



Over The Top

Hunting the Most Underrated
North American Trophy

By Weston Millward
B&C Associate Member

Marty Lightburn, owner of Rocky Mountain High Outfitters in southern British Columbia, had spotted two mountain goats high above the tree line in a place called Goat Creek. One goat was about twice the size of the other, with massive shoulders I could see through the spotting scope.

As I looked at the goat, I grew apprehensive about my conditioning. I had been in great shape until the California wildfires surrounded my work and home and put everything on hold for more than three weeks. The gym had been shut down, my hiking area had burned, and the air had been full of dark soot.

As we plotted strategy for the next day, I recalled someone saying that the mountain goat is the most underrated North American trophy. I had no idea what tomorrow would bring.

The next morning, after arriving in Goat Creek by mule and a short hike, we began climbing toward the top of a mountain roughly 2,800 feet above us. Beautiful fluffy white clouds floated effortlessly through the air, which was cold enough so the existing snow didn't melt.

We hiked easily through fir trees on a gentle uphill slope, until we ran into large trees felled by fire 20 years earlier. Some were small, some were enormous. They were crisscrossed and bundled up in stacks of three or four deep. Marty is a veteran of these mountains, but me, I'm a flatlander, and when I hit the blowdowns, my breathing increased dramatically and my Winchester

.338 became a burden. Shifting the rifle from shoulder to shoulder, my only thought was to stay on my feet and follow my guide up this mountain.

We walked up to a large slide with 50-foot-tall ridges on each side. Hidden behind one of those ridges was the spot where we saw the big goat the day before. We began climbing again, and as the sweat streamed from my body, we broke out of the deadfalls and made for the tree line. The trees faltered and became jagged and windblown; then they got smaller, and finally, disappeared. I occasionally looked down, and it took my breath away. I saw the tops of mountains in every direction, and I noticed the ridiculously steep angle of this slide.

But during our ascent, the slide had hidden us from the goat; he could neither see nor smell us. As the trees petered out,

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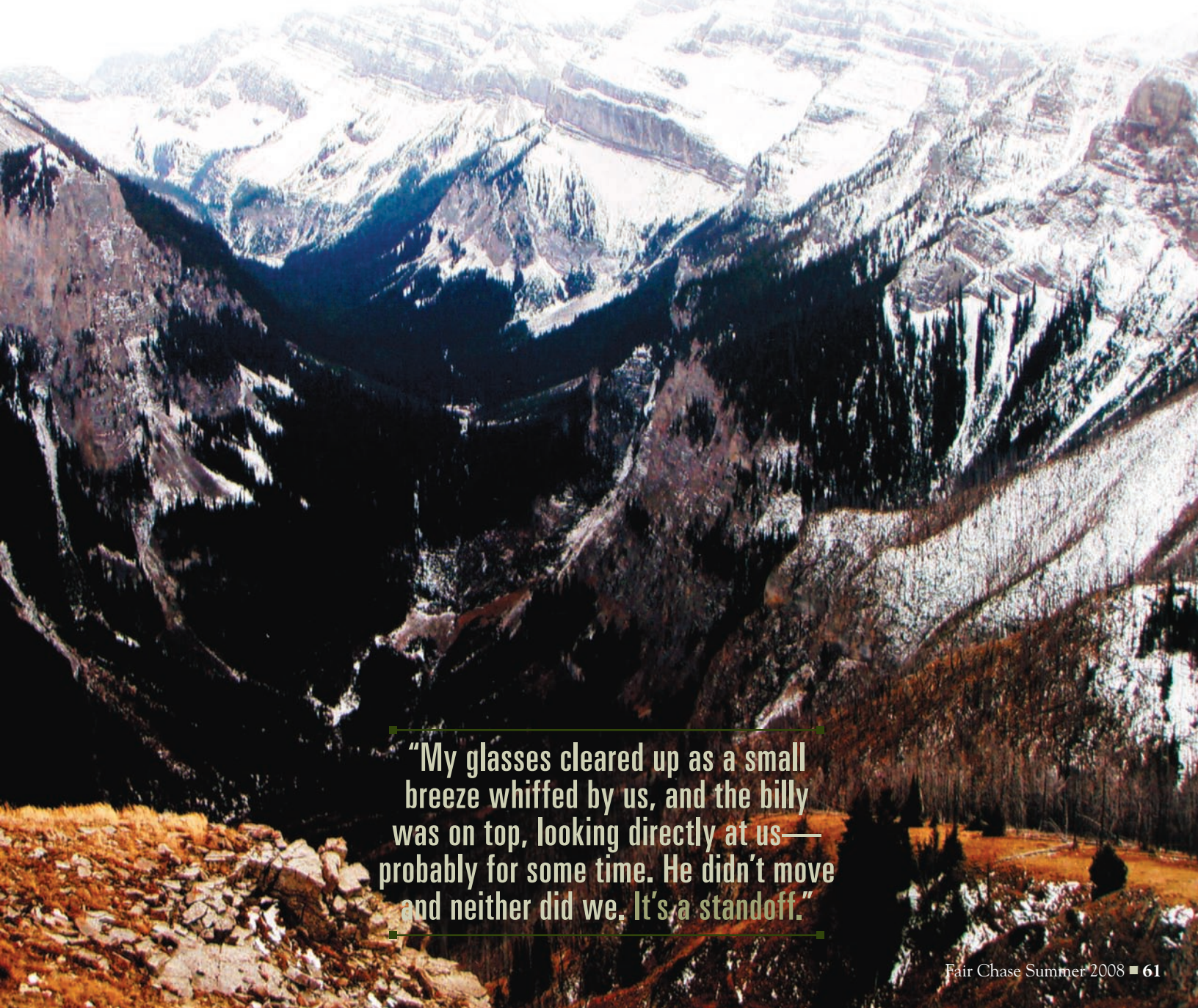
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Marty sat and said we made good time.

He said, "Not much farther, we go up this rock outcropping, over to the ridge on our right and when we top out, he should be there. How do you feel?"

"I'm doing fine," I said, still breathing hard, soaked with sweat and trying not to look down. Below me was a steep



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mountain covered in shale and rock. The large blowdowns looked like toothpicks, and the trail we left more than two hours before was a thin snowy pencil line meandering through the evergreens far, far below us.

We scrambled through the loose shale, up rock outcroppings that only crazy men would hike into. Then we hit another slide that went almost vertical, straight to the top of the mountain. We rested right below it, moved to our right, hit the ridge, and moved slowly into position over the top.

Marty froze ahead of me; so did I. With sweat running down my brow and my glasses fogged up, I couldn't see much. So I listened to my pounding heart, breathed, and stayed behind my guide.

My glasses cleared up as a small breeze whiffed by us, and the billy was on top, looking directly at us—probably for some time. He didn't move and neither did we. It was a standoff.

"Get your pack off and get ready," Marty said.

I did so, but the angle and positioning were all wrong.

Marty said, "Wes... When he moves and gives you a broadside, take him."

"Marty, let's move to the fir tree in front of us, I can't make a shot from here."

He looked over and saw that I had no rest for my rifle, and the angle was so high that I could not bring my Winchester to bear on the goat. He agreed, and we crawled 40 yards to get behind a small fir tree.

The goat was still watching us, and this spot wasn't much better. I removed a rock from the ground and put my Winchester on it for a higher rest. Finally, I got the goat in my scope. The angle was tremendous, the yardage long, there was some wind, I was out of gas, and that goat was giving me no shot. He was just standing there, straight on. When would the goat make his move?

Finally, Billy moved to his left, giving me a one-third broadside shot, and my .338 barked, the recoil slamming into my shoulder. Nothing... no hump, no blood, he didn't even notice the noise.

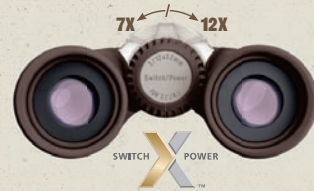
I'm stunned; did I miss? No rocks or dirt flew, and at 300 yards, my .338 should have dropped 7.9 inches, and with the upward angle, it should have hit exactly where I aimed.

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"Aim lower and I think you will nail him," Marty said. After five minutes the goat moved to his left again, and I squeezed off another round. Nothing!

But, wait! He slowly and hesitantly walked down a ledge toward us, in obvious distress. Another shot and he went down quietly.

The goat was huge, weighing more than 250 pounds. He came in at seven years of age, had horns 9.5-inches in length, and wore a soft, long-flowing white winter coat.

We took majestic pictures, caped him out, talked about the stalk, and rested—but then realized we had to move. It would be dark in two hours, and we had a long way to go.

We packed the cape and head on my back, and Marty took the meat. The first third of the descent was straight down, and my quads and knees screamed as I put on the brakes time and again in the loose shale.

We hit the blowdowns about dark, and Marty turned occasionally so I could see his headlamp to follow him out. Another three and half hours later, I was exhausted, but we were still hours away from camp. I started to fall from exhaustion. I watched as the sweat dripped from my cap past my flashlight and down into the dark, frosty night.

I felt like I was in a tied football game in the fourth overtime and was playing hurt. There was almost nothing left. Finally, we busted through the fir trees onto the trail and headed to the mule to ride out. It was pitch black.

The mental and physical elation I felt was immense. I beat the mountain, barely.

During the ride back to the truck, the skies began spitting a 30-degree rain-snow-slush combo, soaking me inside and out. My wool kept me warm enough, but after the 1 1/2-hour ride back to the truck, I ate my last sandwich, drank 35 ounces of water, and started to come out of the shivering pre-hypothermic condition I was in. What a day!

Marty commented, "That was way over the top, Wes. Would you like to hunt goat again?"

I looked at him and said, "Not really, Marty."

"Funny," he said, with a grin on his face. "Everyone says the same thing." ■

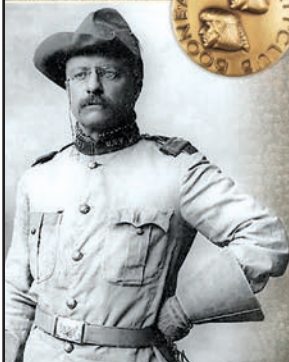
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