

HUNT FAIR CHASE AWARD WINNER

Boone and Crockett Club presented the Hunt Fair Chase Award to Michael G. Swyers of Quesnel, British Columbia. He was surprised with the award while on stage accepting his 2nd Award received for his Rocky Mountain goat scoring 55-6/8.

Professional Member, Craig Boddington emceed the 29th Big Game Awards Banquet and addressed the audience:

“If you polled sportsmen across North America about the name Boone and Crockett you would likely hear two things... record-book trophies and fair chase. Up to this point we’ve been honoring record-book animals. Now it’s time to honor fair chase.

“Fair chase is just two words, but their meaning has deep significance to everyone who hunts and teaches young people about hunting. Of all the trophies that were the result of a fair chase hunt that we will recognize tonight there is one hunt that stands out that the Club’s records department and the sponsor of this next award felt read ‘fair chase’ from beginning to end. I’ve read the accounts of all of these hunts and trust me this was not an easy call to make.”

Leupold & Stevens sponsored the award, which included a plaque that read – In recognition of a hunt that best represents the determination, self-reliance, and respect for the game that embodies the tenets of fair chase set forth by Boone and Crockett Club founder, Theodore Roosevelt.

Michael G. Swyers was presented with this second award plaque, Hunt Fair Chase Award plaque and a one-of-a-kind 29th Big Game Awards engraved Leupold VX 6 3-18x44 riflescope. LEFT TO RIGHT: B&C Records Chairman Richard T. Hale, Mike Slack with Leupold & Stevens, Michael G. Swyers, and B&C Records Vice President Eldon L. "Buck" Buckner.



SOLO WINTER GOAT HUNT

MICHAEL G. SWYERS

HUNT FAIR CHASE AWARD RECIPIENT

“Sorry Mike, I cannot do the goat hunt” were the words that stand out at the start of this epic journey. The plan was for my sheep-hunting partner to join me on this late-season Rocky Mountain goat hunt. Due to circumstances out of his control, he could not join me.

Upon hearing those words and many apologies, I was in a state of limbo. I thought long and hard about what I wanted to accomplish on this hunt and ultimately decided to go. I arranged for another friend to tag along. He was going to meet me on the second day of the hunt.

The gear was packed and snowmobiles loaded for a one-week hunt. As this was a new location for me, the research put into access paid off. The area had experienced a large snowfall a few days before. The deep snow was nearly impassable, but I was able to find an old path and began to break trail on the first day. Alone with my snowmobile, I pushed into the valley where the adventure would take place.

Day 1: That first day was a long, tiring one. I was getting stuck and digging out the snowmobile at every corner. Many times the trail cut along steep ledges. With the snow, it was very treacherous. At each obstacle I had a recurring thought, “What am I doing in here alone?”

By day’s end I had the trail established, but I was tired—exhausted, actually. I pushed through, knowing that my partner would show up the next day. That night I received a phone call and those words came back to haunt me. “Sorry Mike, I cannot do the goat hunt.” My second partner could not help me out. He had business commitments beyond his control. I sat in my hotel room thinking, “What am I going to do?”

Winter goat hunting is very strenuous, and with the deep snowpack, the risk of avalanche is a possibility. Therefore, going solo on such a hunt is not a recommended practice. I weighed the risk versus reward; I decided to stay on the hunt.

I put out a call for a short-notice hunting partner on a hunting blog for British Columbia hunters. Many people responded, wishing they could get time off work. However, one local fellow responded to say he could not go with me, but would check in with me each day to ensure I got back safely at day’s end. With that, I felt more secure. Little did I know that this stranger would become a great friend after this week.

Day 2: I awoke to a miserable day. It was typical coastal weather: cold and rainy, with poor visibility. I decided to leave the snowmobile at the truck and snowshoe into another valley in my area. Deep snow to my waist made the trek almost impossible. I spent the day pushing into a valley with steep timbered sides and no trail to follow. With every step my snowshoes sunk deep into the snow. Many times I had to switch to crampons to climb the steep timbered slopes. Periodically, I was glassing through binoculars when the skies cleared.

By midday I had spotted a goat, high above the tree line. I settled in behind my spotting scope to see a mature billy. I



judged him to be a goat to harvest, but unfortunately, the mountain he was on was not in my hunting zone. It was a great feeling to see such a beautiful, mature animal with long winter hair and large horns sitting there getting warmed by the sunlight. That was what I needed to stay on this weeklong adventure. I returned to my hotel and spent the night dreaming of that huge billy, hoping to find another one of the same quality.

Day 3: Early to rise and back on the hunt. This time I decided to go back to the first valley. On my snowmobile, I slowly made my way up the trail, glassing at every opportunity. This was a great morning; I spotted a nanny and kid in the first hour. I arrived at the trail's end and set up for a day of glassing. By midafternoon, with no other goats spotted, I decided to put the snowshoes on and walk further into the valley. I wanted to see what other areas lay beyond my glassing location. As I

snowshoed along, I realized that I could possibly push further into the valley, but to do so, I would have to cut a small trail around a landslide. This trail cut along steep topography. The risks were real, but I decided to push on. By day's end, I made it back to my snowmobile and I had a plan: return tomorrow to cut the trail and push deeper into the valley.

Day 4: With the anticipation of the hard day's work ahead, I was up much earlier and ready for the challenge. I stopped at the trail's end, put the snowshoes on and hiked further into the valley with chainsaw in hand for the small trail I had to cut. By 9 a.m., tired and feeling the aches of my muscles, I had returned to my snowmobile and sleigh, ready to push on.

"This is going to be really good as long as I don't fall off the edge with my snowmobile and gear," I thought. I slowly made my way without incident past the landslide to a large opening, which gave

me many glassing opportunities. It was now 11 a.m., and I was sitting behind the spotting scope with a warm cup of coffee in my hands. Little did I know how this day was going to unfold.

The skies cleared, and I saw more and more of the mountain in front of me. A little past noon, I spotted movement high above a large avalanche chute. "There he is," I thought. It was one of those moments where you do not have to think. You know he is the animal you came looking for. Large horn bases, good length, and large body; a mature billy.

Now my heart was pumping because I realized the time of day. Judging the climb, I was going to be pressed for time to get up there before sundown. I quickly made the decision to go. I did a quick gear check and elected to take only the necessities. This lightened my pack so I could make good time climbing the mountain. I pressed on without snowshoes through the deep snow across the valley bottom.

This proved to be tougher than anticipated. With each step I sunk past my knees into the snow. I encountered a large creek that luckily had a large windblown log lying across it. I elected to walk along the log, and as I did, I lost my footing and fell into the creek. I was fortunate to land on my feet, but in waist-deep water. This normally would have ended the stalk, but my determination prevailed. Getting that rush of cold glacier water was the motivation I needed to move even faster.

As I crossed the bottom of the chute through the maze

of willows, I had the chance to glass the billy one last time. Securing the location in my head, I noted the necessary landmarks and pressed on. The climb was very steep. Even with my crampons on, each step was a difficult one.

At 4:30 p.m., I was in position. I quickly put my white cover-up suit on and pushed into an opening. As I came into the open, there he was. The billy was lying in a quartering-away position, 116 yards across a deep gorge from me. He had no idea I was there. This was it! After the first shot through the shoulders, he stood. It had hit on-target. I cycled another round and put one more in the boiler room. In typical goat fashion, he made one last kick and fell out of sight into the deep gorge.

I quickly gathered my pack and proceeded to the gorge's edge. There he lay at the bottom. I was elated. My voice echoed through the valley in celebration. However, this was short lived once I realized it was almost impossible to get to him from where I stood.

I quickly devised a plan. Utilizing the 150-foot rope from my pack, I cut out a section of it to make a harness. Next, I secured the rope to the best anchor I could find, and then proceeded to rappel down the 80-foot edge to my goat. I had no thought about how I was to get him out; I just knew I would cross that obstacle when it came time.

There he was. The emotions were running high; I was trembling and cheering loudly. The dreams of harvesting a winter mountain goat became reality. All the aches and pains from the climb were nonexistent; I didn't care how

big he was at that time. I was just glad to have harvested such a great animal.

His hair was long and he showed the evidence of a rough life of living in this harsh environment. A winter mountain goat is a true trophy, and he was just that. I quickly got a satellite message out to my wife to let her know I was ok. Next, I proceeded with the photography the best I could. Then I got my goat caped and deboned the meat.

I was losing daylight. I quickly loaded up the pack and started down the gorge. The weight of my gear, the meat and his wet life-sized cape was tremendous. It was the heaviest pack I have ever had on my back, but the adrenaline was pumping because I was on my way down.

Darkness fell as I came to an impassable section. With headlamp on, I quickly scanned the terrain for landmarks and pushed up over a small ridge to the large avalanche chute. This was the one the goat was above when I first spotted him earlier in the day.

Walking down an avalanche chute is not recommended practice, but I weighed it against staying on the mountain. I did not have the gear to spend the night. Fortunately, the risk of another slide was low; there was minimal snow at the top of this particular chute. I proceeded down slowly. I took the cape out of my pack to lighten my load; I was getting tired. I held on to the game bag containing the cape in one hand as I walked down the slope.

An hour or so into the descent, I heard flowing water. Suddenly, I fell through the snowpack. Luckily, between my pack and the cape/game bag in my left hand, I was saved from falling into the unknown. With my feet dangling below, I felt helpless, but

I was able to get my crampons dug into hard ice and wiggled myself out of the precarious position. I then belly crawled over the snowpack to the side where I was in willows. The snow was waist deep, but I knew I had solid ground below me. I descended this side of the chute through dense brush and deep snow.

Hours later, I reached the large creek I crossed earlier that day; it was now 11 p.m. I rested briefly alongside the flowing water, contemplating what I'd just endured. Then, I looked at my GPS for an idea of where I was. I was only 300 meters from my snowmobile trail, but with a large creek in between. I crossed the waist-deep creek with the cape first and then went back for my pack.

I stashed the meat and cape under an old tree, marked the location and made my way to the trail. I was 1 kilometer from where I left my sled, and the walking was easy on the established trail compared to the last 12 hours of walking and climbing. I turned the snowmobile around and began the ride out, physically and mentally drained from the day's events. I decided to leave the goat stashed along the creek for the night and return in the morning after much-needed rest.

As I rode my snowmobile out with sleigh in tow, I approached the location of the trail I cut earlier that day. I misjudged the trail and overturned my snowmobile. Exhausted, I disconnected my sleigh, then dug deep to gather the strength to upright the snowmobile. This action took everything I had. I needed a break, so I put on some warm clothes and boiled water for coffee.

It was just after midnight when I was ready to resume the trek. I started my

sled, and it took off over the edge of the cliff. I later learned that a stick had gotten lodged in the throttle.

The feeling of being alone set in instantly. It was dark, and I was in a predicament—survival became a concern. Luckily, the sleigh, with all my gear, was disconnected, so it did not go over with the snowmobile.

"Am I dreaming?" I thought. My emotions were running low, but there I was, and I had to do something. I realized I had to leave the snowmobile and walk out. I put on my snowshoes, grabbed my rifle and left everything behind. I was walking out to my truck. It was well after 3 a.m. before I reached my hotel room, exhausted. I fell into bed.

I awoke the next morning to multiple texts from people wondering where I was. I quickly called everyone to make them aware that I was fine and that I'd taken a goat. By 8 a.m. I was at the trailhead. Luckily, I had a second snowmobile on the trailer that was originally intended for my hunting partner.

I snowmobiled to my first spotting location. Four hours later, after multiple trips on snowshoes, I had my sleigh with all my gear and got my goat to the snowmobile. I left the first snowmobile over the cliff where it fell; I would need assistance to pull it out.

That afternoon I arrived at my hotel. My new friend James was there waiting to see me and my goat. It was a great feeling to share the moment and story with him. We took the time to look



at this fine goat and could not decide what was more impressive, the horns or the cape. He was a magnificent goat with his thick, long hair and long horns.

We pulled out the tape to do a quick green score. I did not want to measure him, so James obliged. Still, the suspense was killing me as he took the measurements. I looked at the horn length of 12 inches and nearly passed out.

Not only did I go on a solo goat hunt in the winter, I got a monster Rocky Mountain goat. This was something I thought I would never experience. Any goat would have been a monumental feat in those conditions. I was in shock. It all sunk in when James pulled out the Boone and Crockett records book. We saw that this was a possible top-10 goat. High fives all around and a celebration ensued!

We were unable to retrieve the snowmobile while I was there. I returned home and some friends of James' retrieved the snowmobile in the spring and delivered it to my house seven hours away. For a hunt that at times seemed destined not to happen, it turned out to be a great success. I harvested a once-in-a-lifetime animal, and better yet, I made a great new friend. ■