AMERICA'S MAGNIFICENT BIGHORN

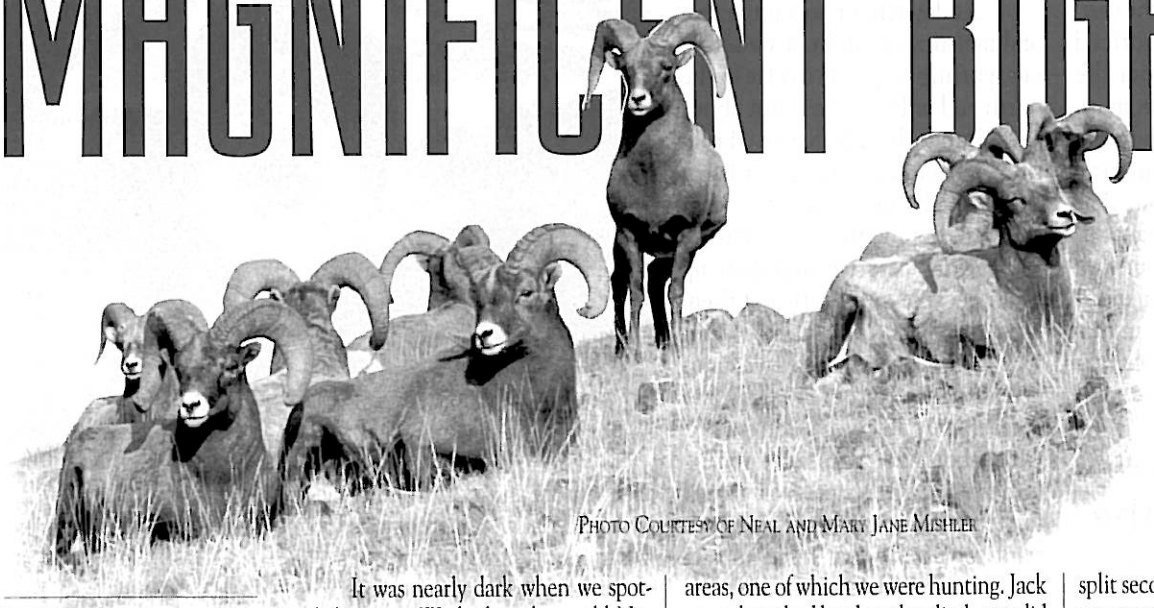


PHOTO COURTESY OF NEAL AND MARY JANE MISHLER

THANKS TO SOME OF THE MOST INTENSIVE AND MOST EFFECTIVE CONSERVATION EFFORTS THIS PLANET HAS SEEN OUR BIGHORNS ARE COMING BACK—AND A GREAT RAM IS TODAY A POSSIBLE PRIZE.

BY CRAIG BODDINGTON
Professional Member
BOONE & CROCKETT CLUB

It was nearly dark when we spotted the ram. We had made a cold November camp beside long-frozen Spirit Lake, and he was miles away, all the way up on top of a charming place known as Froze To Death Plateau—one of the most apt place names I've ever seen. Although Montana is a mountainous state, there are no really high peaks there. Froze To Death is as high as it gets at 11,000 feet and a bunch of change. In November in a year that brought an early winter that's very high indeed.

The ram was alone, and he was on a slide of jumbled shale right on the edge of the plateau where it dropped off into our valley. Had he not been skylined we would never have seen him at so great a distance. But see him we did, and we watched him bed right there in the shale.

We moved on him at three o'clock in the morning, following a steep and snow-drifted trail that led to the top of the plateau. It was cold in the valley, but it was brutal as we topped out in the predawn chill. A freezing wind ripped at us, and although our timing was close we had to huddle in the lee of a boulder and shiver until it grew light enough to proceed.

I was with Jack Atcheson Jr., one of the great sheep hunters of our time and one of few people to achieve consistent success in Montana's "Unlimited Permit" areas, one of which we were hunting. Jack never breathed hard on the climb, nor did he shiver in the wind. I did lots of both.

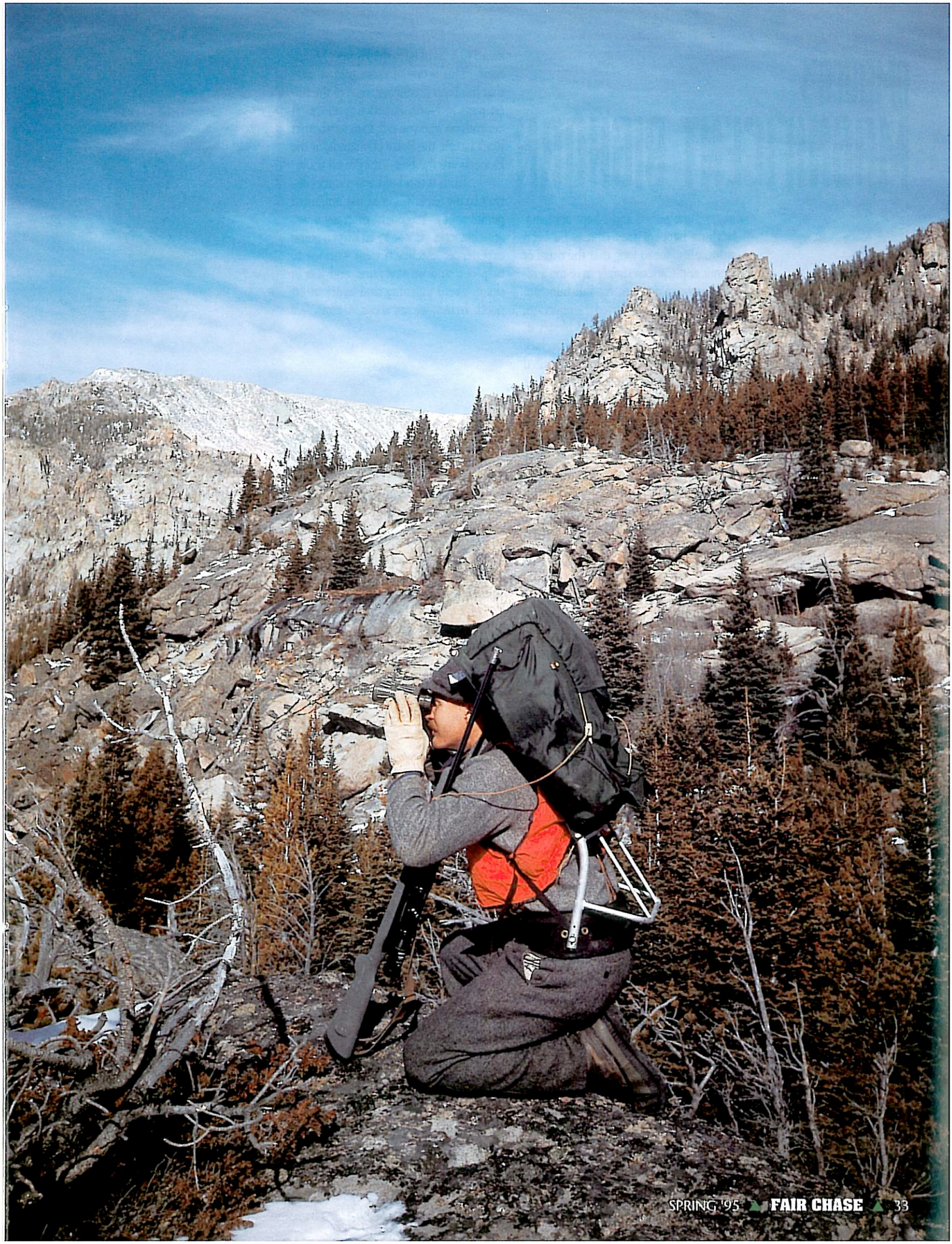
From below, with spotting scope turned up all the way, the ram had appeared exceptionally legal—not a "book" ram, but a very fine mature specimen, especially from the rugged unlimited zones where sheep rarely grow the best horns. He also appeared to be alone. Later we would conclude that he was the only sheep on top of Froze To Death—and what in the heck he was doing, all the way up there in the rocks that late in the year, I have no idea. He hadn't moved in the 12 hours since we last saw him, and therefore he surprised us as much as we surprised him.

He jumped up and I dropped down across a rock and got the crosshairs on him. He was 250 yards away, and the crosswind was a good 30 miles per hour. It was a difficult shot at best—but it was a very possible shot, and it wasn't really a great surprise. We'd thought we might find him somewhere on that shale slope, and I'd been thinking about the wind and what to do about it ever since I'd first felt its force. The problem was that I didn't shoot.

My explanation—to Jack then, to you now, and to myself over the last few years—was that I first looked at the horns to make sure he was legal. And in that split second he turned and was gone over an unseen lip. When he reappeared he was well past 400 yards and running like the hounds of hell were after him. We watched him cross a boulder-strewn valley, climb the far ridge, and vanish over Froze To Death the best part of a mile away. He was still running like I never knew a wild sheep could run.

We tracked him, but he gave us the slip in some boulders. We never saw him again that day. We did see him again two days later, when we were at the bottom of the valley once again and we spotted him slipping through a high saddle. So we climbed Froze To Death once more. But that brief glimpse was the last we saw of him. Soon it was time to pack out and make sure the area's quota hadn't been filled. And, to be perfectly honest, I'd had my fill of Froze To Death Plateau.

In the few years that have passed since then I've relived those seconds over and over again. I had wanted a bighorn most of my life, and at that time I'd been rejected in the permit drawings for about 15 years. It's an easy one to second guess. I had the shot, I knew what to do about the wind—but I didn't shoot. Did I really check the horns to make sure he was the right ram? And if I did, was that the right thing to do? Or, as I'm sure Jack suspects but was too much a gentleman to voice, did I freeze up? I wish I knew.



AMERICA'S MAGNIFICENT BIGHORN

Hunting sheep in them (Unlimited Permit areas) is like searching for a needle in a very big haystack.

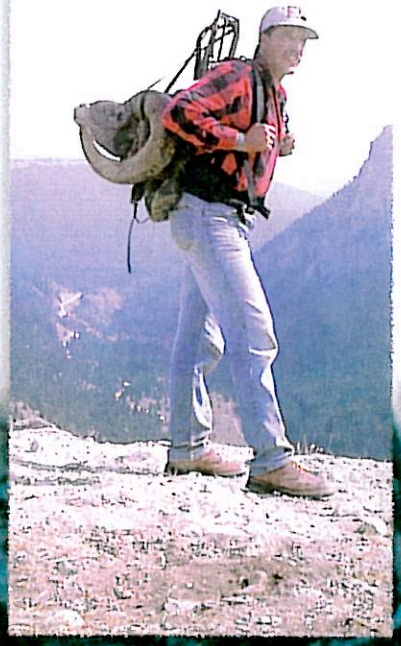
Time passed and I kept applying. Nothing happened, of course. I'd been unsuccessful for so long that the ritual of permit applications simply gave me a reverse savings account for fall hunting! Secretly I figured I deserved the rejection, for I'd had a chance but had blown it, whether for the right reasons or not. Jack and I talked about trying the unlimited areas again, but somehow didn't quite get it put together. And by then you had to make your decision at application time between a permit area and an unlimited area—so I stuck with the permit draws with no real anticipation of it happening. Not only Montana, of course. I've been pretty consistent in Wyoming, and in some years I've put it for New Mexico, Idaho, and of course I started in Colorado as soon as nonresident permits were authorized. On the desert side I don't think I've missed many years in Arizona and Nevada, and I've applied in Utah when I could scrape up the money.

Mind you, I could have booked a bighorn hunt in Alberta or British Columbia. My excuse has been that I can't afford it, but that's really just an excuse. I manage to get to Africa frequently enough that I suppose I could have booked a bighorn hunt if I wanted to badly enough. But time passed and I stuck with the permit draws almost as a ritual—not because it might someday work.

In 1993 U.S. Outfitters' George Taulman (Box 4204, Taos, New Mexico 87571, phone 1-800-845 9929) started his computerized tag application service, and I signed up. I seriously doubted George knew more about the application process than I did after 20 years—but it sure made life simpler. With a check or credit card number, a limited power of attorney, and for a small fee George will put you in for any drawings you're interested in. In my case it was mostly sheep.

It wasn't George who called to tell me I'd drawn the Montana tag. It was Jack Atcheson Jr., who'd just gotten the printout from the game department. Quite honestly, and I hate to admit this, I didn't even remember George had put me in for Montana. But he did and I drew. Not in just any area, but in the portion of area 340 west of I-15, the Pioneer Mountains. This is one of those golden areas that has been producing some of the finest rams in North America recently. It depends on who you talk to as to whether Rock Creek, the Butte Highlands, or the Pioneers are the best—they're all good.

Truth is this hunt was a stark contrast to my experiences in the unlimited permit zones. You might even say it was anticlimactic. It was in all ways a grand experience. Atcheson went with me to help out, and we saw rams, and lots of them, every morning and every afternoon. In fact, we saw about 90 rams. We



climbed no mountains, although we climbed a few hills. My father, who at 72 had never seen a wild sheep, also came along to help. He saw a good 50 rams, and he climbed no hills at all. In other words, it was not a sheep hunt as legend has sheep hunts to be. It was not a sheep hunt as my hunts for Stone's and Dall's sheep have been. But it was truly fabulous—and it was quite possibly akin to the sheep hunting our forefathers might have known.

Ovis canadensis, the bighorn sheep, is not really a creature of the high mountains. In the days of pre-European man he certainly existed in the high country, but perhaps much like the mule deer he was equally, and perhaps more so, a creature of the breaks and foothills. Custer hunted him on his Black Hills expedition a year before his fateful hunting trip along the Little Big Horn—and there's a reason for the name of that river. Theodore Roosevelt hunted him in the Black Hills as well. Unfortunately wild sheep, especially in the foothills and badlands regions, were extremely vulnerable to the excessive hunting of the last century. Worse, all wild sheep are extremely vulnerable to domestic animal diseases. By the early years of this century the Audubon or Badlands bighorn was extinct, and in the United States only isolated populations in the highest mountains remained.

Southern British Columbia and especially southwestern Alberta, with relatively untouched sheep range, became the place to hunt bighorns. In fact, for the fella just wanting to hunt sheep, Alberta was still the place—much more accessible than Stone's and Dall's sheep country farther north. The golden era was probably the '30's and '40's, when transportation was relatively simple, per

INSET: JACK ATCHESON JR., WITH THE HEAD AND HORNS OF A MONTANA BIGHORN. JUST THE SKULL AND CAPE CAN WEIGH IN EXCESS OF 40 POUNDS, AND THERE'S LOTS OF GREAT MEAT ON A BIG RAM.

RAM PHOTO COURTESY OF BILL MCRAE.

AMERICA'S MAGNIFICENT BIGHORN

mits were unlimited, and great old sheep outfitters were leading long packstrings into the Alberta Rockies. These were the days when sheep hunting greats like John Batten and Jack O'Connor took their bighorns. But those days didn't last, not even in the Canadian wilderness. Disease crept in, and although Alberta never closed, permits became limited and the hunting always difficult but not always successful.

Below Canada total closures were the norm and permits by drawing the exception. Montana closed a number of areas, but has never, ever closed sheep hunting since 1953—and to this day jealously maintains her Unlimited Permit areas. Make no mistake; Montana's Unlimited zones aren't unlimited because they're wall-to-wall sheep. They're unlimited because they're rough, rugged, and remote. Hunting sheep in them is like searching for a needle in a very big haystack. But there are sheep in these areas. Quite a lot of sheep, actually—and some decent rams. In general the Unlimited zones are original herds on original range; these were the remnant populations before reintroduction began. Their gene pools have been unmolested and are probably a bit stagnant; record book rams have been taken from Unlimited areas, but they're rare.

On the other hand, these zones offer the opportunity for you, me, or anyone else with the moxie to buy a sheep license and go hunting. By Montana law no guide is required. Each area has a quota, and the season is closed by area when the quota is reached. That means you can't stay in the Unlimited areas for 21 days; after the season has been open a few days you must hike out and make sure your area hasn't closed around your ears. That makes things a bit tricky, and almost certainly prevents these areas from reaching their hunting potential. I've been in there, and I reckon if you could spend three weeks at it, the hunting would be every bit as good as some of the famed Canadian bighorn grounds. However, good or bad, I love the concept that anybody can still go sheep hunting if he or she is tough enough. I hope Montana sticks with the program!

My uncle, Art Popham, whose work has also graced this magazine, was one of the early "grand slammers." In the 1930's desert sheep hunting in Mexico was not a big problem. Bighorns were no problem in the '30's and '40's. Like most sheep hunters of that day, his northern sheep were the most difficult to get to and came last.

In my time the bighorn became the most difficult of our wild sheep to obtain. It still is, although I'd rate it almost a tossup as to whether the Rocky Mountain or desert varieties are more difficult. Desert permits are more difficult to obtain, but on average the hunting is more successful given a permit. Technically there are six bighorn subspecies today; the Rocky Mountain, the California bighorn, and four desert subspecies. The California subspecies actually grows smaller horns than the largest desert variety, but this article isn't about splitting taxonomic hairs. These days all of our bighorn permits are hard to get, all are worth having, and any tag you can get for any ram offers a great experience!

Never again will sheep hunting be as simple as picking up the phone, but things are starting to look up. Beginning around the 1950's the introduction and reintroduction programs began, and very slowly sheep started to reappear in their former ranges. This job will almost certainly never be finished; there remains vast habitat throughout the West—habitat that used to support wild sheep, or that certainly could.

The progress, however, has been astounding. Although permit numbers are limited, there are sheep and sheep hunting in every state west of the Great Plains today. There are even a few tags in the Dakotas. After a century of total protection (and continued decline), I never thought I'd see a sheep season in California, where I lived for 15 years. But there is one. There are sheep seasons literally within sight of Denver. And, for that matter, Tucson and Albuquerque.

North of the border outfitters in both Alberta and the Rocky Mountain bighorn zones of southeastern B.C. are on a very tight quota, with outfitters receiving from one to four permits annually. Outfitters with track records charge accordingly, as is their right, and permits tend to be spoken for years in advance. Farther west, much of the California bighorn country in the Chilcotin-Cariboo region is not on quota yet. It's a bit like Montana's Unlimited hunting in that it's tough and success is uncertain—but there are plenty of sheep, and hunts can generally be booked a year or less ahead.

South of the border the central government in Mexico City controls the sheep hunting, and there is a drawing for permits. The government basically outfits the hunt, and permit holders are obligated to pay the fees. They are steep enough that the draw isn't that tough, and most hunts are successful. Obviously, local hunters and ranchers in the two sheep states (Baja and Sonora) resent central government control—and historically have tried to circumvent it. Non-Spanish speakers have been unwittingly fooled. Do not accept any Mexican permit that

CRAIG AND HIS FATHER, BUD BODDINGTON, WITH A RAM TAKEN FROM MONTANA'S AREA 340, ONE OF SEVERAL PARTICULARLY GOOD TROPHY RAM UNITS. SUCH PERMITS ARE VERY HARD TO DRAW, BUT WELL WORTH APPLYING FOR! THE RIFLE IS A DAKOTA MODEL 76 IN .270 CALIBER.

INSET: THE HOOFPRINT OF A MONTANA BIGHORN DWARFS A .270 CARTRIDGE. NORTHERN BIGHORN CAN WEIGH WELL IN EXCESS OF 300 POUNDS AT FULL MATURITY.

doesn't come out of Fauna y Silvestre in Mexico City! Rumor has it that, at least in Sonora, where most of the sheep are on private land, the management may be turned over to private industry. If a Mexican desert sheep hunt is of interest, keep your eyes on that situation.

In the United States virtually all the sheep tags are very difficult to draw. Most difficult is probably Arizona, followed by Nevada and the better areas in Montana. I drew one of these, so it can happen—but it takes patience and persistence. If you don't apply, you surely won't draw. Wyoming has lots of applicants, but also gives out quite a lot of permits. Although I've never drawn, I honestly expect to some day. And then there are the bonus points and preference points systems. Nevada, Arizona, and Colorado each have their own unique system. Odds are so tough in both Arizona and Nevada that, statistically, it isn't ever gonna be easy—but every little bit helps.

In Colorado, the preference point system does help. There's a cap at three points, so it takes three points to get in the draw. However, Colorado gives out lots of sheep tags. The best trophy areas remain tough, but there are several areas with pretty darn good odds. Or you can do what I'm going to do. I have three preference points, so as a resident I can almost certainly get a rifle tag in a marginal trophy area, or I can get an archery tag in the best area. I'm going for the archery tag.

Bighorn management is difficult, and has not been without its problems. The chief problem is generally disease, and it can be devastating. More than a decade ago disease swept the Kootenay bighorns in B.C.—and they're just now recovering. Disease ruined some of New Mexico's reintroduced herds just when they were going good. It struck in Texas even before their desert bighorn program had taken off. Arizona's famed Aravaipa Canyon herd had a problem a few years ago and is still rebuilding. Just this year we've had a disease problem in Colorado, and the very herd I hunted last fall in Montana was fed medicated salt blocks all winter to contain a problem.

Quite honestly, you could see that one coming. There were too many sheep packed into a relatively small piece of country. Montana had responded by doubling the ram permits (which is undoubtedly why I and a few other nonresidents drew!) and letting out some ewe tags, but it was too late. Disease in the form of lungworm crept in by late fall. If caught early, and if the funds and manpower are available to get medication distributed, managers today know how to contain some of the common diseases—but given the remoteness of sheep range, often the losses are grave before the disease is discovered, let alone reacted to.

Right now sheep management is almost a victim of its own success. Numerous transplanted herds, put into ideal habitat with the genetic vigor of expanding into new range, have done fabulously. Reproduction has often been so rapid that within a very years that herd, too, has a surplus available for live-trapping and restocking elsewhere. But relocation isn't always that simple. There is often resistance to relocation, usually from stockmen's groups—and indeed there's little sense putting sheep in place where they even might be exposed to the domestic diseases they're so susceptible to.

Montana did a great job for so long, and picked some of the relocation sites so well that the sheep not only bred like rabbits, but grew horns like Chernobyl sheep. But right now Montana's relocation program is on hold due to lack of politically available sites (certainly not for lack of suitable habitat). With plenty of money in the bank from auctioned tags, Montana has had to resort to ewe hunts instead!

So, with regrets, I seriously doubt that bighorn hunting will ever be as available as whitetail hunting. I do expect the numbers of tags to slowly increase across the West—but since I doubt that those who want the tags will decline in numbers, it's gonna stay tough. But we all have choices. We can get in shape and assault Montana's Unlimited Permit areas. Or we can save our pennies and go to Canada or Mexico. Or we can apply for every sheep tag in every state that offers them. If you apply long enough, it will happen.

After waiting 21 years for a permit, I said that my own Montana bighorn hunt was anticlimactic. It was. I had allocated six weeks to sheep hunting, and would have used every day if I'd needed to. But from the first afternoon, when we glassed a herd of more than 40 rams, I knew that success would be a matter of days, not weeks. If the hunt was a bit of a letdown, the shot was not and neither was the ram that shot was fired at.

We'd seen him three days before, early in the morning just as he and his cronies moved into timber. We saw him again that same night when he sauntered back out of the timber—and then bedded in an open basin until dark, keeping us completely and utterly pinned down at a bit over 400 yards away. I well remembered that unlimited permit ram as I made the decision not to shoot. I could have made the shot. Well, at least eight or nine times out of 10. But there was black timber all around, it was nearly dark, I was shooting a .270 at a 300-pound ram at very long range, and I'd waited 21 years for this permit. He and his half-dozen buddies, every one a record-book ram, weren't spooked. We would wait and try again in the morning.

BIGHORN NATURALLY ARE NOT EXCLUSIVELY CREATURES OF THE HIGH MOUNTAINS. RELOCATION EFFORTS HAVE RETURNED BIGHORNS TO NUMEROUS BADLAND AND FOOTHILL REGIONS IN THE WEST, AND THE ANIMALS TEND TO THRIVE PROVIDED DOMESTIC DISEASES ARE KEPT AT BAY.

Morning came and those rams were gone—and it was deja vu. I kicked myself for not carrying a .300, and kicked myself even harder for not taking a shot I knew I could make. I kicked myself for the next couple of days—until we found them again. They hadn't spooked and they hadn't moved. Well, they'd moved, but just to another patch of timber in a little hidden valley about 1000 yards away. It was almost dark again when we closed in on them. This time the group was larger, all monsters, and when we had them at 125 yards they were all balled up together in fading light.

I'm pretty cool under fire, but not this time. Twenty-one years of waiting and hoping—and more than a couple of failures—weighed on my shoulders. I was completely unglued, and when the chosen ram stepped clear the crosshairs of my Dakota wobbled across the entire herd, not just my ram. I never got it under control, not completely—but enough to get the shot off. The herd took off across the darkening hillside, my ram trailing, faltering, lying down. The great head was up for just a moment, then sank into the sagebrush. I shook uncontrollably for a long time.

EDITOR'S NOTE: CRAIG BODDINGTON IS SENIOR FIELD EDITOR FOR PETERSEN'S HUNTING AND GUNS & AMMO MAGAZINES, AND IS THE AUTHOR OF EIGHT BOOKS ON HUNTING AND SHOOTING.