

# Survivor: Man meets 600-pound black bear

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It was just before dawn on Friday, November 17, and Thurman Hensley's life was about to change. Making his way over the rocky terrain and thick patches of mountain laurel of his 250-acre property bordering the Shenandoah National Park, the seasoned hunter and expert marksman tracked his prey.

Then, at 8:30am, with the sun shining brightly on the cool fall day, Hensley finally spotted his mark. He raised his muzzle loader, took aim, and fired the gun's single round. Through the cloud of smoke, the 60-year-old saw the animal lurch as his bullet penetrated its torso behind the shoulder.

It could have been a fatal shot. But rather than fall, the massive creature lumbered off into the woods with Hensley close behind, determined to snare a prize kill and put the wounded animal out of its misery. An hour later, however, Hensley, now unarmed, found himself fighting for his own life, locked in a bloody battle to the death with Virginia's largest mammal.

Like the guns carried by cartoon characters, a muzzle loader is an old-fashioned firearm, though most used today are not antiques. It must be loaded by hand with gunpowder and bullet. And after each shot, reloading can take up to a minute, a long time when the hunter suddenly becomes the hunted.

As Hensley began tracking the bear he had shot that November morning, another hunter was waiting and watching high above the ground. Soon after hearing the shot, he saw a sight that shocked him.

"A huge bear came by," recalls Tim Cass, Hensley's neighbor, who was hunting with his 19-year-old son, Nicholas, from a tree stand. "It looked like it was 800 pounds." Cass says that in addition to its unbelievable size, the bear was acting strangely. "It kept sitting down, laying, sitting," he says.

Cass had already killed his one allotted bear for the season that morning, so he remained in his stand.

About 45 minutes later, Hensley came past, and Cass joined the pursuit, making their way through mountain laurel so thick that in places the trio had to crawl on their hands and knees before they spotted the wounded bear. "It was laid down," Cass says.

Both he and Hensley fired their weapons, but even those shots didn't finish the job, and when the smoke cleared, the bear was gone. And so was their ammunition.

Both men had left their packs with extra ammo by their tree stands, so Cass used a radio to ask his son and his son-in-law, Curtis Barton, who were hunting nearby, to bring more. Re-armed, Hensley, Cass, and Barton continued the hunt. Nicholas, who'd lent his gun to his father, stayed behind.

There were signs that the bear wouldn't go far-- "There was a lot of blood," Cass says-- and before long, the hunters had another chance to kill the bear. Hensley, walking about 10 yards ahead of the other two, spotted the wounded animal lying in close range under some laurel, took aim, and shot it in the head. "The bear started rolling, moaning, roaring," Cass recalls.

He and Barton also fired their weapons. One shot to the head might have killed an ordinary bear, but this creature's massive size afforded it some protection from the bullets, and game wardens later estimated the seven-foot-tall bear's weight at about 600 pounds. According to VDGIF spokesperson Julia Dixon, the largest Va. black bear on record was 720 pounds and was shot in the Suffolk area.

"That is above normal," says Steve Morgan, owner of Appleberry Mountain Taxidermy in Schuyler. He handles about 30 to 40 bear carcasses a year, most under 300 pounds. At a nearby bear check station, The Gun Shack in Verona, Jordan Coffman says he's never seen a bear that size. "The biggest bear we've weighed is 180 pounds," he says.

Hensley's target leapt out of the laurel. From 10 yards away, Cass says, he watched a "horrific" scene unfold. "When it came out, it spun to the right," he remembers. "Thurman was in the bear's path."

When Hensley saw the bear charging, he turned to run. But the bear reached him in seconds, knocked him down, and tried to turn him over. It chomped through his knee and bit out his inner thigh. When the bear flipped him to his back, Hensley stuck his gun crossways in its mouth to keep it from reaching his head and throat, and the gun broke one of the bear's canine teeth and its jawbone. When the maddened creature wrenched the gun out of his hands, Hensley put his left forearm into the bear's mouth in an effort to protect his face.

Nearby, Cass and his son-in-law watched in horror.

"I look at my son-in-law and say, "Oh my f\*\*\*ing god,"" Cass recalls. "We went over there and started beating the bear on the head to get him off Thurman.

"I was hitting that bear with everything I had," says Cass, 47, a weightlifter. "I beat and beat and beat on that bear. It broke my gun all to pieces."

When Hensley couldn't free his arm, he headbutted the bear, breaking his own nose in the process. He then grabbed its mouth with his right hand. The bear's teeth ripped through his tendons, and

nearly tore his hand in half. Cass and Barton kept bashing their guns over its head, but the bear seemed oblivious to their assault and continued mauling Hensley.

"You could hear popping bones and just crushing," says Cass, "like he was chewing a big old bone."

The bear finally turned its attention to Hensley's rescuers and chased them down a hill. But, weakened by blood loss, it finally retreated uphill into a stand of mountain laurel.

Cass and Barton went back up the hill to try to rescue Hensley.

"You could see his skull, the front of his forehead," Cass recalls. "He had a hunting suit saturated with blood like a sponge-- I thought he was going to bleed to death."

But before Cass could help the still-conscious Hensley, the bear returned once more, and Cass and Barton ran, with the bear in close pursuit.

With the bear distracted, Hensley-- despite his massive injuries-- rolled into a nearby patch of mountain laurel. And when the bear returned to him, the scent of the blood on the ground where they'd fought-- his own and the bear's-- may have confused it, and it lumbered away.

Hensley managed to get to his feet and stumble down the mountain to find Cass.

"It was almost like the walking dead," says Cass, stunned to see Hensley upright and moving. "It's hard to explain how bad it really was."

Cass had radioed his son to go get the four wheeler and call for help. The men loaded Hensley, who was rapidly going into shock, onto the four-wheeler and raced to Cass' house. There, thanks to Cass' son who'd made the call, the rescue helicopter ambulance Pegasus was waiting to carry him to UVA Hospital.

At home making stew on the morning of Hensley's attack, Jennifer says, she initially laughed off Cass' call as a prank. "They're always pulling stuff like that," she says. When she asked Cass how big the bear was and he told her more than 600 pounds, she hung up on him. "Yeah, right," she thought.

But when Cass' son-in-law called back a few minutes later, his voice shaking, she realized this time was different and raced over Afton Mountain. Hensleys' daughter, Shea Willis, also soon realized the seriousness of her father's situation. "The word 'airlifted' knocked the wind out of me," she says.

Arriving at UVA Hospital's emergency room, Willis, 39, says she couldn't believe what she saw. "The room was covered in blood. He was *tore* up."

Hensley was wheeled into surgery while family and friends filled the waiting room, anxiety rising during the seven-hour life-saving procedures. "They couldn't tell us the extent of the damage," says Willis. "We didn't know if he'd come out with all his limbs, if he had head, neck, or brain injuries or what."

For about three weeks "it was touch and go," says Willis. Doctors told the family that Hensley might suffer organ failure. Jennifer Hensley says that from the moment she arrived at the ER, she began administering the eastern medicine techniques she practices. "I started cranking the Qi into him because he looked like he needed it," she says. She and Hensley believe the combination of eastern and western medicine allowed him to recover more quickly than doctors ever expected.

There were setbacks, however. Hensley's femoral artery burst in the week after the attack, and he almost bled to death, says Willis. Amazingly, despite the bear having bitten through bones, Hensley never contracted a systemic infection, which can be fatal. But doctors frequently had to cut away dead or infected flesh from inside his wounds. Remembering the pain of those procedures, Hensley now shakes his head and says, "You just don't know...."

Two weeks and over a dozen surgeries after the attack, Hensley went home to finish healing. But in some ways, says Willis, the next two months were tougher on everyone than the early days.

"Learning to live with something long term has been a lot harder," she says, "than walking into the ER and seeing him in little pieces."



**PHOTO COURTESY THURMAN HENSLEY**