

# The Great Hualapai Sheep Hunt

By ELDON "BUCK"  
BUCKNER  
Regular Member  
Boone & Crockett Club  
Active Member  
RECORDS COMMITTEE  
PHOTOS BY AUTHOR  
ARTWORK BY KEITH BALFOURD

It all began early in 1972 when I started thinking about which game management unit in Arizona I would apply for in my annual attempt at obtaining a desert bighorn permit. My losing streak had lasted for a dozen years and as I was anticipating a possible move out of the state later in the year, I wanted to make the most out of my last chance to be drawn as an Arizona resident.

I finally decided to apply for Unit 14 - the Hualapai Indian Reservation, which for those unfamiliar with the area, is a large u-shaped piece of the northwestern Arizona plateau bordered on the northern edge by a hundred miles of the western end of the Grand Canyon. The reservation had first been opened to sheep hunting by non-tribal members the previous fall with three permits being issued. Two of the three hunters showed up and

ing me from bringing a lot of gear from Oregon.

Late on November 30, two days before the season was to open, Ollie and I and Abe, Ollie's top lion hound and constant companion, arrived in Peach Springs, the Hualapai Reservation headquarters. We had all our gear packed in a surplus jeep cargo trailer behind the Jeep we were driving.

Through previous correspondence with Monroe Berecher, head of the Hualapai Wildlife Department, I had learned that I would be required to hire a Hualapai guide before I would be allowed to hunt. Monroe's two sons were going to guide the other two sheep hunters permitted for \$1,000 each. I had some reservations about the availability of qualified sheep guides on the Hualapai, but through another sheep hunter I had learned the name of a former Hualapai government hunter who had taken a sheep or two and might guide me. I arranged for his service by telephone and Ollie had made a preliminary trip to Peach Springs to talk to Norman Imus, the guide. We now drove to his home to see what the plans were for the next day.

Norman was probably in his sixties, a likable old fellow with a weather worn face who talked knowledgeably about hunting. He had just recently returned from the hospital at Prescott and was still recovering from a respiratory ailment. It was obvious he was in very poor health, but he had enlisted the help of his grown son, Willard, who was the tribal herd manager. His plans were to gather some horses the next morning, and then accompany us to a campsite some 45 miles northwest of Peach Springs.

After helping gather the horses, we headed northwest over a narrow graded road which became narrower and rockier as it traversed the juniper covered ridges and steep draws to the plateau overlooking Meriwhitica Canyon. This canyon is

one of the many gigantic side-canyons which wind for miles through the reservation, eventually joining with the Grand Canyon. Norman and his son put the horses in a corral bordered on the west side by the vertical drop of Meriwhitica and returned to Peach Springs. Ollie and I set up camp on the plateau, a mile or so from the canyon edge among some thinly scattered junipers.

Unlike most of Arizona's desert sheep population which is found in the rugged desert mountain ranges of the state, the Hualapai sheep are canyon dwellers, finding solitude and refuge in the uncountable miles of cliffs, caves, rock slides, buttes and ledges created by eons of erosive action by the mighty Colorado and its tributaries.

Opening morning of the sheep season dawned cool and clear, and as Ollie set off afoot across the plateau. Willard, the tribal herd manager, and I saddled our horses and began the steep descent down the switch back trail to the broad canyon floor several hundred feet below.

Wild horse and burro trails crisscrossed the terrain in the canyon and these animals had nipped every edible browse plant to the ground. The only thing spared was the evil smelling creosote bush. Once, when I had halted the procession and dismounted to glass the terraced canyon walls, I caught a glimpse of movement halfway up the east side. It eventually materialized as the head of a horse browsing on a solitary shrub. This was the first of many horses we glassed on the nearly vertical walls of the canyons, many so high up that they appeared only as black specks to the naked eye below. I've spent all my life around horses and I wouldn't have believed one could negotiate the ledges these were on. The animals were obviously forced to turn mountain goat in search of bits of browse after eating themselves out of house and home in the canyon floor. Throughout the hunt it was a common occurrence to spot horses and burros, either singly or in small bands while glassing for sheep. As a former professional range conservationist, there was no doubt in my mind that the horses and burros were in direct competition with the sheep for what little forage remained in the barren canyons.

By early afternoon we had ridden



OLLIE BARNEY AND ABE PACKING OUR GUNS INTO OUR SECOND CAMP.

took two young rams during the first days of the season.

As luck would have it, I received my permit in September after having just moved from northern Arizona to a ranch in eastern Oregon. I immediately called my friend, Ollie Barney, in Tucson, to see if he would like to go with me on the hunt. Ollie, besides being an outstanding Arizona guide and trophy hunter, is a resourceful individual whom I had hunted with before and knew I could depend on. He agreed to come along and would provide a camp outfit and transportation, thus sav-

four miles to the vertical drop which marked the juncture of Meriwhitica with even larger Spencer Canyon, had skirted around the sheer face into several basins of the latter canyon and had returned to Meriwhitica Spring near the confluence of the two. I had done a lot of glassing and had seen no sign of sheep. We unsaddled the horses, watered them at the little stream flowing from the spring and ate lunch. In years past there had been an Indian camp at the spring, complete with small irrigated fields, the traces of the ditches faintly discernible. Remains of walls still stood and I found the flattened corroded copper hull of a .44 Henry rifle cartridge and a button from a cavalry uniform.

Suddenly I heard rocks rolling from the west side of the canyon a half mile distant. I had just begun to glass the area when Willard's horse slipped his head out of his bridle and began to amble off. I dropped my binoculars and headed him off before he'd taken more than a few steps, managing to get my belt around his neck while Willard retrieved the bridle. The rolling rocks forgotten, we saddled up and headed back up the canyon. On the way, I talked to Willard about the number of sheep he'd seen, and he admitted that he'd seen only a couple, as had the tribal herd manager, and these only incidental to working cattle or hunting. Old Norman was the only one who had killed a sheep of the three and he had observed sheep many times while hunting lions and roaming the canyons. He had been too ill the last few years to do much of either. The men were familiar with most of the canyon and the trails however, and I jotted notes on this information on a reservation map.

"Well, what was the matter? Didn't you like any of those sheep this afternoon?" Ollie asked over supper that night.

"What sheep?" I countered.

"The ones that were rolling rocks while you guys were eating lunch," he replied.

I silently cursed myself for not having done a thorough job of glassing after the horse was caught.

While we had been at the spring, Ollie had been on the east rim of the canyon above us and had spotted six sheep on a large talus slope across the valley. This distance had been too great to determine much about heads through his 9x glasses, but he thought he could see horns on two of the sheep. Earlier, in a different canyon to the east he had also spotted a lone ewe. "We're going to get a sheep!" Ollie said. "We have to. I've never seen so many sheep beds and sign in my life!"

That night, with my negative feelings about horseback hunting of desert sheep reconfirmed, we made plans to go back into Meriwhitica the next morning on foot and try to relocate the six sheep.

It was nearly noon by the time Ollie and I had glassed our way down the canyon to the spring, seeing nothing more than horses and burros. The sun had reached into the canyon by this time and was a little too warm for comfort so we sat on the ground in the shade of some runty mesquites as we glassed the west side of the canyon where the sheep had been the day before.

For an hour or more we saw nothing. Then as I began one more systematic sweep from the valley floor upwards, the white rump of a feeding ewe appeared in the glasses.

"There they are," I said to

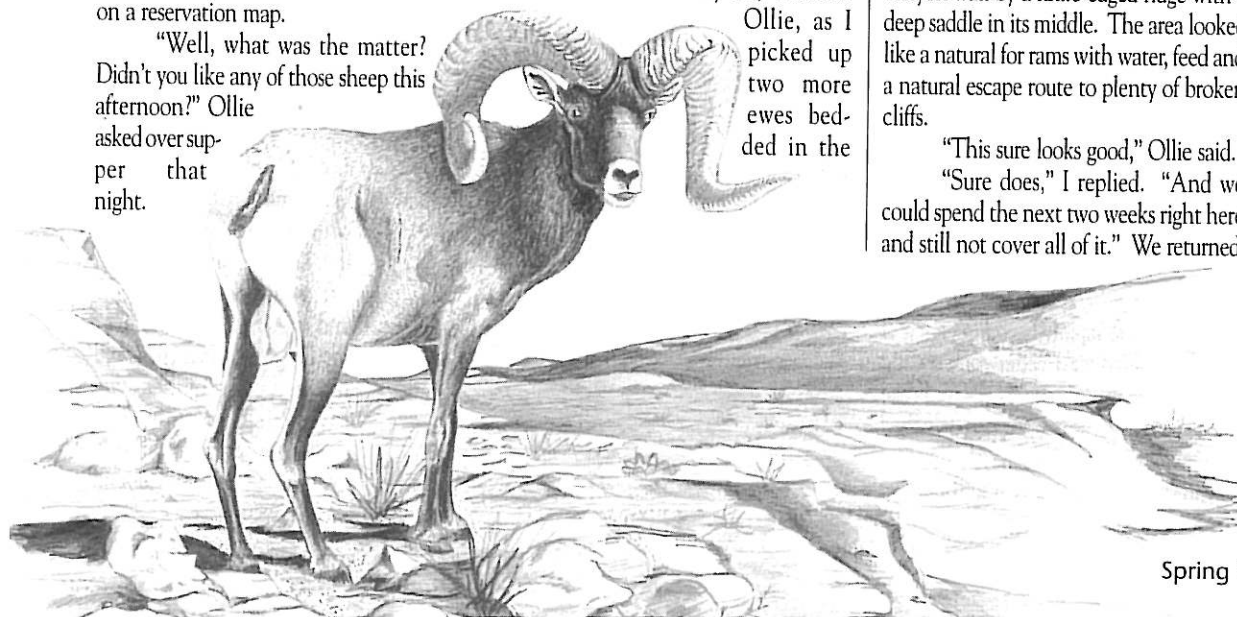
Ollie, as I picked up two more ewes bedded in the

rocks just to the left. Just above the ewes was a large yellow boulder which had broken loose from above and come to rest a hundred feet or so above the valley floor. On this boulder lay a ram, facing us. Ollie had picked up the sheep by now and was setting up his 20x spotting scope. Through it we could see the ram much better but still somewhat distorted by mirage. Finally he turned his head to one side and we got a look at his horns. They were thin and appeared to be nearly pointed at the tips, although they completed more than the three quarter curl required for a legal ram. We guessed the ram to be about six years old with 30 to 31 inch horns. He definitely wasn't the kind of ram I was interested in, so we watched for some time trying to locate the other ram which Ollie had thought he'd seen the day before. Finally a sheep appeared from behind the large boulder and hopped up on it beside the first ram. Through close scrutiny we determined he was an even younger ram with horns not much bigger than those of a ewe. He playfully butted at the first ram a time or two then hopped down off the boulder. The sheep had certainly seen us, just as they had the day before but at that distance, they paid little attention to us.

After eating lunch and taking some pictures of the ram on the boulder through the spotting scope, Ollie and I continued on past the ruins at the spring to the sheer bluff at the mouth of Meriwhitica and glassed the huge basin in Spencer Canyon. At one point near the center of the basin, an immense haystack-shaped peak projected upwards, connected to the south canyon wall by a knife-edged ridge with a deep saddle in its middle. The area looked like a natural for rams with water, feed and a natural escape route to plenty of broken cliffs.

"This sure looks good," Ollie said.

"Sure does," I replied. "And we could spend the next two weeks right here and still not cover all of it." We returned





THE GUIDE, NORMAN IMUS' SON, WILLARD, BRINGING IN THEIR HORSES FOR THE SHEEP HUNT.

to camp without seeing anything more interesting than a big lion track made some time before.

Arriving at camp shortly before dusk, we found Norman sitting by a juniper fire with a big pot of venison stew. While we ate and talked about the sheep situation, we decided it might be a good idea to hunt the other end of Meriwhitica the next day. As horses would be of no use, Willard and Norman would return to Peach Springs and check back with us in a couple of days.

During the night, a front began moving in and morning showed overcast skies, drizzling rain and a cold wind. All day we hunted along the edges of upper Meriwhitica and through numerous side canyons, basins and pockets, finding somewhat better feed conditions here and countless sheep beds under the overhanging ledges of limestone tiered one above the other. But from the droppings in the beds I guessed that this upper canyon country was probably used more in the spring and summer.

We returned to camp just before dark, thoroughly dampened by the continuing light rain and chilled by the increasing wind. By the time we had fixed supper in the tent over Ollie's little two burner propane stove the wind was blowing harder and as we went to bed the rain began to pour. By 9:30 the wind had become a gale sweeping across the sparse juniper of the plateau, and I began to wonder if our tent could withstand the beating it was taking. As if in reply, one of the interior frame supports broke with a pop and half the tent sagged in on top of us, amidst sheets of rain. Repairing the tent in the wind was next to impossible and as the plateau was rapidly becoming a sea of mud we realized we'd better pack up and get out while we still could. As we broke camp in the dark the pouring rain drenched us, then slowly changed to wet, slushy snow. We finished stowing our gear in the trailer

with numbed fingers and lashed the tarp over the load. But even in 4-wheel drive, the jeep wouldn't budge. Unhitching the trailer, we finally succeeded in maneuvering the jeep with the aid of the winch to the relatively dry ground where the tent had stood. From there we had enough traction to get moving and eventually reached the road which was rapidly disappearing under the snow. It was nearly midnight by the time we reached the motel at Peach Springs; mud covered, soaking wet, and chilled to the bone.

The front which passed through that night left the reservation blanketed in white and the ground beneath frozen rock hard. We took advantage of the freeze to retrieve our trailer and then headed for the northwest corner of the reservation to hunt a different area.

Our new campsite was an old abandoned line shack located a few miles from the rim of the Grand Canyon. There were holes in the roof and the floor; the windows and doors were gone and a pack rat's nest now occupied a large area in one corner. To top it off the ancient remnants of a skunk lent a heady fragrance to the interior. However, as storms were still forecast in the area, we decided to take advantage of what shelter it offered and pitched our crippled tent inside. After covering the roof with a canvas and boarding up the windows we had a fairly snug camp.

For the next six days we hunted out

of this camp, during which time another six inches of snow fell and the temperature dropped to six below zero. Our canned goods and fresh eggs froze solid and we had to melt ice out of the Jeep cans for tea and coffee.

One of the points we glassed from along the rim was the location of an abandoned tramway which had been previously used for hauling bat guano from a cave on the opposite side of the Grand Canyon. From this promontory, the view of the canyon country was awesome. As far as the eye could see to the east or west, the silver thread of the Colorado, thousands of feet below was laced in by canyons of such immense proportions that they were difficult to comprehend. I could think of no words to adequately describe this.

Ollie and I walked miles through the snow to various points along many of these canyons and spent hour upon hour scanning the ledges for sheep. Many times, we could climb down into the canyons a considerable distance in order to see more of the lower country, but invariably we'd wind up at a dead end of a steep vertical cliff. Most of the sheep we spotted here were inaccessible; one lone young ram with low droopy horns, another younger illegal ram with a ewe, a pair of ewes bedded on a ledge 2,000 feet below us and across a canyon, another pair of ewes feeding on a bench so far down in a deep slit of a canyon that the sun only reached them for a few minutes of the day.

Late on December 10th, we packed up and fought our way through the snow to Peach Springs. We met Monroe Berecher and learned that one of the other two hunters had taken a young ram which had to be retrieved with ropes. He had been hunting the same area we'd just come from. The remaining unsuccessful hunter being guided by Berecher's sons had been forced to return to Phoenix for a couple of days and was due back the next morning. Monroe suggested that we accompany their party to a camp they had set up in the northeast corner of the reservation and try our luck in



---

## The rolling rocks forgotten, we saddled up and headed back up the canyon.

---

that area for a while. Ollie and I accepted the invitation and spent part of the evening visiting with Monroe and his sons and measuring a good pick-up head they'd found. It had 34 inch horns and 14 inch bases and had come from the area we planned to hunt.

The next morning, with replenished supplies and renewed hope, we set out on the 60 mile journey to the Berecher camp in Prospect Valley.

A topo map showed large side canyons to the northeast, so we drove in that direction leaving the Berecher camp to the northwest. We eventually snaked our way up onto a juniper-speckled bench by following old horse trails. By dusk we had followed the trails as far as our vehicle would go and hastened to pitch the tent before dark.

The following day was clear, cold and windy as we hiked north across the broken plateau to the Grand Canyon. Glassing the canyon we worked our way west to where it was joined by Prospect Canyon from the south. Prospect was a relatively short canyon which headed rather abruptly at the lower end of Prospect Valley as a deep basin of black cinder. In the depths of the canyon near its confluence with the Colorado River, the warmer temperature had melted the snow and there were patches of short green grass where a warm spring emerged from the rock. This was a sheepy-looking basin and we glassed it until nearly dark before returning to camp through the snow covered sage.

It was seven miles from camp to National Canyon as the crow flew, but if the crow was walking and packing a rifle, it was a great deal farther. By the time we'd crossed three intervening canyons, climbed up and over a broad mesa and descended to the canyon rim, it was afternoon. We had intercepted this major artery of the Grand Canyon about midway of its length some seven miles from the Colorado. We soon spotted one lone ewe deep in the canyon but could not locate other sheep until mid-afternoon.

"There's some sheep," Ollie said, as he put down his binoculars and focused the spotting scope. He had first spotted the white rump of an ewe as she lay facing away

from us on a sharp point on the opposite side of the canyon. As we watched, the ewe rose and joined nine other ewes and yearling lambs below her on a narrow bench. It was just as well that a ram was not in the bunch, as I calculated from a topo map that there was nearly 2,000 feet of sheer cliffs both above and below them, even if we could have figured some way to get across the canyon.

For the next three days our routine continued. We'd leave camp before daybreak and hike through the snow to one of the canyons within range; Mohawk, Coyote, Prospect, National or the Grand Canyon itself. We had seen herds of wild horses, an occasional mule deer, bobcat and coyote tracks. We'd break the ice covering the water which had collected in various sized holes in the sandstone rims in order to drink, just as the horses and burros did. Late in the day we'd head home along one of the major horse trails, usually arriving in the moonlight and thus completing a 15 to 25 mile hike. Our score for the three days was two ewes and a lamb.

The last day of the season found Ollie and me again glassing the sheepy looking basin in Prospect Canyon. Within a mile to our right and some 4,000 feet below Prospect joined the Grand Canyon. To our left the basin ended at the mouth of a short deep canyon which began a few hundred yards away in the broad valley floor. Much of this canyon ran perpendicular to the basin and thus was out of sight of our vantage point in the black lava boulders of the basin rim.

As I glassed the basalt of the basin for the ram which had eluded me so successfully on this hunt, I thought of the 27 sheep we'd seen in the past 15 days. Only four had been rams and only two of them legal ones. We had hunted at three widely spaced locations along the Grand Canyon and had found sheep and sheep sign at all three, just no old rams. Perhaps they were

down in the canyon along the river where it was warmer – inaccessible, except by boat. I was sure that somewhere in this labyrinth of erosion there had to be some old rams with heavy broomed horns living out their last days. But at this point, with the kind of luck we'd experienced so far, I was equally sure I'd never get a look at one of them.

A sudden rattle of loose rock jolted me from my daydreaming. The sound was amplified by the silence of the canyon and I couldn't estimate its distance or direction. The clatter persisted and my pulse quickened as I realized it was coming from the mouth of the hidden canyon to our left. With my Remington .270 across my knees, I sat behind a chunk of basalt which would provide a steady rest and glassed the canyon entrance some 200 yards away. Suddenly I caught a flash of movement just below the rim of the wall. A half grown lamb bounded into view sending a stream of small rocks cascading into the basin. Then another sheep appeared behind it – a ewe. More rolling rocks and another sheep was coming, a ram this time! But instead of being an old Grandpappy, this ram was a young one like the rest we'd seen. He was legal, but his horns were thin and pointed, completing little more than the minimum three-quarter curl. With heart pounding I waited for the big one to appear, but nothing more emerged from the canyon. Meanwhile the young ram, ewe and lamb picked their way along the upper edge of the basin, their light brown pelage contrasting sharply with the black basalt in the morning sun. I watched them through the 4x scope slowly realizing I was looking at my last ram of the hunt. But I felt no temptation to squeeze the trigger.

Considering the difficulty of obtaining legal permits, it's very likely that I'll ever again have the opportunity to hunt desert rams.

But on that last day of the 1972 season, I think I got a lot more enjoyment watching that young ram traverse a nearly vertical lava flow high above the Colorado than I would have experienced trying to make excuses about his size to someone in my trophy room.

---

OLLIE BARNEY, LEFT, AND BUCK BUCKNER AT THE END OF THE GREAT HUALAPAI SHEEP HUNT.



EDITOR'S NOTE: THE FULL TEXT OF BUCK'S STORY WAS PUBLISHED IN THE SECOND EDITION OF ARIZONA'S WILDLIFE TROPHIES.