

Chugach Ram

BY KENNY MEINZER

Like many things these days, this hunt started with a phone call. It was my hunting partner Robert "Jake" Jaquish. We had been drawn for a limited Dall's sheep permit in Alaska's Chugach Mountains. Our luck was unexpected. We fretted about other things that we had scheduled, work, family, finances. We finally got our head on straight, and went sheep hunting in Alaska for the second year in a row!

The area we were drawn in is Game Management Unit 14C which is located in the western Chugach Mountains, at Anchorage's back door. Mature rams in this area tend to be heavy horned with deep curls. Rams with 15" bases have been taken in 14C. Some 40" rams have been taken in this unit that have not yet reached full curl. This unit has produced Dall's sheep over the 170 point B&C minimum for each of the last six years. It has also yielded the current Pope & Young and pistol world records for Dall's sheep.

Frank Cook, who took the current number two Dall's sheep listed in the 10th

edition of the Boone and Crockett Club's all-time records book, Records of North American Big Game noted, "One of the greatest functions of the Boone and Crockett Club is its record keeping. A quality gene pool can't be imagined and can't reach its potential unless properly managed. Hunters interested in taking exceptional trophies can scan the records and find where they have been taken throughout history and get an idea of the gene pool that exists in each area. Hunters can also find where exceptional trophies have been taken recently to see which areas are currently enjoying quality management." The Boone and Crockett Club's Twenty First Big Game Awards book listed one of the largest Dall's rams taken and entered from 1989-1991 as coming from Troublesome Glacier which is a drainage in unit 14C. Right now, I don't think there is a better area for a hunter to have a chance to take a B&C Dall's sheep than Alaska's unit 14C.

Jake and I flew from Reno to Anchorage late on September 15, 1992. Sheep season in the rest of Alaska ends on September 20. Our tags were good from September 18-30. We were met in Anchorage by Bert Flotre and Steve Smith of Pinnacle Guide Service. They had helped us apply for the permits and would be our guides for the hunt. We spent the next day getting gear and licenses organized, picked up a few last minute items and were ready for our flight out the next morning. Bert and



Steve told us that their season had not been an easy one. Early snow had caused some difficulty but the major problem had been the eruption of Mount Spur, an active Alaska Range volcano. The ash that spewed from Mount Spur's first eruption had fallen directly on 14C. It made sheep hunting an ordeal and flying impossible. The next morning we were up at 5:00 a.m. and like a good Hemingway story, the gun went off. Mount Spur had erupted again! A quick call to the FAA gave some sketchy information about the direction the ash was going. It was dark and they would have better information at daylight. Bert's plane was waiting for us in Palmer, an hours drive north of Anchorage. Winds were light and the ash was moving slowly. A call to the McDonald's in Palmer gave us a "no ash yet" report. Bert and Steve decided that the ash would probably pass to the west of Palmer. We would be flying east of Palmer for the hunt. We loaded up the truck and raced the ash plume to Palmer. In the twilight, the dark ash cloud was evident to the west. When we reached Palmer, there was a slight ash haze. We loaded the plane quickly and were clear of the ash in two minutes.

The Chugach Mountains have a well-earned reputation as some of the most rugged in Alaska. After my hunt the year before on the mild slopes of Alaska's Brooks Range, these mountains were awesome. Glaciers with crevasses large enough to drop a house into, poured out of vertical walled canyons topped with razor-back ridge lines. But there were also green-grass slopes above the glaciers. It's magnificent sheep habitat with escape cover everywhere, plentiful feed and high winds in the winter to blow the snow away.

We landed on a gravel bar at the base of the mountains we would hunt. Our guides, Bert and Steve, my partner, Jake and I got organized and began to climb. Like many Alaskan hunts, there were plenty of alders to crash through as we climbed. After climbing 2,500 vertical feet we were above the alders and into the treeless alpine area. There

were about 25 mountain goats in the drainage that we hunted. They looked well haired and some of the billies looked huge. As evening approached, it began to rain and then snow. Bert and Steve knew what could happen if it snowed on us all night and we quickly moved ahead and descended to the bottom of the drainage to wait out any extended bad weather. We set up two backpack tents side by side, had dinner and slept well after a hard days walking. In the morning we awoke to continued snow, rain and low clouds. Our tents were in the clouds most of the day. It seemed like a perfect day to hunt white-tails or honkers but sheep hunting was put on hold. You can't hunt sheep you can't see and jump shooting Dall's sheep in the clouds is not recommended.

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Bert and Steve had been in this situation many times before. They fell into a hibernation like state. Jake and I soon followed their lead. On the equipment list we were given was a paperback novel. It seemed extravagant as I packed, trying to keep things light and gear to a minimum. Now, that book was sanity. You can only sleep so much and read the freeze-dried meal package so many times. The drill went something like this: sleep, roll over, read book, look out tent, roll over, ask your guide how long it will rain or snow, roll over, eat a cup of instant oatmeal, roll over, sleep, trade books with your partner, roll over,

your guides console you with successful hunt after bad weather stories, roll over, sleep. This process is repeated as required.

The snowfall was significant. At the elevation that the sheep were probably at, there was about six inches of snow and building. Bert and Steve were worried it might be enough to move the rams out of the drainage toward their wintering ground. If they were moving, we would never see them through the clouds. This concern mounted when we had a dozen ewes and lambs scamper 20 feet from the tent. They had come out of the clouds, passed the tents and climbed back into the clouds toward their destination. We lay in the tent and did the hibernation drill.

After the fourth night in the tent, the weather began to break. We packed up and cautiously began to climb up the side of the glacier that gashed its way down the drainage. We wore our "whites" to provide some camouflage in the snow and glassed carefully as we climbed. We cut several sets of sheep tracks and could see others on the slopes above us. There were usually 30-40 sheep in the drainage and we wondered if the rams were gone. The overcast began to thin and the sun was fighting its way through holes in the clouds. We continued to move up the slopes and moraine on the edge of the glacier, carefully glassing as we went.

Rams! Two rams were spotted about a mile and a half up the glacier, feeding down near the ice. Before we could get a spotting scope on them, they were swallowed again by low clouds. We moved up to a better vantage point and waited. Soon the clouds moved through and the rams we had seen had fed out of sight. We sat at that vantage point and scoured everything we could see as gaps in the clouds drifted by. The rams emerged again and there were three of them. Steve carefully studied them at about a mile as they walked across a large snow face. Two of the rams were large mature rams and the other a young immature one. Steve and Bert told us they had seen four exceptional rams in the drainage. One of those four rams was



THE GROUP TAKING A BREATHER WHILE HIKING THEIR WAY OUT. FROM THE LEFT, JAKE - GLASSING THE MOUNTAIN SIDE, STEVE - STANDING BY THE ROCK AND KENNY - PACKING HIS TROPHY RAM.

significantly larger than the other three. Steve and Bert agreed that the largest of these three rams was one of those exceptional rams but not the biggest one. As the evening wore on, we watched the rams, glassed for others and strained to spot tracks in the snow with the help of some evening sun that was breaking through the clouds. The weather was improving fast and it looked like we would get some sunshine the next day.

We pitched the tents on a flat part of the glacier that was not in the way of falling rocks from the steep slopes above and out of sight of the slopes above us. There were a lot of rocks falling from the slopes loosened by the rain, snow, freezing and thawing of the previous four days. With the clearing skies, the temperature dropped to a little below zero.

The next morning greeted us with perfect blue skies and calm air. After a quick breakfast we climbed to our vantage point and spotted the rams we had seen the night before. They had moved a couple hundred yards down the glacier toward us but appeared to be settled in. They had bedded in an area that gave them a commanding view of the drainage and had plenty of feed just below them. There was no way for us to make an out of sight stalk of those rams if they stayed put. We spent the day evaluating the rams from the different angles they gave us as they fed and bedded. We spotted no other sheep and didn't see any tracks up the glacier. It appeared that all of the sheep had moved out of the drainage except these three rams. We looked at the glacier and slopes between us and the sheep. Bert and Steve had been on these slopes

before, and knew that with the snow and ice on them now, they were impassable.

Jake and I have hunted together on many occasions including the Dall's sheep hunt in the Brooks Range the year before. Over the past twenty years Jake had managed to take his Grand Slam of North American Sheep. I had just begun my sheep hunting the year before. There were several locations in 14C with good rams that we could have hunted separately and there was no requirement for Jake and I to hunt together. Bert and Steve were confident that we could take two good rams from this drainage. The weather changed things and we had to play the cards dealt. We decided that I would try and take the best ram of these three and that Jake, Bert and Steve would try to locate the rest of the big rams again. Jake was holding out for the biggest ram in the area. All we had to do now was figure a way to stalk rams that appeared unapproachable!

That morning the rams had fed low enough on the hillside that if we had been on the glacier below them, they would have been within gun range at about 300 yards. We had to get there without them seeing us. We ruled out a stalk in the dark since the glacier was too dangerous to negotiate in the dark and unpredictable winds could spook the sheep before the sun came up. As we looked at the rams, we remembered that the morning sun had risen directly at our backs. The next morning, Bert and I would take a page from the Red Baron's tactics manual and attack with the sun at our back. It felt like a long shot but it was our only chance.

I didn't sleep well that night,

thinking about our plan for the next morning. We were greeted by clear, cold skies again. We dressed, climbed to our vantage point and could see the rams in the morning twilight. They were bedded in the same place they had been the evening before. As the sun rose, the shadow from the peaks behind us moved down the slope the sheep were on. As soon as the sun hit the rams we were on the move. The sun was blinding as I looked back and we quickly and carefully worked our way up the edge of the glacier in about six inches of fresh snow. As we moved up, the rams got out of their beds and began to feed their way down the slope just like the morning before. We moved fast knowing that the rising sun would give us cover for only a half hour or so. We were about 600 yards from the rams when our cover began to degenerate. The rising sun coupled with our movement below the sheep was making us visible. Just when we needed some luck, we got it. The rams fed out of sight, the largest down into a small depression and the other two behind a small ridge. We moved fast to a point nearly below the rams and looked for a good shooting position. We had just reached a large rock on the edge of the glacier when the young ram fed over the ridge line and spotted us. We froze hoping not to spook him. The young ram didn't know what to make of us but didn't lose interest. Slowly I got my rifle situated with a good rest on the rock. The young ram continued to stare us down and looked back often to the second largest ram that was still out of sight to us. As I looked back down the glacier, our tracks were filled with black shadows. It looked like a couple of elephants had walked up the glacier and we were standing at the end of those tracks. At the start of the stalk I may have felt like the Red Baron but now I felt as conspicuous as a guy in Sunday church with his pants around his ankles. The second largest ram fed over the ridge below the small ram, looked our direction for less than five seconds and decided to get out there. The two rams were moving at a hurried walk up the ridge on the skyline. The larger ram

was a heavy horned, deep full-curl ram, which the Chugach Mountains are known for and much larger than the ram I had taken in the Brooks Range the year before. The ram paused and my cross hairs were steady, on his shoulder.

Bert said, "Let him go Kenny. He's not the one we want."

They both walked over the ridge out of sight, heading up out of the drainage. Gone! As anxious minutes passed, we held our shooting position. Bert reassured me that the big ram would show and I would get my chance. I thought of the ram that had already gone over the ridge. With 20/20 hindsight he was easily 165 Boone & Crockett points. We watched and waited for the big ram. It looked like when the ram did appear he would be at about 350 yards. We didn't know if the big ram had seen or heard the other two leave. The wind wasn't steady and occasionally pushed at our backs as the sun heated the slopes causing an updraft. We hoped the ram would slowly feed into sight and give us plenty of time to take a shot. About five long minutes had passed when the big ram burst into sight like a flushed quail. He had probably winded us and was moving out quickly. The ram paused quartering away and looked down the

slope. I held my .270 on his spine and pulled the trigger.

It took at least an hour to climb to where my sheep lay on the steep ice and snow-covered walls that rose abruptly from the edge of the glacier. I have to admit that I was shaking all over when I saw the sheep up close. Bert was right behind me and said, "How big is he?" "He's old, has horns in the 40" range and I'm proud of him. This is what I came for," I responded. "I guess I've done a little too much whitetail hunting, Bert. It was now or never — and for me it was now!"

Photos were followed by caping and boning of the meat. I carried out these tasks with the skill and ease that comes from being reared on a dairy farm in Nebraska. We loaded our extra clothing and the horns on my backpack. Bert carried the boned out meat.

I enjoyed the strain on my muscles and the careful selection of footholds with this full load. I knew that time and my body would someday not allow me this privilege. We arrived at our backpack camp at last light. Just enough time to turn the ears, split the lips, and clean and salt the cape. That night held the warmth of friends and the excitement of

taking a beautiful ram. The next day we slept until the sun reached our tents and brought some relief to the bitter cold we had endured. We broke camp and began our long and treacherous walk back to Bert's Arctic Tern. As we loaded the plane for the trip back to Anchorage, I took a moment to look back up at that great mountain that had given me the hunt of a lifetime.

I'm sure there are many great guides in Alaska. But for me that hunt with Bert and Steve was the finest hunting trip and the greatest outdoor adven-



BERT, LEFT, AND STEVE, RIGHT, BASK IN THE SUN WHILE THEY HAVE THE CHANCE.



EDITOR'S NOTE:
KENNY MEINZER'S DALL'S SHEEP OFFICIALLY SCORED 170-7/8 POINTS, QUALIFYING IT FOR THE BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB'S ALL-TIME RECORDS BOOK, RECORDS OF NORTH AMERICAN BIG GAME.

ture I have ever had. As I reflect back on my hunt I realize that I am one of the few fortunate people who had the opportunity to hunt with and get to know Bert Flotre and Steve Smith, owners of Pinnacle Guide Service. Bert was a funny kind of guy. He would and could make you laugh even if you weren't up to it. Bert always had a smile on his face. No matter how hard things got or how tired he was, he always kept your chin up. Steve was a quiet and shy type of guy. All business all the time. Steve was like a walking calculator. He knew where to go up, where to go sideways and when to stop. My hunt in the Chugach with these two guys was in some of the toughest conditions anyone would ever want to hunt in, but Bert and Steve made it seem easy. They both knew where the big sheep were.

The entire business will miss both Bert Flotre and Steve Smith.