

# Three Weeks in PARADISE

**M**y mind went into overdrive as I saw the envelope from Fish, Wildlife and Parks in my mailbox. Obviously I had drawn a Montana special permit, but for what species? Tearing open the envelope the first thing I saw was a tiny picture of a bighorn ram. I had been selected for a sheep permit in one of Montana's top trophy producing areas. For a 47-year old hunter who had grown up on Jack O'Connor stories of chasing sheep in the high country it was a dream come true.

In 1992, Montana had opened a new sheep hunting area. Located along the Flathead and Clark Fork rivers in western Montana, the Paradise-Perma area 124 was formed to help manage a very successful bighorn herd introduced only thirteen years earlier. From an initial plant of fifteen animals the herd had expanded to an estimated 600 sheep ranging between the new area and the adjoining Flathead Indian Reservation.

For the sportsman, new hunting opportunities are always welcome, especially with the high quality of rams being produced in the early years of these introduced herds. Good habitat combined with little competition for food and no hunting pressure often results in some fine animals. Area 124 was no exception with several excellent rams taken during the first two years of hunting. Four ram permits were awarded in 1992 with six in 1993 and six more proposed for 1994. In actuality twelve ram permits and 60 ewe permits were awarded in 1994 to help control the rapidly expanding population.

I had faithfully applied for Montana's special permits for over

thirty years with limited success so this permit was a very welcome surprise. The state had recently changed its permit process requiring an earlier application, and in turn holding an earlier drawing and notification. Instead of only a few weeks, I had over two months to scout and prepare for my adventure. As events worked out, this became a mixed blessing. Little did I know what the coming months would bring.

I didn't plan on using a guide so I promptly started laying the groundwork. The area was relatively small and had few access roads. Boat access was possible in some places but landowner permission needed to be secured. Phone calls to hunters from previous years, visits to taxidermists, talking with locals and days of knocking on doors opened up several hunting options. The importance of this shouldn't be missed. Those who failed to get permission early found themselves crowded into one small area of public land that gets heavy hunting pressure. Attention to this detail was highly important in my enjoyment of the hunt and eventual success.

August brought bad news as forest fires raced through much of the area's high timberland. Large crews of firefighters, helicopters and equipment traversed the countryside and roads were closed to all unauthorized parties. Scouting was impossible and one could only guess what the effect on the sheep would be. It was September before the fires were out and access again became available. Scouting revealed a few scattered bands but nothing like on earlier trips. The season opened on September 15, and the first few days were exciting with sev-

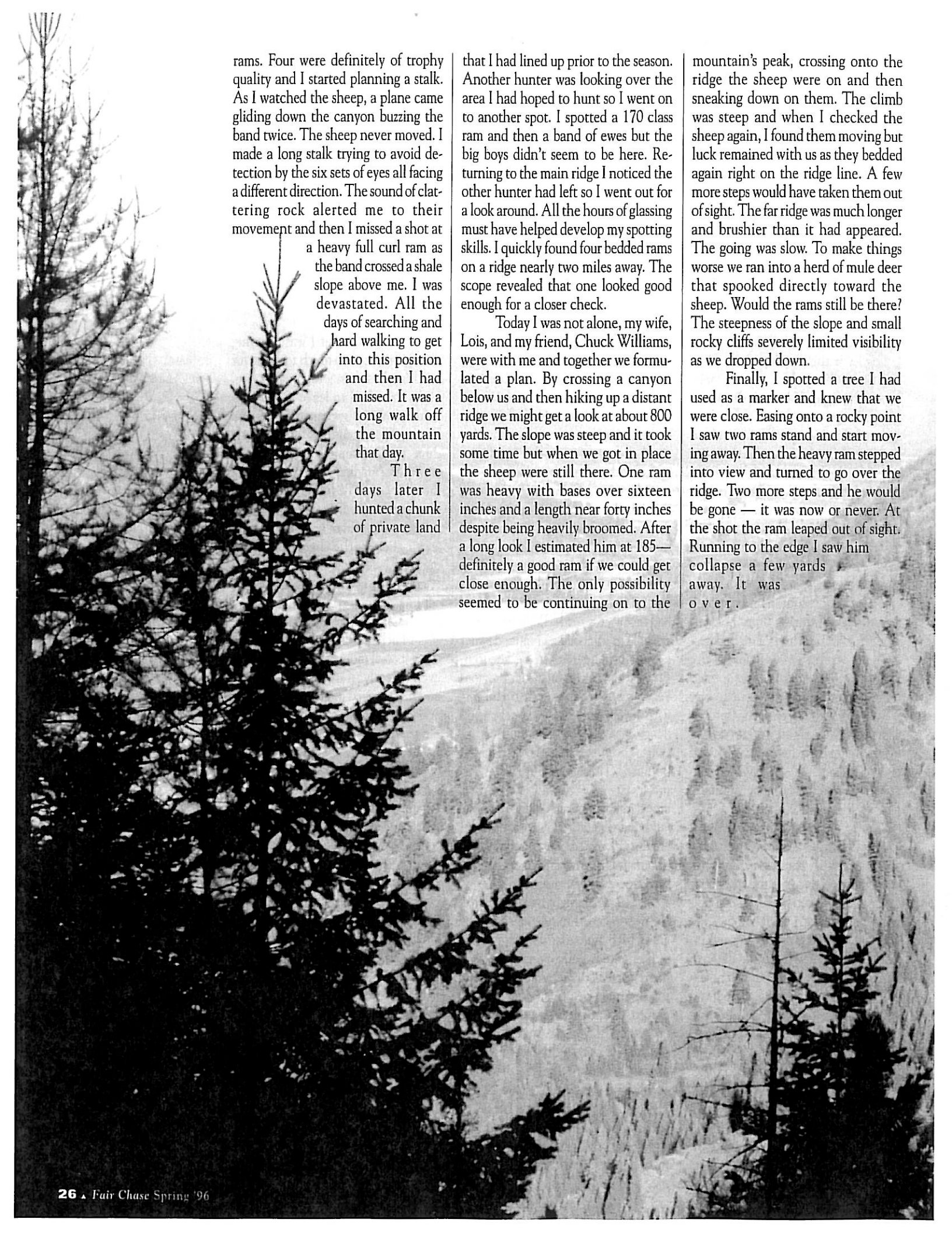
eral rams spotted but I was enjoying the experience too much to settle for anything less than a top quality ram. My partner had to leave so I took a small tent and set out on my own. During the next month, I spent nearly three weeks roaming the ridges and basins of Paradise. The memories of those days will never be forgotten—blue grouse in an early snowfall, a mountain lion crossing a sunny slope, and especially the sheep. Images of ram bands feeding at daylight, close encounters in the timber and the echoing crack of clashing horns remain etched on my mind.

Each day had its adventures but a few special moments stand out. One evening early in the hunt I was tired and discouraged after miles of hiking and hours of glassing in nearly 90° temperatures. Only one ewe and lamb had been seen all day. I decided to check out one final ridge in the last rays of sunlight before heading back to camp. Almost immediately five rams were spotted moving down off a high ridge. As they neared the bottom they were joined by two other rams that seemed to materialize out of nowhere. The spotting scope confirmed the heavy sweeping horns of a truly giant ram. I watched in awe until the darkness swallowed them up. At daylight I was in that spot. The five rams were soon spotted but the other two including the big ram were never seen again.

On October 13, nearly a month into the season, I headed up into a series of cliffs that ended in a grassy basin. Heavy fog rose from the river wiping out any view as I continued to climb. Finally, I broke out above the fog and almost immediately spotted six bedded

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rams. Four were definitely of trophy quality and I started planning a stalk. As I watched the sheep, a plane came gliding down the canyon buzzing the band twice. The sheep never moved. I made a long stalk trying to avoid detection by the six sets of eyes all facing a different direction. The sound of clattering rock alerted me to their movement and then I missed a shot at

a heavy full curl ram as the band crossed a shale slope above me. I was devastated. All the days of searching and hard walking to get into this position and then I had missed. It was a long walk off the mountain that day.

Three days later I hunted a chunk of private land

that I had lined up prior to the season. Another hunter was looking over the area I had hoped to hunt so I went on to another spot. I spotted a 170 class ram and then a band of ewes but the big boys didn't seem to be here. Returning to the main ridge I noticed the other hunter had left so I went out for a look around. All the hours of glassing must have helped develop my spotting skills. I quickly found four bedded rams on a ridge nearly two miles away. The scope revealed that one looked good enough for a closer check.

Today I was not alone, my wife, Lois, and my friend, Chuck Williams, were with me and together we formulated a plan. By crossing a canyon below us and then hiking up a distant ridge we might get a look at about 800 yards. The slope was steep and it took some time but when we got in place the sheep were still there. One ram was heavy with bases over sixteen inches and a length near forty inches despite being heavily broomed. After a long look I estimated him at 185—definitely a good ram if we could get close enough. The only possibility seemed to be continuing on to the

mountain's peak, crossing onto the ridge the sheep were on and then sneaking down on them. The climb was steep and when I checked the sheep again, I found them moving but luck remained with us as they bedded again right on the ridge line. A few more steps would have taken them out of sight. The far ridge was much longer and brushier than it had appeared. The going was slow. To make things worse we ran into a herd of mule deer that spooked directly toward the sheep. Would the rams still be there? The steepness of the slope and small rocky cliffs severely limited visibility as we dropped down.

Finally, I spotted a tree I had used as a marker and knew that we were close. Easing onto a rocky point I saw two rams stand and start moving away. Then the heavy ram stepped into view and turned to go over the ridge. Two more steps and he would be gone — it was now or never. At the shot the ram leaped out of sight. Running to the edge I saw him collapse a few yards away. It was  
o v e r .

Three weeks of excitement and heartache, long days and thrilling moments, anticipation and fulfillment were wrapped up in this magnificent trophy. I sat down and took a few moments to thank God and to relive the experience while Lois and Chuck caught up with me.

Final taping revealed that my initial estimate was very close. The ram's final score was 185-1/8 points. He wasn't the biggest ram in the hills, but each time I look up at the mounted head I am reminded of my three weeks in Paradise.

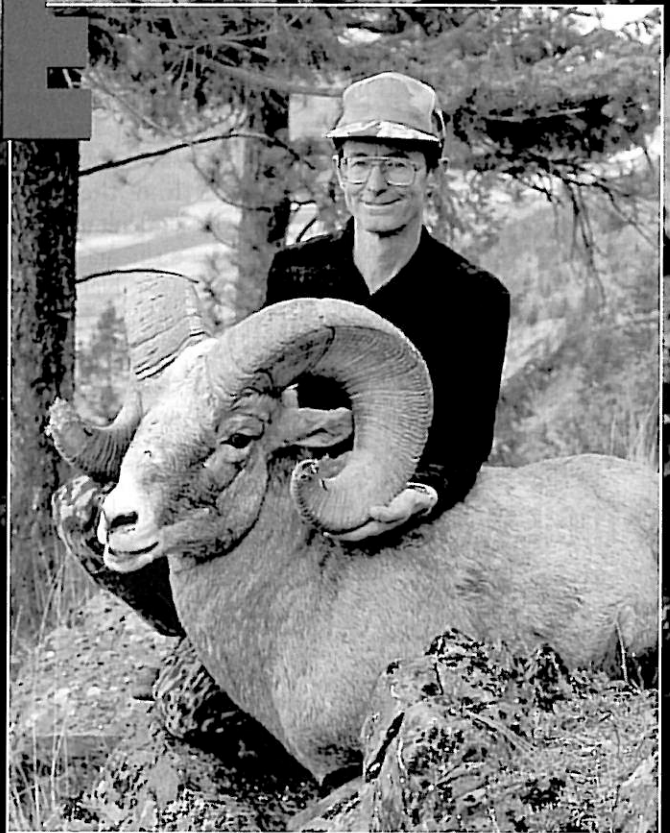
During 1995, several management activities were carried out

in the 124 area. Spring saw a trapping effort with 45 animals removed. Nineteen were transplanted to the Beartooth area near Wolf Creek, Montana, while the remaining 26 went to the Boulder drainage near Columbus.

Hunting permits for the 95 season were again increased with 22 ram and 60 ewe permits awarded. The goal is to keep the herd constant at approximately 600 animals. Some animals have been observed in the areas burned during the 1994 fires and biologists feel the long-term effects

may be beneficial to the sheep. The opening of visual corridors has encouraged pioneering of new areas as well as removing the shrub layer and improving forage quality. Dispersal over a wider area would lower the risk of a disease epidemic and enhance the area's carrying capacity. Overall the herd seems to be doing very well. Hopefully it will provide other hunters with a treasured opportunity for many years to come.

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MARCUS M. NICHOLS WITH HIS BIGHORN SHEEP TAKEN IN THE PARADISE-PERMA AREA. THE SHEEP SCORES 185-1/8 POINTS. BACKGROUND: THE RAM WAS SPOTTED FROM HERE, BEDDED ON THE SECOND MAJOR RIDGE.