

The Vizcaíno BIOSPHERE RESERVE

A Hunt for Desert Sheep in the Yellowstone of the Baja

By **Mary Webster**

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Photos courtesy of the author

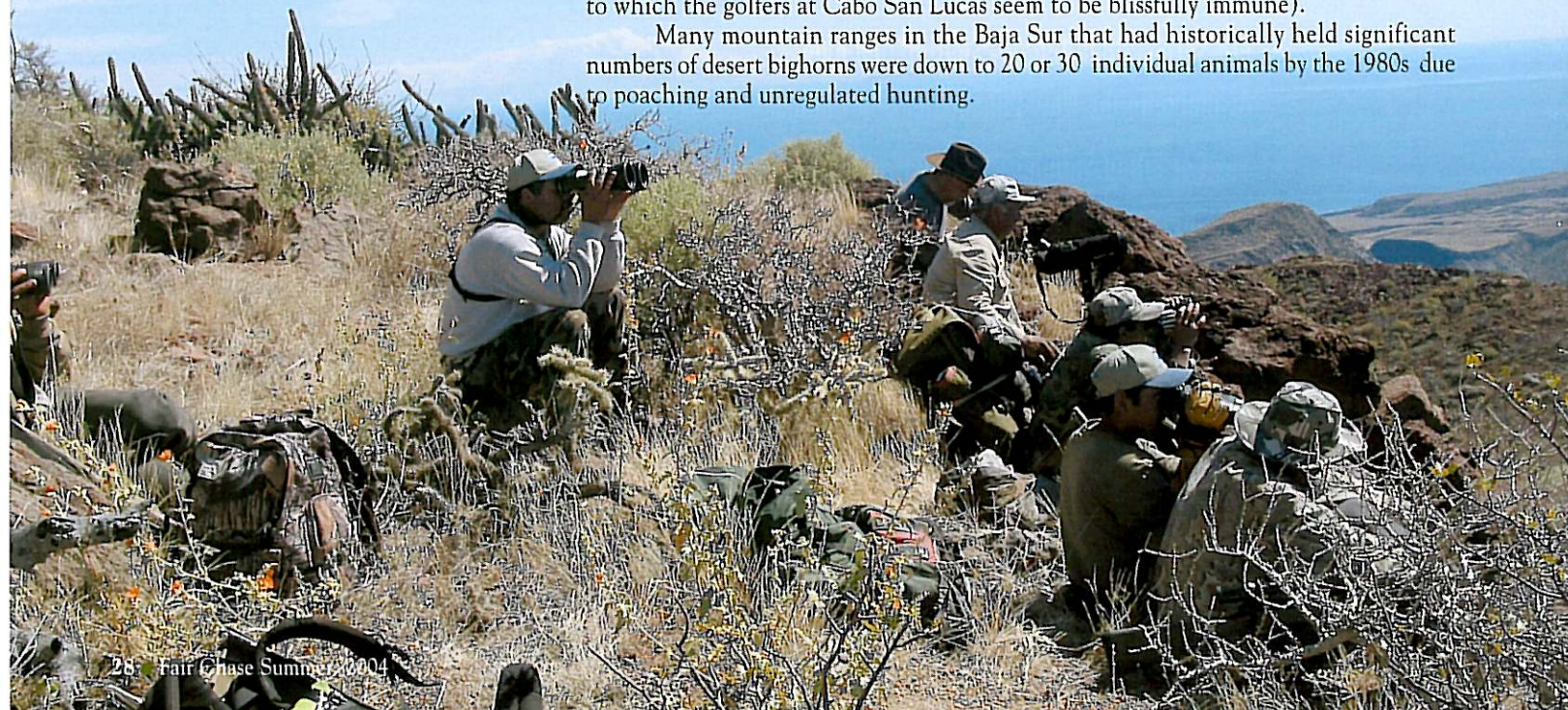
According to our local Mexican guides who had been doing a bit of scouting, a group of seven desert sheep, including two older rams with massive horns, had been hanging around in the same small canyon for days. But by the time we arrived, this group had seemingly dissolved into thin air. And it wasn't easy climbing over the steep, rock-strewn, cactus-covered, rattlesnake-hugging terrain to peek into every nook and cranny that could hide the rams.

My husband, Paul, and I were pondering the rams' disappearing act in our well-run spike camp, located deep in the heart of the Baja of Mexico within the largest biological reserve in Latin America. Paul had bought one of the few tags for the reserve's desert sheep, known to the Mexicans as "Borrego cimarrón" — a much more enticing name than the taxonomically-correct *Ovis canadensis weemsi*.

Desert sheep, as most people know, are probably the hardest of the four sheep species found in North America. They must survive the brutal heat, lack of water, and sparse vegetation that typify the desert mountains of Baja California Sur (conditions to which the golfers at Cabo San Lucas seem to be blissfully immune).

Many mountain ranges in the Baja Sur that had historically held significant numbers of desert bighorns were down to 20 or 30 individual animals by the 1980s due to poaching and unregulated hunting.

It takes many pairs of eyes to spot dusty-colored desert bighorns hidden among the rocks.



The "Yellowstone" of the Baja

In 1988, the federal government of Mexico set aside just over 9,800 square miles to create the Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve, a place of exceptional biological and historical interest: the Reserve contains an important calving area for the endangered ballene (gray) whale, cave paintings thousands of years old, and other unique fauna and flora. The Reserve stretches from the 28th parallel (that cuts the Baja peninsula almost in half) south to Loreto on the Sea of Cortez. Several mountains overlooking the Sea of Cortez are bighorn country.

The desert sheep living in the Reserve became protected in 1988 — at least technically. The sheep existed mostly on private lands where there was really no enforcement by government officials, and the 143 families who owned the land had little incentive to act. The land, given to them tax-free many generations ago, wasn't much good for farming or making a living of any kind. The locals welcomed the few pesos offered by poachers and visiting hunters, or simply shot the sheep themselves when they needed some fresh meat on the table.

Two brothers born in Mexicali, a bustling capital in the north of the Baja, were concerned about the long-term outlook for desert bighorns in the Baja. Dr. Manuel Chee (Manny to his family and friends) is currently a practicing surgeon from Phoenix and a Boone and Crockett Club Regular Member. His brother, Dr. Pablo Chee runs the hospital that they built in their home town of Mexicali. Although their childhood consisted mostly of bird hunting, their father instilled in them a love of the desert and the big-game animals that live there. Using their influence with a childhood friend, Ernesto Zedillo, who happened to be the President of Mexico at the time, they lobbied for a hunting program within the Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve. "This was a bit like suggesting a hunting program for Yellowstone National Park," Manny remarked, "The idea was met with hostility from environmental groups in Mexico and skepticism from bureaucrats."

The Chee brothers prevailed, however, and in 1996, about 190 square miles of sheep habitat within the Reserve was set aside for a sheep hunting program. The Chees hired a biologist to perform helicopter surveys to determine the appropriate harvest levels for the sheep population. The first four permits were auctioned at U.S. hunting organization meetings in 1996, bringing in over \$262,000. Each

year this amount, or slightly more, has been pouring into the Reserve's sheep hunting program.

"Every dollar goes to improving sheep habitat or the lives of the people who live there," Manny is proud to report. The funds have been used to build a base camp called Campamento. It is also used to hire guides, cooks, wranglers, and packers during hunting season, and permanent employees to keep the water holes clean and take on other projects to upgrade sheep habitat year 'round. Virtually everyone who helped us during our hunt in Mexico is descended from the original 143 landowners. These same people also receive funds directly from the hunting program, which they use to improve their lives or livelihoods as fisherman, ranchers, or farmers. The Vizcaíno Reserve's hunting program appears to be one of those federal-state-private partnerships that really works.

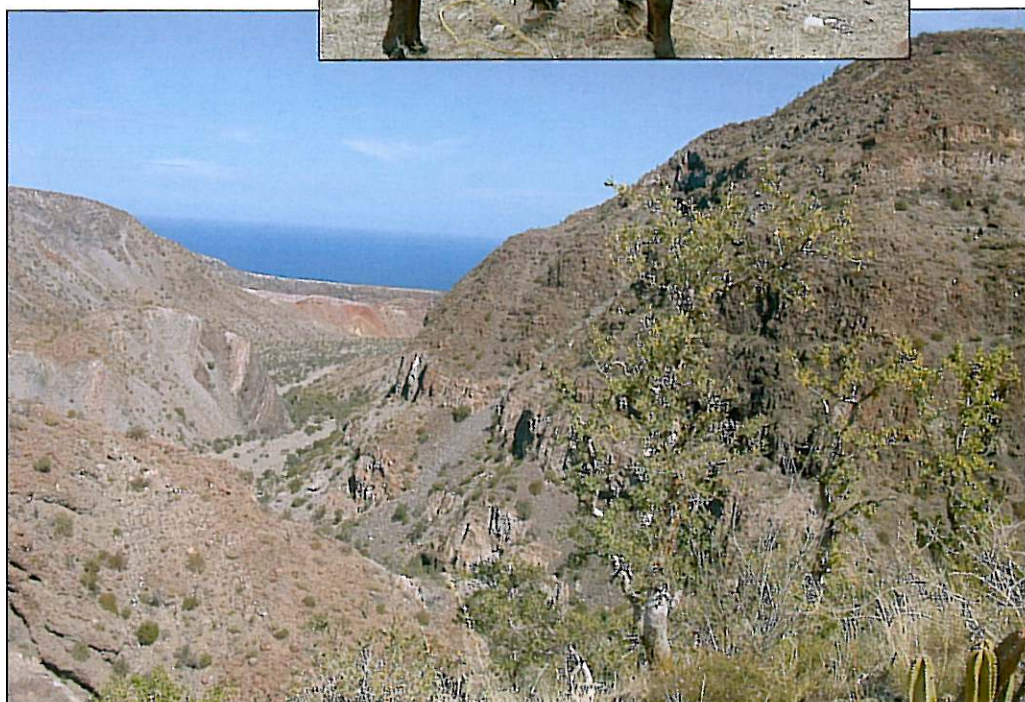
The Ever Elusive Ram

Early one morning in late February, we rode mules to spike camp through strange and

...by the time we arrived, this group had seemingly dissolved into thin air. And it wasn't easy climbing over the steep, rock-strewn, cactus-covered, rattlesnake-hugging terrain to peek into every nook and cranny that could hide the rams.

RIGHT: The sturdy, little burrows that carried our water supply were always in four-wheel drive.

BELOW: These barren hills, with the Sea of Cortez as a backdrop, were the lower reaches of desert sheep habitat in the Reserve.



The Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve's Mule Deer

The mule deer of the Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve are just as magnificent as our Rocky Mountain version — large bodies, sleek coats, and good antler structure. Poaching remains a problem despite the mule deer's status in the Reserve as protected fauna, and Manny Chee wants to establish a hunting program for them. "Without a hunting program that produces value for the landowner like we have for the desert sheep, the mule deer are not going to thrive like they should," Manny informed me. "And I am convinced that our mule deer are a unique peninsular subspecies. If I can prove it, they will have greater value to hunters, and we can provide an incentive for the landowners to protect them, just like the desert sheep." Manny has sent DNA samples from local mule deer to Purdue University where they are being examined as part of a larger project to map the genome of all North American deer (a project funded in part by Boone and Crockett's Grants-in-Aid program). If the Chee brothers are successful, stay tuned for some tough, thrilling peninsular mule deer hunts in the Yellowstone of Mexico.

RIGHT: Our host, Dr. Manny Chee, and a trophy-sized rattlesnake that was, thankfully, moving a bit slowly in the chilly February weather that had settled into the Baja.

ividly-colored volcanic rock canyons and wide, bone-dry arroyos. The desert appeared unusually green, which would be borne out by the fatness of ewes and the healthy-looking rams we glassed later. We watched the active volcano of Las Tres Virgenes that towers over Campamento disappear to the west and the turquoise iridescence of the Sea of Cortez emerge to the east. We were a caravan of ten people, five mules, and eight fully-loaded burros. Manny Chee was along for the pure enjoyment watching a hunt and to ensure that his hunting programs were running smoothly. Five hours later, we arrived at a dry riverbed where the men quickly set up camp as evening fell. Except for the planned execution of a scorpion scooting toward the door of our tent, we rested peacefully.

During the next three days, our keen-eyed guides looked high and low for the "group of seven" and any other large rams. On several occasions, we paused to watch beautiful, healthy-looking mule deer in the lower elevations. We were also very successful at finding "trophy-size" rattlesnakes and scorpions, but the book rams eluded us. We knew the big boys were there: recent helicopter surveys suggest that the sheep population in the Reserve had expanded to about 600 sheep from the 100 or so animals the biologists estimated in 1996. "The average size of the rams is increasing as well," Manny told us. "The rams harvested during the beginning stages

of the hunting program tended to be in the range of 150-160 B&C points, but in recent seasons we are taking rams scoring well over 170. Our hope is to produce more records-book trophies, which will increase the value of the tags and the money flowing to the land."

We did not see a ram the following day either. The unceasing mountain winds and unusually cool temperatures (and whatever other factors affect the rams' decision-making process) had perhaps caused the animals to move to another area of the mountain. In order to get a quick start on the new hunting strategy, the men decided to climb several hours to the top of a ridge named *Filo de la Liona* that evening and sleep "under the stars." Despite the romantic sound of it, I stayed in spike camp in a tent. It turned out to be an excellent choice. Storm after storm blew in, drenching everyone and adding up to a mighty soggy night for the men sleeping without cover on the ridge.

The next day, the hunting party saw many ewes and several young rams, but it wasn't until afternoon that they spotted a very old ram (they could tell this from afar by the dark brown color of his coat and horns). The resulting stalk put my husband in position for a 180-yard, uphill shot at a 45-degree angle. For whatever reason, Paul failed to compensate for the steep angle of the shot. The bullet went low and missed the ram. "A stupid mistake," he said later, "but it can happen."

On the fifth day of the hunt, the guides glassed another solitary, full-curl ram about two miles away. Leaving some of the men on a ridge to watch the ram, the hunters were soon faced with crossing two ravines of about 1,000 vertical feet each. "The mules and burros, which are always in four-wheel drive, were of no use there," Manny told me later, "It was virtually impassable. I grabbed every bush, leaf and stick I could find to keep from tumbling to the bottom." It took about three hours to cross the ravines and get within shooting range of the ram.

The hunters circled above the point where they thought the ram was grazing, still unsure as to its precise location. As they carefully crept onto the edge of an overhanging cliff, they saw the bighorn standing beneath them. His body reflected a winter of plentiful food. The ram's horns had large bases, good mass, and a full curl with one side slightly broomed. It was an older, beautiful animal that Paul would be proud to harvest.



The shot he had to make was even more of a challenge than the last — it would require a 100-yard shot almost straight down. With the guides holding onto his ankles, Paul inched out to the edge of the cliff, placed the .270 Weatherby on his backpack and waited for a clear shot. He pulled the trigger, certain that the 150-grain bullet had found its mark... but the ram didn't even seem to flinch with the impact. The worst thing that could happen was for that ram to move off of the ledge. Below the ledge, there were huge, vertical cliffs on three sides that would have made tracking impossible. "Shoot, shoot!" The guides whispered, "Shoot again!" And he did. With his third shot, the ram finally rolled over. They discovered later that all three shots were within a millimeter of each other.

When the group arrived at base camp, I was surprised to learn that Paul had not taken a single photo of the ram before it was field-dressed. "The guides could not figure out a way to get down to the ledge without climbing gear and ropes, so Manny and I decided to let the two younger guides do the acrobatics necessary to retrieve him," he explained. While we admired the trophy, Campamento was bursting with ac-



tivity: sheep meat was being roasted, fresh tortillas were piled high, coolers were filled with Tecate beer, and the musicians were warming up for a party to which all of the local landowner families had been invited. ¡Arriba! ■

Paul Webster, and his ram with Dr. Manny Chee (left), both are Boone and Crockett Club Regular Members. Manny Chee's desert sheep hunting program in the Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve has been a tremendous success.

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