



### Shock. Awe. Disbelief.

These are a few of the emotions surging through me as my mind does a fast rewind through the events leading to this moment. The excitement of drawing the tag in April, the hours of scouting, and finally the day. This day. This moment.

I hunted opening week of the Montana big game season with my lifelong hunting partners, who just so happen to be my dad, a younger brother Scott, and my oldest son Andrew. They had bagged a cow and a branch-antlered bull. We spotted another very good mature bull, but were never able to get in the right position. By the end of the week, when those necessary job obligations interrupted the chase and demanded my return home, we had not seen him for a couple of days.

In the middle of the third week of the season, at the grocery store a friend reported seeing a "pig" a couple of drainages away from where my efforts had been focused. He described an area I had frequently hunted in the past, and I thought maybe this was the elusive bull we had been pursuing earlier. Encouraged, I made plans to check it out the next evening. A couple of hours glassing the area intently at dusk exposed nothing more than a pesky chipmunk; however, while making my way back to the truck at dark along the same route I had hiked a short while before, the

## NON-TYPICAL AMERICAN ELK 431-7/8 — SECOND AWARD

# GARTH W. SESSIONS

dim beam of my headlamp exposed a fresh pile of elk droppings, nearly in my tracks. This piqued my interest enough to merit a return in the morning to hunt.

November 11 dawned clear and unseasonably warm, with the weatherman on the camp radio threatening temps into the high 60s. The struggle to be in hunting position before daylight was an exercise in futility. All those aggravating little delays added up to the sun peeking over the horizon as we finally made our way to the desired location. Dad dropped me a couple miles from a predetermined pickup point, and I hurried into the timber as quickly as stealth would allow. After a brisk 15-minute hike, I crested a knob and reached for my binoculars, which typically hug my chest. I realized too late that in my haste, I had left them on the seat of the truck. A stern mental lashing later, I continued along my planned route. Sitting on a ridge a mile or so farther in, I sensed, as much as saw, movement about

a quarter-mile away. My rifle scope could not reveal the desired detail. Glancing the other direction, I glimpsed the faint outline of the truck in the distance and the forgotten field glasses seemed to beckon me from its interior. A silent internal debate flared over which way to go. Possibilities won. I quietly made my way toward the movement. Finding it impossible to maintain a consistent elevation in the rough terrain, I labored up and down through the breaks until slowly raising my head over the final obstacle.

It is here that I first saw him, stealing the vestiges of the morning's shadows for cover. Silhouetted against the tree line, he calmly grazed toward the heavy timber. I eased over the rise, thanking the heavens for favorable wind. I snatched a succinct moment to admire the gorgeous, contrasting tan colors and heavy frame rack. Struggling to regulate my breathing as the crosshairs settled just behind the front shoulder, he lifted his head, and again I was struck by the width and dark

girth of his antlers. Time seemed to pause, and then the retort from the .300 Winchester Mag. shattered the stillness while the bullet found its mark. He lifted his head for the last time as the second round finalized the first and he succumbed to the inevitable. I was a little numb with shock, trying to wrap my mind around what was occurring. I approached slowly, in awe, each step providing a measure of clarity which only added to his grandeur.

Finally at his side, in this moment, I took a knee and marveled at his majesty, immensely grateful for the opportunity to harvest such a magnificent beast.

One of my favorite quotes reads, in one variation or another, "Success is where preparation meets opportunity." Generations of my family have spent lifetimes learning and hunting public lands. Likewise, I know scores of fellow sportsmen who do the same. I guess it was my turn. Sometimes, after all the preparation, it boils down to a hot tip from a buddy,

Even though photos weren't Garth's priority a few were taken during the packing out process. Garth had no idea what an impressive bull he had taken.





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knowing your area, and maybe most importantly, a fortuitous nod from Lady Luck. Most of us in the outdoors community are regular everyday folks. I feel blessed to have public lands that offer the regular, everyday sportsman an area to recreate.

The real work of caping and breaking the animal down began. The cavalry, consisting of my brother Scott (who had just finished a shift at work), his two young boys,

and another friend who was hunting with Dad and I that day, came to my rescue when beckoned and we were able to pack the bull out in a couple of trips. I have almost no field pics for two reasons: One, I am not renowned for my photography skills; and two, I was just a little amped in the heat of the moment and pictures weren't my priority.

I had no idea at the time that this was a record bull. Originally, I had not even planned to have it officially scored. I have several "trophies" that would not score anywhere in the official record books—they score huge in both memories and true organic cuisine. My 90 year-old grandfather's final elk hunt with Dad and uncles in Wyoming Area 38 is one of my cherished trophies (we did not even harvest an elk); my boys' first deer; brothers' firsts, and so on. We all have these trophies. In fact, when I

make the choice to pull the trigger on an animal, it is not to please anyone other than myself and primarily to fill a freezer. For this reason, I never judge another's kill, for it is not mine to judge. This animal, as all the animals I have harvested, met my self-imposed criteria. It was my own personal dream bull, so who cares what it scores?

My brother Duane did not agree with my assessment. He adamantly insisted I get the animal officially scored. At one point, he even threatened bodily harm. In the end, I acquiesced. Not out of fear of harm, mind you, but partly because after researching the mission of the Boone and Crockett Club, I discovered that it represents a movement aimed toward the conservation of our hunting heritage and the animals we pursue, and is not solely a recognition of an individual hunter. In part, I admit, I got it scored because I was curious.

After sorting through the procedure on the B&C website, I found a name I recognized in the list of official scorers. As it turns out, Fred King is an accomplished and

noted B&C scorer, a fact I was not aware of at the time. I chose Fred because I met him nearly 20 years ago during an elk hunting trip in the Gravelly Range of Montana where he served as a Fish and Game warden. Alas, that is another trophy story. Arrangements were made with Fred by phone to meet during a visit with my youngest son Jake, a student-athlete at Montana State University in Bozeman (Go Cats!). I might add, for those like me who did not know, the official scorers are all volunteers who sacrifice their personal time and sometimes their own means to provide this service. My son-in-law, Jonny, joined me in Bozeman, and we lugged the rack into Fred's home. Not being familiar with the scoring process, I was thinking we would pull a tape here, run a string there and, voila, be done in a few minutes. Turns out, it is a tad more involved than that. A couple hours or so later, Fred turned to me and said, "Congratulations on your trophy."

I still was not sure what that meant, relative to comparative standings with other bulls. Fred graciously walked me through it all and showed me how it compared to other non-typical bulls. It is the current Montana state record non-typical elk and ranks 21st overall, with a final B&C score of 431-7/8 points. The bull was honored with a 2nd Award in the Boone and Crockett Club's 30th Big Game Awards Program. But do you know what I see when I look at that gnarly old boy? He is not a number or a record; he is my personal dream bull with a forever trophy memory. ■

Garth's Montana state record non-typical American elk has a final B&C score of 431-7/8 points and earned the Second Award at the 30th Big Game Awards Banquet.





**This hunt started like every other—waiting for tag results. I assumed I would get a deer tag as I had a few bonus points, but was completely surprised when I learned I drew a Rocky Mountain goat tag. I had around nine bonus points, so I never thought I would get that tag. The odds have always been around 600:1, so I would just make my annual donation to the Nevada Division of Wildlife and hope for a deer tag. Having lived in Nevada since 1963, I have been fortunate to harvest my elk, desert bighorn, along with several mule deer and pronghorn. Needless to say, I'm in a waiting period for most hunts, so my application list is short. This tag came as a total shock. Someone "up there" was helping me.**



Having never hunted goats before, I called several friends for advice and visited all the sporting goods stores to get a good look at as many goats as possible. Talk about hard to judge for a possible score! I'm a fair judge of most game animals but this was going to be a challenge. It also didn't help that every mounted goat I looked at did not have a score available. I have always been a do-it-yourself hunter and was committed even more on this one. The one advantage I had is that I was retired, so I had as much time as I needed, allowing me to scout whenever I wanted.

In mid-June, I decided on my first trip. My sister-in-law, Judy Lancing, would be my first partner (victim). I had to do a little convincing, but she finally agreed as she had never seen a goat and wanted to see just how amazing the Ruby Mountains are. I had seen goats south of Lamoille Canyon before so it seemed like the logical place to start. We packed in several miles and set up a base camp, planning to go in several directions. The country is



amazingly beautiful and a heavy snow the previous winter left many snow drifts to cross or go around. After three days, we only saw one goat, and he was two miles south. A little disappointing, but at least we found one.

My next trip was to the far north end of the unit. A good friend told me he had seen several billies in two different areas there. I couldn't convince any of my buddies to go along once I informed them of how long the walk was, so I did this one solo. After a long day's hike, I set up camp on a high lake, at around 9,000 feet. I worked out of there for two days. Every time I got above 10,000 feet, I started to find sign of goats and expected to bump them. No such luck, as it was pretty warm, and I assumed they had treed up early. I decided to move my camp two miles further south and look in another area. Two days later, I saw lots of sign, but no goats. I was beat, but still had a seven-mile walk out to my truck. I'm not sure how accurate my Fit-Bit is, but it showed I had walked 52 miles that week. I lost 12 pounds! But not one goat sighting.

My next scouting trip was a month later.

Having regained my senses and stamina, I was ready to try again. This time I enlisted my hunting brother/brother-in-law Paul Bilbrey. This trip was focused on finding access on the east side of the Ruby's. Our search proved futile, as access was very limited by private property. We did, however, find the only hiking trail, and decided if I returned to hunt there, this was the way to go. Once again, no goat sighting.

With the hunt drawing close and covering more ground than I cared to, I was getting nervous, and even considered getting a guide. I talked to some friends in Elko who re-invigorated me and suggested I try an area north of Lamoille Canyon—a tough walk, but I should see some goats. So, three days before opening day, I drafted my other hunting brother, Bruce Bilbrey, another brother-in-law. We hiked for six hours in really steep, rocky, cliff-ridden, and brush-filled country. As we broke over the ridge top, we found the only flat spot to set up camp. The wind was howling, so I started up the ridge to look for another spot that would be out of the wind. I instantly froze—60 yards in front of me was a mature billy!



Smith wore out one pair of boots and four hunting partners and walked over 120 miles scouting for his Rocky Mountain goat and he only saw a total of three goats on all those adventures. He was 61 years old and all his partners were older than him, but they all enjoyed sharing this adventure with him.

# HUNT FAIR CHASE AWARD WINNER

I hit the ground and belly crawled out to a point to where I could get a good look. Bruce saw what was happening and joined me. The goat had no clue we were there, so we had time to get a good look. He was probably four years old, and had a very distinct dark spot on his vitals area on his right side, so we named him Spot. Little did I know that this would be the first of several encounters with him.

Did I mention the wind was blowing? This posed a problem as our flat spot was the only one for a mile, and we had a goat less than 100 yards away, and the sun was setting. We decided to set camp as far away as possible and hope Spot would feed the other way. The wind blew all night so we didn't get much sleep.

The next morning, we worked our way north another mile to a large peak. Now we started seeing lots of tracks and beds. I noticed one in particular had a very large set of tracks. A closer look showed he was dragging one leg. By now, I knew we were in the right area and I was determined to see the goat with big feet. As the sun set, we headed back to camp only to bump into Spot at the peak. We snuck around him without being seen.

The morning before opening day, we headed back to the peak. Sure enough, there was Spot at 400 yards. We glassed him for half an hour when suddenly another goat appeared. Wow—this must be the big-footed goat! He physically dwarfed Spot. He just swayed from side to side as he walked, then turned to face us. The first thing I



Gregory E. Smith (center) received his plaque and medal at the 30th Big Game Awards Banquet, shown here with Chairman Richard T. Hale (left) and Vice President Eldon L. "Buck" Buckner (right). Smith was also the recipient of B&C's Fair Chase Award, which is given at each Awards Banquet in recognition of a hunt that best represents the determination, self-reliance, and respect for the game that embodies the tenets of fair chase set forth by Boone and Crockett Club founder Theodore Roosevelt.

noticed was how little white was showing between his horns. Now I knew he was big—not sure how big, but he towered over Spot. I also noticed he was dragging his right rear leg. I assumed he was old and maybe had some arthritis. The sun was now peeking over the horizon and they headed over the ridge and into some trees to bed. We had a long walk back to camp to get settled in for the week and refill our water supply. We returned that night but saw nothing. Still, what a day! Someone was definitely watching over me.

Opening day, we were back at the peak. As it got light, we could only find Spot, and no sign of Big Foot. With the warm weather, we had about 30 minutes in the morning and an hour in the evening to catch them out. We watched Spot go over the same saddle they always used to get to bed. That afternoon's trip only produced Spot, not Big Foot.

The morning of day two only showed Spot, but that night, Big Foot presented himself. I took off on a sneak to get

within a hundred yards, wanting to use my muzzleloader. As I got closer he started working his way over the saddle. By the time I got there, he was nowhere to be found. He worked himself back into the trees, out of the wind. Did I mention the wind always blows here?

The next morning, only Spot was there, and off to bed he went. At this point I knew the goat I wanted and it started to get personal. I knew where he lived and that if I was patient, he would eventually show himself again. I vowed to wait him out, no matter what. I also knew he was a large goat and I didn't want him to get away. I planned to return with my .300 Winchester Short Mag. Upon mutual agreement, two very tired hunters decided to take a needed break, which also gave the goats a chance to relax—just in case.

I returned on September 6, and somehow convinced my only remaining hunting brother, Ray Farnsworth, that it would be an easy hunt once

we got on top. I assured him it wasn't a bad hike—even though I wore out my previous three partners. That, and we found a game trail part way up (Whew! He bought it!). After the arduous hours-long hike to the top, low and behold, the wind was back to howling.

The sun was setting so we needed to set up camp, until—Not again! This time Spot was lying where our tent was set last time, and sound asleep with his chin on the ground, facing us, obviously enjoying the fruits of our labor! As we retreated, he woke up and saw us for the first time. He made a slow escape, seeming not to worry a bit about us. Or he may have known who we were coming for. I hated to have him see us, but we were down to the wire. After another freeze-dried meal, we tried to get some sleep, listening to the tent flap in the wind.

We were in position the next morning, and nothing came to greet us, so we worked around the far side of the peak. There was nothing





into a spot where I could get a shot, though not the best. I had my right leg fully extended, my left knee spread eagle over a boulder, and my rifle lying on my jacket, chest high. I had to shoot with one hand as my left hand was cling-

there, so we went back to camp to rest and restock water. We dropped down a thousand feet to the closest spring to refill our supply, and that's when I noticed Spot's tracks from the night before, and they were headed out. I guess we chased him off. Back at the peak for the evening hunt produced nothing. I told my hunting brothers early on that I would stake out this peak until the end. This was Big Foot's haunt and eventually we would cross paths.

On September 8, we were back in position, but still nothing. Oddly enough, the wind stopped blowing around noon. Back at camp, I worked on building a flat spot under a pine tree (out of the wind) as this hunt may take a while. Around 3 p.m., I told Ray we should head for the peak. I just had a strange feeling that Big Foot may be earlier than usual. Once there, I left Ray at the lookout point and started my slog to my hiding spot.

Halfway there, I looked up and Big Foot was out. I was caught in the open. Now I had to play cat and mouse, as he went through some trees. After 15 minutes, I managed to get to a rock cliff that I could scale and hopefully get a shot. I ranged him at 163 yards. Adrenaline was raging, but fortunately I didn't have a shot, which gave me a chance to settle down. After a few minutes, I was able to climb

ing to a rock ledge for support. I hung on for what seemed like minutes until he turned and presented a shot. As the sound of that distinctive thump made its way back to me, I knew it was lethal. In that moment I was overcome with sadness. It was more than a sadness that comes with the taking of such a majestic creature, a sadness that I couldn't explain or understand, but a sadness that touched the bottom of my soul.

I waited five minutes, and all I could see over a tree was six inches of his back. After five more minutes and still no movement, I started toward him. Once there, I realized he had died lying on his belly with his chin on the ground, as if to say, "It's my time and you were the one to take me." The sun was setting and I was deeply moved by the true beauty of the alpine environment and its spectacular views that make up the world in which these magnificent animals exist. I felt blessed to have had this opportunity.

**Smith with his award-winning Rocky Mountain goat that he harvested in Elko County, Nevada, in 2016. The billy has a final B&C score of 52-6/8 points and earned a Fourth Award (Tie) at the 30th Big Game Awards Banquet. He had lost his wife, Senator Debbie Smith, in February to brain cancer and firmly believes with all of his being that she guided him on this amazing adventure from the beginning.**

When I walked up to him, I knew he was a good goat, especially having seen many mounts and photos to compare. Only later would I realize how good. We had a lot of work to do. Lucky for us, the meat would have all night to cool down. I now got to see the reason he was dragging his leg—he had a broken ankle which looked to be months old. It also occurred to me that he probably would not have made it through the winter. The reality now set in that we would be hard pressed to get him and our camp off the mountain in one day. I called a good friend in Elko to help us if possible. When I sent a picture, he quickly responded, and was there in the morning.

Before Scott Roberts arrived, I finished the caping and started deboning the meat, which he helped complete. We decided to leave Ray to break camp and we headed for the ice chest with the meat and cape. We got there at lunch time. I thanked Scott, and bid him farewell. Now I was faced with going back up to retrieve camp with Ray. I was beat to a frazzle and wanted to rest a bit and have a bite to eat. I sat in my truck to

enjoy some elk meat sticks and cheese. I turned on the radio, and within seconds, the song "Humble and Kind" by Tim McGraw started. I just sat there and cried until the song ended. The song renewed my strength to go back up the mountain one last time.

When we checked in my goat in Elko, the biologist asked where I harvested him. I showed him on a map and, fittingly, it turned out to be Smith Peak. He was impressed at the size and said it was the biggest goat he had ever seen.

When I got home, I noticed on the cover of AAA Via magazine a picture and story of Lamoille Canyon. Very clearly and right in the middle of the picture is exactly where I harvested Big Foot. Another sign from above! For many years, Debbie tolerated hunting as my only vice, but she knew how important it was to me. For that I am eternally grateful. Some people might call this hunt "luck". I call it "Help from Above".

My goat has a final B&C score of 52-6/8 and was recognized with a Fourth Award (Tie) at Boone and Crockett Club's 30th Big Game Awards Program on August 3, 2019. ■

