



UNFINISHED BUSINESS

BY LEN WURMAN
B&C LIFETIME ASSOCIATE

FOR SOME REASON, my hunts seem to consist of brief periods of alternating ups and downs. This was true for moose and sheep in 1994, for the 1995 moose hunt, and now again for the 1996 Alaskan Dall's sheep hunt. Perhaps it's just my personality that goes from optimism to pessimism and back, but I found myself jumping back and forth between these two emotions.

Two years earlier, in the same location, I unsuccessfully tried for a sheep, never firing a shot. I thought I trained hard for that one, but this year had me preparing even harder. I trained longer and more vigorously on the bike, running, climbing, and with the weights, and also did far more rifle practicing. I even learned to use a Whalen military sling and my target practice was typically 200 yards sitting. My gun this year was a .280 Ackley improved, built on a Remington 700 action, with a Shilen barrel and McMillan stock, firing 150 grain Nosler partitions in consistent sub-one and one-half inch groups. I even memorized the size of my reticles so I could judge distance.

The plan was to drive from my home in Wisconsin to Minneapolis and take the 9 p.m. flight to Anchorage but severe thunderstorms were predicted for the Twin Cities that evening. Naturally, I imagined that the flight couldn't take off, which did indeed happen to me two years earlier on the same flight to Alaska. I had dinner with my

daughter and her husband in St. Paul and amazingly did manage to leave on time watching the storms approach. After a nip at the motel bar in Anchorage, and several hours sleep, a beautiful day greeted me. Dennis Harms' Alaska Trophy Safaris' van picked me and three other hunters up at 10 a.m. A half-

ALASKA DALL'S SHEEP 1996

hour ride took us to the Harms' home. From there, two seaplane trips by pilot and air scout, Terry Adlam, flew us into the heart of the Alaska Range and the beautiful log structures which make up the base camp at Bearskin Lake. Besides me, hunting were Ed Davis from Terra Haute, Indiana, Joe Callanan of Boise, Idaho, and Dale Bell from Atlanta, Georgia.

My guide was once again Les Kinnear, now a friend, who had guided me to two records book moose the past two seasons, and who, when my wife and I fished with him the prior summer, had helped land her a 123 pound halibut. However, on the first moose hunt, we also were after sheep, and were defeated by a wind shift at the last moment of a stalk for the only good ram we saw. So, for Les and me, this was unfinished business. After supper, we settled into sleeping bags on the cots of the guest log building, full of expectations and fears, of what lay ahead.

Morning was overcast. This being the summer's first hunt, preparations were a little slow, but by noon the packhorse, Bearbait, was loaded, with Les on Whiteout and me on Leroy. Les didn't give Leroy

VIEW FROM THE TOP LOOKING BACK AT THE CLIMB LEN AND LES SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED.

much credit for having any brains, which obviously didn't increase my confidence. At noon, the rain started. After a quick lunch, we were off, riding down the Bearskin River nearly 20 miles, fording the numerous rapidly flowing channels back and forth. On some of these crossings, water was well above my boots, and despite covering the boot tops with neoprene anklets, water got inside. Logic was that if the first two horses crossed uneventfully, that would be the best route, but old Leroy, forgetting thousands of generations of evolutionary horse sense, would frequently pick his own way, letting the current take him across at a different angle. The rushing water, carrying glacial silt, prevented viewing the rocks and boulders below the surface, and on several of these intellectual maneuvers, he stumbled, never quite completing his fall, and never quite swimming, but always managing to give my lower extremities a good submersion.

Despite the continuing rain, we could frequently see the mountaintops all around us, but no sheep. We passed a tent camp on a long bar, with three hunters and their guides, flown in on repeated trips with their Super Cub, and passed one other empty base camp. At 9 p.m., after following the river north for over 20 miles, we turned west up a boulder-strewn cascading stream, the sides of which were walled with abominable willow thickets separating the stream from the spruce forests. As on the river, we alternately rode and walked, but whenever we stopped, the mosquitoes and their entourage of gnats and other flying insects found us in nanoseconds. We continued west upstream beyond a shallow mountain pass to the north leading to a lake to which other hunters had flown in and were camping, and finally at 11 p.m., set up our own two tent spike camp in a small meadow near the canyon we were to hunt. With plenty of grass, the horses were staked out to feed. The meadow floor was tundra, soft and lush – great for sleeping. We ate quickly and by midnight fell asleep listening to the rain drumming on the tent fly. My socks and long John's were worn inside the sleeping bag in an effort to dry them out.

Morning, the first day of hunt-

ing, found the weather worse, still raining, but with mist everywhere so we could not see the mountains. The elevation was only 2,000 feet above sea level, and the place was like a jungle, with bugs and humidity. The trees sheltered the wind, and the carpet was saturated and spongy. Les doesn't wear a watch, and I had been up for two hours reading Roosevelt's *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, when I wandered over to his tent to see if he was alive, to which he answered affirmatively. He also said yes to my offer of some candy bars, so I went back to my tent for reading and napping. At 1:30 p.m., Les emerged, put up a tarp over the mess area, and we had our first meal.

The weather persisted, so more catnaps and reading, until Les was hungry again, which was less than five hours later, and our supper was served. With nothing to do, Les cooked a meal of real food, following which we again retired to the tents. Its amazing to me that with no activity available, the body adapts, and despite all the sleep of the past 24 hours, I again slept soundly, only occasionally waking to the patter of the still falling rain on the tent.

The next morning was more of the same, but for some reason Les was now up at 5:30 a.m. Bacon, eggs and hash browns under the tarp, and then back to the sleeping bag. By noon, after 48 hours, the rain finally stopped, and some of the mountains became visible. We saddled the horses and headed up the canyon, on foot initially leading the horses.

The stream was now a torrent, and when I first tried to cross it, jumping from exposed rock to rock, still leading old Leroy. The horse decided not to follow. What happened was, I'm sure, comical to the horse, but not to me, for as my body was in a mid-air jump going in one direction, the arm holding the rein was now jerked back in the direction of the immobile horse. Gravity rapidly entered the picture, and I went into the stream, sustaining another lower body soaking.

We walked the horses for a half mile until we were out of the thickets and could begin glassing. To our right were four rams, and to their left was a single ram, perhaps a mile away. To our left, most of the way

up the mountain were 20 ewes and lambs, divided into two feeding groups. No rams were at the head of the canyon, so the stalk of the four began.

We rode the horses through the low willows to save us some climbing and to get us closer, scaring up a young grizzly as we went. We then continued on foot, going up the slippery, rocky and narrow stream channel that drained that part of the basin. The walls here were 10 to 30 feet high, and we hugged one wall or the other going upstream to avoid the sheep's watchfulness. Finally we arrived at the downhill side of an old glacial moraine, which gave us some breathing room.

We rested, grabbed some candy bars and drank the cold mountain water. A little invigorated, despite the onset once again of some rain, we continued forward in the shadow of the moraine to its uphill terminus, which we climbed to get our first good look at the sheep, now some 400 yards off. Two were less than full curl, and the other two just made it, but neither was large enough to come close to satisfying Les. So after several hours of a difficult stalk, we called that one quits and traveled along the mountain side to our left after the single ram we had seen from below. While we were doing this, he had apparently decided to join the other four, and came shortly into view above us. Les put the spotting scope on him, and again the ram was too small for his taste. So down the slippery mountain we went, most disappointed by our findings but happy to see the horses.

At supper, we agreed to ride to the head of the canyon the next morning to see if other hunters may have pushed some rams. If we did not see any good ones, we would break camp and go hunt somewhere else. Little did we know that a black bear would make that decision for us.

We had no sun the next morning, but at least not much rain. We were starting the day with a hearty bacon and eggs breakfast when the sound of ripping greeted us beneath the tarp. Les stepped out to observe that, not 20 yards away, a very courageous black bear had collapsed his tent and was chomping on his sleeping bag. Mind you, it was new,

B&C LIFETIME ASSOCIATES SERIES

Lifetime Associate, Len Wurman shares his account of hunting Dall's sheep in Alaska in this issue of Fair Chase. Enjoy this and future articles by our Lifetime Associates.

NEW LIFETIME ASSOCIATES:

- 86. Steven D. Kellesvig
Mt. Horeb, WI
- 87. Carl H. Spaeth
Zion, IL
- 88. Michael D. Searle
Chicago, IL
- 89. David A. Miller
Tucson, AZ
- 90. Phil Barnes
Hamburg, AR

BENEFITS

Subscription to Fair Chase,
Long-sleeve shooting shirt,
Duck-cloth hat,
Lifetime Associates Plaque,
20% discount on merchandise,
Significant Tax deduction,
and
Invitation to special events.

Contact our headquarters
toll-free at (888) 840-HUNT

We offer the following plans:

- 1) one payment, check or credit card, for \$1,000;
- 2) four quarterly charges to your credit card of \$250; or
- 3) twelve monthly charges to your credit card of \$83.34.

SEE ORDER FORM IN THE
CENTER OF THIS ISSUE FOR
MORE DETAILS.



**VIEW FROM
INSIDE LEN'S TENT.
CAMPSITES DON'T
GET ANY BETTER!**

and it had only been slept in twice, so it couldn't have been too ripe. Not only that, there was no food in the tent, not even a candy bar. The three horses just watched the whole escapade with indifference, the nearest one being no more than 20 yards away. As Les ran over yelling, the bear looked up, took one more bite at the bag, and ran 40 yards away, where he eyed us with disdain. Les was still saying naughty words when the bear finally sauntered off. Blackie had shredded the tent, which was unsalvageable. Our hands were now tied, so to speak, by Mr. Bruin. We knew he would come back, especially if we were not present, and having not much fear of neither man nor horse, one can imagine what the camp would look like when we returned. Our choices were to break camp, and either set up a new camp up the canyon or head back down to the river and make the long haul back to Bearskin Camp. After due deliberation,

Les selected the latter, and by 10 a.m., off we went again.

We found an easier way downstream, but the river, now engorged from two days of rain, provided some mighty humorous crossings. Leroy proving, as expected, that he was even less intelligent negotiating the now faster and deeper water. The weather was very slowly breaking, no rain, no sun, but the mountain peaks were all visible. My hunt was half over, with one disappointing stalk. Les knew of several good rams southeast of the Bearskin Camp, which he felt we could go after the next day. However, with a failed hunt two years ago, when Les and I did three difficult mountain climbs, and now halfway through another hunt, my pessimism crept in, and I began to think that sheep for me perhaps were not to be.

We did make good time, horses seemingly going faster heading for home, but Leroy now developed two annoying traits. For one, he would lag

behind until he was 100 yards back, or until the other horses got out of sight in some brush, at which point he would begin an awful canter to which I could not adapt, so my underparts received quite a pounding, and by the time we reached Bearskin, were quite sore. Leroy was now awarded for this effort by becoming the pack horse, and I would ride Bearbait; but that evening a hot shower and plenty of talcum powder the following days alleviated any recurrence of butt battering.

Leroy's second wonderful trait reflected the need to scratch his back by turning upside down and, with his legs up, rubbing the afflicted area on the ground. It really didn't matter to Leroy if he was still wearing his saddle. It certainly didn't matter to him even if I was in the saddle. The first time he tried this, I thought he was just dying, so I hopped off quickly. I didn't want to have a leg under a dead horse. But when he tried to roll over onto the scabbard, with



UNFINISHED BUSINESS

my rifle of course inside of it, Les yelled for me to pull the reins. Fortunately, I pulled them away from the direction he was about to roll and stopped him from doing any damage. After a while I became quite adept at this maneuver.

We arrived at Bearskin Camp in the early evening. Ed had already brought in a beautiful 38" ram. He was soaked and cold when he finally got his shot, and as I told him, any ram is a trophy. He had a caribou hunt yet and was drying everything off in the cabin. Soon after, Joe came back unfortunately having missed at 125 yards, and with a horse with a badly cut hoof requiring attention. Joe had a great attitude. I think I would have been forlorn had I missed, but Joe made sure his rifle was still sighted in and was ready for another go at it. There were still rams where Joe had been, so he was to go back, while Les and I would go to the area where we had been two years earlier – a decent ram with four ewes had been spotted near there.

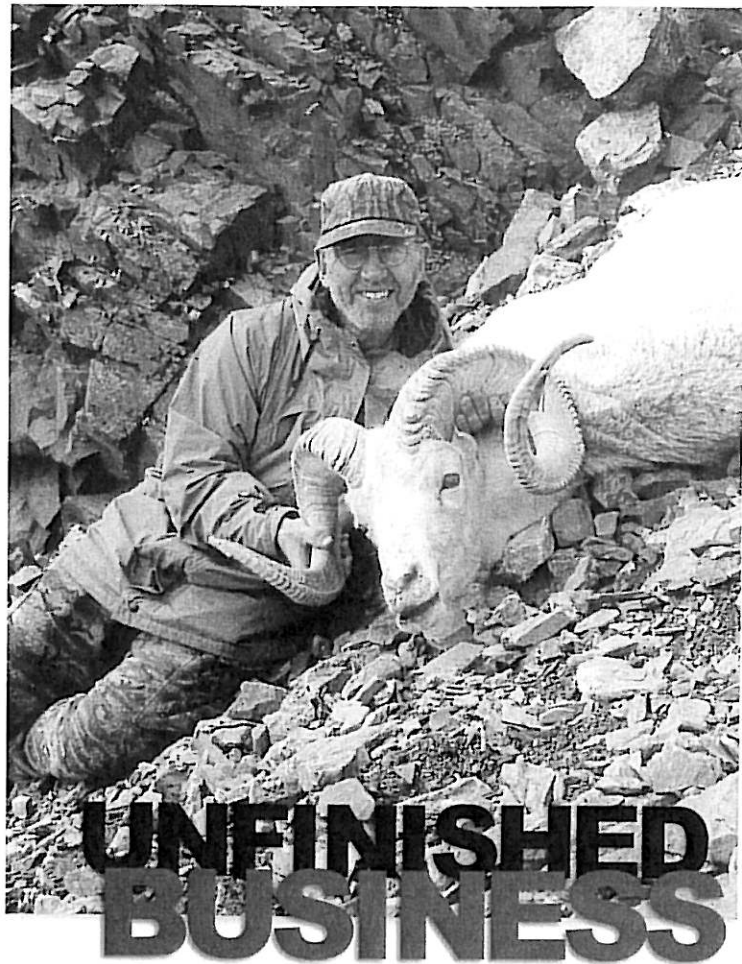
There were also two other rams six miles farther away. The clothing dried in the heated cabin, and even my boots were converted from sopping to only damp.

With the renewed positive scouting reports, and now with finally a day during which the sun actually shone, albeit partly, I became more optimistic once again and headed now with Les back to the river, crossed and headed in a southwesterly direction. We continued up one canyon for several miles, then rode and walked for five miles over a long flat 700 foot high pass, where we spotted four rams high on a mountain. Les pulled out the spotting scope and announced that perhaps the largest was a keeper, but only as a backup if needed.

Descending sharply into another canyon brought us to the drainage that I had hunted two years earlier. The valley floor here was at 3,000 foot elevation, 700 vertical above the Bearskin River and 1,000 feet higher than

the jungle camp. We were above the tree line, the sun was shining, there were no mosquitoes, my feet were dry and we were surrounded by grandiose mountains. We walked up this canyon three miles to its final fork and established a beautiful campsite in a grassy inclined willow field, with wonderful vistas presented in all directions. We didn't see any sheep, but Les, with all the confidence of experience, felt we were in good sheep country. Mixing potatoes, carrots, crisp bacon, onions and chicken in his frying pan, he served a great meal on an evening during which we actually had a sunset behind the mountain before retiring.

I awoke to Les walking by the tent telling me to glass directly out the tent door. There, on the hillside one mile away, up the left fork was the ram and his four ewes, only 500 feet above the valley floor. The ram was certainly one to shoot, but what followed is one of the characteristics that makes Les an extraordinary



UNFINISHED BUSINESS

LEN WITH HIS DALL'S RAM TAKEN ON HIS SECOND TRIP TO ALASKA FOR DALL'S SHEEP.

guide. I didn't know where he went, and since Les in general likes to take his sheep in the afternoon, I read while I assumed Les was still in his tent, or perhaps moving the horses to new grass.

When he came to get me an hour later, I found out he had climbed a small hill behind the camp and had been glassing all the surrounding mountains. Rather than accept a very good ram, which we had already found, he just wanted to be sure there just didn't happen to be a great ram leaving its feeding area and heading up some mountain to a safe haven for the day. Sure enough, he felt that he had indeed seen a extremely good ram on the right side of the right fork, still low but migrating from its grassy feeding slope toward the higher elevations.

Suspecting a strenuous day ahead, we gobbled down as much eggs and bacon as possible and headed on horseback up the right fork for a mile, dismounted and glassed the side mountain. The mountains we were in are not what one frequently thinks of as mountains. Rather than multiple isolated peaks, which there are

occasionally, these were mostly high ridges, sometimes 4,000 feet high, extending for miles, the sides of which formed several huge irregular amphitheatres, each one being up to several miles wide, and each containing several high drainage gorges, some shallow, some deep. These gorges would often have areas of avalanche debris, long stretches of summer softened ice and rock under which the water would flow, creating a tunnel within the ice. These water flows would join together to eventually become one and this would now tumble down to the amphitheatres on each side.

It was at the junction of this amphitheater's outflow stream with the canyon floor that we now set up to watch for the big ram. Presently he came into view in the company of a smaller ram as they headed up the face of the huge irregular bowl. Perhaps 1,000 yards ahead of them was a third ram, smaller but still a full curl, walking in the same direction. We watched them for an hour until they bedded down on the very top, the two in a long saddle and the third among some rocks still quite a distance to their right. The left two were side by side, but looking in different directions, one facing toward us and the other into the canyon on the mountain's other side – covering the back door, if you will. The third sheep initially faced us, but was looking into the sun, and eventually he turned the other way. They were only a mile from us, but the terrain was steep and rocky. It was now 10 a.m. and the most satisfying and challenging day of my hunting career had begun.

Les is an unusual character. He is absolutely at home in the wilderness, but like many guides, doesn't follow the usual recommendations. He has no wool or Gore-Tex, but he did have one fleece shirt/jacket he brought along. For the first stalk, he wore a cotton shirt and pants, hip boots, and a heavy rubber non-breathing rain suit. He left the rain suit top with the horses for the stalk so he had no protection except for a sweatshirt in the backpack. For the stalk we were about to begin, he thought he'd try rubber-bottomed, leather-topped boots without laces to see how well they did, along with

heavy cotton bibs. Meanwhile, I was prepared for anything. Lightweight King of the Mountain wool pants, a Worsterlon shirt and Vasque boots. There were Gore-Tex rain pants and jacket in my pack, as well as a Gore-Tex wool jacket with a separate liner, and then all sorts of emergency extras. My large internal frame pack, which I was about to lug up the mountain, weighed a total of 25 pounds. Les was one or two inches over 6 feet, and, since everything put on the seaplane was weighed first, so was Les, and he was 250 pounds. He is built like a linebacker, except now at the age of 46, some of his chest has fallen. Yet he is nimble as a mountain goat on the rocks. He still guides goat hunts in southeast Alaska. But he doesn't train. It's like all the years of hunting and climbing have created a permanent conditioning for this sport. I suspect, but could be wrong, that I could easily outdistance him in a long foot race, except we were now about to go up almost as far as over. I wouldn't be surprised if he could have gone up the climb in half the time if I weren't tagging behind.

We started up the drainage stream, which at this point had eroded a narrow gorge in the rocks. We crossed it, stepping on the exposed rocks, repeatedly, seeking the easiest footing, moving slowly when the angle brought us into the sheep's view. Les frequently glassed to be sure the sheep had not seen us and were still in the same place. Soon, the climb became steeper, but it never, fortunately, became dangerously steep. On some of the crossings, Les, having already crossed, would take my rifle and lend me a hand. But the rifle came in handy, because it was used in the uphill hand to balance like a third foot against the rocks. There was seldom solid footing. It was almost all loose, varying from tiny to a foot or two in diameter, with almost no vegetation. There were areas of solid rock formation, but these tended to be vertical structures, part of the solid mountain itself, but for the most part, what we walked on was loose. Grass tends to stabilize the rocks and offer better footing, but on this hike both up and down, our trail didn't cross any. Steps frequently were tested before weight was placed to

be sure the rock wasn't loose, and frequent small avalanches were created when a rock broke free.

We reached a split in the stream and took the left fork, which took us away from the sheep's view. I had to stop frequently to catch my breath, but we never really took a good break. On several occasions, after a particularly steep climb, we did sit down for a chocolate bar, and the stream provided ice cold refreshment. When we hit an avalanche ice debris segment, we stepped carefully onto the ice first to cool our soles or else we didn't have any traction.

The last part of the climb was up a long scree field that stretched to the top bringing us to the saddle. Viewed later on a topographical map, our climb covered only one mile horizontally, but we had climbed 2,300 feet vertically with very little solid footing along the way and it had taken us five hours. The scope cover was removed and a shell chambered.

This saddle extended and formed a thin ridge line between two higher and bulkier parts of the mountain. We had no wind on the way up, but the wind all of a sudden gusted to 25 mph, enough so that it was cold on my perspiration soaked clothing, and I put on my rain jacket as a windbreaker. A mental note was made of wind speed and direction for my upcoming shot. Viewed from below, we had arrived at the left side of the saddle. The sheep we were after were in the center and the third sheep was on the right. The saddle was about 800 yards long, and was interrupted in several spots by rocky elevations. We slowly worked over the first elevation to see if the sheep were on the other side. They weren't, so we knew they were behind the next elevation, 100 yards away.

At this point, the ridge narrowed, and was only five feet wide with the slope on the backside dangerously steep. Walking on our shallow side was fairly safe and, when we made it to the rocky elevation, Les peered around, saw the two sheep and motioned for me to take the pack off. Immediately, we heard small rocks falling, and looking around, we saw the two sheep now running along the saddle, but on our side and away from us.

The pack was quickly placed on the rocks and I lay semi-prone with the rifle on the pack. By good fortune, the pack was stable and formed a very solid rest for the gun. Les repeatedly said, as only the voice of experience could, "Wait until they stop, wait until they stop."

However, all I could see was the image of the big ram getting smaller and smaller in my rifle scope. All thoughts about wind deflection of the bullet and using the reticle size to determine distance completely vanished from my brain. All I could think about was the hunt two years ago when we had spooked a good ram and now I had done the same thing again after an absolutely exhausting ascent.

But, Les was right; when they came to the lowest part of the saddle, they stopped, turned their heads around to look at us and see what startled them. Les knew, but I didn't then, that sheep tire, and he correctly judged they would stop before they would have to climb the far side of the saddle.

Good combo – Les had the knowledge, and I had the confidence that he did. The cross hairs settled easily on the sheep, giving me a shot from a mild elevation, but to tell the truth, despite all my practicing and confidence in my rifle, when the trigger was slowly squeezed and the gun went off, I was almost astonished when the sheep was hit. The damage was mortal, but the animal was standing. The ram could not run, nor hide. The second shot was pressure free; he immediately collapsed and started to tumble down the steep scree slope, going 200 yards before stopping. Les thought the shot was about 250 yards, but I thought it was at least 300 based on reviewing the size of the image in the scope. Les gave me hearty congratulations, and photographs were taken.

My relief was profound. I had succeeded. All the efforts of the past year had culminated in this one moment. All the agonizing physical training finally paid off on the difficult climb. And all the bullet load development and the hours of honing my shooting skills had been worth it. The elation was absolute.

The animal had come to rest on a steep slope and could not be

cleaned there. We tried dragging him down but he kept rolling and twisting in our arms. Finally, Les did something he never did before – he just let the animal roll until it finally came to a more level spot several hundred yards down the slope. We watched with the glasses, hoping he did not break off a horn.

We slid down the scree slope. Les moving at easily twice my speed. Lunch was now had, peanut butter and jelly, and photographs were again taken. The longer horn was 41-4/8 inches, the shorter side broomed to 36". The animal was cleaned and the entire hide was saved for a full-body mount.

We put the salvageable quarters in my pack and Les took the rest. My pack was 60 pounds, Les' 100 pounds. Going down was no piece of cake. My legs were exhausted. The footing was bad and slippery at times, especially on the ice.

What a relief to reach the bottom, where we could put the packs on the saddle horn. My legs felt springy as we walked back to camp. After supper, we further cleaned the hide, removed it from the skull, and removed the horns and skull cap. The next day, we headed back to Bearskin.

In my absence, Dale had come in with a beautifully symmetrical 40-4/8" ram, and had left for his caribou hunt. Ed had already returned with his caribou. Within minutes of my arrival, Joe came in with a 36" ram. He had seen bigger rams, but with one missed shot already, he took the ram that gave him the best shot, wishing to avoid anymore strenuous stalks. He is 57 years old, and I sure do not blame him.

Les and I, mostly Les, finished the hide and salted it. After more photographs, single malt scotch was used to toast the success of the four of us, as well as my 55th birthday, and cigars were puffed to appease the hunting gods. The next morning, wishing to avoid any weather delays, Ed and I flew to Anchorage, changed our flights to that evening, and shared a meal. The overnight flight brought us to Minneapolis, where Ed caught a flight to Indianapolis and I drove back to Wisconsin. A great challenge had been met and a wonderful mission accomplished. ▲▲▲