

Winnipeg Free Press > Sports > Other Sports > BLACK BEAR WAS CLOSE ENOUGH TO HUG

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Black bear was close enough to hug

TV's 'The Edge' shoots episodes in Manitoba

By: Shel Zolkewich / Hunting

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Shel Zolkewich / winnipeg free press Future rug looks photographer square in the lens.

When Scott Stirling of Wild TV mouthed the words "he's right here!" I assumed the bear was a good three metres away from our ground blind.

But when I saw the thin wall of the blind move, and when videographer Dan Forty leaned way, way back from the opening, I realized "right here" meant close enough for a bear hug.

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I admit that my hand was pushed hard against my mouth, muffling any screams of terror that might sneak out. After two minutes that seemed like half a day, the bear lost interest in us and returned to the bait, about 10 metres away. That's when Stirling and Forty began to giggle just a little bit, amused by my reaction on my first-ever bear hunt. (In my defence, I was weaponless. And there was only a bow and crossbow in the blind -- no rifle.)

This season, four episodes of The Edge -- one of Wild TV's most popular shows -- will be based in Manitoba. The spring bear hunt, hosted by Vance and Maureen Hrechkosy of Trail End Camp near Pointe Du Bois, kicked off the project.

For the last five weeks, Hrechkosy and dozens of Manitoba guides and outfitters have been hosting hunters for the spring bear season. If you think Vance puts his feet up at five every day and relaxes before dinner, think again. Sleep, or any kind of rest, is a bit a rarity for the Hrechkosys and their team of guides and workers during this stretch.

At breakfast, it's the ever-chipper Maureen who puts a meal on the table for hunters in camp. There were eight of us the day I was there. Guides then take out clients for a morning of fishing. It's back to camp for a hearty lunch (once again put together by Maureen) before it's time to get ready for the evening hunt.

Each hunter is stationed at a remote spot accessible only by water along the Winnipeg River at Trail End Camp. You might be at Ranger Station, the Honey Hole or Gas Can. Vance said when he first bought the business, the spots were numbered, but that got too confusing, so over time, unique names evolved. Fresh bait is added to the spot and hunters position themselves either in tree stands or in ground blinds. For the next five hours or so, it's a quiet wait.

It doesn't take long for the first curious and hungry bears to show up at the baits. Like ghosts, they appear silently. You'll turn your head to watch a chickadee for 10 seconds and when you glance back, there's a bear nosing around.

At dark, hunters make their way to the beach and then begin the trip back to camp with guides navigating the waterway. On the night I was there, a good old-fashioned Manitoba storm kicked up, complete with a howling wind, driving rain and blinding flashes of lightning. Vance was piloting a 28 foot craft outfitted with a 300 HP outboard. It's plenty of boat that can handle all kinds of conditions, yet navigating the Winnipeg River in the dark, without headlights, is not for the timid.

"It's all about experience. You watch the tree line, read the river," said Vance. He likens it to people who drive to work every day. "You get to work and think about a ton of other things while driving. You aren't even thinking about where you are going. That's how I am on the river."

Vance and Maureen purchased Trail End Camp in 1990. It's their 23rd season in business. Vance's experience on the river runs deep.

"I guided 84 days last season alone, just for fishing. That's not including the five or six weeks for hunting. It becomes second nature," he said.

When everyone is back at camp, usually after 10 p.m., there's the gathering at the shed to view bears that have been taken that night. Maureen is there. And then there's another meal to put on the table. Around midnight, hunters, hosts and guides are ready to flop down for the short night.

Trail End Camp has 29 tags for bear. About 60 per cent are sold for the spring season and the remaining for the fall. Their success rate is 100 per cent.

Stirling and Forty worked over the next couple of nights making a television show and waiting for just what they wanted. On the final night, they scored a doubleheader. Look for the spring bear hunt show of The Edge on Wild TV next season.

Shel Zolkewich writes about the outdoors, travel and food when she's not playing outside, traveling or eating. You can reach her at shel@shelzolkewich.com

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