

# THE O'Connor Connection

**By Eldon L. "Buck" Buckner**

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Photos Courtesy of Author

Most hunters who were of reading age between the years 1935 and 1975 are familiar with the name Jack O'Connor. It became synonymous with sheep hunting, the .270 Winchester, and *Outdoor Life* magazine. Even today, nearly 29 years after O'Connor's death, it is difficult to find a current issue of a gun or hunting magazine that doesn't include some reference to this legendary outdoor writer.

I was fortunate to be hatched early enough to begin enjoying O'Connor's *Outdoor Life* stories and columns in the 1940s. Indeed, his writing was the primary reason I became an avid reader. I was also fortunate to grow up in southern Arizona where I learned to shoot and hunt with many of O'Connor's friends — one being a great uncle who'd known O'Connor since their days together at Flagstaff in the early 1930s. Through serendipity I got to know O'Connor and Eleanor well and became friends with their children.

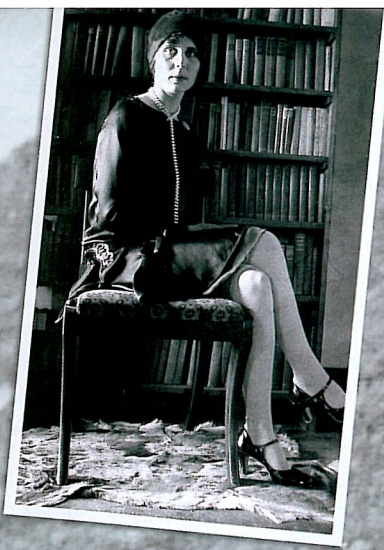
Another generation has grown up since O'Connor "shuffled off to Buffalo," as he used to say. Although this newer generation has been deprived of the contemporary O'Connor writing I enjoyed, some of its members have discovered O'Connor's talent through his numerous books and later reprints. Most of these books are about firearms and hunting. What follows is a bit of O'Connor background and some lesser known aspects of O'Connor's life concerned with subjects Boone and Crockett has long been involved with: conservation and big-game records.

Born January 22, 1902, in the Arizona Territory border town of Nogales, O'Connor grew up in Tempe, Arizona, near Phoenix. O'Connor's parents divorced when he was five. He developed an interest in firearms and wildlife at an early age thanks to his maternal grandfather and a paternal uncle. His passion for reading was encouraged by his mother, a teacher at Tempe Normal.

After serving in both the Army and Navy, O'Connor earned a masters degree in journalism from University of Missouri in 1927, married Eleanor Barry, and was soon teaching English at Sul Ross Teachers College in Alpine, Texas. He taught his new bride

**OPPOSITE:** Jack O'Connor and his guide Moose Johnson with O'Connor's Dall's sheep that received a second prize at the Boone and Crockett Club's 1950 Competition held in New York City. ■ Pictured in the center is O'Connor (standing at left) with close friend and former student Arthur C. Popham (standing next to him) at the 1950 Competition. Popham's Alaska-Yukon moose also received a second prize like O'Connor's Dall's ram. ■ O'Connor taught his new bride Eleanor (pictured at top) how to shoot. She later became a constant companion of his on hunting trips.







**ABOVE:** O'Connor in his trophy room surrounded by memories from a lifetime of hunting adventures.  
**INSET:** O'Connor's son Bradford is pictured here in 1951 measuring his mountain caribou. Bradford's caribou received the first prize at the 1952 Competition.

He was paid extra for feature stories that appeared monthly, each eagerly anticipated by thousands of fans. Upon his retirement from *Outdoor Life* in 1973, O'Connor accepted the executive editor position with *Petersen's Hunting*, where his articles appeared until his death in January 1978.

O'Connor's interest in natural history in general and game conservation in particular led to his first published articles on these subjects in the 1930s. O'Connor's keen observations soon earned him considerable respect as an amateur naturalist from such professionals as Dr. John McGregor of the Museum of Northern Arizona and Dr. A.A. Nichols of the U.S. Biological Survey and National Park Service. O'Connor also collected wildlife specimens for the Arizona State Museum's natural history collections. His observation and collection of the Benson's or elegant quail in Sonora confirmed that bird's range far north of where it was believed to be at the time.

One of O'Connor's conservation concerns was the overpopulation of pronghorn on Anderson Mesa near Flagstaff. On a national level, pronghorn were just beginning to recover from near extinction. With no open season in Arizona since 1908, the

to shoot and bought her a .22 rifle and an Ithaca .20-gauge double shotgun. In his spare time he also authored *Conquest*, a risqué historical novel which created considerable controversy and was subsequently banned by the El Paso Library. As a result, O'Connor resigned in 1931 and took a similar position at Arizona State Teachers College at Flagstaff (now Northern Arizona University), where he remained until 1934. That fall he relocated to the University of Arizona at Tucson and became its first professor of journalism.

O'Connor's return to Arizona in the midst of the depression marked the

start of his career as an outdoor writer. Energetic and highly motivated, he sold early articles on firearms, wildlife, and conservation to *Sports Afield*, *Field & Stream*, *Hunting*, and *Outdoor Life* to augment his meager professor's salary. O'Connor's superior writing skills were soon recognized by readers and editors alike. By 1940 he had authored another western novel (*Boom Town*, 1938), a Derrydale classic (*Game In The Desert*, 1939) and was a regular columnist for *Outdoor Life*. In 1945, O'Connor resigned from the University of Arizona to become *Outdoor Life's* gun editor at a salary four times that he'd received as a professor.

Anderson Mesa herd had increased tremendously and was destroying its habitat by the early 1930s. O'Connor's first article for *Outdoor Life* was titled "Arizona's Antelope Problem" and appeared in the magazine's special conservation section in May 1934. Never a shrinking violet on an issue he felt strongly about, O'Connor kept tabs on the increasing herd, collected buck and doe museum specimens in 1936 and continued pressuring the Game Commission for a limited open season. His position as conservation columnist for the *Arizona Game Protective Association's* (AGPA) magazine helped spread his message to the state's sportsmen.

Finally, in 1941, Arizona held its first open season. O'Connor and his wife Eleanor were two of the 400 permitted hunters. Eleanor killed the first buck of the season at dawn the first day with her .257 Roberts. Photos of this buck show that it was probably a record-book head under B&C's current scoring system, but alas, in 1941 no such system existed. The mounted head was stolen later without ever being measured. I doubt that many of Arizona's pronghorn hunters over the past 65 years were aware that O'Connor was largely responsible for instigating the hunt that has produced more world-record programs than any other.

Most sheep hunters are aware that O'Connor's many stories about the sport were a major factor in it becoming the elite proposition it is today. Few know how much time and energy he devoted to improving the plight of the desert bighorn.

O'Connor's first sheep hunt took place in December 1934 in Sonora, Mexico. Although the hunt was unsuccessful, O'Connor did see a ram on the trip and was hooked on sheep hunting for the rest of his life. O'Connor's next sheep hunt was in August 1935, and was shared with Arthur C. Popham, Jr., one of O'Connor's journalism students at the University of Arizona. Popham, now an Honorary Life Member of the Boone and Crockett Club, and an early O'Connor fan, chose the U. of A. for his pre-law studies, primarily because he knew O'Connor was teaching there. The hunt, guided by the legendary Charlie Ren, was as much an endurance test in the Sonoran Desert as anything, and is well described in a chapter of Art's book, *Stalking Game From Desert To Tundra* (Amwell Press, 1985). The hunt was successful for my friend Art,

but O'Connor struck out again. However, he returned to Sonora a month or so later and bagged his first ram.

There were very few desert sheep hunters in the 1930s, because no legal

friend, Dr. A.A. Nichols, to do the first desert sheep survey in Arizona. With more prodding by more people, the Kofa and Cabeza Prieta Federal Game Ranges were established in Arizona in 1939, primarily to protect desert bighorns and their habitat.

Campaigning for desert sheep had been a lonely effort for O'Connor, but it eventually gained support and resulted in improved management and controlled hunts in the 1950s. But by then, O'Connor had moved to Idaho. As he later recalled, "mostly by agitation for the sheep simply gained me the reputation of being sort of a harmless nut, but since I have left, the State Game Department has followed the program I used to plead for." ("The Desert Bighorn," *Outdoor Life*, May 1960).

Because O'Connor was accustomed to taking measurements of animals through his museum work, it was natural for him to

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**To me the mounted ram head on the wall should bring back memories of beautiful country, solitude, bright adventure, of a good shot on a well-selected ram. No ram head is a decent trophy if it is immature, if it was poached, if the hunter used a helicopter to get it, if he landed above it in a light plane. — Jack O'Connor**

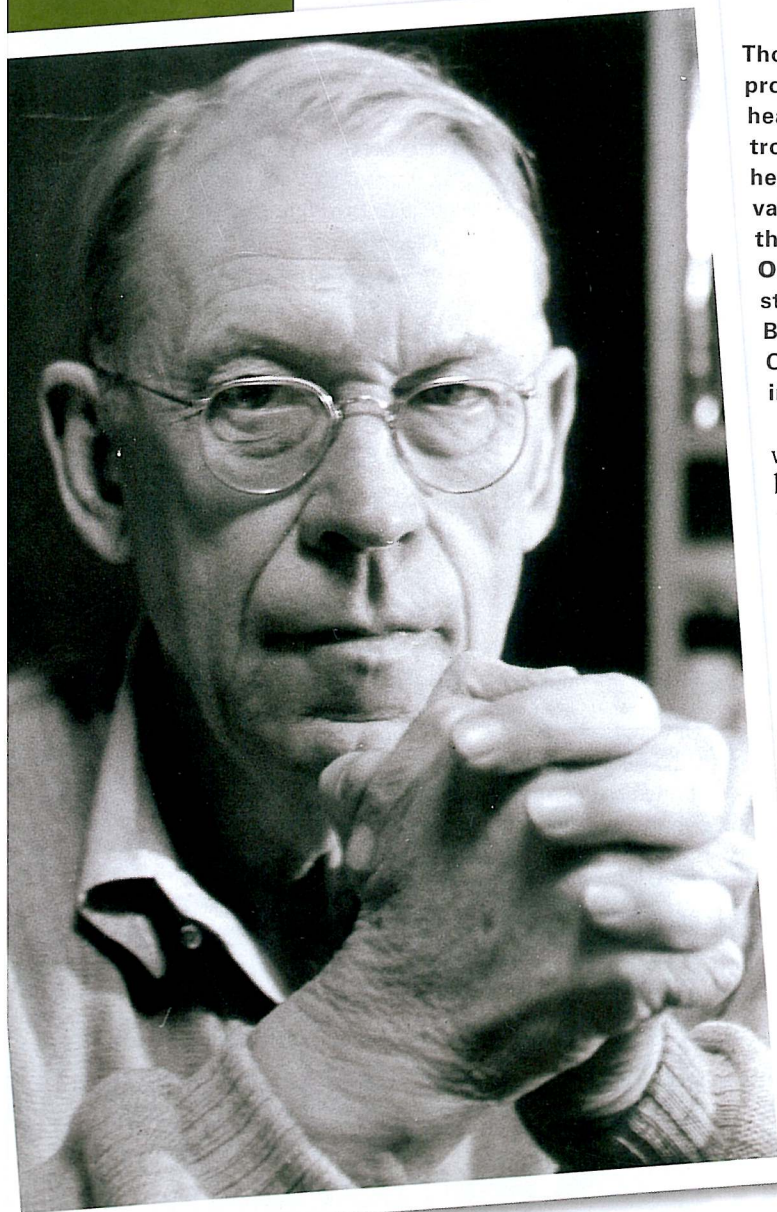
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hunting for the species existed in the U.S. and special permits had to be obtained to hunt Sonora. In Arizona, sheep hunting had been illegal since the late 1800s, yet poaching was rampant. The game department showed little concern for a species that was not hunted and created no revenue.

O'Connor set about to change the situation. Using his credibility as a university professor and frequently published writer, he approached any and all receptive audiences, from women's clubs to service organizations. He wrote newspaper articles, talked to sportsmen's clubs and as new editor of the AGPA magazine, crafted hard-hitting editorials asking for better protection, studies of habitat factors and restricted hunts for a few mature rams to increase interest in wild sheep. Finally, in 1937, the National Association of Audubon Societies commissioned O'Connor's

**Bill Ruger, left, and Bob Chatfield-Taylor with trophies taken on a 1963 O'Connor pack trip in the Yukon.**





**Though O'Connor was proud of his record heads and admired great trophies taken by others, he placed much more value on the type of hunt the trophy represented. OPPOSITE: The author standing in the Yukon Basin after scattering O'Connor's ashes there in 2005.**

whitetail deer for the new book. Of course, Mr. Ely took care to point out that all work on the book was being done gratis for the sake of the sport and game. O'Connor sent the requested copy within a month.

The 1939 record book listed simple measurements of antlers or horns without a summary score. It listed a Coues' deer and mule deer taken by O'Connor in 1934, his 1935 desert ram and the aforementioned pronghorn.

During the 1940s, O'Connor became good friends with Grancel and Betty Fitz. While not a member of Boone

and Crockett Club's records data-gathering project, which the Club began in preparation for publication of the 1939 record book, *North American Big Game*. Although O'Connor never told me so, I imagine he became involved through the Arizona State Museum, because one of the heads listed is the pronghorn buck he collected on Anderson Mesa in 1936.

By 1938, O'Connor was well known through his writing as a dedicated hunter of Coues' deer, or Arizona whitetail, as it was also known, and had submitted measurements and corresponded frequently with the B&C Records Committee then consisting of Chairman Alfred Ely, Harold Anthony and R.R.M. Carpenter. I'm sure it was no great surprise to O'Connor when he received a very complimentary two-page letter from Chairman Ely in early September, asking if he'd be willing to write the chapter on hunting the Arizona

and Crockett Club, Grancel was a dedicated trophy hunter who authored part of the 1939 records book, served on the special committee which developed the current scoring system adopted in 1950, and eventually became the first to collect all species of legal North American big game. His wife Betty, a noted hunter herself, served as B&C records secretary for many years.

Grancel Fitz used the term "grand slam" in the title of a story he wrote for *True* magazine, describing his collection of all four species of North American wild sheep. He named O'Connor as one of four or five other hunters believed to have achieved the same thing. In fact, by the fall of 1946, O'Connor had collected three "grand slams" without knowing of such a term!

Prize medals for the first B&C trophy competition using the newly adopted scoring system were awarded in 1951 at the American Museum of Natural History

in New York City. Two of the recipients were O'Connor and his former student Art Popham. O'Connor's Dall's sheep from the Yukon's Sifton Range the previous year, which scored 177-1/8 points, received second prize, while Popham's Alaska-Yukon moose, scoring 220-6/8 points, also placed second. Years later, when old records were triple proofed and math errors corrected, O'Connor's ram score dropped to 176-7/8 points while Popham's moose increased to 224-2/8 points.

At the next competition in 1952, another O'Connor received a medal. O'Connor's teenaged son Bradford bagged the first-prize-winning mountain caribou while hunting with his father and friends near Atlin, British Columbia. The bull scores 408-4/8 points.

When the 1952 records book was published, it listed a 1939 desert ram, 1945 barren ground caribou, 1946 Stone's ram and the 1950 Dall's as taken by Jack O'Connor. His desert ram, Coues' deer, mule deer, and pronghorn listed in the 1939 book all failed to make the grade under the new system.

The next records book, published in 1958, acknowledged O'Connor in its foreword and included two additional trophies to his credit: his 1943 Alberta bighorn ram scoring 178 points and his last desert bighorn shot in 1946, which scored 168-6/8 points.

On June 28, 1961, B&C Records Committee chairman Robert Waters invited O'Connor to serve on the Judges Panel that would finalize the scores for the trophies entered in the 10th Competition of 1960 and 1961. The judges, led by Dr. Elmer Rusten, included O'Connor, a former hunting partner Elgin Gates, B&C Club members Berry Brooks and Dr. John Hammett, and Charlie Welch. This was the last judges panel scoring at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, as the next few programs were held at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

When O'Connor was asked to serve on the 11th Competition Judges Panel in 1964, he declined due to an upcoming book deadline. It was probably just as well, because the third place Dall's sheep was taken by his wife in 1963 on a Yukon hunt they shared with Bob Chatfield-Taylor, Lenard Brownell, and B&C honorary life member Bill Ruger. It edged O'Connor's 1950 Dall's sheep by 3/8 of a point!

It was obvious when the 1964 records book was published that trophy hunting had become a big thing with American hunters. Minimum scores for trophy listing

were increased and would be again, dropping O'Connor's caribou and bighorn ram from the records.

In 1965, O'Connor and Eleanor accompanied B&C member John Batten and his wife Katy on a tiger hunt in India. O'Connor shared his concerns about people hunting for the wrong reasons with the veteran sheep hunter. He felt somewhat guilty that his writing had helped fuel the sheep hunting mania and that many competitive-minded hunters were ignoring fair-chase standards and good sportsmanship instead of hunting for the pleasure of the sport and enjoyment of solitude and wild country as he did. Many were solely in pursuit of honor and prestige, he believed. Though O'Connor was proud of his record heads and admired great trophies taken by others, he placed much more value on the type of hunt the trophy represented. His philosophy on trophy hunting in general, and sheep hunting in particular, was well expressed in his 1974 book, *Sheep and Sheep Hunts*. "To me the mounted ram head on the wall should bring back memories of beautiful country,

solitude, bright adventure, of a good shot on a well-selected ram. No ram head is a decent trophy if it is immature, if it was poached, if the hunter used a helicopter to get it, if he landed above it in a light plane. I speak not of its having been purchased or picked up."

O'Connor's last sheep hunt was a successful one, made in 1973 at age 71 out of a camp in British Columbia shared with the late B&C Club member Glenn Napierski. It was shot with his favorite custom Model 70 Winchester .270. Less than five years later O'Connor was gone, shortly followed by his hunting partner Eleanor.

On August 30, 2005, I rode a stout Yukon horse up a steep mountainside to a high basin where I'd seen sheep. Two days earlier, I'd shot a 10-1/2-year-old ram with 39-4/8-inch horns after a week of riding and hard climbing from a campsite frequently used by O'Connor pack trains in years past. Upon reaching the basin I dismounted, removed my hat and after a brief prayer, scattered O'Connor's and Eleanor's ashes on the wind; a promise made years earlier had finally been kept. ■



### **JACK O'CONNOR HUNTING HERITAGE AND EDUCATION CENTER**

On June 3, 2006, the Jack O'Connor Hunting Heritage and Education Center was officially dedicated at Hells Gate State Park in Lewiston, Idaho, two miles upstream from O'Connor's home on the Snake River. The center is a 501(c)3 qualified charitable organization, with displays depicting the history of hunting, Jack O'Connor's contributions to conservation education, journalism, and firearm design. Other displays include O'Connor's trophy collection, numerous photos, books, magazines, firearms and memorabilia. Boone and Crockett's role in early conservation is explained, and a special exhibit pertains to the restoration of bighorn sheep in Snake River's Hells Canyon.

The center is open daily in summer months; Friday, Saturday, and Sunday during the winter months. For more information, contact: Jack O'Connor Hunting Heritage and Education Center, P.O. Box 394, Lewiston, ID 83501, Phone: (208) 743-5043; web address: [www.jack-oconnor.org](http://www.jack-oconnor.org).

