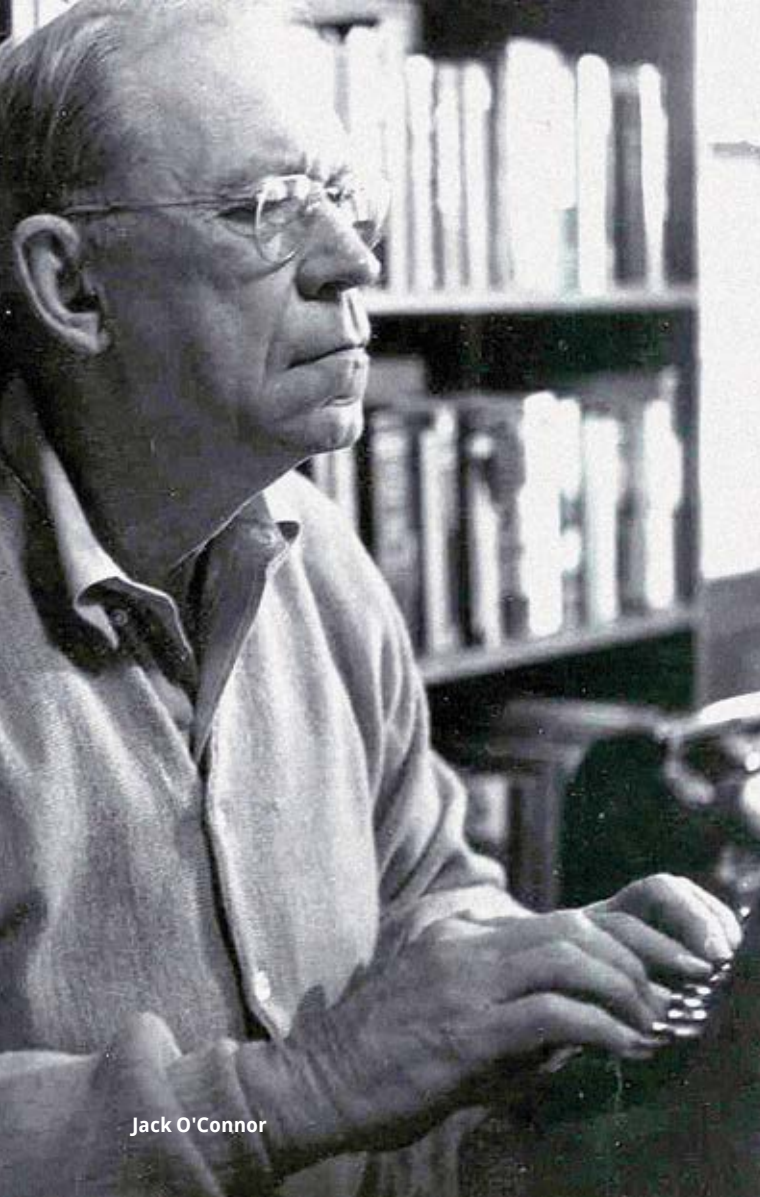


# A North American Wild Sheep Trifecta

- A 50-year quest in Jack O'Connor's footsteps

I will never forget the first article I read by Jack O'Connor. The year was 1972, and the article "Paradise in Turkistan" was translated from English to my maternal Farsi language. Even though it was a translation, the article struck a chord with me because of how Jack articulated his experience in the Kopet Dagh mountains of north-east Persia. In my family's hunting culture, proving the hunter's prowess meant hunting wild chukars in flight. This was considered the royal game (not sheep nor Ibex). After reading his article, I was in love with how Jack romanticized his time afield in my native land, particularly how he described his chase for the wild sheep.

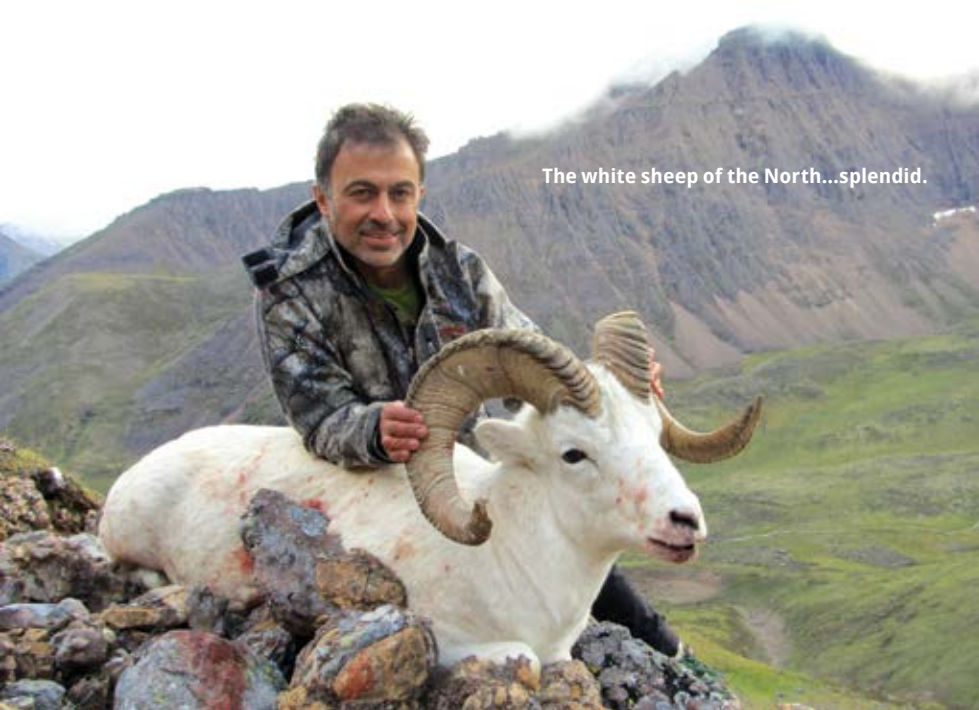
At the time, I could not possibly realize how much the writings of Jack O'Connor would influence my hunting pursuits later in life. I am not just talking about the .270 Winchester as his favorite caliber but rather how he approached hunting the wild sheep with utmost respect and enthusiasm, how he would try and penetrate their comfort zone for a close, clean shot, how he would always choose age and maturity over length and girth, how he would sight-in his rifle to eliminate the guesswork on range estimation and how through his stories, he would transport the reader to the saddle of his packtrain somewhere in the mountains of northern British Columbia. As most of us know, besides his full-time position as the editor of *Outdoor Life* and *Peterson's Hunting*, Jack would eventually become not only the man who popularized sheep



Jack O'Connor



Attached to his home in Lewiston, Idaho, the trophy room in the Jack O'Connor home was a place of cherished memories. Most of the trophies now are on public display at the Jack O'Connor Center in Lewiston.



The white sheep of the North...splendid.



Jack O'Connor's Dall's sheep, taken in 1950, scored 176-7/8 points.



Read about Jack's sheep hunt.

hunting but also the honest and vocal advocate/spokesman for wild sheep and one of the first pioneers of the wild sheep conservation movement in North America.

And then life happened. In the following years, I pursued an education in the United Kingdom and the U.S. I worked and started raising a family, which temporarily changed my focus. In 1997, I moved to Alberta and saw the hunting opportunities available for sheep and mountain goats with over-the-counter tags. This opportunity rekindled that passion.

At the same time, I was fortunate to meet my late mentor, Dr. Valerius Geist, at a lecture on mule deer. That lecture transformed the way I looked at hunting and conservation. We connected through a series of lucky events, and I became his lifelong student, learning and implementing his North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. Our relationship continued until death took him away in 2021, but his teachings shaped my hunting ethos. Geist himself was an O'Connor student and told me how much Jack had influenced his own prose, and that later in life, had even dedicated one of his last books to Geist.

Enamored with sheep hunting, I was determined to get my hands around the horns of a mature ram, but I was a rookie when it came to sheep hunting in North America. I spent seven seasons with buddies or alone in my beloved Canadian Rockies, looking for a legal ram. Even though I couldn't connect with a mature legal ram, I had a lot of fun doing it and learned a lot about sheep habitat and how to look for mature rams. Being a mountaineer all my life, besides my love for God and my family, I realized that sheep hunting provided the ultimate high amongst all my outdoor pursuits and that no other activity truly compared.

#### DALL'S SHEEP

My first North American hunt for a ram came to fruition in August 2010 on an opportunistic cancellation hunt in northern Yukon Territory. It was a tough, 10-day backpack hunt. When the airline lost my gear, I borrowed some from my guide. Then there was the weather, a grizzly sow and her cubs that bluff-charged our party, abundant wolves, and many mosquitos. The ram

I eventually killed near the end of the hunt was a 10-year-old, doubly broomed Dall's, which I was lucky to kill at 10 p.m. on a very steep slope. Upon reaching camp at 1 a.m., I made a bonfire, set the ram's head next to me, and celebrated the major milestone. I also killed an old mature caribou. There were times on that hunt that I would rub my eyes while in the saddle to make sure it was real and not another dream after reading one of Jack's late-night stories in the Yukon. Having read all of O'Connor's sheep hunting stories, I had taken my .270 Winchester, convinced that it would do the job well, which it did.

That hunt taught me several things. I had read the accounts of Charles Sheldon, who hunted in that same area several decades before me. He described abundant sheep, moose, and caribou

**"He has amber eyes and horns the color of dried lemon peel."**

**- Jack O'Connor**

populations, which we did not encounter. That made me wonder where the game had gone. Upon discussing my findings with Dr. Geist, I realized firsthand that I had been hunting in a predator pit. In the old days, trapping was a lucrative

trade, but it also had the benefit of controlling predators, resulting in higher game numbers. I connected the dots and saw the big picture. We saw five grizzlies on that hunt and heard several packs of wolves in different drainages.

#### ROCKY MOUNTAIN GOAT

My next successful high mountain hunt came in late October 2011. In an area very close to my hometown of Calgary, I killed a nine-year-old billy. This was a relatively easy hunt compared to my experience in Yukon Territory, as we hunted out of a comfortable camp and had access to horses. It nevertheless had all the elements of a classic O'Connor pack train hunt, and I indulged in it. With what I had learned on my Dall's sheep hunt, I paid more attention to the habitat and the predator situation. There was a resemblance, but I found more goats and fewer signs of predators over the seven-day hunt. I narrowly escaped death as rocks tumbled down a steep slope while I caped my goat. Incidentally, on that hunt, I used a .300 Winchester Magnum, the caliber O'Connor had used to



**"A beast the color of snow."**

- Jack O'Connor

Old mountain goats in late season have the most wonderful capes and the most pronounced scent glands around the base of their horns.

kill his first mountain goat in British Columbia.

### ROCKY MOUNTAIN BIGHORN

Two seasons passed without a legal bighorn ram in my home province of Alberta. I studied and tried to learn from my mistakes in the Canadian Rockies. Finally, in late October 2013, with help from buddies who had horses, I killed a mature 11-year-old bighorn on the last day of my 10-day hunt.

This was my best trophy ram, and I cherished the experience. I

used my .280 Remington to kill that ram, a caliber that O'Connor would become partial to in his later years. And as for the shot, the ram never gave me a chance to range him, yet my O'Connor system of sighting in three inches high at 100 yards with a trifle of hold over his back did the trick as I watched him tumble down into a steep chute like a sack of potatoes.

There was another O'Connor connection, too. I confirmed what Jack had experienced in the Canadian Rockies in his later years. The construction of seismic roads for oil and gas exploration eased access to prime sheep habitat, changing the landscape and the declining sheep population numbers.

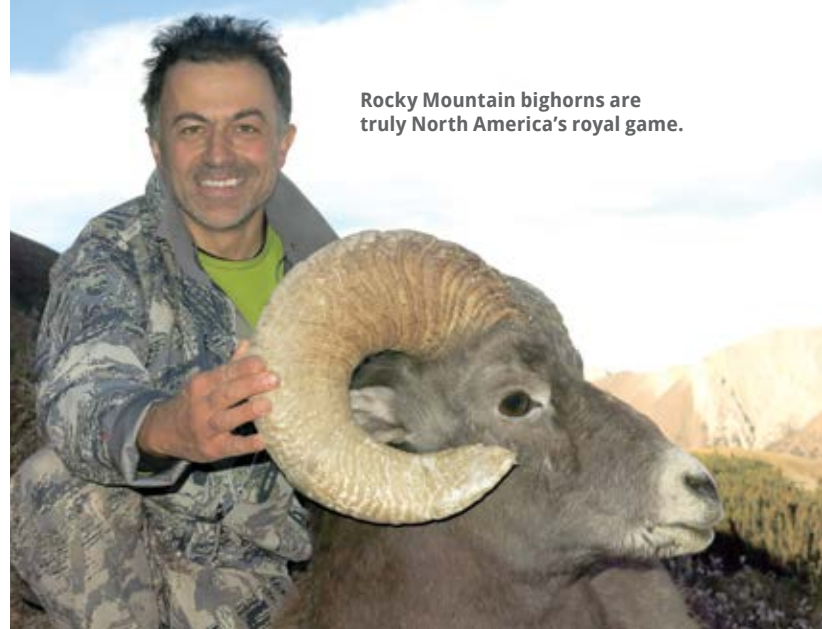
For the next six years, I hunted sheep every fall in Alberta and came across a couple of legal rams. Having taken an 11-year-old monarch already, I had set the bar high for something older. My son accompanied me on one of those hunts and even though he was sheepless, I discouraged him from shooting a barely legal ram that we found in late 2018.

### DESERT BIGHORN

In 2019, the stars lined up, and I drew one of two non-resident tags for a desert ram in Arizona. This hunt came as a gift from my dad, who had been promoted to heaven several years prior but had come to my dream the night before I found out about the draw results. In the dream, he told me that he had a piece of good news.

I took my younger son and two close buddies on that hunt. We found a 12-year-old broomed ram and killed it on opening day. Lots of laughter and good stories followed. I returned home with a smile the size of Man-

hattan. Our camp was set up in a dry arroyo on the shady side of a tall mountain with cholla trees surrounding us and desert quail calling in all directions. We also had set up a fire pit and had an ample supply of single malt with Mexican grub—a setting that Jack would have undoubtedly approved. Once again, it was the .280 Remington that barked on that



Rocky Mountain bighorns are truly North America's royal game.

hunt, one that I think O'Connor would have also used for taking his favorite desert sheep. After all, that's who got me into sheep hunting in the first place.

I am certainly not the only sheep hunter whose hunting métier has been so profoundly shaped by Jack. Jack taught us that as sheep hunters, our primary focus should be only to harvest mature rams to ensure future generations can enjoy the same liberties we enjoy today. He taught us to participate in the sport of sheep hunting because of the challenging habitat they live in, not for bragging rights about having a Grand Slam title.

Wisdom comes with age, and Jack was certainly a master of it. Even though he was the first "grand slammer," he never bragged about it.

In conclusion, it disheartens me that some sheep hunters have no clue who Jack O'Connor was, nor have they read his captivating stories and books. Perhaps reading this article will entice readers to delve into the life of this veteran storytelling sheep hunter, whose values and traits on sheep hunting, together with his rudimentary yet sophisticated ways of handling the rifle and the shotgun, hold true today as they did 80 years ago and are forever timeless. ■



Divine interventions are possible!