

A scenic mountain valley with a rocky riverbed and a ram silhouette. The background shows rugged mountains under a cloudy sky. The foreground is a wide, rocky riverbed with a small stream of water. A large, stylized orange silhouette of a ram is overlaid on the scene, with its head and horns extending towards the top left. The title 'Lacy AND THE RAM' is written in orange, with 'Lacy' in a cursive font and 'AND THE RAM' in a bold, sans-serif font.

# Lacy AND THE RAM

The ram was silhouetted on the skyline as he stopped to take one last look in our direction. Chantelle and I gazed back at him from the valley floor as he disappeared into the shadows of the evening light. The old warrior had eluded us for the second time in three days, and it seemed that no matter what we did the ram was always one step ahead of us. It had become the ultimate game of cat and mouse, but we were not going to give up that easily. We knew that a ram of this caliber did not get to be old by making mistakes. It was going to take a lot of blood, sweat and tears to get the job done; but after all, that's what sheep hunting is about.

CASEY L. DINKEL

60TH PARALLEL ADVENTURES

CO-OWNER

Photos Courtesy of Author



With the heavy weight of success on her back, Chantelle carefully picks her way up the gravel bar towards camp



Excited for the adventure that lay ahead, Chantelle and Casey pose for a photo next to their air taxi as they let the butterflies calm.

*Chantelle ascends the mountain  
in pursuit of a ram, this would be  
the first of many miles to come.*



Six months earlier, I awoke to the sound of my cell phone ding and buzzing its way across my nightstand. My eyes still a little fuzzy and my brain in a fog from working late the evening prior, I pushed my phone aside for a moment to gain some clarity. It was February 15, 2017, and to most people in the world, it was just another day like any other. In Alaska however, February 15 was not just any other day. It was the day the Alaska Department of Fish and Game released its annual big game draw results (or second Christmas as my girlfriend Chantelle calls it). Somehow, I had slept through my alarm, text messages, and emails, letting the draw results totally slip my mind. Once I had gained consciousness, my adrenaline was catapulted through the roof as I read the draw results. Chantelle had hit the jackpot and pulled a highly coveted Dall's sheep tag in the Chugach range of Alaska. In a state of disbelief, she called me to confirm her successful draw. We both acted as if she had won the lottery as we hooped and hollered over the phone. In a strange way, to a sheep hunter, it was better than winning the lottery—and especially for Chantelle, who had never drawn a big game tag in the state where she was born and raised. Hanging up the phone, I was overly excited for her and the adventure that lay ahead of us.

Watching the pilot cinch the five-point harness around Chantelle in the back seat of the tiny Super Cub, her face showed nothing but excitement. She waved and signaled a thumbs-up toward me and the pilot as we taxied in behind her in a separate Super Cub and readied for takeoff. The hair on my arms stood on end as I caught a whiff of the high-octane fumes coming from our plane. It was a smell that I had come to welcome,

as it reminded me of the steep peaks, rock slides, and blueberry-riddled tundra slopes that accompany Dall's sheep hunting. My mind raced with excitement as I could only imagine what was going through her head. Her first ride in a Super Cub and first fly-in Dall's sheep hunt; I assumed that she was filled with butterflies and covered in goose bumps.

Riding in one of these lightweight hot rods for the first time can be both fun and scary. The Super Cub is the perfect tool to access tiny gravel or brushy strips in the backcountry of Alaska. Sitting directly behind the pilot, you are able to view the world at 90mph through plexi-glass doors on either side. With little to nothing between you and the ground but a piece of foam, the ride is an absolute thrill. That being said, we had nothing to worry about whatsoever. We were flying with some of the best bush pilots Alaska had to offer. Mike and Matt of Meekins Air Service are as good as they come. At the time, I had flown with these two top guns on dozens of hunting adventures, and their flying skills never ceased to amaze me. With both Cubs running, I watched over Mike's shoulder as Matt ran through basic ground checks. "Everybody ready?" Matt asked over the radio as he throttled up his cub. "Yep, all good," Chantelle confirmed with a slightly nervous crack in her voice. With that, the Cub roared away and became airborne in only a couple hundred feet. Matt had no more than cleared the runway when Mike charged the airstrip in the same fashion. Airborne and heading into the mountains in tandem, the adventure had finally begun. The flight would only take about 20 minutes but crossed over some of the most beautiful country Mother Nature had to

offer. “Couple black bears on the ridge over there,” Mike said, as we passed a mountainside that looked close enough to reach out and touch. Looking to my right, I watched as Matt and Chantelle dropped slightly in elevation and glided over a glacier that disappeared into the clouds at the head of the valley. Matt banked the plane hard left 180 degrees to make an approach for the airstrip. The two of them passed us heading in the opposite direction and I chuckled as I observed the biggest smile on her face that I’ve ever witnessed. Mike slowed our approach slightly, letting Matt taxi a few yards off the end of the brushy strip. Within a few seconds, Mike and I bounced gently to a rolling stop. “Well how was the ride in?” I asked sarcastically to Chantelle as she still struggled to unbuckle her harness. “That was amazing. I want to do it again!” she shouted, still trying to get out of the tiny Super Cub’s back seat. Mike and Matt took a few moments to chat with us about the valley we would call home for the next 10 days. This area was particularly special to Mike since he grew up guiding in the very mountains we were staring at. You could almost smell the history in the air as all the old sheep hunting stories Mike had told me over the years started to come to mind. “You two are gonna have a load of fun,” Mike said as he jumped in the front seat of his plane. “Good luck you guys!” Matt yelled, as the whine of the engine turned over the propeller. In a burst of wind, leaves, and dust, the two Super Cubs were in flight and soaring away. The drone of their motors faded into silence as they disappeared over the ridge of the mountaintop. Putting my arm around Chantelle, the sweet silence spoke volumes as we stared at the jagged peaks and adventure around us.

The sun flooded the valley around 6:00 a.m. the next day. Feeling secure inside our bear fence, we slept like babies. The sun quickly heated up our tent, driving both of us outside before we actually wanted to get up. Chantelle and I crawled out of the two-man Hilleberg to find ourselves surrounded by picturesque mountains and a cloudless sky.

Since the valley was an old guide camp, the remains of a very small tin-sided shed stood near the head of the airstrip. We had decided the evening before to stash our food in the shed, to keep any trespassing bears away from our camp. The shed had definitely seen its better days as it displayed many years of wear and tear from Mother Nature and mischievous bears. The night before I wasn’t able to see just how much the bears had destroyed the innocent shed, but in the daylight, the damage was more than evident. There was nothing they had not touched. Any piece of gear that was left in the shed had been bitten, clawed, or both. Even an old lantern had

been ripped from a shelf and displayed puncture holes from a small bear’s canines. “They are like giant children,” she said as she propped up an old aluminum camp table to make our breakfast. “Speaking of giant children, there’s one now,” I said, glassing a nearby slope. Not more than 300 yards away, a large bruin grazed a patch of blueberries. We continued to watch the bear for the better part of 30 minutes while we ate our oatmeal. “You should go get him. He’s a giant,” Chantelle said, eating her breakfast. The bear was indeed a giant and most likely every bit of 7 feet or more, but we were not black-bear hunting, and I didn’t want to subtract any valuable time away from Chantelle’s dream hunt. So, I reluctantly declined her generous offer.

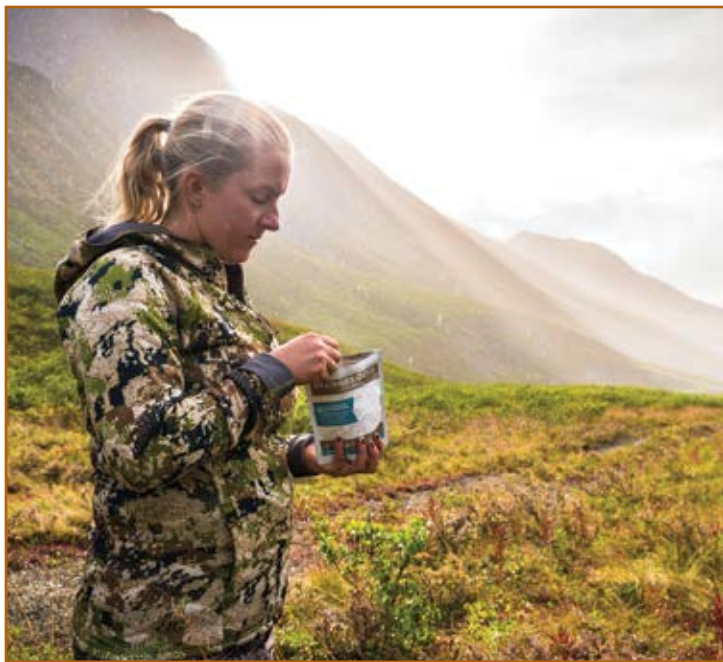
We had no more than finished breakfast and begun to strategize a game plan for the day when Chantelle spotted several sheep about a mile away up a drainage. At first glance they looked to be rams, but they were too far away to tell. Chantelle kept an eye on them while I hustled back to

camp about 100 yards away to grab the spotting scope. Through the spotter, we could see that there were seven rams in the group, three of which looked to be full curl. Since it was Chantelle’s hunt, I let her decide our next move. She elected to close some distance between us and the rams, which I agreed was a good decision. There was a lot of country between us and them, and it would take the better part of a day to reach them, in which case we wanted to make sure the ram of her dreams was in the group. We quickly gathered our gear and started our trek toward the group.

Dropping into the drainage bottom about 200 feet below, we concealed ourselves by putting a mountain between us and the sheep. After several hours of hiking up the rocky drainage, we crossed a shallow glacial stream to move into the alpine tundra. We hadn’t gone very far when Chantelle spotted the sheep about a third of a mile away. Turns out the rams had been feeding their way toward us as we hiked toward them. Dropping our packs, I handed the spotting scope to Chantelle. As she adjusted the scope, I watched a grin grow upon her face. “That’s what we’re looking for,” she said, and motioned for me to take a look. Eagerly looking through the scope, I could see several mature rams in the group; however, one ram in particular stood out above the rest. The good news was that we were somewhat within striking distance. The bad news: we had no approach whatsoever. The rams were positioned on a grassy bench above some very tall cliffs that left nothing between us and them—a classic situation when hunting Dall’s sheep. Our only move was to watch and wait, with the hopes they would move down the mountainside enough to put some



With a grumbling tummy, Chantelle stops to pick some wild Alaskan blueberries.



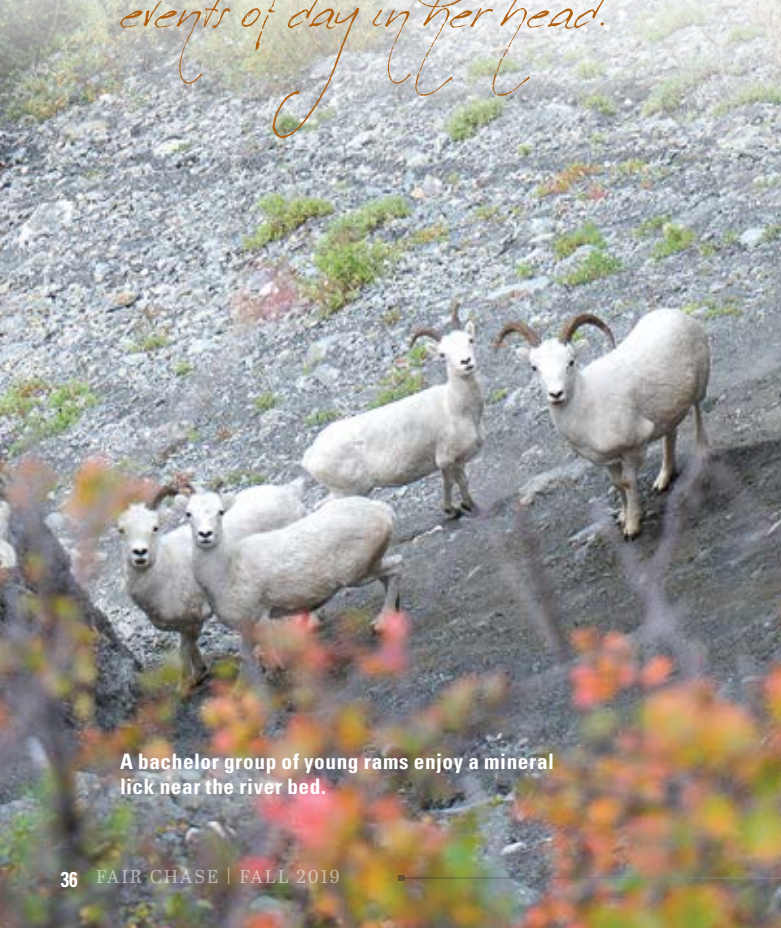
*As the sun slowly dips behind the ridge, Chantelle enjoys some dinner while turning over the events of day in her head.*

terrain between us so we could close the distance. Chantelle and I watched the rams for several hours while we picked blueberries and ate them for an afternoon snack.

As fate would have it, the rams did not move down the mountainside. Instead they moved up into some jagged cliffs and bedded up for the evening. Knowing we had lost round one, we slipped back down to the gravel bar and out of their sight. We headed back to camp, Chantelle leading the entire way and arriving just before darkness fell. After dinner, I lay awake for an hour or so thinking about what might be going through her head. Whether the hunt turned out successful or not, I was overwhelmingly proud of her. Not only had she transformed herself over the months to prepare for such a physically challenging hunt, but she was mentally ready as well. She knew that pursuing an old mature ram was a lofty goal, and she was prepared to come home empty-handed if she didn't find such a ram. I could tell that she had set her

goals and was willing to work hard for them no matter what obstacles were thrown at her. Most of all, she was ready to enjoy the adventure that sheep hunting is all about and famous for. It had been really enjoyable for me to see her progress into her own as she became a sheep hunter.

The next morning, we awoke before dawn and decided to prepare our gear for a three-day spike out from base camp. We felt like the rams would stay in their hiding spot for a few days since they had plenty of food, water, cover, and a great vantage point to see predators. We started hiking just as the sun's first light broke the horizon, and within a couple hours we reached the spot where we had glassed the rams the day before. With the sun to our backs, we spotted the rams still bedded and in the same place as we had left them. Again, there was no approach to the rams without exposing ourselves in the wide open. Chantelle decided to take advantage of the sun as it blinded the rams. We made our way



A bachelor group of young rams enjoy a mineral lick near the river bed.



Spotting a good ram, Chantelle contemplates how to close the distance of the wide-open terrain.

in a slow walk across the wide-open tundra some 500 yards to a small side drainage that would give adequate cover. The plan worked flawlessly, and we made it to the drainage just before noon. Taking a short break to catch our breath and grab a protein bar, we took a quick look at the position of each ram. Once we started up the cut to close the distance, we wouldn't be able to see them for an hour or two. The work began as we gained roughly 2,500 feet in elevation before reaching the top of the cut. It was early evening when we peeked our head over a large rock to stay concealed. We glassed the mountainside for nearly 30 minutes, and the rams were nowhere to be found. "Where in the heck did they go?" I muttered to myself. Chantelle and I looked at each other a little baffled as to how the seven rams could disappear into thin air. Since we had no idea where the rams had gone, and it was getting close to dark, we opted to set up our spike camp in a small depression just out of sight. Keeping a close eye on the mountain, Chantelle spied a ram feeding just above the cliffs where we had last seen the group. One by one the rams sneaked their way into the open, feeding on a steep, grassy slope. They had been there the entire time. There was a small depression just above the cliffs that we couldn't see from our lower vantage point. As daylight faded, we watched as the rams marched high into some crags to bed up for the night. Chantelle and I retired to our little tent, knowing our only move was to wait and see what the morning would hold.

The next day brought bluebird skies as far as the eye could see. Unfortunately, as we surveyed the mountainside, the rams were nowhere to be found. Thinking that they might still be bedded, we

patiently waited for the rams to show themselves. Morning came and went, yielding zero sheep. After several hours of waiting, we decided to pack up our spike camp and head back to the airstrip. As we hiked our way down the mountainside my mind started to wonder if the rams had spotted us at some point, or if they were just being sheep and aimlessly walking around the mountains. In either case, I kept my thoughts to myself and let her lead the way. Stopping several times throughout the afternoon, we glassed every crook and cranny of the mountain, but no sign of the rams. It took us the better part of the day to make our way back to base camp to the comfort of our larger tent. That evening, both Chantelle and I sat, quietly eating our dehydrated dinner as we wondered where the rams had gone. It was a humbling experience to have such a magnificent ram slip through your fingers not once, but twice. Our silence was broken when Chantelle spotted the ram on the very top of the mountain. "There

he is," she said pointing at the tiny sheep silhouette that I could barely see with my naked eye. Grabbing the spotting scope, I zoomed in on the sheep that was well over a mile away. Even in the failing light I could perfectly identify the giant ram. He stood like a statue looking our direction for nearly a full minute and then disappeared over the ridge. Staring at the mountain, neither of us said a word; both of us knowing the ram had won yet again.

That next morning, we found the group down drainage about two miles from base camp. Still prepared to spike out for two more days, we grabbed our packs and headed toward the rams. Chantelle decided it would be best to cross the glacial river further up drainage, in fear that we would not be able to cross downstream. In agreement we both stripped down to our undies and prepared to cross the frigid water. Chantelle let out a little shriek as the fast-moving glacial water rose to her hip level. Seeing the anxiety in her face, I knew

exactly what she felt and how painful the icy water is on one's body. Following suit, I was blasted with the same experience as I followed her path. Once on the opposite side of the river, we took several minutes to dry off, warm up, and re-gear.

Sidehilling slightly, we angled our way up the mountain closer and closer to the sheep. It would take us several hours before we could visually see the rams again. As we crested a small ridge, I spied the rams high in the cliffs about a half-mile out. Unfortunately, our path to the rams was stopped abruptly as we encountered a massive cut in the mountainside that neither of us had seen. With no way around the cut, we reluctantly dropped some 1,500 feet in elevation only to have to gain it all over again by hiking up a different finger. A couple hours later we found ourselves lying in wait, looking at the massive ram not more than 500 yards away. Positioned on a rock spire, we could only see the ram's head as he chewed his cud and surveyed his domain. With the ram the closest we had seen him yet, I watched as goose bumps filled Chantelle's arm while she gazed at the ram through the spotting scope. We were within striking distance, but the ram would need to move down from his perch and to our right. If he moved in any other direction, a shot would not be possible due to the rugged terrain.

With only a couple hours of daylight left, the ram finally stood and moved from his spire, disappearing in the crags. We readied for a possible shot opportunity, and as fate would have it, the rams emerged one-by-one, walking single-file down and to the right of the cliffs. The biggest ram followed the back of the group as they moved out toward a green slope to feed.



The old ram perched upon a tall rock spire, surveys all of his domain below.



All smiles, Chantelle holds her ram in front of the iconic Super Cub.

*After years of waiting, many miles traveled, and lots of sweat equity, Chantelle finally holds and admires her dream ram.*

Stopping in a rock chute, the ram began to lick a mineral deposit. I called the range at 434 yards as Chantelle settled in with her rifle. The seconds ticked by, feeling like hours, as she waited for the ram to present a good, broadside shot.

The report of the rifle broke the evening air as I watched the ram tumble down the rock chute and roll about 30 yards, stopping near a large boulder to his final resting place. In a haze, Chantelle and I were overtaken with emotion from the events of what had just transpired. The tears on her face said it all as I hugged and congratulated her. Weak in the knees, we sat, just living in the moment for a short time as we viewed the ram lying motionless in the rocks. It took us the better part of two hours to reach the ram as we traversed our way through the cuts and crags of

the rugged mountainside. Working our way up the rock slide, I smiled once I saw the sheer mass of the ram's horn protruding from behind a boulder. It was an indescribable feeling as I watched Chantelle lift the 10-year-old ram's head from the rocks. Kneeling next to his body, she held his horns, completely speechless.

"There's nothing quite like sheep hunting," I said, as she shook her head in agreement, still admiring the ram. It was a magnificent ram, an amazing adventure, and an experience that will not soon be forgotten. I was grateful for the time spent with her and proud of how far she had come. It had been a ram well-earned and an adventure of a lifetime. However, with the daylight fading and a ram on the ground, the adventure had only begun. ■



The only thing better than sheep hunting, is getting to share the experience with someone.