

SHEEP HUNT IN THE SAN JUANS

By Dan Wand
B&C Associate Member

After 16 years of completing license applications, the opportunity for a Colorado bighorn sheep hunt had finally arrived. There would be no guides, but plenty of support from friends and family. Would the physical and mental preparations that preceded this hunt-of-a-lifetime payoff? I was about to find out.

"Hunting the bighorn is always a toilsome and laborious task... No other kind of hunting does as much to bring out the good qualities, both moral and physical, of the sportsmen who follow it."

—Theodore Roosevelt

Over the years, my youngest brother Rob had expressed interest in assisting on a sheep hunt should I ever draw the tag. Since I was a Colorado resident and he a non-resident from Wisconsin, he realized that might be his only opportunity to hunt bighorn sheep, and he eagerly agreed to join me should I draw successfully. I joked that should the happy day occur, he would be "chief guide and taxidermist," but the job title of "pack mule" would be more appropriate.

After 16 years of completing license applications, I finally drew a tag to hunt in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado, not far from my home in Durango. I immediately began preparations.



The Coyote Camp situated at an elevation of 11,400 feet.

LEFT: A View of the mountain where some of the "fun" took place.

The San Juans had received an exceptional snowfall during the previous winter, with the snow pack measuring 150 percent more than average accumulation. With this snowfall also came rumors of avalanches and trail closures, which I confirmed months later on a July horseback scouting trip with my neighbor Vern. Our destination for a likely sheep camp location was 10 to 12 miles from the trailhead. We progressed seven miles before we came to a dead end. An avalanche had filled the narrow valley with snow, rocks, and jack-strawed spruce timber. (This trail would later be opened in October, which did me little good since my hunt was in September.)

The weekend prior to the season opening, Vern and I packed in 300 pounds of gear near the avalanche site and established a base camp equipped with wall tent and all the fixin's at an elevation of 9,560 feet. A few days later my brother Rob flew in, joining me and my friend Nick for the pack-in to base camp.

For the final pack-in, we used two packhorses carrying 150 pounds of gear each, including our aluminum-framed backpacks. Since our final destination could not be reached with livestock, I had arranged for Nick to get us to base camp, and then we would proceed past the avalanche with backpacks.

Climbing into the saddle, Nick puffed on a hand-rolled cigarette as his trained eye inspected the ropes and panniers. Finally, he swung the Morgan's head toward sheep country and announced, "We're good to go." Rob and I followed up the trail on foot.

Base Camp, and Beyond

The wall tent was a welcome sight as we approached in a soaking rain, but we weren't

going to linger. The next morning we said adios to Nick, his dog, and the horses while we shouldered our 70-pound packs and started up the trail around the avalanche.

A few miles beyond, we established a spike-camp at an elevation of 10,280 feet. Greeting the day with stiff muscles the next morning, we crawled out of our sleeping bags and took in the brisk star-filled morning. After a breakfast of instant oatmeal and coffee, we started up the mountain with flashlights.

Crossing the cascading stream that we had camped along was a challenge in the daylight and seemed downright foolish to attempt in the dark. Nevertheless, we were determined to proceed. Searching high and low, we finally found a combination of boulders littered across the stream

"On the other side of the mountain, we saw he had escaped into a craggy hell of rough habitat, so we reluctantly conceded defeat."

that served as a starting point. By dragging a nearby log close enough to be useful, we determined the odds for a successful crossing were now tilted slightly in our favor, and we decided to give it a go. Fortunately, God watches over small children and fools. We managed the crossing with only a minor splash or two.

The first rays of sunlight revealed elk above the timberline. It was the beginning of the rut for these regal creatures, and the bulls' bugling echoed down the valleys. A 6x6 bull sidetracked us more than we should have allowed. He would stroll out into the soft morning light with his harem of cows, offering an impressive sight.

Associate Hunting Journals

Share your adventures with your fellow Associates

SEND YOUR SHORT STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS TO:
 bcclub@boone-crockett.org
 OR MAIL TO:
 Fair Chase, 250 Station Dr.
 Missoula, MT 59801

Climbing straight up for the next couple of hours was even more fun. After some difficulty, we found a game trail that took us through the first set of cliffs. We marked the passage in case we needed to use it again and then worked our way around the slope toward our hunting destination.

At times we had to use fingers, knees, and toes to cling to the steep slopes, but we pushed steadily forward until we were in what we thought was good sheep country. We eventually spotted a small "sickle-horn" lying on a pastoral bench, surrounded by a fortress of jagged cliffs. There was no approaching him—every way we tried, we were "cliffed-out."

Finding a Way Around

We were determined to hunt the area where we saw the ram, so the next day we made our way beneath the rim where we'd seen the ram. Eventually finding a passage through

BELOW LEFT: Heading back to the Coyote Camp. **BELOW:** Rob and Dan Wand after their successful Colorado bighorn sheep hunt. Dan's sheep scores 178-5/8 points.



a steep drainage, we followed the narrow line of timber along the edge. As we approached timberline, I shed my pack and crept along, stopping to glass.

Rob had waited with the gear until I had a good head start, then carefully maneuvered toward me. As he came around a corner, he noticed I was settled in with the spotting scope. I motioned for him to join me.

"There's our ram," I whispered, pointing to the cliffs above us.

Muscular and perfect, the ram looked as though he had been carved from the granite he stood on. He was not the largest ram in the world, being about a $\frac{3}{4}$ -curl and somewhat light horned near the tips, but he was a majestic animal. I figured our best bet was to leave him alone until he decided to bed down. Once he had settled in, we would try to maneuver above him and get a shot.

The ram grazed and occasionally jumped from ledge to ledge, but always kept a watchful eye below him. While he skipped along 800 yards above us, we tried to study the terrain and determine how we could get into position in case he finally settled down. Eventually, he vanished around the side of a cliff, leaving us disappointed, but far from ready to give up.

With burning lungs we struggled on, making use of the game trails to get over the roughest parts. On the other side of the mountain, we saw he had escaped into a craggy hell of rough habitat, so we reluctantly conceded defeat. There was nothing left to do but descend from our 13,000-foot perch to the spike camp below.

Rain Out

The next day we opted for seeing new country and headed up a sloppy trail in the rain well before daylight. We were in the clouds as we picked our way up the mountain through the bugling elk. Upon reaching the summit we huddled behind some boulders hoping the cloud cover would soon lift. It never did. Lightning finally chased us off the mountain by mid-afternoon.

We reached camp with some daylight left and decided to take a hike on the valley floor to glass for sheep through some lifting clouds. Rob grabbed the spotting scope and went down the valley while I made the trip up with the binoculars. Rob was anxious to view the area and see if our $\frac{3}{4}$ -curl ram remained on the mountain. Perhaps we had harassed him enough to make him move.

While I saw nothing, Rob returned to camp with exciting news. He spotted two rams in the area where we had hunted the $\frac{3}{4}$ -curl ram. One was very small and nowhere near legal, but the other was a dandy—full curl, heavily horned, and car-



"Muscular and perfect, the ram looked as though he had been carved from the granite he stood on."

rying his mass the entire length. He said it was difficult to gauge his real size, as even with the powerful scope he appeared very far away. He was much bigger than the ram we had previously seen.

Rain continued during the night and heavy clouds and fog greeted us at daylight. We did not want to ascend the mountain as we had done the day before when weather conditions offered no visibility. We decided to glass what we could from the valley floor and to then head down to base camp for a fresh supply of food.

I was in a foul mood because I could not find the walking stick that I had carefully selected on the hike in. I had probably thrown it down with an armful of wood when replenishing our supply. I had come to realize that a good walking stick is worth its weight in gold when hiking with a heavy pack. Rob did sympathize with my loss, but not enough to offer me his favorite stick.

Taking Camp to the Sheep

Rob went down the valley and again saw two sheep; he was convinced it was the big fellow

and his companion. Rob was adamant that we take our camp to the sheep. So later that morning, we sorted out more provisions and returned to spike camp.

The next morning we lashed our tent, sleeping bags, and other essential equipment to the pack frames and started up the mountain. Because of the late start and extra weight, it took us most of the day to make the climb. As we approached timberline, we spotted the $\frac{3}{4}$ -curl ram near the top of the mountain and a quarter mile out of our reach.

Sneaking through the timber, we eventually found a place to set up our tent. There was no such thing as a gentle slope in this area, so we had to settle for an incline on the edge of a spruce thicket well below where we expected to see any sheep. We did not want to camp on top of them, but we wanted to be close enough to move into position if they gave us an opportunity.

We were down to bare-bones camping, having left the comfort of our base camp and spike camp far down in the valley below. Our Coyote Camp was perched at 11,400 feet on a spot far from level. By now, we were getting physically worn down. I was coming down with a cold, and our muscles and joints ached, especially my knees. Rob was having issues with the altitude. We spent a restless night on that slope, trying not to slide out of the tent.

The View From Coyote Camp

At last, the gray dawn slipped over the peaks and filtered through the door of our tent. Upon awakening, I dressed, took my rifle and slipped around the corner to glass the cliffs above us. Rob finished lacing his boots and tended to his equipment, but soon missed me and wandered after me, afraid he might miss something.

He was missing something—when he saw me, I was desperately trying to find a good rest for my rifle. I could make out a little white dot at the base of the cliffs that I knew must be a sheep. As I drew nearer, I could see the ram was by himself and presumed it to be the $\frac{3}{4}$ -curl that had given us the slip the previous day. I was surprised to find him grazing this low on the mountain.

"Are you going to shoot?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"How far is it?"

"Over 300 yards," I whispered.

"That's do-able!" Rob said. "Wait, let me spot for you."

Rob lifted the binoculars and quickly found the ram. The animal grazed

unsuspectingly, facing directly away from us. Then, the ram lifted his head.

My heart skipped a beat as a set of massive horns came into view—it was the full-curl trophy.

“Holy smokes, it’s the big one!” Rob exclaimed.

“I was trying not to think about that,” I said.

Ka-wham! The bullet left the barrel of the .300 Magnum with deadly intent, and the ram exploded in a flurry of movement. I couldn’t tell if he had been hit, except to note that I didn’t see any rocks fly. Either the bullet had struck him, or it had missed by a mile!

The ram was running hard down the rock slide toward us. His back legs moved with all the power and speed of a healthy animal, but his front legs were just a fraction of a second behind. Something was not quite right with him, indicating that he was wounded.

“You hit him!” Rob said, as I jacked another cartridge into the chamber.

The ram tried to negotiate the rock slide at full speed, but lost his footing and piled up. Once down, he struggled mightily to regain his feet, but could not.

Suddenly, the ram laid flat and disappeared from our view. After what seemed like an eternity, he struggled again and flashed his white rump, allowing us to locate him.

“Let’s go get our ram,” I said.

Because of the sheer slope and sharp rocks, it took us a good 40 minutes to cover the 300 yards between us and the ram. I stood over the handsomest ram I could have imagined. I reached down and pointed out the bullet hole just behind the muscular front shoulder. I had made a perfect shot.

On the Way Down

After caping and butchering the ram for transport, we returned to Coyote Camp and packed it to begin the four-mile journey to base camp. Each of us had nearly 100 pounds on our pack frames and carried sleeping bags, pads, and other odds and ends in our arms. We carefully stepped our way down the treacherous slopes.

Before leaving, we took one last look at the mountain and said our good-byes. Though the mountain had nearly broken us, it had eventually offered up the trip of a lifetime, and quite a trophy to boot.

The base of the ram’s horns each measured a full 16 inches in circumference, and their well-broomed lengths were 36 inches. With a final score of 178-5/8 points, the ram qualified for the Club’s Awards Program. But you didn’t need a tape measure to see this was truly a magnificent animal—God had made him well. ■



Dan and Vern gathering up camp for the pack out.

**In hunting, you make
your own luck.**

Zenith 1.5-6x 42 Flash Dot



Sure, every hunter needs a bit of luck. But when the trophy you’ve been after for a lifetime shows up at very last light, and you can’t see well enough for a shot, that has nothing to do with luck. It has to do with your optics. With some of the highest light transmission values ever achieved in riflescopes, Schmidt & Bender has been helping hunters get lucky for 50 years.
800.468.3450 • info@schmidtbender.com
www.schmidtbender.com

SCHMIDT BENDER

See it our way.

