

THE HELLHOLE RAM

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The majestic full curl ram lay quietly in his talus bed with a court of four lesser rams around him. As I peeked over the last rocky ridge of cover, a short 30 yards from the trophy ram, the past three months of excitement, planning, scouting and preparation rushed through my head. My three month adventure began the day I was interrupted at work by a call from my wife telling me I had drawn a coveted New Mexico bighorn sheep permit. The episode was now closing after a treacherous climb down the rocky cliffs of Hellhole Basin which put me in good range for a shot at the trophy of a lifetime.

I had always dreamed of hunting the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, so upon moving to New Mexico over seven years ago, I began to fill out Special Hunt entry forms for bighorn. As many hunters put in for these permits but few are issued, the odds on receiving one are very low. I was thrilled to know I had beaten the odds.

I received notice of my permit in late June. By the Fourth of July weekend my wife and I were headed for the Pecos Wilderness in northern New Mexico for a backpack scouting trip. As an extra bonus, while on the scouting trip we met Amy Fisher and Bob Bavin, both of the New Mexico Game and Fish Department. They were returning from a research trip on New Mexico's largest bighorn sheep herd. Amy is the wildlife biologist in charge of the New Mexico desert and Rocky Mountain sheep herds and Bob Bavin is the Game and Fish officer in charge of the Pecos Wilderness Area.

Lisa and I sat down and had lunch with Bob and Amy. Their wealth of knowledge and enthusiasm in assisting me on my hunt were much appreciated. Oftentimes our Game and Fish personnel are overlooked as valuable resources. They are dedicated professionals working to protect the interests of all users of

our National Parks and Wilderness areas and New Mexico has some of the best.

During our four day scouting trip, we found ram hangouts, ewe and lamb summer ranges and enjoyed the beauty of the breathtaking Pecos Wilderness. We hiked to places with names that will be etched on my mind forever: Pecos Baldy, Trailriders Wall, Truchas Peak, Chimayosos Peak and Rincon Bonita. We found rams and observed their personalities and characteristics: Scarface, One-horn, Tight Curl, Roman Nose and others. By the end of my first scouting trip, I knew that this would be a hunt to remember.

Other scouting trips were made and the planning continued. I decided that I would attempt to fill my tag with a bow. I had been an avid bow hunter years ago, but time constraints had limited my recent adventures to rifle hunting. After visiting my local archery professional, I was somewhat surprised at the advancements in bowhunting. However, after several trips to the archery store and hours on the range, and I soon began to feel comfortable with shooting a bow again.

After much research, I had decided to entrust my hunt of a lifetime to outfitter and guide, Ric Martin of Ric Martin Trophy Adventures in Jemez Springs, New Mexico. Ric, I discovered, is very well respected as a guide and is very knowledgeable of the New Mexico Pecos herd as a result of successfully guiding several hunters in the area. Ric uses horses to pack in equipment for the ten day hunt and to transport game out because the sheep are located in a remote and rugged area of wilderness.

Finally the much anticipated day of my hunt began. Ric packed me into camp several days before the actual opening of the season so we had an opportunity to do a little pre-season scouting. Much to my surprise, but not to Ric's, the mature rams that were so

visible in their majestic poses above timberline in the summer months, were nowhere to be found. Occasionally we spotted rams from great distances feeding on open slopes right at timberline but for the most part the rams had moved into the timber. Ric's theory on this is that the grasses on the open slopes above timberline are the first to frost and dry out in the cool nights of late summer. The grass and vegetation of the lower elevation timber bowls and meadows remain fuller and more succulent. The rams are busy preparing themselves for the upcoming rigors of the rut and the long, cold winter by feasting on these healthier plants.

After a long and sleepless night, opening morning finally came. We started the hunt much as we had scouted—riding above timberline on the wind swept ridges and stopping to glass the open and wooded slopes of the many basins for rams. By mid-morning of the first day, I had spotted the distinctive white rump of a sheep feeding in an open meadow of a timbered ridge. Through the spotting scope, Ric and I were able to locate nine rams feeding in that meadow. One ram, previously nicknamed, Tight Curl, was among them as was an impressive sheep that warranted another look. After a one hour horse ride and a long slow stalk through the timber, we entered the small meadow where the rams had been feeding. Although the rams were not visible, their distinctive odor was present in the slight breeze that blew in our faces. As we moved slowly through the trees, I spotted a small ram that was feeding with his back to me. We froze and I dropped to one knee with my bow at my side. I glassed the area behind the small sickle-horn in an attempt to find the rest of the herd. Like searching through the pieces of a puzzle, I began to discern the rest of the animals bedded in a thick patch of forest. First a horn here, a white

rump there, then a white nose of a mature ram all became apparent.

With the wind in our faces and the rams in a restful state after feeding, we stalked to within 30 yards of the largest ram. Ric and I whispered the estimated dimensions and probable score of the big ram. After coming up with a projected score in the 173 to 175 class, I decided to pass the ram in hopes of a larger one.

As Ric and I slowly backed out of the timber, it was hard for me to contain my excitement; to be that close to a trophy ram with bow in hand and permit in pocket was exhilarating. The hunt was on!

The next three days met with similar results. Many hours were spent riding the open ridges and glassing the timber and grassy pockets for trophy rams. Several other rams were stalked, judged and passed on. As the fifth day of the hunt rolled around, the weather began to deteriorate. Storm clouds moved across the high peaks and basins and banks of fog obscured our vision. I was reminded of a story I had heard about a sheep season several years ago when fog had covered the mountains for seven of the ten days of the hunt. Only one of the five permit holders had scored.

On this fifth morning, we decided to hunt Hellhole Basin. I named the basin when Ric led me into it the day after he discovered it. Although, hell to get into and out of, the basin was an ideal ram hangout. Not only was Hellhole secluded, far from any trails and surrounded by steep imposing cliffs and shale slides, but the bottom was full of small pockets of succulent feed between heavy patches of timber. The lower end of the basin area was completed by a spring fed stream.

After a grueling hike to the edge of the basin, Ric and I spotted several rams bedded on some rocky outcroppings below the rim. I had learned that where there are a few rams, there are usually several more not far away. After several minutes of glassing, a total of nine rams in two separate groups were located in the basin. The largest of these rams was a magnificent full curl ram with what appeared to be 40 inch horns with massive bases. He was bedded along a steep rocky ridge making a stalk from the cliffs above impossible. We circled the basin to the

opposite side. From our new vantage, Ric and I observed the rams get up and move lower in the basin to feed. At this point, Ric and I used a talus chute for cover and dropped into the basin itself.

Once in the basin, we watched the rams feed along the edge of the timber below a steep rocky slope for two hours. Finally, the entire group bedded on the side of a talus slope. We circled the rams to get the breeze moving up the basin in our faces and began our stalk.

We crawled along a game trail 100 yards to the only cover that remained on the slope, a small ridge of rocks. Ric stayed behind at 50 yards to catch my final stalk on video tape without spooking the rams. I worked my way forward, using the ridge as cover until I was 30 yards from the rams and undetected. The five bedded rams were facing different directions. Two of the rams faced me directly, but the large full curl ram was facing directly away. I had the perfect set up.

After mentally preparing myself for the shot, I slowly stood up with my bow at the ready. Immediately, the two smaller rams stood in their beds and began to move down the slope toward the timber. Although the largest ram looked at them, he did not move. I took advantage of his indecision and quickly closed the distance to 22 yards. As I did this the remaining three rams rose to their feet and headed for the timber below.

As the largest ram rose to his feet, I instinctively came to full draw and found myself automatically placing the 20 yard pin behind his shoulder. My hours of practice and mental preparation now began to pay off. Without hesitation, I placed a perfect shot. The arrow struck the ram behind the shoulder and completely penetrated the animal. As the arrow skipped off the rocks 20 yards behind my trophy, the remaining rams exploded off the side of the slope and headed for the timber. The young rams then hesitated, waiting for their leader as I nocked another arrow for a follow-up shot I hoped I would not need. The large ram tried to run with the others but managed only a slow unsteady walk. After about thirty yards, his legs buckled and it was over.

The wave of feelings that rushed over me was incredible. The adrenaline of the successful stalk and shot ran

through my veins. The thrill of knowing that I had achieved my dream of harvesting a trophy bighorn with a bow was accomplished. Last, but not least, was the disappointment that my once in a lifetime hunt was over.

After many slaps of the back and lots of follow up shots with the camera, the work began anew. The ram had to be caped out and the meat boned in order to transport him out of the steep basin. So with the ram caped, boned and packed on our backs, we began the laborious task of climbing out of the basin.

Climbing up a talus chute out of a basin at 12,000 feet is grueling.



What had taken us 30 minutes to go down now took a lung busting two hours to climb up. Once the top was achieved, we packed the horses and went on to camp.

Later that night I went to sleep thinking about the life long dream I had accomplished that day while listening to the sounds of September bulls bugling in the basin next to camp.

After returning to civilization, we went to the New Mexico Game and Fish Office in Santa Fe where Amy Fisher checked in my ram and officially green scored him. To my surprise, the ram scored a whopping 177-1/8 Pope and Young points and ranked as the new state record with a bow. The ram taped out at 38-1/2 by 40-1/4 inches with 15-1/2 inch bases. People warned me that sheep hunting would get into your blood and now I understand why. I've got the fever!

KEVIN REID, B&C ASSOCIATE, WITH HIS NEW MEXICO BIG-HORN THAT SCORES 177-1/8 POINTS.