

Hunting the Ultimate Game Animal

by Ty Zabel

Hunting wild sheep is thought of as hunting the ultimate game animal, especially the Rocky Mountain Bighorn. Wild sheep in North America range from Alaska to Mexico. In Alaska and the Northwest Territory of Canada are the Dall sheep, through British Columbia are the Stone sheep, from the southern reaches of British Columbia through Colorado are the Bighorns, and from Arizona through northern parts of Mexico are the Desert Bighorns. For a hunter to get all four of these North American wild sheep is a great accomplishment and is called a grand slam.

In 1984, I had the opportunity to go to Canada to hunt Stone sheep with my family. The only reason I had this opportunity was because of my dad, who is an artist. He was contacted to do a bronze sculpture of a Canadian guide who is known worldwide. The bronzes were to be purchased to give to family and friends. Through this commission we met the family and arranged the sheep hunt.

This hunt in Canada would be one of the greater experiences in my life, especially for a 16-year-old boy. I ran the hunt through my mind, trying to picture what it would be like. I thought of it like an article you would read in **Outdoor Life** magazine.

Our hunt was to take place in August. We spent much of the summer preparing for the trip, trying to plan what we needed and how to get from plane to plane and through airports the best we could so our gear would arrive at the same time we did. The first major thing we had to do was to buy good boots. We would be doing a lot of climbing and walking. We wore these boots most of the summer to break them in. We also had to shoot our guns a lot and make sure they were sighted in well. We used 270s and sighted them in at 200 yards. We had to plan our wardrobe. We needed clothes for hot weather, cold weather, rainy weather and possibly snow, plus sleeping bags and personal gear, and our guns.

The trip started by flying from Steamboat to Denver. Once in Denver we flew to Vancouver, B.C., and from there to Ft. St. John, then to Fort Nelson, where a bush plane took us on a 40-minute flight to the main lodge of Big Nine Outfitters. Flying is the only way to get to his place. The plane had to make two trips, one with us and one with our gear.

The country was big and beautiful. There were no roads anywhere. You had to fly, walk or ride horses to travel. The horses at the lodge were trailed in and it took days for them to get there.

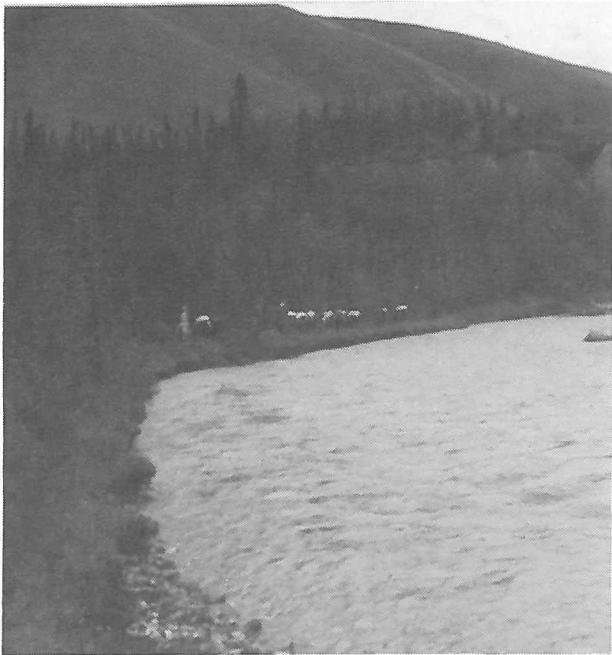


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The horses are just left on their own during the winter. They feed on wind-blown ridges. The area doesn't get much snow and is much like Colorado mountains, but yet more open and bigger country.

After being in planes for 10 hours our 12-day adventure had started. I was overwhelmed with excitement.

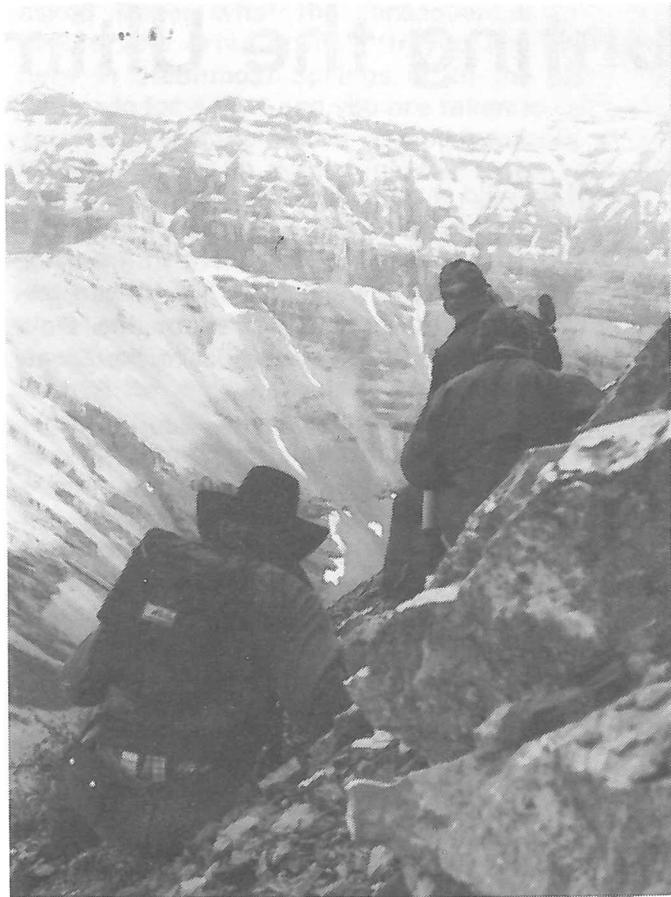
The next day we packed up the horses and were off to hunt. It had rained the night before and the river was high. We had to cross the river to get to where we were to hunt. The skies were still cloudy, adding to the atmosphere of what was to happen. We reached the river and started to cross the water which was very swift and high. It washed some of the pack horses downstream, making them swim. My brother and I made it across. My dad and mother were washed downstream and almost didn't make it. One of the guides went down to help the pack horses. His horse drowned and he went swimming through the rapids. We didn't know if he was going to make it or not! One of our other guides rode downstream and found him and picked him up. Now he was on foot, so he had to go back to camp and get another horse. The hunt was not looking too good after this. We all realized that these



were pretty tough people. This ordeal didn't seem to bother them; it was just another problem during their everyday life.

After we reached our camp we were more relaxed and eager for the next day's hunting, for we had spotted some sheep from camp. The next morning we didn't go out because the sheep were in a difficult place to get to. So we went fishing and caught some nice fish. The third day we went for the sheep. We climbed up high on the mountain in a rain storm, but this helped and we were getting close to a huge ram. Because of the fog the sheep couldn't see us. Everything was going well. Then the wind changed so we struck out that day. Later, back at camp, we learned that my brother, Kirk, had struck out too in a similar situation. The next few days we didn't have any luck, either. On the seventh day we decided to go to another area.

We rode back to the main lodge, having no trouble in the river, to get supplies ready for our next outing. Leaving on our second journey I felt positive about our hunting. Later that day my



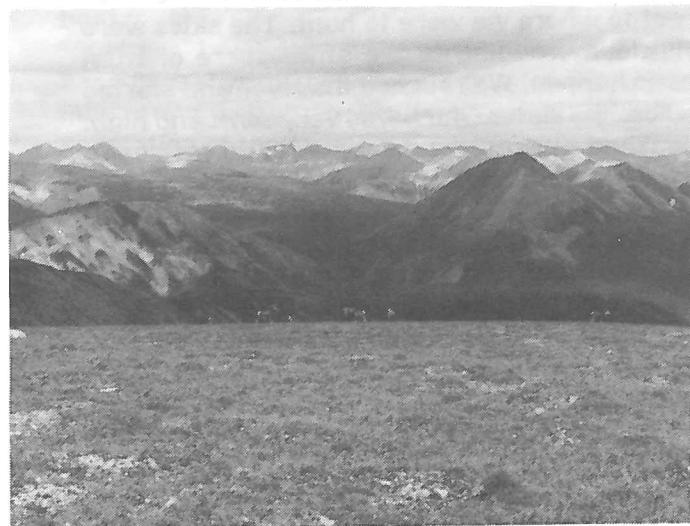
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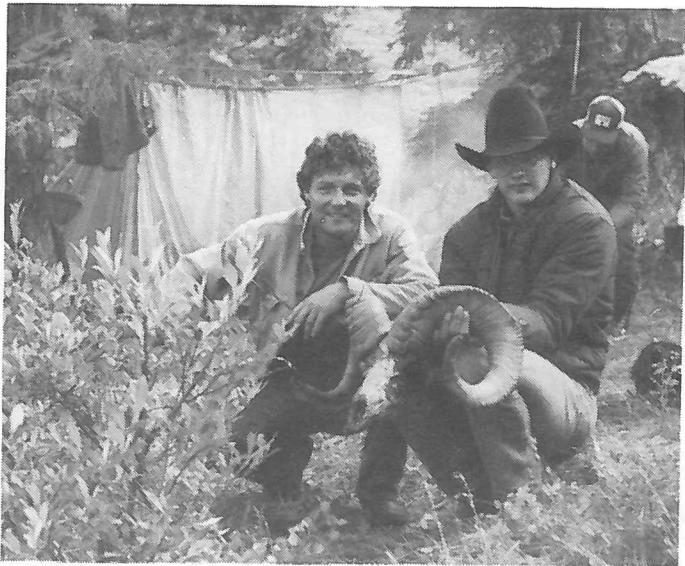
attitude changed when I struck out again. When we made camp that night I was thinking of the fun I'd had, when a grizzly bear came along! The bear passed right by our camp, only adding to the wildlife we had seen — elk, deer, moose, caribou, stone sheep and a mountain goat. I went to sleep wondering what was going to happen the following day.

The next morning I was tired and not enthused as I climbed the steep mountain. Then my dad



A lot of sheep hunting is just looking.

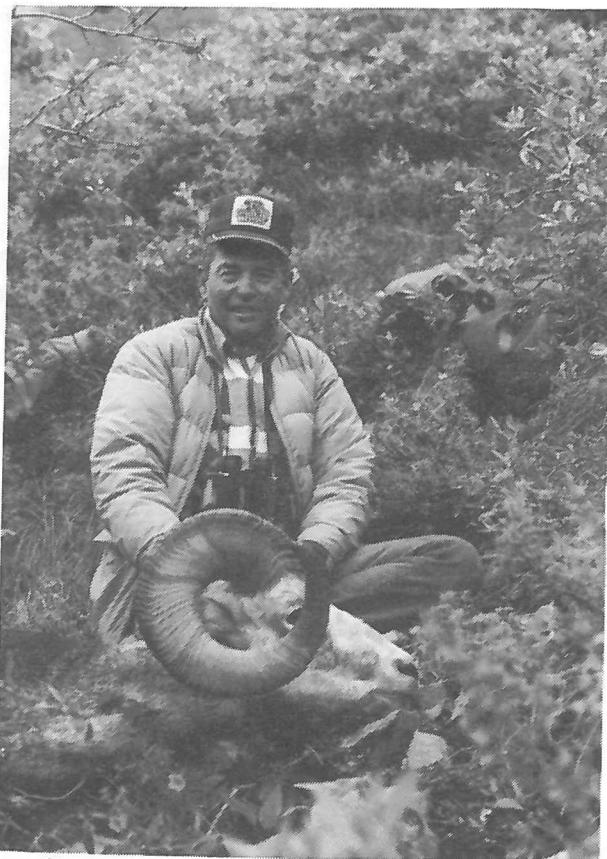




The sheep hunting bug had got me.

and his guide motioned to us from across a little valley. My guide led me down a ridge and directly below us were sheep! I couldn't shoot where they were, so I waited. When they stepped out from behind a rock, my guide told me which one, and I pulled the trigger. The horns of my Stone ram measured 37 inches in length and the bases were 13 inches in diameter. That night at camp I had a tasty dinner of sheep loin and ribs.

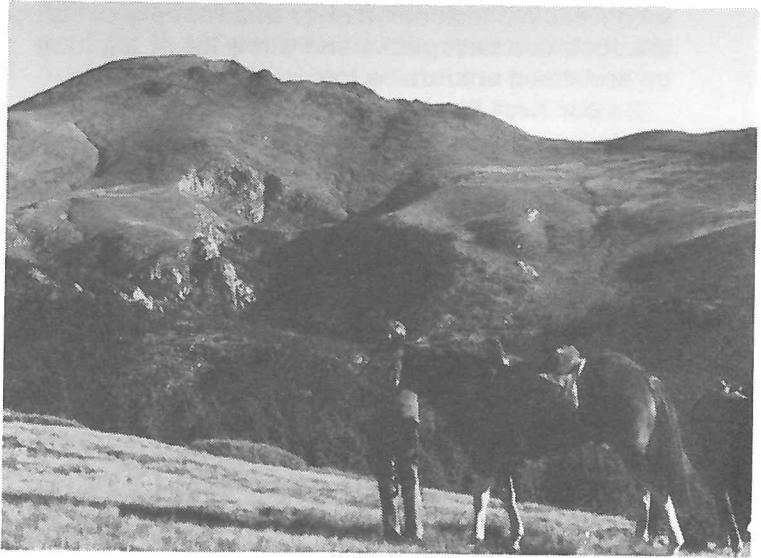
I would remember this hunt for the rest of my life and the sheep hunting bug had got me! My dad got his ram two days later. Its horns



My Dad's stone ram.

measured 39½" in length and the bases were 13 inches. Anything over 35 inches is considered a good trophy. Kirk hunted harder than any of us, but luck didn't go his way on this trip. He's looking forward to going back in the near future to get his ram.

BIGHORN HUNT



I decided to apply for a Bighorn sheep license in the spring of 1985, hoping that by the time I was 25 years old I might draw one. I know of people who have applied for 20 years and have not drawn a license. I got very, very lucky and drew a license my first year. My brother and dad couldn't believe it. I drew for Pikes Peak.

Because of my job this summer I didn't have time to scout the area, so my dad went down one weekend and scouted around. He didn't see anything so we decided to get a guide who could scout the area and have more time than my dad or I. He spent a few weeks before the hunt looking around. He called us and reported seeing some nice rams, so we expected a good hunt. The season was to run from September 10 to October 8.

September finally came and we were off to hunt Bighorns. We were to have a base camp just outside of the Colorado Springs city water shed, which is right in the middle of the hunting area and is off-limits to hunting. So guess where all of the sheep go? From the base camp we were to ride horseback up the mountain.

On the first day we woke up at 4:30, ate breakfast, saddled the horses and were on our way. We didn't see any sheep all day, but we sure saw a lot of neat country. That evening, a long ways away we spotted some ewes and lambs, but no rams. The next day we went up the mountain. We didn't see any sheep until that evening when

we were returning to camp. They were all rams and some big ones too, but they were in the watershed!

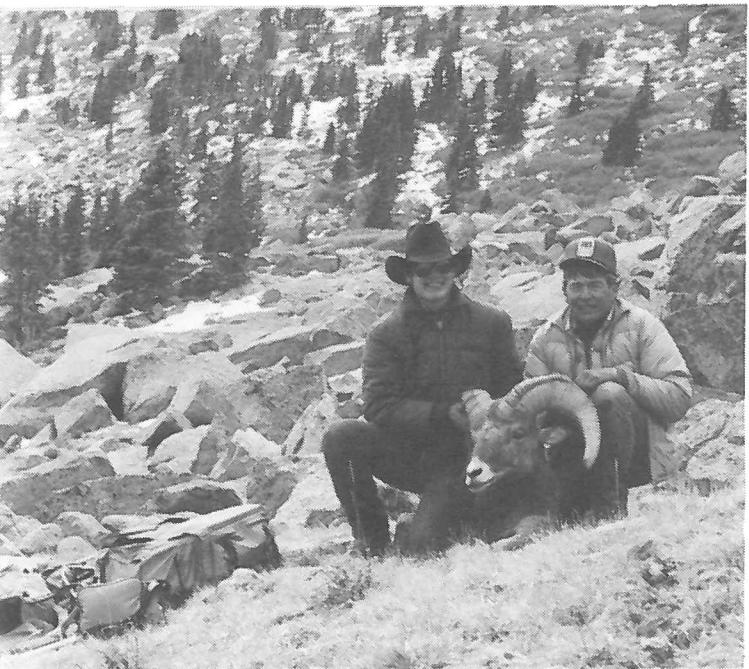
The sheep in the watershed sure were tempting, but we couldn't go in and the sheep didn't come out. We continued to hunt in other areas for a few more days, but we didn't have any luck. So we decided to come back the last week of the season, because I had football and school to get back to.

On the return trip just my dad and I went, with no guide. We took our trailer and made a camp. We took our backpacks and did a lot of walking up and down mountains looking for sheep.

On our first day back we hunted hard, walking up a good steep hill. We were on the Colorado Springs side of Pikes Peak. We saw two good rams down in a deep hole about a quarter of a mile deep. It was late in the afternoon and we knew if we got one we would be walking out in the dark or staying out the night. We went down trying, anyway. We got as close as we could, which was 300 yards downhill so I had to shoot up. The sheep knew we were there. The ram I was going for was a full curl. I got a good rest and fired, but I missed! It took us 45 minutes to an hour to get out of that hole, and it took the rams 3 minutes. After I missed I figured I had had my chance and missed.

The next day we didn't see anything. By the end of the day I was real pessimistic, because the next day was the last day of the season. But I told myself I was lucky just to get the license and even get a shot at one.

On the last day of the season it was snowing. On the way up we spotted some nice rams, so we made a plan of attack. There was fog that kept lifting, but always coming back; we hoped it



An experience of a life time.

would help us. We worked trying to get to the sheep for about an hour and 45 minutes. Then we got to where they were, but we couldn't see them. So we crawled closer, and we were right on top of them! But we didn't know it until they ran, and I couldn't get a shot. I was ready to quit and go home after that, but my dad kept telling me not to give up.

It was about 9 a.m. and we walked out on a little ridge to look around. We didn't see anything; we just glassed with binoculars to see if we could find out where the sheep had gone. Then around 10 we saw three rams headed our way. So quickly we got in good position and waited. The sheep worked their way down the hill slowly. I was cold and shaking because of the wind and snow, but I waited. Then two of the sheep stayed behind and the biggest one kept coming, but very cautiously looking ahead. It was about 11 when he stepped out from a tree at 50 to 60 yards. The sun came out and the wind quit blowing. I pulled the trigger. It was the last day, 11 a.m., and I got my Bighorn. I let out a yell that echoed around the mountain! The ram measured 32 inches in length and 16 inches at the base.

I will remember the sheep hunts clearly for the rest of my life. I will also look on my good luck! I am now 18 years old and have my grand slam half completed. I hope in the future to be able to hunt more mountain sheep. They are by far the ultimate game animal. Long ago an Indian hunter supposedly remarked: "Bighorn can't hear thunder, can't smell dead horse, but can see through rock."

I am going to apply for a goat license this year and if my luck holds out and I draw a license I figure that I will have two weeks to hunt before I leave for college.



One more closer to my Grand Slam.