

BEYOND MADE IN U.S.A. 7 8 P.R. APP'D. 9 252 Tc THE SCORE

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Hell's Canyon Sheep

Hells Canyon in Oregon is not only No. 1 in the United States in terms of depth (yes it is deeper than the Grand Canyon), it also ranks among some of the best sheep and goat country in the lower 48 states. This is greatly due to the efforts of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife as well as the Oregon Wild Sheep Foundation chapter. Because of their tireless efforts and overall dedication to the sheep and goats of Oregon, the state continually puts out world-class Boone and Crockett heads including most recently, a 191-1/8 point bighorn sheep for Jenni Thornton.

As with most all sheep hunts in the Lower 48, drawing a tag is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and there is no guarantee that you will draw at all. Jenni was well aware of this when her notification showed up informing her that one of the Hell's Canyon area tags belonged to her.

She and her husband instantly started preparing for the hunt by making phone calls to everyone in the area with any information on these rams as well as beginning a practice regimen with both her .270 and Thompson muzzleloader. While Oregon does not have a separate sheep season for any short-range weapon, the tag is good for any legal weapon, and she had decided to try with the muzzleloader if the opportunity presented itself. After contacting local biologists and making friends with a few of the locals who knew the sheep well, opening day couldn't come quick enough.

The two had spent hours reviewing sheep articles and DVDs on field judging sheep. They were confident they were ready and that the unit held some magnificent sheep—that is, until she heard that the unit had already produced a 189 and a 177 green score sheep in previous seasons that year.

They headed out the Thursday prior to the Saturday opener of their season for the 400-mile trek.

After arriving, they scouted the first day and only found a few bands of ewes and lambs with a couple young rams. Exciting, but not the caliber of sheep they were there to hunt.

Opening day found them working the open rocky terrain up from the river. As they progressed, the evidence of times past was spread across the hills. Remnants of the intense mining activity could still be found in the form of dilapidated buildings and equipment long-abandoned.

After climbing to a good vantage point where Jenni felt there was a ram, glassing revealed a pair of rams at over 500 yards. They watched intently as the two sheep stood and fed their way across the hillside. While the better of the two was estimated in the low 170s, they weren't ready to take a sheep of that caliber just yet.

They continued working across the hills, though the wind was really gaining some force, gusting up to 40 mph. After finding shelter in some sage, her husband Dale spotted a pair of rams with one being nearly a full-curl. However, Jenni wasn't comfortable with a 300-yard shot in such intense crosswinds and the ram was also bedded within 10 feet of a very steep canyon.

After passing this ram, Jenni decided to go back and look at the first ram again, though they could only get within 400 yards before the rams spooked. They hunted the rest of the day and looked at a few more sheep but ran out of daylight before a shooter could be located. The next day Jenni received a call from Dan, one of the contacts she had made with her pre-season phone calls, and he was headed her way. Jenni and her husband began hunting up the mountain toward a spring where they thought the big ram may be,



Jennilyn Thornton with her bighorn sheep, which scores 191-1/8 points. She took this fine ram while hunting Hell's Canyon in Baker County, Oregon, during the 2010 season. It is the largest ram from Oregon taken by a female hunter in Boone and Crockett Club's records listing.

This column is dedicated to those trophies that catch our eye as they come across the records desk at Boone and Crockett Club's headquarters. Some score high, some are downright entertaining, and many are just unique.

though failed to locate him. The two were about to move on when Dan arrived and met the two for the first time in person. The threesome continued on with their morning hunt and soon had four rams located. They judged the group and Jenni was still wondering about the ram she had seen earlier and passed. When they descended to the base of the mountain, Dale's cousin Walt, whose land they were hunting on, was waiting for them. He had spotted a band of seven rams in the junipers. As they headed up to take a look, Dan spotted the big ram that Dale found opening morning. Dan wasn't confident this ram was what Jenni was looking for. They passed him up again to have a look at the seven rams. Dale and Jenni stayed to glass the seven rams while Dan went to a better vantage point to scope the big ram. Suddenly the seven rams stood up and came down the hill on a full run. Jenni got her muzzleloader ready and watched for 20 minutes as the rams watered at the spring 100 yards away, but the largest ram never presented a decent shot.

They regrouped and Dan confirmed what Jenni had thought all along, that the big ram she'd passed on earlier was worth trying for. The threesome moved around the hill into position and Jenni grabbed her .270 and prepared for the shot. The grade was so extreme she had to dig her toes into the hill to prevent from sliding down. Finally, the ram turned broadside and a solid thunk confirmed the accuracy of her shot. Light was fading as they watched the ram bed over 500 yards away. All Jenni and Dale could do at that point was pray the ram would quickly expire and they could make a quick recovery the next day. Dan headed to the top of the drainage the next morning while Dale and Jenni positioned themselves toward the bottom in case the ram had made it through the night. They soon received sign Jenni's shot was indeed fatal. The adventure was far from over with the pack job ahead and the fact that Jenni had the largest ram from Oregon taken by a female hunter in Boone and Crockett Club's records.

This ram was aged at 7-1/2 years old by a state biologist. Measuring 191-1/8 at that

age! That sounds like a ram out of the Missouri River breaks of Montana, which has produced the largest sheep in the lower 48 states with four taken this year alone that scored over 200. Hopefully the work of the Oregon Wild Sheep Foundation and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife will help

these sheep to continue to thrive in the face of challenges and continue to produce world-class sheep in world-class country.

While the trophy ram would be satisfaction enough, Jenni says the meat was the absolute best-tasting they had ever eaten. ■

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