

# FIELD

Telling the difference between big and small billies — or a billy and a nanny — takes a close look and a trained eye.

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# JUDGING

By Bob Robb

ROCKY MOUNTAIN GOATS THE TENTH IN A SERIES

After six hours of “going vertical,” Mike and I were high on the mountain overlooking Alaska’s massive Columbia Glacier. About 100 yards below us was a bedded mountain goat, enjoying the relative warmth of the October sunshine while surveying his domain. His two buddies were out of sight somewhere around the corner. We took out the spotting scope and dialed him in. I

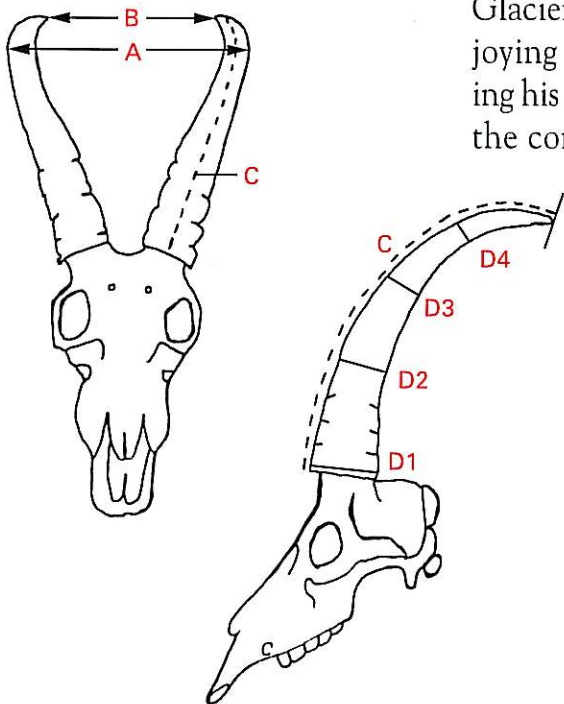
wanted a crack at a really good billy with my bow, and after years of hunting mountain goats the one lesson I have learned is that, when field judging old *Oreamnos americanus*, little things can make a big difference.

After 30 minutes we decided this was a goat worth stalking. He had heavy bases, good length, and carried his mass well out toward the tips. Neither horn was broken at the tip. I guessed him to be about 9-1/2-inches long, with bases of just under 6 inches. In this part of Alaska that’s a really good goat. So I cautiously began a butt-slide down the slope, using a narrow depression and tufts of tundra as cover until I had snaked within 45 yards. When the billy got up to stretch my arrow met him; he ran only about 75 yards before piling up. He ended up officially having 9-6/8-inch long horns with 5-4/8-inch bases and no deductions, scoring 48-4/8 B&C and Pope & Young points.

Like all large game animals with relatively smallish horns, mountain goats are really tough to judge in the field. A difference of a half-inch of horn length or a quarter-inch of base circumference can mean the difference between a really great goat and one that is simply a good one. Another complication is the fact that both billys and nannies have horns of similar length and shape, making sexing the animals a chore. That’s why in most places where they are hunted either sex is legal, though game managers strongly encourage the taking of mature billys.

### Sexing Goats

Step one in the field judging process is sexing a goat. While there are no absolutes, there are some established guidelines that work well. From a long distance away, your first clue is the animal’s position on the mountain. Adult billys are generally found either alone or in small groups of two to four animals, and are located higher up the mountain in the tougher,



### UNDERSTANDING GOAT HORNS

- A – Greatest Spread
- B – Tip to Tip Spread
- C – Length of Horn
- D – Circumferences

steeper terrain. If you see a band of 6 to 12 goats, usually it is comprised of nannies, kids and sub-adult billys — though you must look carefully to make sure grandpa isn't hanging with them for some reason.

Another clue is body size and shape, though I have found this to be the least effective way of sexing goats. Generally speaking, billys have blockier, stockier bodies than nannies, with more pronounced shoulders and a more square head shape. They are also some of the largest goats in a band, but beware of this clue, as I have often seen an old, mature nanny without kids that is the largest goat in a given band.

More telling is the color of the coat. Billys often have a stained coat, especially on the hindquarters, caused when they stretch forward to urinate. Nannies squat to urinate, and do not have this discoloration. At a distance, if one or two goats in a band have a yellowish rear end and others are a purer white color, the chances are high the discolored goats are mature billys.

After stalking closer, using horn shape and size is your best method of sexing goats. Generally speaking, the horns of a billy have more of a sweeping backwards curve than those of nannies. The bases of a mature billy's horns seem to almost grow together into a blackish blob (glands at the base of each horn), while the horns of a nanny or sub-adult billy will have a larger white space (hair) between them. A billy's horns have a gradual curve to them, while a nanny's tend to have a sharp curve near the end. Also, nannies tend to have a wider spread between the horns than billys do.

### **Horn Length, Mass**

As is the case with most antlered or horned animals, the mass of the horn is a key determinant in its final Boone and Crockett score. Mature billys have horns with heavier bases that carry their weight further than nannies, and billys with horns that carry their weight as far out along the entire length of the horn will score more than those that taper quickly to a pointy tip. A mountain goat is similarly scored like sheep, that is, both horns are measured for length. The longer horn is used to determine the circumference locations for both horns. Then quarterly circumference measurements are taken (including the bases). These numbers are added together, then deductions subtracted for differences in each horn's segment measurements to determine the final score. Therefore, the overall mass of each horn is the key to a high-scoring goat.



Most hunters will take but one mountain goat in their lifetime, and for them the long, lush hair of a late-season billy is as much a part of the trophy as the horns.

# FIELD JUDGING

That's not to say that horn length is not important. Trophy-class goats have horns at least 9 inches long, those with horns over 9-1/2 inches in length are considered very good, and goats with horns measuring over 10

inches in length are great, and rare, prizes. But how to judge horn length? That's a tough call. A rule of thumb is that if you visualize the horn as not curved but straightened out, and it then approximates the distance from the goat's nostrils to the bottom of its eye, you have a horn length of over eight inches, but probably not nine inches. If this visualized horn length stretches from the nostrils to the base of the ear hole, it is almost a certain record-class goat, assuming it has the necessary mass.

Another common way to gauge horn length is comparing the horn with the length of the ear.

**This big Prince William Sound, Alaska, billy scores 48-4/8 points. Note the heavy bases, long curved horns, square shoulders, and blocky head — key indicators of a trophy billy.**

Generally speaking, if the aforementioned visualized straightened out horn has a length of two to two-and-a-half times the length of the ear, it's a very good one.

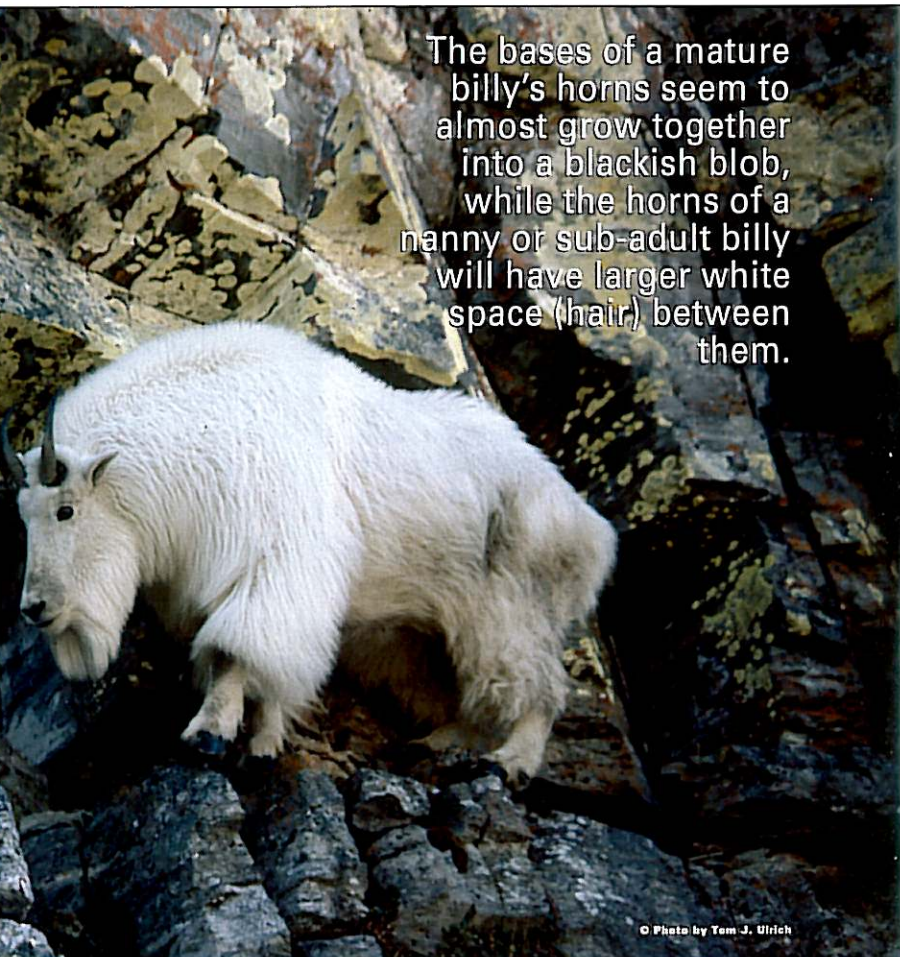
The minimum score to make the all-time B&C book is 50. There are many ways a goat can achieve this score. Two random examples from the Club's 10th edition records book illustrate this. One billy has a horn length of 10 and 10, base circumferences of 5-4/8 and 5-4/8, and 2-inch circumferences at both third quarters for a score of 50. Another has horn length of 9-4/8 and bases of 5-4/8 on both horns, with third quarter measurements of 2-1/8 and 2-2/8; it also scores exactly 50. The shortest horn length of a goat that scores 50 in this edition of the book is 9-1/8 and 9-3/8, with bases of 5-6/8 and 5-6/8 and third quarter measurements of exactly 2 inches.

## Other Criteria

When I go mountain goat hunting, of course I am hoping to find a billy with horns approaching records-book size. To me, however, there is much more to the game than the length and thickness of horn.

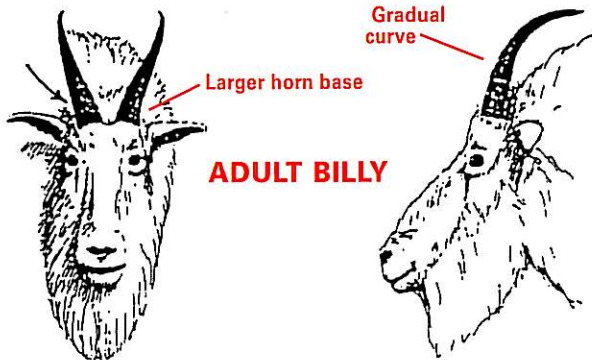
In many areas you can hunt mountain goats from early August through late November or even December. That means that the length of a goat's hair can vary

The bases of a mature billy's horns seem to almost grow together into a blackish blob, while the horns of a nanny or sub-adult billy will have larger white space (hair) between them.

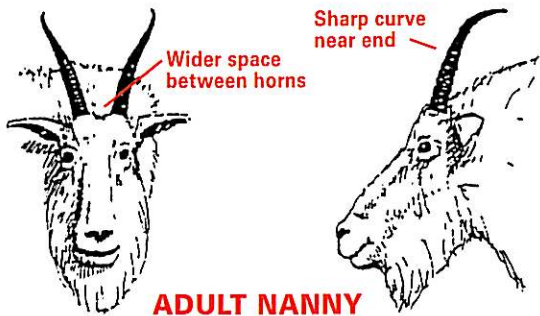




Mountain goat hunting can be hard work! Care must be taken when packing meat, cape, and horns down steep mountains after a snow. Here I am packing a big billy down an Alaska mountain. A big boned-out billy can easily yield 100 pounds of meat, cape, and horns.



**ADULT BILLY**



**ADULT NANNY**

Typical goat horn shape is a key indicator of the difference between billys and nannies. Billys have a larger horn base and more gradual curve to the horn, while nannies have a wide space between the horns and sharper curve near the horn tips.

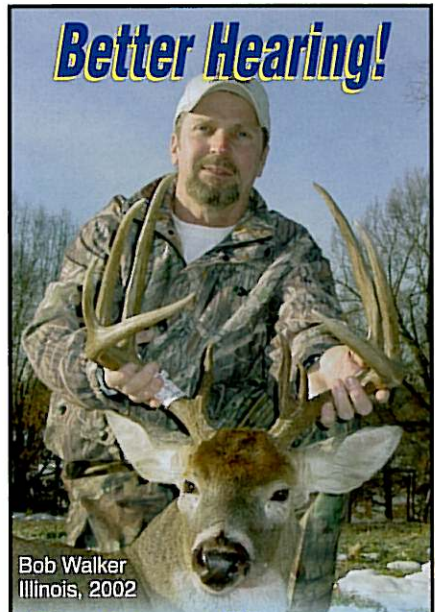
rugged peaks of goat country you have to be cautious, aware that it only takes a single misstep to create a dangerous fall.

That's why smart goat hunters know their own physical limitations, share them openly with their guides and hunting companions, and do not push those limitations to the point of danger. Yet

greatly. For example, one billy I arrowed near Petersburg, Alaska, the first week of August had the buzz cut of a marine recruit. Another I shot in Alaska's Prince William Sound in late October had hair so thick you could bury your hand to the animal's chest nearly to the elbow. Most hunters will take but one mountain goat in their lifetime, and for them the long, lush hair of a late-season billy is as much a part of the trophy as the horns.

Most important to me, though, is the challenge of the hunt. Rocky Mountain goat hunting can be dangerous at times, especially when the animals are pursued in the steep scree slopes and cliffs after the first snows have added a slippery sheen to the terrain. Anytime you negotiate the

true mountain goat hunting is about challenging the mountains, and yourself, returning with a mature billy that will awaken vivid memories of the hunt many years after it is all said and done. I know there are places where you can drive logging roads and hunt goats like mountain deer, or shoot late-season goats the length of a football field off the water. There's nothing wrong with this type of hunting, as each offers its own unique set of challenges and risks. It's just that when I look at my small collection of mountain goats, more than almost any other big game animal I have hunted extensively, each rekindles a kaleidoscope of memories of a hunt fairly conducted, a mountain challenged, and a prize hard-earned. ■



Bob Walker  
Illinois, 2002

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