Play Hooky Ram

By James M. Peek, PhD.

I had sensed it was about time to hear from Ross about doing a hunt for Stone's sheep. We had invited him to the Taylor Ranch in the central Idaho wilderness last winter "to show him a real bighorn," and time and weather prevented his visit. He had asked me up four years ago, and I had to decline because of teaching commitments. If he told me he had space this time, I knew I was going, come hell or high water. At 57, my knees were beginning to go, and there aren't too many 60-year old sheep hunters rattling around on the mountain, and I couldn't be certain of another invitation, or of my health to do the hunt the way I wanted to do it. So the letter came, with an invitation that started out, "If you have time, we would be most pleased to have you and Pat up for a visit and a little sheep hunting." Pat would have wandered around camp with Deb while Ross and I went up on the mountain.

To try to explain where this all really starts for me, let me state that I probably would not be able to read or write except for Jack O'Connor, Elmer Keith, and the 1922 bound issues of the National Geographic that my grandfather kept. The write-ups in the Geographic of the North American mammals were of sufficient interest to encourage me to do what the teachers had trouble with: read and read again. O'Connor's exploits in the sheep mountains of the north always captured my attention and left me with the hope of some time being able to experience a hunt like he described so vividly.

O'Connor's countenance glowers from beneath an old felt hat from a photo above the counter of Lolo Sporting Goods at Lewiston, Idaho. It makes me want to buy a box of .270 Winchester 130 grain Bronze Points in his honor, except that I don't own a .270. While I enjoyed O'Connor's hunts, I thought his choice of weapons was a bit on the light side, since I also read Elmer Keith. Elmer spent time in Montana haunts where I grew up, and his emphasis on sixguns and big slugs in large caliber rifles just set better with me. So after extensive deliberation and savings, I wound up with a .30-06. In retrospect, I doubt that anything I have done with the "ott six" would have turned out any different if it had been done with a .270. But all of this was decided over 40 years ago. So when Ross offered me the opportunity to go sheep hunting this time, it was the culmination of a whole lot of time, thought, and dreams that are a big part of my real history.

Ross wrote that he had openings in August and late September. Wildlife Society commitments and classes precluded the August dates, so I selected the late trip, realizing that weather can make that risky. The problem, now that Pat had accepted the idea, was my class. I was involved in the study of wildlife habitat ecology with 12 graduate students, and this meant serious time away from the University of Idaho campus. So during a field trip down to the South Fork of the Salmon, while we were standing around a camp fire just at dark, I explained what I wanted to do. I would hold extra classes so I would be present at their presentations after I got back, and invite three guest lecturers in while I was gone. "Students always report that my field trips and guest lecturers are the best part of my classes anyway, so this will turn out to be a bonus for you."

> "As soon as I get into that beautiful country, I'll be on my best behavior—it's absolutely, unequivocally guaranteed."

The class reacted, "Wow, you're giving us such a good deal, maybe you should redo the course description so you're gone in the middle of the semester every year." I guess I deserved that. Students these days have no respect for their professors like we used to have when I was in school.

The trip from Moscow, Idaho, to Fort Nelson, British Columbia, is just about exactly 1,200 miles. If Pat goes along it means many stops so I can rest and get out of the truck to stretch my legs, eat in a restaurant, take a picture, probably stay in a motel. If I go alone it is about half that time, with stops only for gas, eat in the truck, sleep in the back. Pat had been gone for a while and her mother was in poor health so she decided to stay behind, "Although you really need some company on this trip, and I would enjoy a good visit with Deb." I was in Fort Nelson at noon of the second day of travel.

The trip up takes one through spectacular country, which in turn tends to refocus one's thoughts. At 4 a.m. going north of Moscow toward Couer d'Alene, one may run into a herd of elk or a whitetail on the highway, so I drive with amber driving lights, as well as the usual headlights. The north Idaho lake country always reminds me that we need a bigger boat and I should spend less time in front of a computer screen and more on the water and outside. The Selkirks with their remnant populations of caribou and grizzly bears remind me of our skimpy efforts to recover populations in the face of overwhelming odds, with a faint bit of hope that we actually will, for our own good, as well as for the caribou and the bear. The East Kootenay represents, for this cynical game biologist, the region where much of the better game management was implemented in the west, thanks to a manager who was able to recognize the

problems and act upon them. I am reminded that as we manage bitterbrush for deer and elk forage by prescribed fire on the South Fork where I took the class, and that I had taken a class 20 years ago to Premier Ridge in the East Kootenay to witness the first efforts of this kind.

The trip from Radium Hot Springs to Hinton is sure to remind me of the classic mountain sheep studies that captured, in my corner of the world, everyone's attention. And the sheep were there, on the east entrance to Jasper, as usual. The "forest trunk road," now Alberta highway 40, crosses caribou country where the heavy timber harvest is fragmenting the habitat and making caribou easier prey for wolves, just one more example of unanticipated adverse indirect effects of man's heavy-handed activities. The road provides the first real casting of northern coniferous forest with the spruce, lodgepole, aspen, poplar, and willow that will be home for a brief while.

The oil and agricultural country from Grande Prairie to Fort St. John usually has a mule deer or two in it if you are early or late in the day, and this time a 4-point buck with a few does crossed the highway just ahead of me, at dawn. Forty cents per liter gas at Grande Prairie. Breakfast at Fort St. John and a phone call to Ross' mom, Alene. "Just wanted to let you know I'm on my way to Fort Nelson, in case you need to notify anyone."

"That's fine, can you stop by and take in the mail?" she said.

Alene has served as the bookkeeper, scheduler, and organizer for a family of outdoors-people whose interests lay in hockey, horses, hunting, and not bookwork. She is a wealth of information and you can get a line on how things are going fast, with a short visit. "Ross may be a little irritable, since it's tough keeping the guides in there towards the end of the season, you know."

"I remember the situation, and we'll get along just fine. I can't help but have a good time," I replied.

"There's a couple of Austrian hunters in there that are a bit demanding," she added.

"As soon as I get into that beautiful country, I'll be on my best behavior—it's absolutely, unequivocally guaranteed."

A major outfitting service caters to hunters from many countries, and Ross had Germans, Austrians, Britons, and a Costa Rican this year, as well as the usual run of US. citizens and Canadian nationals. Hunters come in all sizes, shapes, and languages. They might expect anything from personal valet service to minimal accommodations. What will be provided is plenty of good food which Deb cooks at base camp, with showers and comfortable beds in a log cabin. In the hunting camps, grub is prepared by a cook or the guide, and the hunter sleeps in a bedroll perhaps under a canvas manta, depending upon the hunt. "We do our best to give the hunter a chance at game given what his physical condition is and what he wants to hunt," Ross once explained. "There are no guarantees that a big ram or bull will be provided, it's the luck of the draw." I found a bit of satisfaction in knowing that money doesn't buy the biggest set of horns or antlers or hide out here in the bush.

On the little questionnaire Ross sent down, there is a place for the prospective hunter to describe his physical condition, probably there only to serve as a reminder that hunting in mountain country can be strenuous. But Ross can size you up fast once you are in camp, perhaps try you out to see how you do, ask you how you feel after a day or so. It's tough getting timely medical help to a hunter in this kind of country. For my part, I put down, after the question about physical condition, "good." I had been in excellent shape after spending all winter in the central Idaho wilderness wandering around the trails and slopes, but was reduced to an exercise program during the summer. But I was resolved to do the hunt the way Ross wanted me to do it. There was no question that I would have to earn the ram, even just the chance at it, and if I had to stay out on a cliff somewhere for the night and crawl back up a slope the next morning on my hands and knees, tough bounce.

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS AS THE HUNTER AND GUIDE CROSS THE TUCHODI RIVER WITH THEIR PACK HORSES.

At Fort Nelson, I was to call the "expediter" who will in turn be sure the plane is there and everything is okay. This is a necessary contact for foreign visitors and folks who are new, but I am acquainted with Glen Gullackson, the pilot, and am fully aware that back-country flying is a hurry-up-and-wait affair. The expediter tries to be certain I am okay when we finally meet at the airport, and I strike up a conversation with her and her husband, who manages the Fort Nelson district for B.C. Forestry.

"Yeah, I bought a wolf tag just so I could tell all my wolf-loving friends at home I went on a wolf hunt," I started.

Bob brightened up a little, "Well, I hope you get one, there's plenty of them out there again."

I found a bit of satisfaction in knowing that money doesn't buy the biggest set of horns or antlers or hide out here in the bush.

I kind of figured we might find some conversation of mutual interest if I volunteered that little tidbit. "Yeah, and when I don't even see one, I'm going to ask Ross what all the fuss about wolves eating up his sheep and elk is about."

Bob smiled a bit wider, "You'd better be a bit careful, wolves are a touchy subject around here, eh?"

"Yeah, I'm just kidding, and Ross knows it. Chances of seeing a wolf are very low, I'm well aware. Say how is the lumber market up here, anyway, these days?" Bob might have been a little surprised at my question, which had resulted from my observation of a lot of logging activity along the Alaska Highway.

"It's high now, and we have a chopsticks factory in Fort Nelson which needs a big supply, but leaves a lot of residue that still could be used."

"Can you supply the timber okay?" I continued.

"Oh, sure, British Columbia still cuts way below what the growth is," he looked at me a bit closer. I decided to leave it at that, thinking this is what I hear from foresters in my neck-of-the-woods, and wondering what kind of owl or animal or plant would be blamed when these guys finally overdo it up here, and do we ever learn?

"Those Japanese use lots of chopsticks, do they?"

Backcountry pilots are a curious lot, in my opinion. We have a good supply of them in Idaho, and the supply increases substantially as you go north. GlenAir at Fort Nelson flies for the outfitters, the government, the oilmen and miners, the timber people, just about anyone who asks. With that diversity of clientele, you don't expand on your conservation philosophy extensively, lest you offend a potential customer. In Idaho, it might be a bit easier, since the outfitters, hunters, fishermen, river-floaters, fish and game and forestry types make up the bulk of the business, the miners come a lucrative but unreliable second, and the timber people drive. You can criticize the agency people but you stand up for the recreation types and you don't have to watch much about the timber folks unless the hunter or fisherman you're flying in happens to be one. And he may well be.

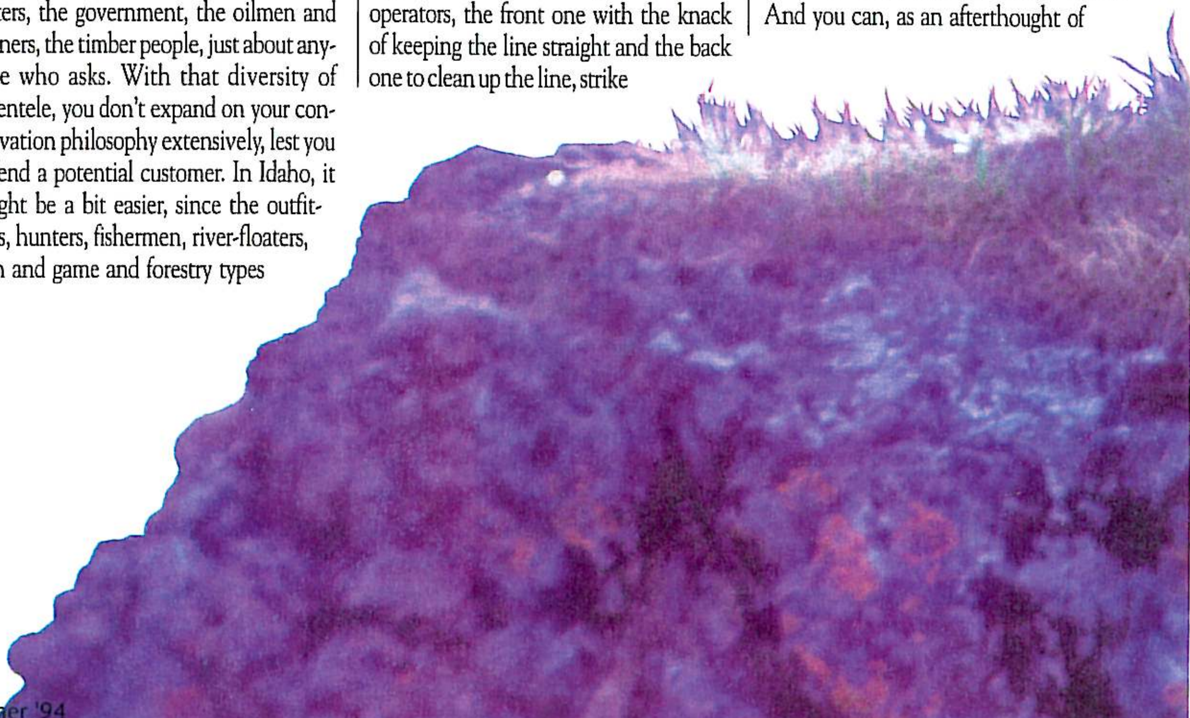
Backcountry flying is dependent upon demand and good weather conditions, which do not always overlap well. When a bunch of hunters are camped on the solicitor's porch, or at the airstrip at camp, and the weather where they are is just great and the weather at the intended destination is unflyable, folks get a bit touchy when the pilot says wait. But today, Glen is flying for outfitters at Toad River and points north, and is expected back by two P.M., I am assured. So I figure that some time today, there is a good probability that I will get in to Ross' horse camp. Glen shows up about a quarter to four, apologizing profusely for keeping "the professer" waiting. Actually, I'm just pleased to see him again, being reminded that he provided me with my introduction to the Tuchodi country which is Ross' outfitting territory. And the slight time delay was certainly no problem, I needed a bit of a nap anyway.

Access. The greatest problem facing wildlife managers might be summarized in that one word. Up here it is first exemplified by the seismic lines cut straight through the lowlands of muskeg, spruce, and aspen forest in the never-ending search for oil and gas. Two dozer operators, the front one with the knack of keeping the line straight and the back one to clean up the line, strike out across the frozen taiga on a bearing which doesn't change. The scars from Fort Nelson to the foothills and a little bit up the hills as well, will be there for centuries.

I guess I can live with the seismic lines, since they locate the oil I use. They may be offensive to my esthetic sense, but as a wildlife biologist interested in conserving wild lands and wildlife who uses my share of the nonrenewable petroleum supply, I'm in enough of a compromised situation without getting too picky about the esthetics of seismic lines.

However, I do object to the use of the term "recover" in relation to the gas and oil supply. We aren't recovering anything, we're extracting nonrenewable resources which do not recover like the renewable resources are supposed to do if we manage them correctly. There's only so much gold, oil, gas, and coal in this earth for humanity to plunder and we do ourselves a disservice by implying that these mineral resources are recoverable. Good public relations for the mining industry I suppose, but it denies the inevitable.

But, seismic lines provide access for ATV's, the euphemism for outdoor recreational vehicle. As long as you have a down payment for a snow machine or a "four-wheeler," you can have access up a seismic line, over the snow-covered tundra, or an abandoned logging road. And your kids and wife can be bundled up in space-age plastic zoot-suits so they can take the climate next to the TV set outside with them and recreate all winter. And you can, as an afterthought of



course, use the "four-wheeler" to go bear hunting in spring, elk hunting in fall, where you couldn't go before. And as more of us tune in on this, the supply of moose, bears, elk, and everything else dwindles. Then the game department or the "Branch" tries to place quotas on the harvest, restrict access, and we scream bloody murder for our rights and how they are being taken away. Ah yes, the good old American and Canadian pastime, exemplified once more, ultimately attributable to too many people trying to use a resource that sustains only so much use. Blame the biologists for it all, and let's get some one administering the department who understands "our problem."

Ross' landing strip was once a combination ditch and horse trail that has been steadily improved to where the ditch is not as obvious as the trail. Glen circles the strip to see which way the wind sock points and to be sure no horses are in the vicinity, pulls his flap lever, and lands his Cessna 185 with hardly a bounce. We taxi up to the corrals and tie racks, get out to give Deb a hug and Ross a handshake, and my eyes wander toward those high, sharp-sculpted crags in the distance with the sheep, and the long lichen-covered hogback ridges below with the caribou and the grizzlies. I just got here and the trip is already a success. The country is honest-to-God, bona-fide, top quality big game country, that always captures my imagination when I first see it.

Glen had time for tea and cookies, with a bit of urging from Debbie. The bush pilot always comes with a bit of news for the backcountry folk, often their only consistent contact with the outside. So it is worthwhile being friends with the pilot, who tends to be more prompt, give you a little priority in a pinch, and extra time if needed, provide more entertaining information if you are hospitable. And not incidentally, you also get to know the person who flies you over rough terrain, in wind and snow, and over long distances.

Ross' best sheep guide went out with Glen, along with assorted salted capes, meat, horns, and antlers. The 185 taxed to the end of the runway, and Glen checked the magnetos, pulled the flaps down, gunned the engine, and the plane whined down the strip and slowly became airborne. I guessed that the 800 pound recommended weight limit for the plane may have been reached with no problem.

The Tuchodi country was in late fall. Willows and birches had dropped their leaves, and most of the aspen and poplar were bare as well. The hairy white catkins on the willow showed up against the otherwise brown and purple cast of the shrub communities in this area. The grassy slopes on the hills were straw-colored contrasted with the darker green patches of spruce. I noticed that the river was relatively clear, suggesting the glacier that fed it had quit melting and no significant precipitation had occurred for a while. The big pond behind the camp was low, further suggesting a hiatus in precipitation.

Debbie's dinners are meant to be eaten by hungry people. Home-baked rolls, spuds, elk, caribou, and moose, and a nice colored cabbage salad fills an empty space or two or three. Hot tea and some rice and raisin pudding cap it all off, and one wonders what could possibly be better. Some casual conversation follows dinner, a question or two about plans for the hunt. "I thought we'd take a spike camp up in back here and see what there is to see for 3 or 4 days, eh?" With that, I went to my cabin and hit the sack.

Elk are nature's woodwinds. The standard melody is the clarinetist who plays three notes up a scale, three back down, and tops it off with a few

windy grunts. If you're going to win a bugling contest, imitate the clarinetist. But there is also the flutist, whose higher-pitched airy song wafts across the night and to the early winter. And it is tough to fall asleep when the woodwinds are in full play outside your cabin window.

The horse camp is equipped with saddle stock, to put it mildly. These beasts are bred out of percheron studs, wear size 2 shoes, have the long manes and forelocks of draft stock. A long ride on one of these beasts will stretch your legs, especially when they resemble those of Alley Oop as mine do, beyond normal pain and agony to a state of sublime numbness that is probably akin to the aftermath of torture. But these beasts have special skills and attributes, and once you understand the country and what the stock does, you are very grateful to be riding on one of them. First, they winter on the slopes with the elk, on what grass blows free during the chinook winds, and on the willows, aspens and poplars. A foal born in this country has a better chance than an older animal that is brought in, because the foal can learn from the beginning how to cope. You don't traipse through the muskeg for a week in fall and again in spring with the 150 head or so of stock that is needed to run the operation. So Ross' father started wintering stock in here, and creating winter pasture by burning the slopes to produce grass and resprouting woody plants. The foehn winds or chinooks of the Charley Russell country, where I grew up, that blow warm off the East Front of the Rocky Mountains from their northern extremities here down into Colorado, create the game country. And they enable the horses to winter as well. Those bare slopes come often enough with the chinook to bring mild conditions that melt the snows and give the animals a break from the -40 degree temperatures that can hang on and on up here.

Above and far right: Several Stone's sheep were spotted along the Tuchodi River.

air, and whose highest note might have a bit more emphasis than that of the clarinetist. And there is the piccolo bull, whose high-pitched, well enunciated notes are clearly distinguished with no slurs or slides, obviously the pride and joy of mother nature's music teacher. When this beast brings forth, one wonders how a 350 kilogram animal with fire in his eyes and loins evolves such melody. The piccolo bull may start his song on a high note, step down three or four or five notes, and step those same notes right back up to his start. Just practicing scales, mind you. And the oboist, whose deep song in minor key haunts the night air and your vision as emanating from a 400 kilogram, 8-point beast that charges the woods and guards a harem of 50 trembling cows and calves. It's probably a lonesome rag horn.

And there is the bull who improvises as if he just arrived from Bourbon Street in New Orleans on tour, sliding up and down the scale in a rendition that changes continually. All of these songs may be followed by gulps, snorts, wheezes and whistles, whatever the beast deems appropriate for the occasion. Rutting bull elk, unless suppressed by hunting, are notoriously vociferous beasts. They don't like each other, either, and the fights they have leave festering wounds and sometimes the vanquished doomed. The rut is where the bull focuses all of his energy in that effort to pass on his heritage, and while various strategies exist for doing so, some bulls dominating the rut early and others later on for instance, they are exhausted afterwards, vulnerable to grizzlies and wolves, a generator which runs lights in the cabins and the lodge. The ritual in the morning is to start the generator to turn on the lights 15 minutes ahead of breakfast. When everyone is supposed to be at breakfast, Ross shatters the morning quiet and suppresses the woodwinds with "Breakfast!! Come and get it!!" I had screwed out the light bulb when I went to bed and thus woke up to his yell. Stumbling in about ten minutes later, there were reproachful eyes glancing at me, an abrupt "mornin," and I was already in purgatory.

I remembered an earlier trip when I came to breakfast on time but a bit behind the rest. Three Indian guides and one hunter were slumped over their plates, not looking up, as I cheerily greeted them. "Hear you took a bull moose yesterday. Congratulations and good morning!" The guides and the hunter poked their noses further towards their plates and gave no response. So we ate in silence, they left without a word, and I asked what was going on. "Deb chewed the hunter out for shooting her moose out of the swamp next to camp. They're lucky she fed them this morning." So that's why we get to listen to the woodwinds in this hunting camp during hunting season, and why a bull moose trots between the buildings, rushes the horses, and takes up station at the salt block in the corral—they're in a protected zone with ill-defined but fairly extensive boundaries, and the punishment for violating the zone is no breakfast. And that's plenty of deterrent.

Ross' horses are not your typical

"Well my horses may not be very pretty, but they'll get you through the swamp," Ross states matter-of-factly. And when you slip into the muskeg on one of these steeds and it flounders around in muck up to your knees as it wallows through, you begin to get the idea. And when your old nag walks into a nice cold glacier-fed stream and swims across with you on, you get another faint glimmer. And when your old dobbin carries you up a steep muddy slope, then sinks into the sphagnum-covered north slopes and ridges, and keeps on going, the message starts to crystallize. But when the beast then packs you and your ram's horns off the mountain after dark, and gets you to camp safely, you're beginning to wonder if it might not be useful to have one or

two of these big gentle beasts around yourself. Beauty in horses is in the eyes of the beholder, and these critters are the epitome of equine beauty.

One of the packhorses we used had a big scar across its rump, which Ross noticed when he came in to check the stock one spring. "Probably a wolf or a grizzly."

"Looks too long and deep for a wolf to me, probably a grizzly." Every now and then Ross' stock is known to feed the local wildlife community. I think it's still a better life than being cramped up in a paddock and fed hay all winter. But since I'm in the business of keeping wild things wild, maybe my view of what's good for a horse is a bit slanted. I think folks who try to force wildlife people to feed wildlife are a bit off base in their appraisal of what is good for wild creatures, too. This isn't animal husbandry that we practice.

Every outfitter I ever ran into has what can best be described as well-used packing equipment. The saddles are usually in good repair, but repair is to be emphasized. Trips into the bush, muskeg,and mountains tend to be rough on equipment. The panniers will be scarred or else new. By the end of the season, the saddles will inevitably have some improvised rigging that resulted from an encounter with a tree, a rock, or another horse in prior trips. But there is a method to what looks like utter chaos to the unknowledgeable, and I have learned not to help unless asked. No two packers pack the same, and each packer knows his way is the only right way. Each pannier will have a purpose and a companion of equal weight to counterbalance it. Each packhorse will have been selected to carry a certain load and perhaps for other attributes as well. In our case, a three-year old "colt" still in training was to carry soft baggage, while two others were to carry panniers with groceries and the camp.

A diamond hitch is used in Wyoming, but not much in Montana or Idaho. I learned to cargo pack a decker saddle rather than throw a diamond hitch on the old sawbuck, and I use basket and barrel hitches. Ross throws a diamond, and I finally saw why. In this country where packs that ride low drag in the muskeg and catch the brush, it is well to use a system where the load rides higher on the horse.

My saddle horse, an apparently gentle black animal with a nice long mane, was tied to a tree rather than the hitching post where the other four horses were tied. "He is a bit head-shy and rares back sometimes." No problem, we'll get along, I thought. And we did.

There are no officially designated trails in Ross' guiding territory since he and his father and their predecessors created what trails were needed and the game created the rest. "I don't see any reason to open up the country any more than we've done, when my outfit is perfectly happy with the current trails," Ross says. Up in the wilderness portion of his territory, he did some extra clearing and then in casual conversation, the "authorities" found out about it. The next year there was a brochure available for the public showing where the trails were, expounding on the hiking opportunities now available in the area. Never mind that the trail crossed several glacier-fed rivers that the hikers would have to swim across. What are the ethics of a public agency usurping privately created trails for general public use, on public land? Pretty difficult to sort through, but at the minimum, common courtesy would dictate at least a contact and acknowledgment, as I see it. The problem of access, even on a trail system, is complicated.

...to be continued.

PART TWO OF "PLAY HOOKY RAM" WILL APPEAR IN THE FALL ISSUE OF FAIR CHASE.

Available Now!

Records Of North American Big Game

As a Boone and Crockett Club Associate, you will receive a 20% discount off the cost of the newest edition of *Records of North American Big Game.* This is the largest and most comprehensive edition of the famous Boone and Crockett Club records book ever.

The 10th edition contains over 12,700 big game listings in 35 categories. There are 84 *new* top ten trophies alone. Each big game category features photos of the World's Records, as well as other top ranking trophies. Also enjoy seven full-color paintings of Alaska-Yukon moose, cougar, muskox, Dall's Sheep, mule deer, desert sheep and pronghorn by artist, Guy Coheleach.

To place your order for the Records of North American Big Game, 10th edition, call the Boone and Crockett Club Headquarters at (406) 542-1888 or use the attached order form.