TWO FOR THE RECORDS

By Lowell Stevens

Lowell Stevens with his brother Ernie on "top of the world" with their two Boone and Crockett Club mountain goats.

My brother Ernie and I have been hunting together since we could walk. One of my earliest memories is of him carrying a cotton-tail rabbit that was more than half his size, holding it by the legs with his arms stretched straight out in front of him, and the rabbit's ears touching the ground. We used to go out with our family on Sunday afternoons in the bluegrass region of central Kentucky, usually looking for ground hogs and rabbits, but taking whatever we kicked up that was in season. For us back then, "Boone and Crockett" was simply the two guys who made the coonskin hats we wore famous.

We started deer hunting in the late '70s, back when the sight of such an animal during the season was as new and exciting to us as the different perspective we were beginning to have about girls. As time went on, we graduated from college, started our careers, began our own families, and as you can imagine, hunting together slowed down. It was just a fact of life, and as friend and fellow hunter Bob McClimon put it, "Sometimes life gets in the way." Once things settled down a bit, Ernie and I began taking hunting trips again — bigger trips out West and eventually getting to Alaska for the first time in 2002.

Two years ago I mentioned to Ernie that we weren't getting any younger, and since both of us are in great shape, we love Alaska and the mountains, we ought to try mountain goat hunting. He was deep in the rhetoric of one of Russell Annabel's Alaskan adventures at the time and quickly said, "Let's do it."

I knew that was going to be his answer. I had waited to ask him around the time he was half-way through the book.

I quickly made a call and booked our hunt within a matter of minutes. We wanted an experience that would immerse us into the world of the mountain goat; no boats, no cabins, just relying on our physical condition — what we carried on our backs, and our rifles.

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As the sound of the Beaver faded over Prince William Sound, we stood in solitude looking at the immense glacial and snow-capped mountains around us. I was thinking to myself, "Now this is Alaska." I'd been hunting in the Great Land twice before — the Brooks Range and Wood-Tikchik area — but had a feeling this was going to be unlike anything we had ever experienced before. I first received that hint when our outfitter Dennis Zadra mentioned that he would supply the climbing axes and crampons. I knew we were getting into something very different.

We began setting up base camp when it started to rain; went to sleep in the rain; woke up in the rain; and started to climb the mountain in the rain. Matter of fact it never really stopped raining, it just changed to sleet and then snow the higher we went. Before we left Cordova, Zadra told us he had a honey hole he wanted to take us to, but it would be a tough place to reach.

We were near the end of a seven-hour, near-vertical climb beginning with temperatures near 60 degrees and buckets of rain in the coastal forest, through devil's club, alders, deadfalls, moss, going up root by root through areas you couldn't see ten feet ahead. At one point, our guide, Zach Richardson, was placing trail markers every five steps. We dropped off spike gear after climbing for five hours and continued another two hours with crampons strapped to our boots. One fun thing about vertical climbing through the woods is that you don't even have to use your hands to eat blueberries; they are always at face level. When we finally reached the top, the temperature

was around 35 degrees colder with the wind chill. Our rain- and sweat-saturated clothes were literally freezing on our bodies.

After crossing a glacier, as we stood in the middle of a saddle, we spotted two nice goats on opposite valley sides. We decided against pursuing them since it was so late in the day. We trudged back down and set up spike camp, ate a bite and went to sleep with the comforting lull of the rain and thoughts about which valley wall we would approach the next day.

We woke up a bit too early and stayed in our tents until it was light enough to see. As we eased out of our tents, there was a clean whiteness on the mountaintops that we hadn't noticed the day before. Zach said the locals called it "termination dust," and that we would know it as snow. We reached the saddle from the day before and climbed a small pinnacle on one side of it that gave us a great view of both mountains. Luck was on our side, the cliffs on the right held two goats close together.

We were a little far away to get the spotting scope in close enough to tell exactly how big the goats were, but Richardson acknowledged they were both nice. It took us an hour to reach the area where there was a perfectly placed grassy knoll we could crawl up to hide us from the goats. We estimated the goats would only be a couple hundred yards away from that point.

The wind was good until we reached the knoll, at which time it turned and was directly on our backs. There was nothing we could do, so Richardson quickly climbed the knoll, peeked over and frantically began motioning us up. The goats had our scent. They were skittish and trying to determine which way to run. We had seconds to shoot. It was decided that I was going to shoot the upper goat and Ernie would take the lower one. They were both 200 yards away and 50 yards apart. Getting into position and putting a shell in the chamber happened quickly. Out of the corner of my eye I had checked on Ernie to make sure things were lining up for him, as I wanted our shots to be close together. My goat was quartering away from us and moving out so I had to shoot.

I knew it was good; sometimes you just get that feeling and know. My goat dropped immediately, rolled about 50 yards down the slope, and came to rest. Ernie's gun went "click," then "click" again. After we heard the third click of Ernie's gun, both Richardson and I yelled simultaneously. Richardson shouted, "Trade guns!" I hollered, "Take mine!"

I shoved my gun over to Ernie and he began shooting. The goat was moving out fast, heading around a bend nearly out of sight. Ernie took a final deep breath, let some of it out and stopped, and pulled the trigger. We heard the bang and the "whop" of the bullet. We saw his goat fall and were elated. This whole scene took place in about a minute from the time Richardson motioned us to the top of the knoll to that final shot.

Having grown up in the racehorse business in central Kentucky, Ernie and I know how to prepare for and mentally deal with minute-long events that can shape your future, but how he collapsed from the prone position after knowing the final shot connected was something I'd never seen. However, that's exactly what he did, flat down, sprawled out, face in the rocks and all.

We concluded the cold temperatures slowed the oil-encased firing pin of our Dad's 1960 .300 Weatherby Magnum to the point it wasn't striking the primer hard enough for ignition. Ernie has been using this gun for the past 30 years and I was using my new .300 Weatherby Magnum.

It was only 11:30 in the morning when we began the processing and packing chores, however, we didn't make it back to spike camp until 8:30 that evening. Ernie's goat, having gone that extra 200 yards downhill, made all the difference. Getting down to it wasn't bad, getting back up was. We first went to his goat, skinned, de-boned, divided it among the four of us (the fourth was Casey our packer from Montana) and headed back up a grassy slope that ended not far from the cliff that dropped straight to the valley floor 1,500 feet below. Following Richardson, Ernie, Casey and I were strategically placing every single footstep on the slope, making sure it was solid and only then moving the other foot up to repeat the process. The same words kept playing over and over in our minds, "Never look down."

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With all the weight on our backs, one misplaced step and slip would have taken us quickly right over the cliff. Richardson appeared to have life really easy with his new ski-boot type techno climbing shoes that made it look like he was on an escalator. After he looked back and saw no color in our faces, he took us to the rocks and paused, giving us a chance to stop and converse with God, basically thanking him for sticking with us through that one.

I think there is some un-spoken rule about mountain goat hunting between guides, hunters, and the mountains that says once you have paid the price mentally and physically and the mountain has given its bounty, it is time for you to leave. The mountain goat environment is a special place, like no other in the world of hunting — it is pristine, untouched by man and truly a place to hold sacred. Therefore, we wasted no time the next morning packing, calling the bush pilot to come pick us up and heading back down. Going down was even more difficult than going up as we were tired and had two goats on top of what we started with. However, we made it back unscathed and sat on the lakeshore waiting for the plane with great spirits (the Kentucky kind).

We really didn't know the true size of our goats until our taxidermist called and told us. Like many, it has been a lifelong dream of mine to take an animal that is worthy of entry into the Boone and Crockett Club's Records Program. Outside of the "thank-you" to my spouse, guide, friends and others that made this hunt possible and enjoyable, I am very grateful and appreciative of the mountain goat itself, which has brought such wonderment and fulfillment to my life and passion.

I'm so fortunate to have this hunt be a memory locked in time forever through Boone and Crockett. The fact my brother and I experienced attaining such a lifetime achievement at the same time is just perfect. ■