

Ladies' Day in the High Country

BY MAVIS LORENZ

"Damn, damn, damn...I should have taken that lead ram of the five I saw opening day," I thought to myself as I planned out my next three days of hunting. Thus far, I had seen 25 or so rams, with at least 12 of them presenting good shots, but they all appeared to be too young to me.

I had been warned by sheep-wise hunters, outfitters, and game experts, "Don't take the first ram you see 'cause they always look big to the novice hunter." And I was a novice, although I had spent considerable time learning about sheep. I had studied videos about sheep behavior. I had learned all that I could about field judging trophy bighorn rams; I had studied masters' theses from the University of Montana library which reported the studies of the bighorn sheep herd in my hunting permit district. I had picked the brains of as many knowledgeable people as would answer my questions. Still, I felt there was so much to learn in the short while I had left. Would I find the ram I hoped to find? What if I didn't find that ram? After 18 years of unsuccessful attempts to draw a permit, this was my one and only chance. I would not be eligible to apply for another permit for seven years. By that time, I would be well over 70 years old and may no longer have the stamina to climb mountains.

My plan for the next three days of hunting were to climb up to my spike camp (a tiny mountain tent with backpacking equipment); hunt the benches on the northwest side of the mountain; maybe drop into the next drainage north; hunt out the pockets on a south-facing drainage; and on the third day, hunt down a long ridge back to the bottom.

I left the pick-up when it was still dark and started climbing the 3,000 feet to the top of the mountain where I hoped to find sheep. I move very slowly and do a lot of looking and listening. It was almost nine o'clock when I reached a point on the ridge where I could set up my spotting scope and examine the edges of the openings above me.

Almost immediately, I picked up four sheep in the scope. They were feeding away from me toward some benches near the top of the mountain. One ram looked like he might deserve closer scrutiny. I decided to work my way up the mountain and be in position to attempt to locate the rams on the benches later in the day.

I backed off the point so they wouldn't spot me. As I worked my way around a knob out of their sight, I nearly walked into a bunch of ewes bedded down. Fortunately, I saw them first so I backed off even more and climbed up along a fringe of timber to a fallen fir. The sun was starting to feel good so I sat with my back against the downhill side of the log and started eating a candy bar.

Suddenly, I heard the rattle of balsam root leaves behind me. I thought, "Nuts, here comes another hunter." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a ewe walking by. She went around to the end of the log behind a Christmas tree-sized fir and stood there, 40 feet away. She bleated very softly: baaaaa—repeated it a little more insistently. Then I heard the balsam leaves again. Another ewe appeared and joined the first one. This was repeated a third time and the pair became a trio. All this took place in the space of about 3-4 minutes. The

three ewes moved off across and down into some timber rather nonchalantly. They had no idea I was there. I gave them a half-hour to get out of the vicinity so I wouldn't spook them and started to put on my pack to move on up the mountain. Just then, five young rams came trotting across the open hillside 150 yards above me. I sat down to wait for them to feed out of sight. Before they were gone, three more young rams appeared up in the far corner of the hillside. I was surrounded by sheep!! Every sheep in Rock Creek seemed to be feeding between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. I think most animals sense a change in the weather approaching and fill their bellies in anticipation of holing up for a day. I waited another half-hour and worked my way up through a line of trees to the timber beyond. A storm came in from the west so I hunkered down in a patch of young firs while the thunder grumbled around for awhile.

The rain didn't amount to much, so I decided to explore a few grassy benches up toward the top of the mountain. As I worked my way through the benches, another storm cell came across the mountain. At this point I decided to move on to get to my spike camp before the storm hit.

I was moving along too fast, not paying enough attention to my surroundings, when all at once three magnificent rams stood up and stared at me from 40 to 50 yards away. I had my hat in my left hand at the moment because I was hot and sweaty and my rifle in my right. I remember thinking I didn't want to drop my hat for fear that the sudden movement would spook the rams. With the hat still in my left hand, I brought my rifle up very slowly and grasped the forearm. Which was the biggest? I couldn't tell with the head-on view. They weren't going to stand there much longer if they were like the other sheep I had seen this month.

"Come on, Mavis. Put your research and experience to work; make

up your mind," I thought. Were these record rams or weren't they? Which one? Just then, the middle one turned away and gave me a profile. That's it! His horns matched the three criteria I had been studying in the videos. The size of the hole in the curl; the drop of the bottom of the curl below the jawline; and the way he carried the mass of the base out to the fourth quarter.

An inner voice said, "Take him." I didn't dare move into a kneeling position so I had to take an offhand shot.

I was awfully close—I didn't want to shoot over him so I held on his shoulder. I hardly remembered squeezing the trigger. KAPOW!!! Down he went. I jacked in another cartridge, hit the safety, and climbed up to him.

"Oh, I hope it's a good one, oh please make it be a good one," I kept saying over and over. WOW!! I could hardly believe my eyes. The size of him. He looked huge—all horns and head. YAHOO!! *I did it! I did it!* I was shaking now, as I cut out the month and date on my permit. I must have figured it three ways to confirm the date was October 6 before I marked the permit.

About that time all hell broke

loose. The storm that had been moving my way, hit with thunder and lightning, snow, sleet, and rain. The wind howled and the three snags overhead groaned. It was too dark in the timber to take pictures. I had to work fast as it was almost 3:00 p.m. A taxidermist had given me excellent, detailed instructions on how to skin out the animal for a full mount. Ignoring the storm howling around me, I set to work and had it skinned, head and horns draped over a stump, and the meat quartered and hung in trees in three hours.

I usually hunt alone, as I did on this sheep hunt because one person can poke along, stopping often and make less noise. I had to leave the cape, horns, and meat in the woods over night and go back up the next day with horses. A local outfitter had agreed to bring out a sheep if I got one. I debated whether or not to change my plan. Should I finish hiking up to my spike camp to spend the night or go down off the mountain? My spike camp was only 20 minutes away, but I decided to go down so I could alert the outfitter of my need for his services. It was almost 6:00 p.m. when I started down and I reached my pick-up just

before dark. I really boogied down that mountain.

It rained all night at the ranch. I knew that for a fact because I don't think I slept much at all. This is mountain lion country and two bears had been seen in the vicinity that week, so I worried about the safety of my meat and cape all night.

The ram hadn't been disturbed when we reached it the next morning. There were four inches of fresh snow at my spike camp which made me glad I was in a snug bunkhouse the night before. It rained and sleeted all the way up the mountain and was still raining when we returned to the ranch with the ram. It was a miserable day! But I hardly noticed—I was so happy, my feet were barely touching the ground.

After the 60 day waiting period, my ram was officially measured at 200-1/8 Boone and Crockett points. Not bad for a woman who will never see 65 years of age again!

Editor's Note: Three days after collecting her ram, Mavis was showing it to another Missoula hunter who had a permit for the area. His opinion was that the first ram in a string is usually the largest, a theory not universally accepted. He hunted the same area the following day and brought out a ram that scored 204-7/8—a new North American Record! Was this one of the three Mavis had seen? Who knows?

Mavis is a retired physical education professor from the University of Montana. The ram she took is the largest ram ever taken by a woman. Congratulations to Boone and Crockett Associate, Mavis Lorenz.



MAVIS LORENZ WITH HER TROPHY RAM WHICH SCORED 200-1/8 POINTS. THE LARGEST BIGHORN RAM TAKEN BY A WOMAN.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DARRELL TONN OF MOSCOW, IDAHO.