the brown or grizzly bears, polar bears have excellent eyesight.

Polar bears, the only pure protein eaters on earth, have only one enemy – man, armed with spears or guns. I, of course, chose the second option. It is hard for me to imagine that in more primitive times the Eskimos used their dogs to keep the bears at bay and killed them with whaling harpoons. You talk about bravery, pure will and the spirit of survival. These men are truly the hunters of the north!

The bear was so close that all of a sudden I couldn't see him and neither could James or Darl. There were only two ways to go around the ice fortress, both of which would put the bear less than 40 yards away, tops! I waited for what seemed like an hour but was actu-

ally only a few seconds. But the bear never showed up. When we peeked over the ice, we saw that he had started back up the trail he had come down.

I asked James how big he thought he was. Probably in the seven-foot class. In polar bear terms, that's about 7'6" square. He was out about 100 yards and broadside sniffing the air. He had our scent in the wind. I had to make up my mind, and I had to do it quickly. So I hurried up and laid across a pointed chunk of sea ice in front of me, locked and loaded, safety off, and watched him turn broadside at 100 yards, then at 125 yards and then 150 yards.

I stopped and reengaged my safety. My heart was pounding so hard James could hear it beating. I looked at him, he smiled at me and said it took a lot for me not to shoot that bear. A seven-foot bear is too young, too small.

So, I sat there and watched him walk away, knowing that I might not get another chance. But I knew that I could have taken him if I had wanted to. Hunting to me is not just about the harvesting of the animal.

It was about 20 minutes before I

quit shaking and could move again. I knew I had witnessed something that would become a memory for life. When we came down off position, all the guides shook my hand. I could tell by the looks on their faces that they saw me a little differently now.

It had taken such hard work to get to that open water, five days to be exact. We were running out of time, but it didn't matter. It was a young bear that deserved to prosper and live awhile longer. I had no regrets or disappointment. This hunting trip was already a success for me, even if I didn't see another bear.

We decided to head back to Base Camp for the night. We reached camp around 7 p.m. and made a great hot dinner on the wood stove. As we sat there rehashing the day's events over baked goose, I knew that meal would live on in memory forever, too. Everyone was exhausted, even the dogs, with good reason. We knew tomorrow we would start out bright and early and do it all again!

We were up at 8 a.m. the next day. I gave Bruce a little pep talk (we do that for each other a lot) because he had not

seen much on his side of the ice. I told him this would be a better day; conditions were a little better – only -5° and little wind.

The dogs were howling, and James and Darl were ready to go. We took off. The dogs were running even harder than the day before since it was a little warmer. The first big ice hill we hit, James fell off and hit the ground pretty hard. I turned to ask Darl if we should stop for James and realized he wasn't there either – he had been thrown off the sled, too.

So there I was, packed into the sled doing, I swear, about 100 miles an hour down the ice road we had cut just two days before. I had lost my guides and the dogs were full steam ahead. All I could do was laugh and try to hang on. Since the sled was about 320 pounds lighter without the other passengers, I was literally airborne a few times.

As I was flying over Arctic speed bumps on that icy path, a couple of thoughts passed through my mind. One, I knew I wasn't going to jump out; the dogs would destroy the sled. And two, I wasn't going to end up walking four

*The hunting spot six miles out on the South Beaufort Sea.*



miles or better back to Base Camp.

I knew there was a spot ahead that we would not be able to clear. I just didn't know how far ahead it was. A mile and a half later, the sled hung up on a big ice spot long enough for me to grab the anchor and set it. It took James and Darl about 20 minutes to catch up with me.

We laughed so hard! James said in 25 years he had NEVER lost his team. I told him it seems when I am around crazy things happen – makes it interesting to say the least. We just kept laughing. What a sight – a 6'5", 325-pound man tucked into a runaway dog sled. It could have turned out much worse, but man, what a RIDE!

While James and Darl were double timing it to catch up with the runaway dog sled, Bruce's team pulled up beside them. Jacob asked his father, "Where is your sled and your client?" James pointed to the trail ahead. "They are gone – running out of control with Jack packed into the sled."

James and Jacob were worried that I could get hurt or even killed if I tried to jump out of the sled. Bruce chimed in. "Are you worried about Big Jack?" He

laughed and said, "Don't worry, James. Big Jack will get them stopped. It's going to take a lot more than a runaway dog sled to do Jack in! He just makes it all a little more exciting. He always does."

After my incredible five-mile ride – with and without guides – the time passed like lightning. We got the dogs stopped at the fresh ice, and I jumped out of the sled, pumped up from the ride. James suggested that Darl and I get in position while he settled the dogs.

Darl and I headed up to my own personal iceberg perch. We hadn't been there more than a minute (Bruce was still in his sled) when Darl spotted a bear heading towards us out at about 250 yards. He was following a strip of ice and open water.

Darl disappeared over the backside of the icy perch. I climbed over the ice chunks in front of me so we wouldn't spook the bear. James was still at the sled with the dogs. Alone on the perch, I looked at the bear through my scope. Based on what I'd learned the day before, I could tell this bear was much larger.

I tried to whisper to Darl but got no reply. The bear was about 200 yards

from me, and I knew it wouldn't be long before he was broadside in front of me. This time it was different – I WANTED THIS BEAR!

Adrenalin pumping, I started to shake. Then James whispered, "Can you take him from here? If you take him, make sure you down him because if you don't he will head to that water and disappear."

The bear was now at about 125 yards. "Kaboom," then "kaboom" a second time from my Dakota .375 H&H Mag. He was down and didn't move again. All I knew at that point was there was no way this 325-pounder was walking out onto the thin ice to retrieve him.

James just smiled. "Take a seat, big fella, and enjoy your success. We will drag the bear to safe ice!" All four Eskimo guides tied a rope around the bear and dragged him far enough onto the safe ice that I could get there and help. It was amazing to watch those four men drag a bear in excess of 600 pounds across the fresh ice.

I don't know why I got a second chance, but I was sure thankful to the

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*A 12-mile round trip from Base Camp to the bears in sub-zero temperatures each day of the hunt.*

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**ANYBODY**

**COULD DO IT.**



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*The author and his Dakota .375 H&H with assistant guide Darl Taylor and his almost nine-foot polar bear.*



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hunting gods for making my dream come true. My bear was perfect! About 8'6" squared, over six years old, the hide perfect. He wasn't huge, but he wasn't small like the first bear we had seen. All the hard work my team had done paid off. This was a once-in-a-lifetime dream come true. How many people can say that?

Just seconds after we got my bear to safe ice, Jacob yells out "BEAR!" Out about 600 yards was a polar bear lying on the ice covering his nose with one paw and watching a little strip of open water. We all ran around our little mountain of ice and hid to watch the bear.

Bruce got into position, and we waited. Fifteen minutes later, this big guy wasn't moving. He was hunting just like us. So we resumed our skinning and picture taking. Bruce and Jacob kept a careful eye on the bear's every move, hoping he would move in our direction. We quietly got my bear skinned and out of the way.


Bruce and Jacob weren't moving a muscle, waiting for the bear to figure out what it was going to do. After about

two hours, the bear started up the same path my bear had taken. I watched him close in on us at about 450 yards. Then one of the dogs growled at another. The great white bear stood up on his hind legs, staring straight at our position. When he got to about 400 yards, the same dog growled again. The bear stopped dead in his tracks and stared in our direction. Seconds seemed like hours.

Suddenly, he did a 180-degree turn and headed straight away from us. I could hear Bruce's heart drop from 25 yards. His bear was walking away from us never to return. What heartbreak! Needless to say the dog took a beating, but that wouldn't bring Bruce's bear back.

We kept hunting. I tried to cheer Bruce up as much as I could. The day was ending and we needed to head back to Base Camp. But we looked at the day as "one down, one to go."

Over the next two days, Bruce and Jacob faced brutal temperatures as low as -45° and high winds trying to get Bruce's bear. Unfortunately, the wind caused the fresh ice to close up. Ultimately, Bruce had to leave our icy piece of heaven with no bear.

But as Bruce and I like to say, "Sometimes you get the bear and sometimes the bear gets you." 

#### **Team Keslar Hunt Data:**

**Date:** March 9, 2005  
**Hunt:** The Great White Bear  
**Length of Hunt:** 12 days  
**Place:** Tuktoyaktuk, NWT – South Beaufort Sea Ice Flow (Baillie Island)  
**Team:** John Keslar, Bruce Mathews (aka "The Crippler" and "Dr. Death")  
**Guides and outfitters:** Jim and Jacob Pokiak, Darl Taylor, Alvin Silastiak  
**Method:** Dog Sled from Base Camp  
**Guns:** Dakota 375 H&H ( Keslar), Browning 375 H&H ( Mathews)  
**Ammo:** 375 H&H 260-grain partitions C.C.P.C.

Special thanks to:  
James and Maureen Pokiak, Jacob Pokiak, Darl Taylor, Alvin Silastiak, and to my best friend Dr. Bruce Mathews, who endured one of the most brutal hunts we have ever undertaken! And, let there be no question of our TOUGHNESS TOGETHER!  
Thanks, brother.  
– Jack