

Northland Outdoors

C6 — The Daily Telegram

Hunting bears and leading hunts are Holly's passions

The following is another "Have Fun or Get Out of the Way" column by Don Leighton and Mike Granlund and their alter egos, Lance Boyle and Billy Pirkola, which runs occasionally in The Daily Telegram.

Keith Holly does not stick out in a crowd. His stature does not afford him the best view at the Fourth of July parade, but in the world of bear hunting, Holly is a giant.

This spring, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources adjusted its estimate of the number of bears in Wisconsin from approximately 12,000 to 25,000. Don't blame Holly for the increase in bears. Holly, the owner of Big Bear Guide Service, has a unique and interesting trade located in the heart of the town of Tripp, just north of Iron River.

"You know the excitement a deer hunter feels when he sees a big buck? Well, multiply that by eight when you first see your bear," Holly told a group of people on a balmy evening last week as he welcomed more than 40 people to the preseason pork feed at the building that serves as the center for Big Bear's hunting ventures.

In the crowd were his family, past hunters, Holly's crew, a DNR warden, Billy Pirkola and, of course, this year's hunters.

The evening opened with the Rev. Tom Blomberg blessing the food and praying for a safe and successful hunt. In addition to the fine food, hunters were instructed on the proper methods, procedures and techniques of the sport. An emphasis was placed on DNR rules and sports-



**Have Fun or
Get Out of the Way**

By Don Leighton
and Mike Granlund



manship.

Four first-time hunters from the La Crosse area were excited for the hunt to begin. Brian Adams of West Salem, Alan Pasch of Tomah and Dave Whalen and Wayne Helming of Bangor heard about Big Bear from a friend who had hunted before. It was 12 years ago Adams first put in his application, so he was definitely ready.

Jim Pandow and Tim Hartman of Brodhead are veterans of the hunt and appeared quite prepared for the quest ahead.

Holly is also quite a hunting veteran. He first became interested in hunting through his father. While in the woods with his dad at only eight years old, Holly witnessed his father trap a black bear. It probably didn't come close to the size of some bears now shot, but to an eight-year-old kid, it made quite an impression. Holly was hooked on hunting.

Holly got his first guide job when he was only 15. He lived in Cable and a group of doctors from Rochester, Minn. hired him to help them hunt deer.

Holly continued to provide guidance to hunters throughout his life in addition to working "real" jobs. He raised hogs in Tripp for 18 years and when he quit that occupation, he decided to concentrate on the guide business. His neighbors George and Joe Goetsch do much of the baiting, and one season had 71 sites to care for.

George's wife, Donna, has taken on the title of the Doughnut Queen of Oulu. Her fresh baked goods impressed us (I wonder if she is using Dorothy Elonen's recipe?).

Another who helps with the hunt is John Blasius. He comes all the way from Olive Hill, Ky., to help with tracking the animals along with local outdoorsmen David Smith, Wayne and Bob Holly, Mark and Kyle Karshbaum and Matt Palmer.

Even teenagers get involved as Logan Holly, Devin Holly, Michal Tuura and Cody Stone help with the "taco feed," by preparing the portions for the bait boxes. Keith Holly's wife, Lenore, serves as sounding board, making sure the male hunter's enthusiasm and excitement is tempered with the wisdom and common sense of a woman.

Big Bear does not hunt bears using dogs. Dogs are only allowed on a leash and only to track a wounded animal. More than half of hunters use a bow to conquer

their prey, which seems to be a growing trend over the years.

The success rate statewide for bear hunters is estimated to be around 70 percent, according to local game warden Brad Biser. But in the last three years, Holly

has hosted 79 hunters and, amazingly, every one has gotten a bear. We are right on the middle of the four-week season and he is trying to keep the streak alive. We aren't sure if this should be compared to Cal Ripken's 2,632 consecutive games played streak or Joe Dimaggio's 56 game hitting streak, or maybe Bret Favre's 275 consecutive games-started streak for the Packers that was just stopped through little fault of Brett's, but any way you look at it, it is impressive.

Each year brings different hunters as it takes from five to eight "points" to get a "kill tag." An unsuccessful annual application earns one a "point" and most of this year's hunters waited years for this honor. It's no wonder they are pumped up by the time the eve of the season arrives.

Bear hunting is not confined to just ment. Shelly Tobiasz of Red Granite, Wis., one of the past successful hunters, was back this year for her third time. Other hunters at the preseason feed surmised she could qualify to run for vice president some day. Her daughter, Jessica, participated in the youth hunt one season and bagged a 330-pound bear.

Shelly proved her mettle as she got a 444-pound bear on the second day of this season. Not to be outdone, her husband John rushed up north Sept. 12 and proceeded to get a massive 580-pound bear the same evening. They are believed to be the largest bears taken in one season by a husband-wife combination.

Larry Lindsay, a retired dairy farmer from Mondovi, came back after last year's successful hunt. Asked why he was back even though he could not hunt, he said he just wanted to be around the excitement when hunters bring in their bears. He had his 445-pound bear made into a beautiful rug by Lake Nebagamon taxidermist Mark Lundgren. Crawling under that huge blanket in January will save Lindsay on his winter heating bills but could terrify his unsuspecting grandkids.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

A stuffed 599-pound bear, bagged in 2001, stands as a reminder of a past successful hunt.

The largest bear Holly's group ever nabbed was a 689-pounder back in 1999.

For the last 25 years, local bears have feasted on broken taco shells, procured from the taco plant in Poplar. With the recent closing of that business, Holly has turned to another source of cuisine for our ursine friends: gummy bears. Yes, gummy bears will be the main bait used next year as Holly recently had 23 tons of the children's treat delivered to his business. You read that correctly; 23 tons. The gummy bear company must think Holly has a real sweet tooth.

Lance and Billy will be investing in stock in the gummy bear parent company.

Holly does not confine his guide service to bears. Deer season is big on his agenda too, and bobcats are warned to keep clear of Holly and his crew. The largest bobcat they claimed was a 47-pound critter taken in 2000.

And amazingly, at age 65, Holly also had time to be the pitcher this season for the Grace Baptist team in the Northwoods Church Softball League. The team's record? Twenty-five wins and no losses!

Yes, Holly is a giant in the world of bear hunting and an amazing man. But if you are of the ursine variety, "Let the bear beware!"

Opinions and/or story ideas can be e-mailed to dleigh1273@aol.com or wgrantlund@centurytel.net



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Keith Holly poses for a picture beside a wooden carving of a bear.