

BEATING THE ODDS

Long-Tined Typical is New Montana Number Two

Keith R. Balfourd
203-5/8 Typical Mule Deer
Ravalli Co., Montana 2005

Keith Balfourd, Director of Marketing for the Boone and Crockett Club, with his new number 2 Montana mule deer. The buck officially scores 203-5/8 points.

Hunting mule deer in the West, especially big mule deer, can be a tall order. While numbers of trophy whitetails are exploding, trophy mule deer numbers throughout the West are far off the pace set in the 1960s. One of the few chances to bag a trophy mule deer buck in today's hunting world is to draw a limited entry tag, hunt hard, and pray for good luck.

Keith Balfourd accomplished the first portion of the task when he found out that he had drawn a coveted Montana mule deer special permit. With that in hand, Balfourd assembled a comprehensive game plan to give him the best possible odds in fulfilling a lifelong dream of taking a true Boone and Crockett All-time mule deer trophy.

Balfourd assembled maps, interviewed biologists and game wardens, performed multiple scouting expeditions, and talked with past tagholders. He also added one crucial element to the mix; he spent enough time in the unit ground-truthing so he knew the caliber of bucks that lived in the unit, and what his minimum standard would be before pulling the trigger.

Balfourd began with the bowhunting portion of the hunt. He saw and videotaped several nice bucks, but still held out for something special.

The rifle season then came, and with it a plethora of general-season elk hunters. This forced Balfourd to use all of his skills and knowledge gained from the scouting and homework he had done. Questions that arose had to be answered. Where will the elk hunting pressure be? Where will the deer head to with the increase of human traffic?

Balfourd had heard of a big typical buck that had been seen earlier in the season, and had gone in to look for it with no luck, so he moved on to other areas. A month later, he figured that all the circumstances were about right to go back and try again. The rut was picking up and, if no one had already taken the buck, he might be starting to move a bit more during daylight hours. It was a Friday, with light weekday hunting pressure having rested the area for a few days. Plus, the next day was the opening of a cow elk season, which would increase the hunting pressure dramatically.

By this point in the season, Balfourd was beginning to get weary. He had logged many miles up and down the mountains, and passed on several quality bucks that he hoped wouldn't come back to haunt him. He always made sure to keep his reality checked, however, and not forget why he was here, the quality of tag he held, and what he hoped to accomplish.

He headed up to the area where the big buck had been sighted with a typical hunter's eternal optimism. To his surprise, he suddenly had the buck right within eyesight! Balfourd was stunned, but kept his cool, not wanting to jump to conclusions. He couldn't see all of the buck's antlers, just the goalpost frame, so he kept his finger close to the trigger and waited.

After an intense wait, the buck turned his head and Balfourd's eyes grew wide. It was the deepest-forked, longest-tined deer he had ever seen. He squeezed off a round from 150 yards and the buck dropped. Several other deer instantly jumped up and ran, including a few bucks. Balfourd didn't see how big they were; he didn't even care. With one shot, he had accomplished something that every mule deer hunter dreams of. The buck of many lifetimes lay before him. — by Ryan Hatfield

EDITOR'S NOTE: Keith's big mule deer is the second-largest typical ever recorded in Montana, and the largest taken by a hunter. The largest, a 207-7/8 typical that will be listed as "picked up", was also recently accepted, and will be featured in the summer issue of Fair Chase.



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A Decade's Patience is Rewarded

**Gary Darrah ■ 29-3/16
Alaska Brown Bear
Buskin Lake, Alaska ■ 2004**

Gary Darrah's search for a big Kodiak

Island Alaska brown bear began over ten years ago. During this stretch, he had passed up many good bears. He was determined to wait for just the right one, or take none at all.

On the morning of November 17, 2004, Darrah and his friend Dan Clark were out at first light near Buskin Lake. They were after a specific bear that they had been tracking the day before. It had snowed during the night, allowing for some excellent tracking opportunities — too good, in fact. They soon cut the tracks of two additional bears, and had to spend a fair amount of time deciphering the ground information. They finally got back on the biggest track, which took them through some thick alders.

Tracking an Alaska brown bear in thick cover can be risky business, and that fact was in the forefront of their minds as they proceeded. After more than two hours of penetrating the alder and on full alert, they heard the bear walking through the brush only 50 yards ahead! They kept on, and were just coming out of a small creek when Darrah looked up and saw the bear only 20 feet from him!

At that point, everything became a blur to Darrah. He whispered, "There he is!"

A few minor expletives were whispered while

Darrah tried to find a good shot; he had only seen the head at that point. The bear started to move, offering Darrah an opening. He fired his .338 and struck the bear in the chest. The enraged bruin started spinning in circles and slapping at the sting, literally spraying the hunters with snow. Darrah sent another round behind the shoulder, which sent the bear down the hill at full speed. It drifted out of sight before coming to rest 150 yards away.

They waited more than half an hour before moving in. The bear was finished, so they set to work on getting their huge prize out of the bush. Two days later, silhouetted by moonlight, they finished the grueling packout. They used a kid's sled, which became so heavy that they had to rig harnesses and pull it out like a dogsled.

Gary Darrah's decade of patience had paid off. His bear squared out at 10 feet 2 inches and has a perfect dark-brown hide with no rub spots. At 29-3/16 B&C, it is also the fourth-largest bear entered so far in the 26th Awards Program.



Darrah's Alaska brown bear, taken after hunting the big bruins for more than ten years, scores 29-3/16.

Better To Be Lucky Than Good

Jay R. Wolfenden ■ 325-3/8 Woodland Caribou ■ Middle Ridge Pond, Newfoundland ■ 2005

Jay Wolfenden has put his time in, and has very much earned most of the game he has come by. For that reason, he has no reservations about laughing at the ease with which his hunt went for what is the biggest woodland caribou entered so far in the 26th Awards Program.

Wolfenden had booked a woodland caribou hunt in Newfoundland. Upon his arrival, he found that the outfitter had been short one guide, and so had found a new person on short notice to come in and help. That didn't bother Wolfenden; he was there for the experience and still had confidence. The interesting part, though, was that as hunter and guide left to find caribou, neither had ever seen the area before.

They left camp, crossed a body of water on a boat, and were beginning to survey the area. It was generally a slightly corrugated country, full of bogs and small ponds, with scrubby-looking 15-foot-high spruce. There were no major landmarks, just small knobs dotting the landscape.

They began to climb to a knob, where they ran into another guide with a client. As they stood there deciding who would go where, Wolfenden looked over and saw what looked like the flash of a white pickup moving through the trees about 600 yards away. Then it hit him; they were far removed from the nearest road, and the flash was no pickup!

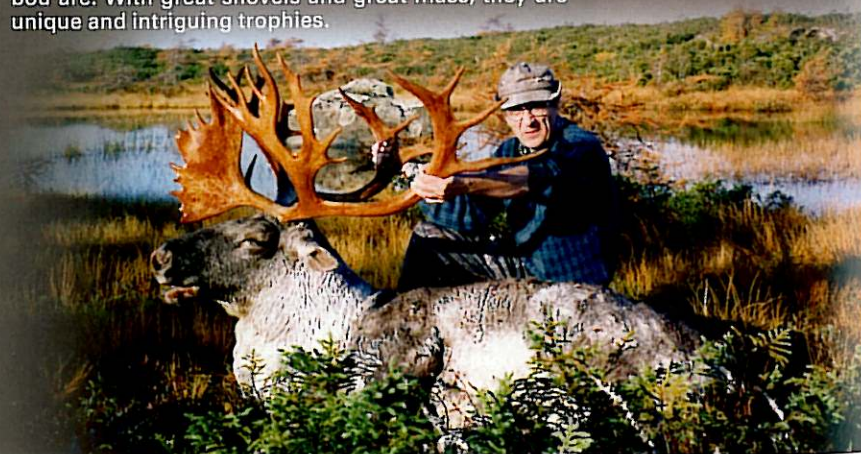
Wolfenden looked over at his guide and said, "How about that one?"

Wolfenden's guide, who had never guided for caribou before, thought it looked plenty good enough. They quickly ducked out of sight and began the stalk. They were able to eventually get to 100 yards and make a good shot, which Wolfenden performed with his 7mm Weatherby.

Jay notes with a smile that there really wasn't much to it but blind luck. Either way, he says, they were still back to camp with a big caribou and having coffee by 9:30 a.m.!

Wolfenden's caribou is a prime example of what a great trophy these smaller, more compact caribou are. With great shovels and great mass, they are unique and intriguing trophies.

Wolfenden's woodland caribou is the biggest entry so far in the 26th Awards Program — scoring 325-3/8 points.



Lucky Number 7 Becomes New Nevada Number 2

Ted L. Wehking ■ Nye Co., NV 2005
415-6/8 Non-Typical American Elk

Ted Wehking loves to hunt as much as anyone else, and he has taken a great deal of interest in Nevada's wildlife. As founder and chairman of the Nevada Wildlife Record Book Committee, Wehking has had a great interest in recording the greatest wildlife Nevada has ever seen. Until recently, it was always recording someone else's name and story. Not this time; this time, it would be his own story.

Wehking received notice in 2005 that he had been drawn for an elk tag, after 27 years of applying. When you wait as long as Wehking has for that tag, all other plans fall along the wayside. Wehking enlisted the help of Mustang Outfitters for the hunt, and would also have the bonus of having his two boys, David and Doug, along to share the experience.

After a three-hour horseback ride into their wilderness camp in the Monitor Range of central Nevada, they quickly stowed their gear. They then spent the afternoon before the season opener glassing the area for rutting bulls. It was the last week of September, and the rut was in full swing.

After a short time glassing, Tanner Allen, their guide, spotted a large six-point bull with an abnormal point on each antler. He recognized the bull from the preceding year. They nicknamed him Lucky Number Seven, because the previous year another hunter had been indecisive and the 7x7 bull remained free another year.

They immediately began making plans on how to hunt this particular bull. Wehking made the decision to hunt Lucky Number Seven for the four days his sons would be on the hunt, and would then worry about whether or not to look elsewhere for another bull on the last three days, if needed.

After searching high and low for more than two days, they again heard the familiar sound of bugling bulls. From a good vantage point on a nearby ridge, they quickly picked up a five-point bull on the southern edge of a mahogany draw. Shortly thereafter, they spotted a six-point and a spike on the ridge above the same draw. While these bulls strutted and bugled, they kept hearing another bull bugle.

With a brisk wind blowing in their faces, Wehking asked his guide to make his way around and upwind of the draw, in hopes of pushing out and identifying the bugling bull in the draw. Tanner was gone for half an hour when a six-point bull from the top of the ridge came charging out to Wehking's right at approximately 400 yards. A minute or so later, twenty cows came running out of the draw. After a brief pause, another ten cows and a huge bull came out.

Doug immediately had the spotting scope on him and said, "Dad, that's him; he's huge!"

David and Doug watched as Wehking's 7mm magnum hit the bull at 277 yards.

Tanner Allen heard the unmistakable hit and came running back, jumping three-foot high sage brush in stride to join in on the celebration.

It meant the world to Wehking to have his two boys with him on this hunt. He remarks that taking a bull of this caliber was definitely the highlight of his hunting career.

Wehking's bull is impressive on many levels; however, one stands out above the rest. He has a very small total of abnormal point lengths (8-4/8 inches), meaning that his typical frame is an incredible 407-2/8.



Grizzly Encounter

Jerry R. Kolke, Jr. ■ 25-6/16 Grizzly Bear ■ Brimstone Creek, BC 2005

After years of wanting to go hunting in British Columbia, Jerry Kolke, Jr., finally booked a hunt with Liard River Adventures for spring of 2005. The hunt was a true adventure, complete with raging rivers, long "death march" treks, and big bears.

They started by hunting the river, but after ice jams, floods, and rising rivers, they decided to head inland. Kolke mentions that "heading inland" meant hiking more than twelve hours while bush-wacking and carrying heavy packs.

Soon, they neared the end of their daylong trek of pushing through brush, crossing bogs, and cutting trail. Chris Schippmann, his guide, suddenly said, "Get down!"

Kolke then heard Schippmann whisper, "Bear! Get ready."

Kolke replied, "Where?"

"Grizzly!" Schippmann said.

"Where?" Kolke asked.

"Shoot!" the guide said.

"Shoot what?" Kolke asked.

Kolke finally identified his target and made a solid shot. They waited a few minutes before proceeding, and then made their way to the point of the shot. Only 100 yards away, they saw the bear, which took only one step before falling over dead.

They mixed the thrill of excitement with the worry of the foreboding darkness and assessed the situation. They still had to pick and make a camp, as well as take care of the bear. Finally, by midnight, they were able to sit by a campfire and relive their good fortune.





New #1 in New Mexico

B. Neal Ainsworth, Jr.

198-4/8 Bighorn Sheep - Taos Co., NM 2005

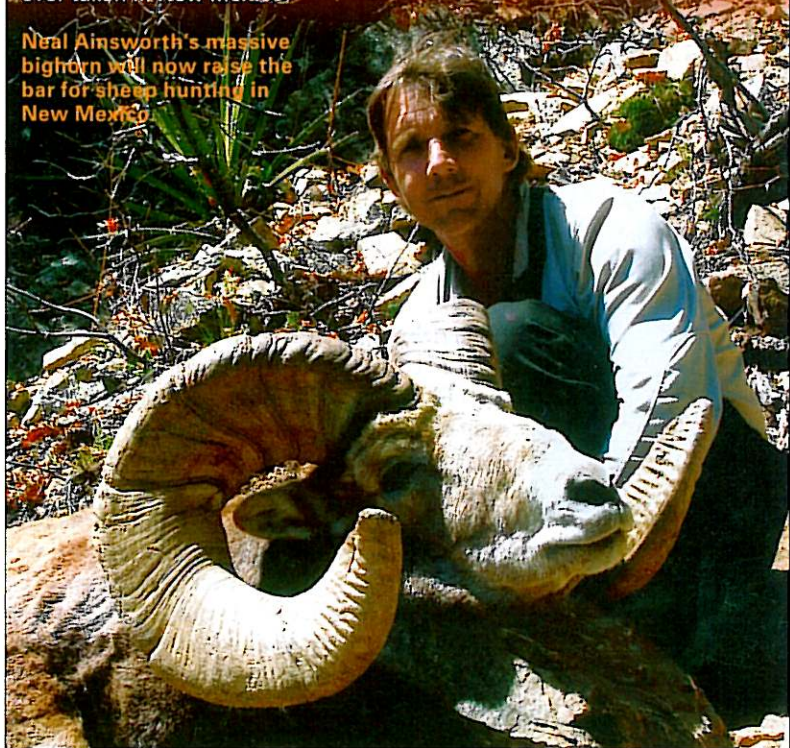
Neal Ainsworth was lucky enough to obtain a permit to hunt bighorn sheep in New Mexico, and he enlisted the help of Jon Barker for the hunt. Barker is a great judge of sheep and would help Ainsworth immensely on the hunt.

The hunt was grueling; at times they tackled steep, slippery slopes, and encountered nearly four feet of snow on the north slopes of the mountains. It was all the adventure one would want and expect on a sheep hunt.

Ainsworth initially had trouble connecting on the ram—the result of a scope problem. The next day, after re-zeroing the rifle, he made good on a nice long-range shot, nearly in the same location as the day before.

After Ainsworth downed the ram, it took them nearly 1-1/2 hours to get to him, but Ainsworth was still all smiles. He had just taken a ram that exceeded all of his hopes and expectations. At 198-4/8, it is the largest ever taken in New Mexico.

Neal Ainsworth's massive bighorn will now raise the bar for sheep hunting in New Mexico.



Elk Hunt of a Different Sort

Ed Fanchin - 303-6/8 tule elk

Inyo County, CA 2005

Tule-elk hunting opportunities have blossomed over the past several years, due to increased interest and proper management. As such, new tags are popping up in new places, and with different types of opportunities.

In the past few years, the California Department of Fish & Game has begun offering a limited number of archery tags for tule elk in the Inyo County area. Ed Fanchin, a B&C Official Measurer, put in for one. He was more than excited when he found out he would be one of seven people to be able to pursue tule elk in that particular area.

The country would be beautiful, but much different than the epitome of elk hunting. This hunt would not be in thick timber in mountainous terrain. It would be in the shadow of Mount Whitney (the tallest peak in the Lower 48) and in 100-degree heat on the flats and desert. Tule elk live different lives, enduring the heat, humans, and surviving in exposed country.

Fanchin scouted the area three different times, and had a bull patterned pretty tightly. The bull had a harem that he would gather out of a field at daylight, then head across a canal they had to swim to get to their bedding area.

Fanchin came back a few days prior to the opener and checked to see if the pattern was still being adhered to. It was, so Fanchin set up a blind near where the herd routinely swam the canal, in hopes of intercepting them heading to their bedding area.

It was the second week of August when the hunt began — the prime of the rut for tule elk. Fanchin and a friend watched the herd go to its feeding area at last light, and nothing about the pattern was unusual. Fanchin left that night feeling confident in the setup, and hoping he could withstand the excitement just enough to get some sleep.

Fanchin and his friend got into the blind the next morning and, as first light bloomed, he was shocked to see a new bull in the area. It was a bull equal to the one he had scouted, and had come in to challenge for the harem, though the two bulls seemed reasonably tolerant of each

other. Fanchin figures that this new bull might not have been quite as big as the other, but it was very close.

Fanchin watched as the new bull came toward the canal, ahead of the rest of the herd, heading for the bedding area. It was mostly coincidence, probably because the area was a natural funnel. Surely this new bull could not have known the herd's routine. The rest of the herd, however, followed not far distant.

Fanchin's excitement level picked up while he watched the new bull swim the canal, as if on cue, and walk to within 30 yards. Fanchin released an arrow, and it hit home. The bull took fewer than ten steps before expiring. One of the best hunts in his life was over within half an hour of first light on the first day. For Fanchin, though, the hunt began long before, with all his efforts to get into a situation just like this.

Fanchin notes that the original bull he was after was only 100 yards out when he released the arrow on the other bull. While it could possibly have been larger, Fanchin wasn't about to turn down a sure thing.

Rocky Mountain High New Colorado Number 3

John Stafford • Eagle Co., CO 2005
182-3/8 Shiras Moose

The words “hunter” and “conservationist” are nearly synonymous to those who know the efforts hunters have made in improving big-game populations and habitat across North America. Just another shining example of the success of what hunters have done in helping to restore and promote big-game numbers is the Shiras moose in Colorado. Moose transplants in that state have boomed into sustainable and huntable populations.

According to the Colorado Department of Wildlife (CDOW), moose were reintroduced to Colorado in 1978, and the state’s first moose permits were issued in 1985. A total of five permits were issued, with three successful and very happy hunters. This new and unique opportunity was surely worth all of those efforts.

John Stafford had been putting in for a moose permit since the inception of the moose-hunting program. Year after year, for 21 years, he kept trying to be optimistic and faithfully put in his application.

In early 2005, Stafford had bad news from his doctor. He had a severe hernia in several of his vertebrae and would have to have them fused. Stafford committed to the surgery, knowing that it would basically be the end to any hunting he might want to do for the year.

The day he arrived home from the surgery, he checked the mail. To his shock, there was a notice from CDOW stating he had been successful in obtaining a moose permit. To say that Stafford was both amazed and feeling up to his neck in irony would be an understatement. He immediately called CDOW to see if his permit could be postponed because of his operation. No such luck. It was now or never. As you might suspect of a hunter who had been putting in for 21 years for a moose permit, Stafford chose now.

He pushed his body to its limits, scouting for a full twenty days prior to the season. For most of those twenty, he found a total of zero moose. He was disappointed, but determined not to let it sway his motivation.

Just a couple of days before the opener, he went back up toward Big Piney Lake. Imagine his surprise when

he saw six bulls, all together, including a monster that towered above the rest. Stafford had been on an Alaska moose hunt before, in an area where a bull had to be 50 inches wide and have a certain amount of brow tines per side, and Stafford suddenly realized that this bull would likely have been legal even as an Alaska-Yukon moose!

Then, the unbelievable happened. As he sat there watching, some “dudes” as Stafford calls them (vacationers up to an outfitter’s camp), saw Stafford. They began harassing him, having the feeling he was there to eventually hunt the moose. On top of that, right in front of him, they charged in front of him and spooked the moose back into the mountains (a possible hunter-harassment violation).

Even with such outrageous actions happening before him, Stafford would not be swayed. He had waited 21 years for this opportunity, and not only was he going to get his moose, he was going to enjoy it to the fullest. He was able to relocate the bulls before opening day, albeit 2 to 3 miles from where they had been.

On opening day, Stafford was only an hour into the hunt, at an elevation of nearly 10,500 feet, when he looked up the trail and saw the giant bull he had been watching. The bull was coming down the same trail that Stafford was climbing. Stafford stepped behind a tree and waited as the bull approached. Finally, at 25 yards, John fired his muzzleloader and dropped the towering moose.

Stafford’s dream had, at long last, been fulfilled. Not only had he bagged a gorgeous moose, but it would become one of the top specimens ever taken in Colorado. Against all odds, including back surgery, unfriendly vacationers, and early difficulty even locating the species, Stafford had come home with a 1200-pound moose.



It is interesting to point out that 37 moose from Colorado have been entered in B&C since the first hunting season in 1985



A Ram with Flare

Merle J. Uscola • 168-4/8 Dall’s Sheep • Chugach Mts., AK 2005

Merle Uscola has been chasing sheep in Alaska for more than 20 years. As such, he has seen both great and harrowing times in Alaska’s mountains.

In late August of 2005, Uscola and his son Marc headed out together after Dall’s sheep. They climbed nearly 4000 vertical feet that day, and they could feel it. It was just a day hunt, so they pushed to the extreme.

After glassing, they spotted two rams from a far distance. They spent the next four hours moving within range. At 375 yards, they both set up and were able to bag their rams.

Marc’s ram turned out to score roughly 158 points, just missing the Awards Book — not bad for a 15-year-old hunter. Uscola’s was larger at 168-4/8, but that isn’t what set this ram apart. The greatest spread on this flaring ram is 32-6/8 inches, which ties it for the seventh-widest Dall’s ram ever recorded by Boone and Crockett Club. To put it in terms that more hunters might understand, it is basically the equivalent of harvesting a 45-inch mule deer or a 35-inch whitetail.