

BEYOND THE SCORE

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On September 25, 2008, shots rang out near the peak of Mt. Joseph in Wallowa County, Oregon. This was the culmination of an amazing hunt prior to moving to Missoula, Montana, to work for the Boone and Crockett Club that same year. I had drawn the one available goat tag for the Hurricane Divide. When applying in Oregon there are no points for sheep or goat, the odds are a random toss at the dart board for which unit to apply. I had chosen Hurricane for two main reasons: First, it was the original release location of mountain goats in Oregon, and secondly, it was right behind a good friend's house that had moved to Enterprise after college to take an engineering job. Enterprise is approximately 12 hours from where I had grown up in Oregon, and where I was residing at the time. Ironically I was sitting in the Stubborn Mule bar in Enterprise when my phone rang; the call from my dad informed me I had drawn a goat tag. I called my buddy Karl and told him I had drawn his backyard. He laughed and asked, "What did you put in for there?" When I replied, "Goat," the phone went silent. I left the Mule and drove up to the Wallowa pack station where I met Matt. His family had run the pack station for years and he did all the guiding on their hunts. I explained that I was looking for someone to take me in and had little experience in judging goats. I didn't mind hunting hard but needed to know when we found a good one. We worked out a price for me, my dad, and Rebecca, whom I later married, to get packed in and the excitement began to build.

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River and recorded the first definitive reference of mountain goats in Oregon. Early explorers mentioned what may have been goats or possibly sheep earlier than Lewis and Clark's expedition, but Lewis and Clark's sighting was the first definitive account. Lewis and Clark were in an area of the Cascades that put them in contact with tribes on the Oregon side of the Columbia River and apparently reported ample numbers of these "white sheep" in the steep, rocky crags. The diagrams Lewis and Clark returned with leave no doubt the hides they wore were those of *Oreamnos Americanus*, the mountain goat.

As with most species currently managed—which are all big game species in the Lower 48—they are directed by the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. The bar by which we tend to gauge the strength and health of a certain species, as well as its appropriateness for a given habitat, is the accepted occupied areas prior to European settlement. It's hypothesized mountain goats were extirpated from Oregon around the time of European settlement, scientists have now mostly concluded their historic presence in two regions of Oregon. Historic presence is what dictates whether or not money should be expended by current management agencies to reintroduce and expand goat populations. The original transplant into this region was a collaboration between Washington and Oregon in 1950. While my research found this was a long talked-about endeavor, one can debate whether the reintroduction was an effort to restore biodiversity or rather an effort to increase opportunity for the hunters of the state. Either could be the case, but at that time, the latter seems more likely.

The first goats were released at the base of Mt. Joseph in 1950 after being wrangled from north Washington near the Canadian border. They were transported

and successfully released, though were only occasionally seen. They thrived in the area of the Hurwal and Hurricane divides above Wallowa Lake. The goats lived a fairly solid existence and did well in their newly occupied habitat.

The first goat season took place 15 years later in 1965. At the time, wildlife managers didn't understand the biology of the mountain goat, and harvest levels were unsustainable. Hunts were discontinued from 1968 until 1997. Since that inaugural modern season in 1997, different management has resulted in one of the strongest-producing goat herds in the Lower 48. It continues to produce goats of the highest caliber. They are doing so well in fact, 2014 was the first year the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife made a non-resident tag available. When I drew my tag in 2008, the state required all hunters to attend a mandatory orientation. It was at this meeting where I met Buck Buckner, the Vice President of Big Game Records, and soon after interviewed for my current position with the Boone and Crockett Club.

The connection to the Club and my goat hunt is far stronger than a chance meeting, though. In 1905, Club Member Madison Grant, head of the New York Zoological Society, published a book on mountain goats which holds the first reference (that I can find) in scientific literature of goats being native to northeast Oregon and the Cascades. This presence was a solid source for the appropriateness of mountain goat reintroduction and management to this day. Additional evidence has surfaced of remnants being recovered on both sides of Hells Canyon, and today it is generally accepted that goats historically inhabited these mountains as well which are mostly managed today as wilderness.

My hunt started at a trailhead located in the Wallowa-Whitman National

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This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt strongly believed that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.

Forest—land that was actually set aside by Theodore Roosevelt himself in 1905. At the time it was the Wallowa Reserve and was included when Roosevelt embarked on his quest to set aside our nation's timber reserves. The Hurricane unit, which I drew, is nearly all managed as wilderness within the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

My trip was the first I had made on horseback into a wilderness camp. Accompanying me on the trip were my dad and Rebecca. We rode high into an alpine basin on the first night and were rewarded with the sight of a band of nannies and kids feeding in the scree field above camp. We hunted hard for three days, climbing the surrounding peaks from the Thorp Creek Basin in which we were camped. We saw goats every day and attempted stalks as the week went on but never quite closed the distance or were able to negotiate the terrain to get in position for a shot. After the first day, Matt told me he wasn't sure what was up as generally the goats were down far lower than the tops of the peaks where we were finding them. On day three, the question was answered as I glassed for goats and caught movement lower on the hill. I found the spot in my glass; a mountain lion had moved into the basin and pushed the goats out of their normal pattern. We saw him one other time that week but never could get a long-enough glimpse to get a tag on him.

At one point, we were in pursuit of a billy that could have bested the state-record

goat at the time. We paralleled the old goat from the scree below the craggy peaks he was negotiating for a few miles. We cut the distance to 700 yards, though even when he paused below the horizon I wasn't comfortable at that range. While the conditions were unusually calm for the alpine habitat in which we were hunting. The shot was not certain, and I never broke the trigger even though the guide told me this was going to be our only chance. Dejectedly hiking back to camp he paused for a moment, looked at me, and said, "That is the first time I have ever called for a shot by a client and had him refuse." He smiled, patted my 25-year-old shoulder, and gave me a grin that was more a compliment than reflection of his emotion.

We continued on, climbing peaks and venturing further and further from camp until the fifth day when we made the longest trek of the hunt. We left camp on horseback and took them to tree line around 8,500 feet. From there we sidehilled up another 300 feet over about a three-quarter-mile-wide scree slope, crested the ridge and climbed nearly another thousand vertical feet to the peak of Mt. Chief Joseph. The view in all directions was breathtaking, though I had little breath left to take! A severe flu had hit me, and my lungs were inflamed, pushed to the extreme at this altitude. The rumbling from my chest resulted in a slightly pink

tint to what I coughed up, but this was a once in a lifetime tag. We rested near the summit of Joseph and took in the view of the glistening Wallowa Lake far below with national forests and wilderness expanses in all directions from the valley floor. I was in the most pain I have ever felt. I was fatigued, I was cold, my body ached all over; but while I hurt, I loved every second of it. I was part of nature. I was engulfed in the pursuit of a species brought back to this area by my forefathers of conservation. I was here in this place and time on a draw tag—my name drawn from 1,317 applicants—and awarded the opportunity to experience this.

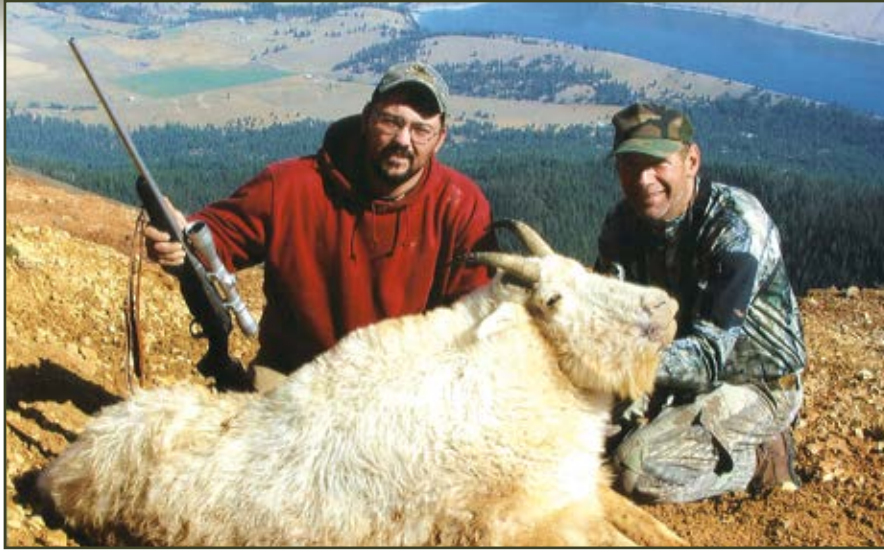
We soon rose to our feet and began working further out on the ridge. We hadn't gone far when a single billy came into view. A small patch of round boulders surrounded us, so I dropped to a prone position and found the goat's chest in the crosshairs at 150 yards. His horns appeared very thick and no white was visible between them. The sound of the shot and recoil was even more muffled than usual as my hearing was also impaired from the sickness, though a solid thump confirmed a hit. The billy appeared unscathed though and turned and began walking toward a cliff.

Justin's first horseback hunt started at a trailhead located in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest—land that was actually set aside by Theodore Roosevelt in 1905.



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POWERED BY



Justin and his dad take a moment to reflect on this successful hunt. His goat scores 48-2/8 points.

and the countless hours of volunteer work put forth by the Oregon Foundation for North American Wild Sheep.

The pack back to the horses was the hardest pack out I have ever experienced. Usually the adrenaline rush of success will motivate your legs and back into carrying hundred-plus-pound loads, but I had nothing left. Rebecca had stayed in camp that day as she had contracted the same funk I was suffering. A look through her glasses confirmed a white hump riding on one of the backs of the horses, and she knew I had found success. She excitedly greeted us as we returned, and it was all I could do to muster a slight smile for her. That night I sat by the fire, staring at the goat for hours, so enthralled by this white mountain dweller. No tape was put to horn until the following morning. It was a time to enjoy the experience the best I could. The experience was far beyond a score. The goat turned out to be a top-10 billy for Oregon at the time but has long since dropped from that ranking. While it was kind of cool to have that distinction, I am far happier to see the goats doing so well. Now that a non-resident tag is available to draw, I hope that perhaps one day I can return to these mountains with my wife, and she can experience this same hunt with a rifle in her hands, to have the opportunity to take a goat of the highest quality, even if she again bests me in yet another category of big game. ■

After a step his vitals were hidden from my prone position, so I rose and followed up with a second off-hand shot. The guide Matt yelled I had missed, though the thump was again audible and my confidence solid on a hit. He kept insisting I find a rest, though I knew I could not see the billy from the ground. So I chambered a third round and broke the trigger just as the goat was nearing the cliff, yet still a few feet shy to ensure a solid back-drop if I missed. We hurriedly covered the distance with few words spoken, though I could tell Matt's confidence in the shot was very thin. I felt certain at least two of the three would have done the job, and as soon as we stood where the billy was last seen, we confirmed the third found its mark as well. The billy lay not 15 yards from where we had last seen him. We paused momentarily for some photos and began the task of

skinning the goat, boning all the meat and putting it into our packs.

Honestly, in the moment I didn't pause as long as one should to reflect on the events that had just unfolded. This was a major turning point in my life and career. I had delayed my start date with the Boone and Crockett Club one month to complete this hunt—and fortunately Buck was quite understanding of the request. I didn't realize the connections I had just made, nor did I reflect on the efforts of those before me that ensured my ability to be there in that moment. I often think of the pen stroke of Roosevelt as he put this land into the trust of the federal government over a hundred years prior. I reflect on the early efforts of those of the conservation movement whose actions facilitated the goats' existence. The work of the Oregon Game Commission and later Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

I was in the most pain I have ever felt. I was fatigued, I was cold, my body ached all over; but while I hurt, I loved every second of it. I was part of nature. I was engulfed in the pursuit of a species brought back to this area by my forefathers of conservation. I was here in this place and time on a draw tag—my name drawn from 1,317 applicants—and awarded the opportunity to experience this.