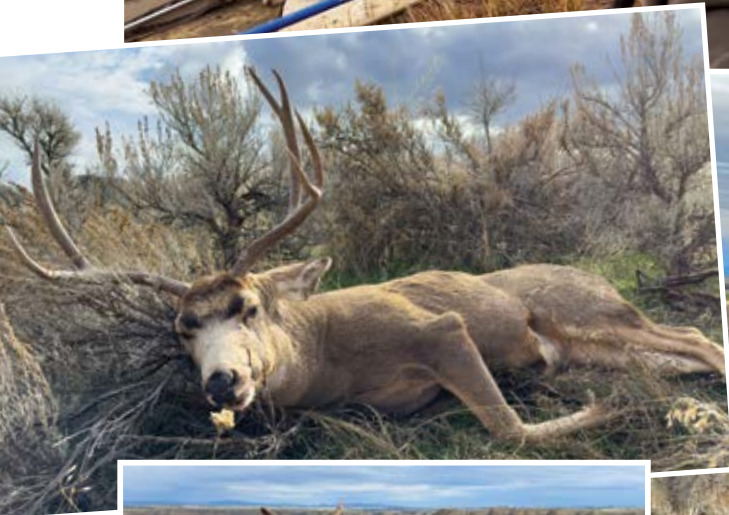


Ewe and Me



Long known for its record-book rams and dismal draw odds, Montana's Missouri River Breaks offers a sheep hunt for those willing to forgo the full curl.

Our ascent began well before sunrise up a formidable 1,000-foot badland ridge behind camp. The ground was firmer in the cool morning frost, but the slope was no less daunting. The terrain rolled up and down like a bad rollercoaster for roughly the first mile, then shot straight up in an almost vertical wall spanning the imposing precipice. We slogged to the summit, reaching the pinnacle near shooting light after taking substantially longer than we thought it would.

At the top, Montana's Missouri River Breaks unfolded with a spectacle of rugged canyons, towering cliffs, and untamed wilderness. Shaped by the timeless force of the Missouri River, the land unveiled its vibrant colors and intricate patterns, a canvas that hunters like us found irresistibly captivating as we stopped to photograph the sunrise. This is the land of world-record bighorn rams, and I had a tag—for a ewe.

A EWE TAG?

The chances of drawing a ram tag here are nearly impossible. My decision to hunt a ewe stemmed from a desire to embrace the hunt itself. I aimed to relish the experience, even if it meant pulling the trigger on a ewe that stood beside a magnificent ram.

The wildness of this hunt began months before boots hit the ground. On the day of the drawings, my eyes

widened as the site indicated I was successful. I would hunt alongside my buddy Parker, who was searching for a Breaks-worthy mule deer.

Armed with tales of elusive giants and a trusty 18-foot jet boat, we hit the Breaks after a heavy late-October snowmelt, a decision that defied warnings of infamous "gumbo" mud from locals and even the sheriff. We weren't stopping because of the weather. We soon learned why they tried to warn us.

This gumbo is similar in appearance to my two-year-old toddler's diaper after he's had too much hummus. Gumbo mud cakes tire treads and lines wheel wells so thick that vehicles can get stuck for months.

Our two-hour, 18-mile white-knuckle drive from town to the boat ramp entailed mud-skating across a hill into a side embankment, 45 minutes of back-and-forth

"mudneuvering," and Parker, using his 6'8" Virginia Tech offensive lineman frame, pushing us by the boat to get unstuck. We were fueled by the belief that getting there was half the battle.

We didn't account for how the gumbo would affect our hunting ability. The treacherous coulees, sloppy with mud from the recent thaw, turned our first few days into a struggle. Each step weighed down our boots, making progress upward (literally) two steps forward, one step back. We couldn't make it more than 300 yards from the river the first two days of the hunt, relegating ourselves instead to a 10-mile float on the river while stopping occasionally to glass. Parker glassed the south and north sides, both open to our general buck tags, while I glassed the northside, where my ewe permit was valid. We saw neither.

WHEN DOWN, GO HIGH

It was 3 a.m. on day three. I laced up my boots to the dim light of the propane heater in the corner of our two-person canvas tent. With a persistent ache in my back from three nights of cot camping, I wondered if this early morning effort would yield anything worthwhile.

Parker decided the preceding evening that we would ascend the menacing cliffs above camp, hoping to spot a ewe or a big Breaks mule deer. We calculated every part of our route, ensuring each step took us closer to the top.

We hiked early while the ground was hardened from overnight frost and heavy winds. From the top, we planned to see all the hidden animals that had slipped our glass. Parker surmised that hunting from the river was no secret, a fact proven correct by the dozens of boats and kayaks we had seen the

two days before. The animals were likely bedding and milling on the backside of the foothills to escape the watchful eyes of jet boats motoring up and down the river. Gone were the days of filling your tag from the shoreline.

“Let’s make some coffee while we glass,” I insisted to Parker upon reaching the mountaintop. I had worked up a chilling sweat on the ascent and was looking for any semblance of warmth to combat the frosty temps and 20-mph winds accompanying the glassing spot.

“I want to work around to this other coulee,” he said. “Because this coulee is any different than the others?” I replied.

Undeterred by my sarcastic retort about the coulee’s uniqueness, Parker guided us towards his golden draw where giant mule deer dreams waited to become reality. Two days of disappointment weighed on my mood, fueled by the locals’ warnings of slim chances for river-dwelling sheep and fading mule deer

abundance. Many told us that the sheep were hanging out primarily in the ag fields, which were inaccessible due to the undrivable roads.

Almost as quickly as we began, a sudden and whispered, “Stop!” led to the anticipation of critters ahead. Two sheep, a trophy-class ram and ewe, grazed within 200 yards, unaware of our presence. Hastily, I nestled into my crisscrossed trekking poles, attempting to find stability above the waist-high sage. The light crack of a suppressed .300 WSM barely rang into the distance. My rushed attempt to stabilize for a shot had ended in a miss, my bullet hitting the unforgiving gumbo behind them with a heavy thud.

Parker stood up behind me, mistaking the thud from the gumbo as the sound of contact as the sheep darted down into the opposing drainage.

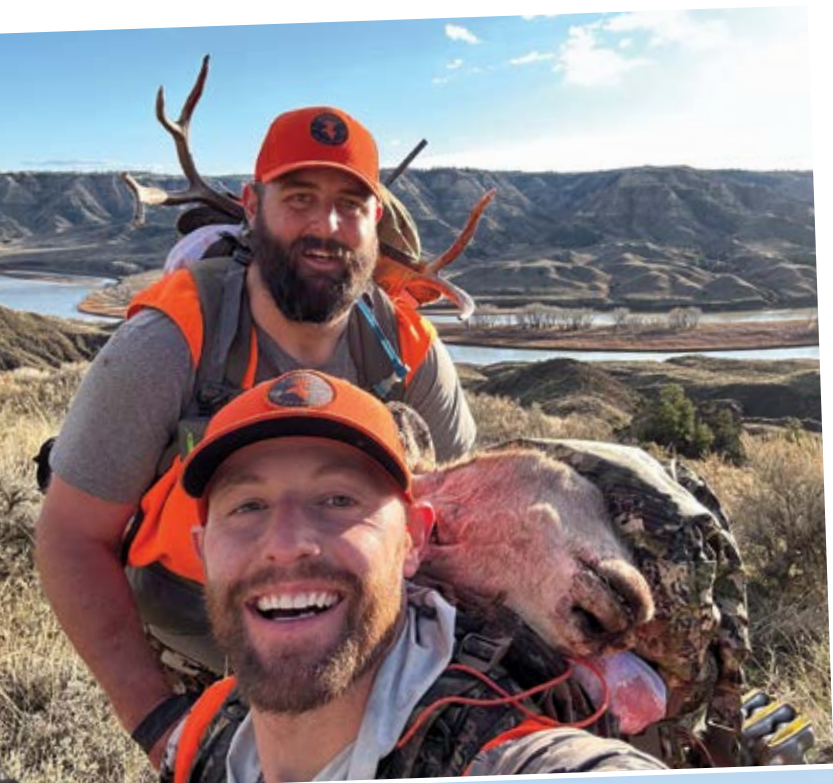
FRUSTRATION LOOMED

As we hurried toward the ravine, hoping to catch a follow-up, a bizarre twist of fate revealed more sheep on an adjoining ridge staring directly at me, not 200 yards away.

With newfound composure, I set my sticks and found solid rest with both elbows on my knees as I sat cross-legged. This time, the familiar thud of bullet on hide resounded throughout the valley. The ewe fell swiftly. The thrill of a successful hunt unfolded with celebration amidst the wild landscape.

Before our descent, I convinced Parker that we had to glass the coulees below to try and fill his tag. It was, after all, his suggestion that prompted our early morning excursion. Less than an hour later, a magnificent 2x4 buck lay beneath the sage bush it had chosen for its mid-morning nap, resulting from a perfectly placed heart shot from Parker. With heavy packs, we returned to camp by mid-afternoon to pack up for the morning departure with full coolers.

Despite my initial doubts, Parker’s foresight prevailed—a reminder of the unpredictable, exhilarating nature of the hunt and how those willing to go hard are often rewarded. It also reminded me that I should often listen to the wisdom of those who travel with me. And just like any good hunting partner, I’ll never hear the end of it. ■



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Breaks Trophy Rams

Most hunters will never hunt a bighorn ram in Montana, regardless of how many years they've been applying and how many points they've acquired. That's the bad news. The good news is that there's an exception. A few units just to the north of Yellowstone National Park offer unlimited tags, but you'd better be in good shape and not afraid of grizzly bears. Those units can close quickly once the harvest quota is filled, which is usually two sheep.

For the rest of us, the draw odds to hunt a ram in a place like the Missouri River Breaks is less than .01 percent. By comparison, your odds of a ewe tag can be as high as 25 percent. Even with 23 points, you're looking at a less than 2 percent chance of drawing a ram tag in a place like unit 680, according to stats from goHunt.com. Then again, someone has to draw. And when they draw, they kill some true whoppers. Take a look at some of the Breaks rams we pulled from the records.



#5 ALL-TIME RANK
#3 STATE RANK

HUNTER: Justin D. Sheedy
SCORE: 208-3/8 points
YEAR TAKEN: 2017
LOCATION: Chouteau Co., MT



#18 ALL-TIME RANK
#8 STATE RANK

HUNTER: Rip Rippentrop
SCORE: 203-6/8 points
YEAR TAKEN: 2010
LOCATION: Chouteau Co., MT

#14 ALL-TIME RANK
#7 STATE RANK

HUNTER: Toni L. Sannon
SCORE: 204-2/8 points
YEAR TAKEN: 2008
LOCATION: Fergus Co., MT





#21 ALL-TIME RANK
#10 STATE RANK

HUNTER: James L. Brogan
SCORE: 202-7/8 points
YEAR TAKEN: 2011
LOCATION: Blaine Co., MT



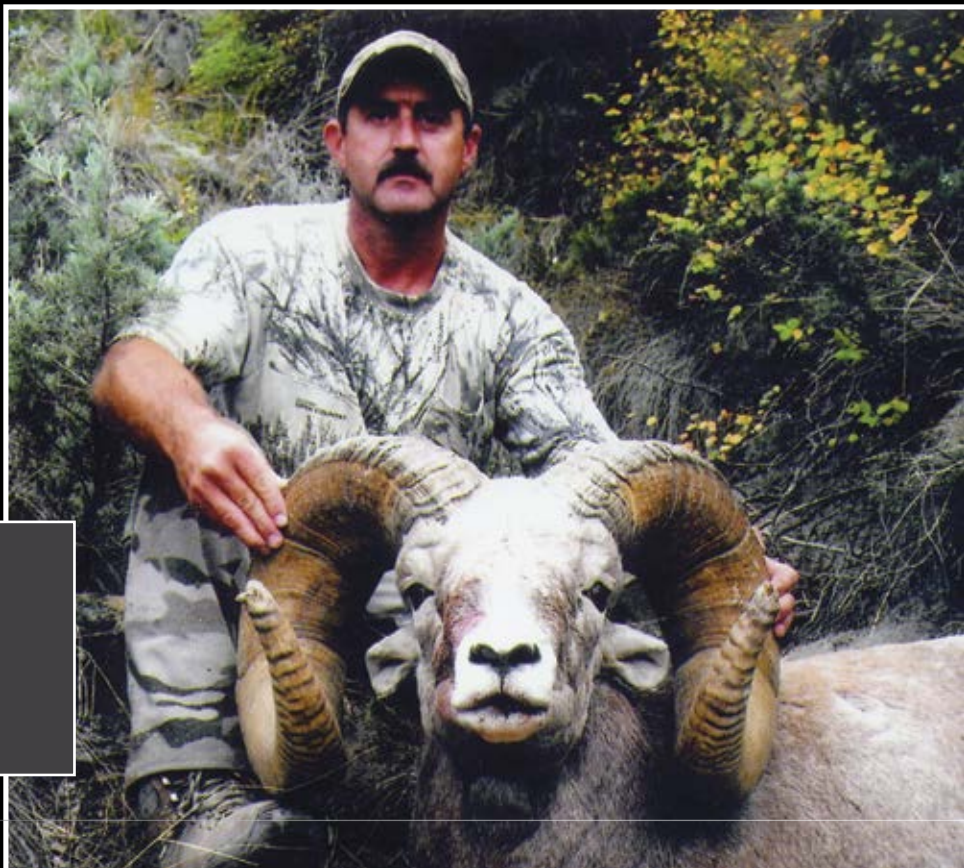
#39 ALL-TIME RANK
#19 STATE RANK

HUNTER: Ryan R. Skillestad
SCORE: 200-3/8 points
YEAR TAKEN: 2016
LOCATION: Fergus Co., MT



#40 ALL-TIME RANK
#20 STATE RANK

HUNTER: Greg R. White
SCORE: 200-2/8 points
YEAR TAKEN: 2011
LOCATION: Fergus Co., MT



#25 ALL-TIME RANK
#14 STATE RANK

HUNTER: Patrick L. White
SCORE: 202-2/8 points
YEAR TAKEN: 2009
LOCATION: Fergus Co., MT