

THINHORN S

Northwestern Canada and Alaska hold the most
Available of the world's wild sheep...
And they occupy some of the most magnificent country.

By
Col. Craig Boddington
USMCR
Professional Member
Boone & Crockett Club

The thinhorn sheep of the far North have always been very special to me, and for many reasons. Like all hunters of my generation, I grew up devouring the works of Jack O'Connor, so of course I knew that sheep hunting was superior to all other forms of the sport. It was the 1960s, and O'Connor was growing older. By then his days of hunting bighorns, both the desert sheep of Sonora and the Rocky Mountain rams of Alberta, were long since over. The sheep hunting he was writing about was Dall's sheep in the Yukon and Stone's sheep in the Cassiars . . . and he made those mountains come alive for me and millions of young hunters just like me.

Unlike many, however, I was very fortunate; my dreams of those northern mountains didn't have to percolate in my subconscious for decades. In 1973, a quarter of a century ago, my dad and I went to the Cassiars. Although we had hunted deer and pronghorns and elk and such, this was my first "big hunt," so of course the memory remains special. We went into Frank Cooke's Scoop Lake camp right on the heels of Jack and Eleanor O'Connor, who had just completed one of their last sheep hunts. This, too, made it special.

Photograph by
Lon E. Lauber

SHEEP



THINHORN SHEEP

But what really made it special, and keeps the memory bright to this day, was the magnificence of northern British Columbia. There had been good rains that summer, and the high basins were emerald green. The leaves were just turning, and the heather and alder bottoms striped the hills with swaths of yellow and crimson. I have been many places in the last 25 years, but I have yet to see country that matches the Cassiar Mountains in early fall.

Come to think of it, I have yet to see game that matches the magnificence of the rams that live there. We all have our favorites, of course. The snow-white sheep to the north are beautiful, and the big-horns to the south are awesome. Each variety of antlered game has its own special attraction, and the bears are dramatic creatures. Perhaps oddly, I do not consider myself a "sheep hunter," but I have long maintained that the dark pepper-and-salt sheep of northern British Columbia are the most gorgeous creatures in North America—and the most beautiful wild sheep in the world.

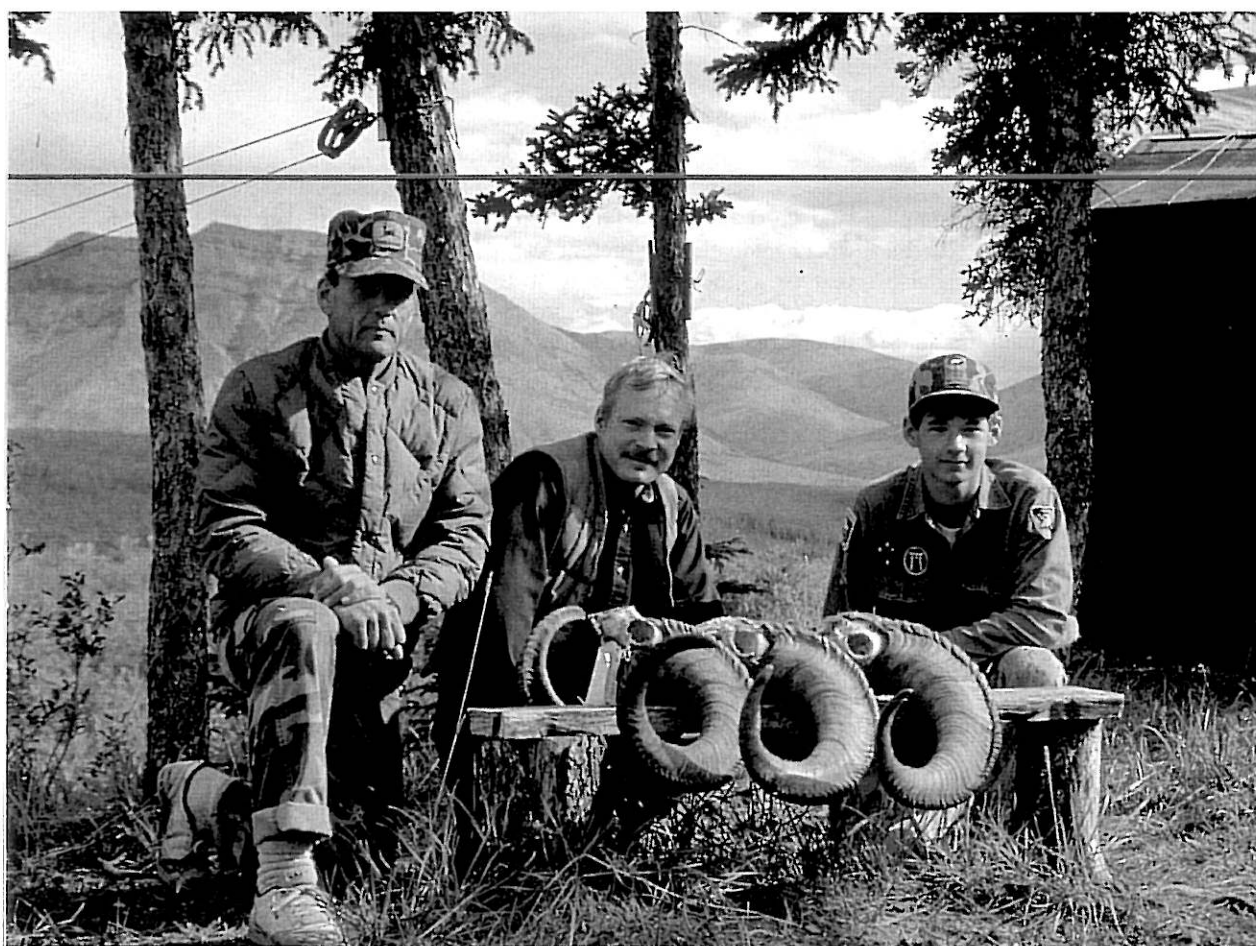
Like, I suspect, many of us, for most of my life I assumed that the dark sheep of northern British Columbia and adjacent southern Yukon were named after the gray and black rocks they live among. Actually, they're named after an early naturalist named Stone, so they are properly Stone's sheep, capitalized and possessive. Likewise, the pure white sheep to their north are named after a fel-



ALTHOUGH HORSES ALLOW YOU TO COVER A LOT OF GROUND, AN ADVANTAGE TO HUNTING ON FOOT IS THAT YOU DON'T HAVE TO CIRCLE BACK TO WHERE YOU TIED THE HORSES. IF YOU'RE IN SHAPE FOR IT, BACKPACK HUNTING IS PROBABLY THE BEST BET -- ESPECIALLY IF YOU'RE AFTER A BIG RAM.



PROVIDED THE WEATHER COOPERATES JUST A BIT, MOST HUNTS FOR BOTH DALL'S AND STONE'S SHEEP ARE SUCCESSFUL. THIS WAS THE RESULT FROM A MACKENZIE MOUNTAIN HUNT WITH ARCTIC RED RIVER: THREE HUNTERS, THREE RAMS.



low named Dall, so they are properly Dall's sheep.

In the early days it was thought that these two wild sheep, so distinctly different in appearance, were altogether different species of sheep. In fact they are not; they are, respectively, *Ovis dalli dalli* and *Ovis dalli stonei*, the two primary subspecies of our thinhorned wild sheep. Although the Stone's sheep is slightly larger and has the potential to grow slightly larger horns, the primary difference is color—Stone's sheep in the heart of their range are very dark, and Dall's sheep are pure white. This, of course, is a problem for the animals; they only know that they are sheep, neglecting to indulge in the color distinctions we humans are prone to. There is therefore a fairly broad intergrade area in south-central Yukon, where sheep in a given band may range from more-or-less white to more-or-less gray. These are the so-called Fannin's sheep which, at their most classic, are very light in color with a dark saddle patch—but they can actually be any shade or mixture of white with a sprinkling of dark hairs.

To keep things simple, most record-keeping systems decree that Dall's sheep are pure white, while thin-horned sheep with dark hairs

mixed into the white are Stone's sheep. Historically this has never caused a problem; although a few dark hairs may occasionally be found, the sheep of Alaska are white, as are the sheep of the Mackenzies in Northwest Territories. The sheep of northern British Columbia are dark—except for a small band of Dall's sheep in that little northwestern corner around Atlin, north of Skagway, Alaska. The sheep of western, northern, and even far eastern Yukon are also white Dall's sheep, with the only area of contention being a relatively small region east of Whitehorse and north of the British Columbia line. This is the primary transition zone, split between just a small handful of outfitters.

It's an irony of history that these have become some of the most desirable hunting territories in North America. In the earlier years of serious sheep hunting these Yukon outfitters could hardly give their sheep away; they weren't pure white, only rarely were they the very classic dark Stone's, and few were the collectors who really wanted the unrecognized Fannin's sheep. Things changed. The white Dall's sheep occupy a huge range, from the Mackenzies clear across the Yukon and on to western Alaska, found in

most mountain ranges throughout. They are quite possibly the most numerous wild sheep in the world, and to this day there is little human encroachment into their habitat.

The Stone's sheep occupies one of the more limited ranges of the world's wild sheep. They are found only in northern third of British Columbia, straddling the Rocky Mountain Trench into the ranges on both sides; and a bit farther north into the Yukon. In the 1950s and into the 1960s this was not a problem; northern British Columbia was huge and remote, and there were lots of sheep for those adventurous enough to reach them. In that era the Stone's sheep was very likely to be the last leg of the journey to the Grand Slam.

Things changed rapidly. The cult of sheep hunting grew, egged on by the matchless writing of Jack O'Connor. The number of hunters in search of the Grand Slam grew as well. In his later years O'Connor regretted this tremendously, but (despite rumor and legend) it was not he who coined the phrase. That distinction goes to Grancel Fitz, who was among the first to accomplish the feat. In answer to the sheep fever, and helped by the proliferation of floatplanes, good outfitters fully

THINHORN SHEEP

THE RANGES OF SOUTHERN AND CENTRAL ALASKA ARE OFTEN EXTREMELY RUGGED. THIS IS DALL'S SHEEP COUNTRY IN THE WRANGELL'S; THE RAM I SHOT WAS SPOTTED FROM HERE, BUT HE WAS OVER ON THE NEXT MOUNTAIN. GETTING TO HIM AND BACK AGAIN ON FOOT WAS A REAL LONG DAY.

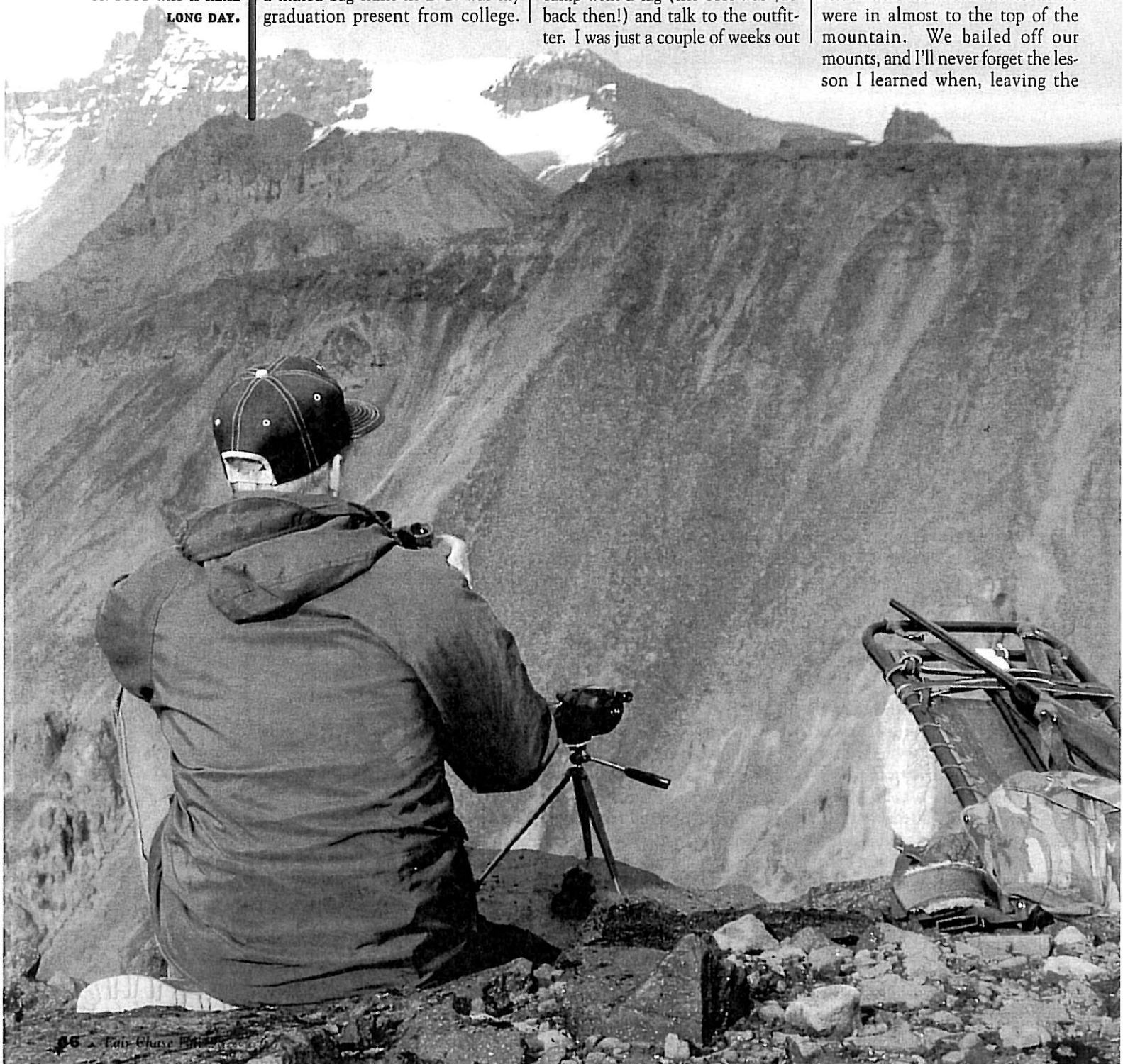
penetrated B.C.'s limited Stone's sheep range. By the early 1970s the Stone's sheep was the most available of all the wild sheep. The Stone's sheep was my first ram on the journey to the Grand Slam. Given the current availability of desert big-horns, it is probably a journey I will never complete—but that Stone's sheep of a quarter-century ago was a wonderful start.

There's a story there. In 1973 a mixed-bag hunt in B.C. was my graduation present from college.

Dad must have had faith that I would graduate; the present was a year early, since I'd be going off to the Marines as soon as I got my diploma. Jack Atcheson set it up for us, a moose-caribou-goat hunt in the Cassiars. A sheep hunt would have been a bit more costly, but not much, so at some point I asked Jack—still my friend and mentor after all these years—if there was a possibility. He recommended that I show up in camp with a tag (the cost was \$25 back then!) and talk to the outfitter. I was just a couple of weeks out

of Officer Candidate School, and after a decade of long-haired American draft dodgers, old Frank Cooke liked me. Or at least he liked my haircut. Pop talked to him, and he allowed that I could have a Stone's sheep for \$500—provided I'd agree to take a nice ram, but not one of his big ones.

A few days later my Indian guide and I glassed two rams feeding a short distance from a long chute that ran from the basin we were in almost to the top of the mountain. We bailed off our mounts, and I'll never forget the lesson I learned when, leaving the



horses and dashing the short distance to the cover of the chute, he said, "Sheep can't count."

We toiled up through the steep rocks, overshooting the rams by a significant margin. Even at that, the shot wasn't difficult. At least the first shot wasn't. But I missed him clean, and the second shot, as he ran through the heather ahead of the lesser ram, was one of my most memorable.

I regret very much not hunting that country and those rams more than I have, but things changed quickly. Too many nonresidents were taking too many sheep, and for the first time there was significant resident hunting pressure as well. By 1975 trophy quality was dropping dramatically. The British Columbia game department, in a move that was most unpopular but absolutely necessary, instituted a quota system. For most outfitters this cut the number of rams they could take to a half or a third of what they had been taking—and prices skyrocketed.

It has taken many years, but today there are more big Stone's sheep seen—and taken—than since the late 1960s. Unfortunately the nonresident quotas remain very tight as resident hunting pressure has continued to escalate. Not only are B.C. Stone's sheep hunts very expensive, but it can be a matter of some years to get a booking in the better areas. This, obviously, has created wonderful opportunity for the few Yukon outfitters who could offer dark-haired sheep! Historically the Yukon rams run a bit smaller, but with much lighter pressure and the rams having a chance to live longer—not to mention more available and somewhat less expensive hunts—Yukon Stone's sheep outfitters have done very well the last 15 years or so, and good on them!

I will not pretend to be an expert on hunting our thin-horned sheep. I have hunted them just five times, three times for Dall's and twice for Stone's. However, from this limited perspective I do have some opinions on the hunting of them. First off, hunting wild sheep differs very little the world

over. The *Ovis* genus is not a creature of the high, slick rocks like the goat, genus *Capra*. He is a creature of grassy bowls and Alpine meadows. However, the hunting does differ, because within that framework the altitudes and vegetation differ dramatically.

Having been fortunate enough to have drawn good bighorn tags (but never desert, darn it!), and also having broken my back and my heart in Montana's "unlimited permit" country, and having done some sheep hunting in Asia, it is my opinion that most sheep are not nearly so difficult to hunt as most deer. They see well, but in general are not nearly so wary as the deer of the world. The secret the world over is first finding them, and then getting close enough for a shot. The difficulty of doing either varies with the terrain, the relative density of the sheep, and probably the hunting pressure they have endured.

Bighorns, for instance, are legendary for their craftiness and their propensity to stay in timber. Given pressure and/or warm weather, this is true—but take a good limited-permit area and some cool weather, and bighorns are much easier to hunt than the thinhorned sheep. But add in some hunting pressure, warm weather, and a relative scarcity of sheep, and bighorns are exceedingly difficult.

Now, with most thinhorn sheep hunting you can take away the timber. When it gets warm the sheep—especially the Stone's sheep—will stay in the brush and be difficult to find, but not nearly so difficult as bighorns under similar circumstances. Of course it depends on the mountains. My second Stone's sheep hunt was a foot hunt in the Skeena Mountains of northwestern B.C., and in an area that had been developed very little. The lower slopes were a jungle of thick brush and devil's club, impassable to a horse and virtually so for a man. On the second day from last we finally found a band of rams far, far up a steep-sided valley. We might have reached them in two hard days, and we might not have—but we couldn't have gotten back. So I



watched them through the spotting scope for several hours, just little wiggling worms across the great distance that I could not cross.

It is my opinion that, today, hunting Stone's sheep is more difficult than hunting Dall's sheep. Because they are farther south, there is more brush. Thirty years ago, given time and effort, success on a big ram was virtually assured. There are more big rams than there were 20 years ago, but today—and perhaps forever—big Stone's rams are scarce and take lots of looking. The looking is not difficult. Stone's sheep are indeed colored like the rocks, but they don't live in rocks. You'll find them in the high saddles and basins, and they're not so difficult to glass—not nearly so difficult as bighorns. Although heavy brush is a problem, most of the mountains they live in are neither especially high nor especially rugged; horseback hunts remain the most common, a big plus for covering ground and seeing country.

When you move north into white sheep country the timberline drops in elevation, and the tops become, if not necessarily higher, more rocky and barren. This is an important distinction because nothing, but nothing, is as easy to glass as Dall's sheep. Reaching them can be a different story, but even Stevie Wonder could glass Dall's sheep. Rocky

THE LATE DAVE HETZLER OF GUNS & AMMO WITH A VERY FINE YUKON RAM. GOOD RAMS ARE AVAILABLE IN MOST DALL'S SHEEP RANGES -- BUT YOU MUST HUNT HARD AND HAVE A BIT OF LUCK TO FIND ONE.



I TOOK THIS MACKENZIE MOUNTAIN DALL'S SHEEP AT THE END OF AN ABSOLUTELY PERFECT BACKPACK HUNT. HE'S HEAVY-HORNED AND VERY PRETTY BUT HIS IS ACTUALLY ONE OF THE SMALLER RAMS OUTFITTER KELLY HAUGEN HAS TAKEN FROM HIS AREA. THE FOLLOWING WEEK THREE RAMS OVER 40 INCHES WERE TAKEN!

Mountain goats, especially billies, tend to be off-white and can be confused with pale rocks. With Dall's sheep there is no question, ever. They show up like salt crystals mixed with pepper, and you can see them from distances much too great to ever get to, let alone judge horns.

This does not make them easy to hunt; it just makes them easier to see. With sheep, of course, that's half the battle. Having said that, I have never shot a "big" Dall's sheep. Come to think of it, I've never yet seen a ram that would clearly top the magical "40-inch" mark. They're there, but the problems are different. Horseback hunts are relatively common in the Yukon, but most of Alaska and the Mackenzies are too remote to bring in horses for the season—and the winters far too harsh to keep them there. Horseback hunting has a significant advantage in that you can cover much more

ground, and the more country you can glass the better your chances of seeing a big ram. On the other hand, country that is accessible to horseback has often been hunted hard, and the older rams may be somewhere out of cayuse country.

This is not to say that backpacking is necessarily the best option. Dall's sheep show up well at great distances, but they live in huge country and aren't exactly on every hillside. I generally prefer backpack or foot hunting because, with horses, no matter what happens you must sooner or later come back to them—and that may not be the direction you wish to go. However, hunting the northern mountains on foot is tough stuff. They may not be especially high, but they are often very rugged and they're certainly very big. It isn't for everybody, nor is it automatically the best course to a big ram.

This depends on luck as well as on effort and persistence.

There's also a psychological difficulty with foot hunting, even if you're in pretty good shape. Sooner or later, no matter how much discipline you want to have, you may reach a point where a ram is going to bite the dust. A number of years ago I hunted the Wrangells in eastern Alaska, a rugged and dramatically beautiful range. Early in the hunt we spotted three rams far across an impossible canyon. Two were beyond full curl, one tight and the other flared. That was about all we could tell; the distance was horrendous.

We moved on the rams before first light. In August in Alaska this was about 2 a.m. They were on a very steep sidehill, a series of rocky chutes. We got there by mid-morning, but of course the rams had moved. We sidehilled along, slipping in the steep shale—and then

the wide-horned ram stepped out on a rocky point above us. By then the commitment was made; I took a snap shot and missed him.

Now the commitment was really made; I'm not sure we ever looked at the horns again! But we sure did keep hunting him! The three rams headed out, and between following tracks and getting the occasional glimpse we stayed with them. About four o'clock in the afternoon we finally caught them crossing a little shale slide. I shot the wide-horned ram that I was fixated on, and my partner shot the other ram, a full-curl with a deeper curl and heavier horn. Neither was a monster, but his ram—the one I never gave a second glance—was actually better than mine.

Mind you, this didn't matter. Both were lovely rams, but neither was as big as I had hoped for—and I had more than a week left to hunt. I should have looked more closely before we passed the "point of no return." By the way, the other part of the equation is that it was now five o'clock in the evening and we had two sheep to pack out. Dark caught us about midnight, and we huddled by a pale willow fire for two hours before trudging on in twilight. We stumbled back to camp sometime in the late morning, at the end of the longest hunting day I've ever spent.

Nearly a decade later I went on another backpack hunt with Arctic Red River in the Mackenzies of Northwest Territories. That season opens in July, when the sheep are slick and sleek in their summer coats. The grassy slopes are emerald green, and the weather is mild. If you're man enough you can hunt from about two in the morning until past midnight, just taking a little break when the light becomes too dim for glassing. On a backpack hunt, chances are good you won't hold that schedule for more than a day or so!

Thinhorn sheep seem to follow the pattern of most wild sheep, being much more active in the evening than during the early morning hours. So my guide, Stu Langlands, and I, would normally sleep as long as we could in the mornings, often not

leaving our spike camp until well after noon. Once out, though, we'd hunt through the afternoon and evening, generally stumbling back into camp during that brief period of semi-darkness.

We saw sheep, and legal rams, every day. I have not hunted the Yukon and would very much like to, but I'm high on the Mackenzies and wouldn't mind spending more time there. But the days passed and we never, ever saw the kind of ram I was looking for—and that the area normally produces. I was warned about this; outfitter Kelly Haugen told me that the bigger rams usually don't appear until mid to late August. It wasn't that I disbelieved him, but where would they appear from? The mountains are there, and the sheep are in the mountains, so surely we would see the sheep that were there.

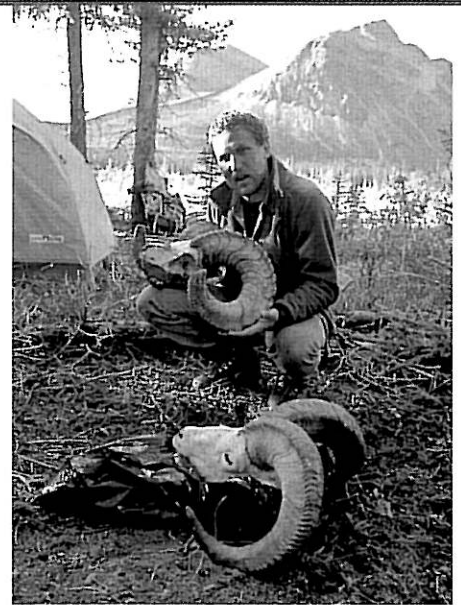
When a good outfitter gives you his best suggestion, take it! Within two weeks of the completion of my hunt—in mid-August—three rams over 40 inches were taken from that area. I never saw one close to that, although as the hunt drew to a close I had looked at an awful lot of rams. We were down to about a day and a half left, and Stu wanted to keep looking. A better man—or better hunter—than I probably would have kept looking, but I let the pressure of stories to write and time slipping away get to me. We spotted a very pretty heavy-horned ram far across a deep valley, and I shot him after a lovely stalk brought us within 60 yards. I don't regret it; I'd long wanted a Dall's sheep in that shiny summer coat—but next time I'll go when the outfitter tells me to go!

Dall's sheep remain our most available wild sheep—perhaps in the world as well as North America. More and more Alaskan areas are going to permit draws, and there is more and more resident pressure as Alaska's population increases. But there remains a great deal of fine sheep hunting in Alaska, enough that costs for guided sheep hunts haven't escalated nearly as much as they have for, say, moose and the big bears. Most of Alaska's mountains, from the Chugach in the south to

the Brooks in the north, hold good sheep—but Alaska is not the only place to hunt Dall's sheep. The Yukon remains very good, and the Mackenzies are very good. All things considered, I don't think one area is better than another, but the circumstances are different.

Many outfitters in the Yukon use horses, a few do in the Mackenzies, and still fewer are able to use them in Alaska. An Alaskan hunt is likely to be a single-species, sheep-only hunt, while a Yukon hunt (with horses) is more likely to be a mixed bag affair. In the Mackenzies it depends on the circumstances. I could have taken a mountain caribou, for instance... but if you take other game on a backpack sheep hunt the hunt is over for several days! In any case, if you want a good ram the best option is to just hunt sheep. Check references carefully and find both an outfitter and a guide who are sheep hunters. Dall's sheep are plentiful enough across most of their range that this is far more important than exactly where you hunt.

The options for hunting Stone's sheep remain few: Classic areas in British Columbia; or those few territories in adjacent Yukon. If a Stone's sheep is on your dream list, save your pennies and do it as soon as you can. Costs continue to escalate and quotas continue to tighten, and I don't see it getting better. I still rate a dark pepper-and-salt Stone's sheep as the most attractive of the world's wild sheep, and his mountains as some of the prettiest country on Earth. I'd love to hunt him again—but the reality is that I may have to stand on that one ram of 25 years ago. I'm satisfied to do that if I must. I remember that day and those mountains like it was yesterday, and that first ram remains my most prized trophy. ▲▲▲



MACKENZIE MOUNTAINS GUIDE STU LANGLANDS WITH THE RAM I TOOK AND A VASTLY BETTER "PICK UP" WE FOUND IN A DEEP CHUTE. THE MACKENZIES GROW FINE SHEEP, AND THE HUNTING PRESSURE IS LIGHT ENOUGH THAT MORE RAMS DIE OF OLD AGE THAN FALL TO HUNTERS.