

The Gunfights are over in the Old West, But if you want a quality hunt Today you have to...

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The millennium is drawing to an end, an obvious milestone in the way we humans measure time. On the other hand, except for the numbers one year is much the same as another, differing only in the events that transpire during its passing. We as hunters should remember 1998 as the end of an era, for this year just past saw the last of Colorado's traditional "over the counter" deer licenses.

Slowly, slowly, as habitat shrinks, human populations increase, and competition for quality hunting grows, we have seen more and more western states move to limited numbers of licenses. I can well remember when Montana first established their "first come, first serve" quota of nonresident permits. At first it wasn't a big deal. In fact, the allocated number didn't sell out at all. But as years passed the nonresident quota sold out more and more quickly, until it eventually became a de facto drawing. Since then other solutions have been sought. The traditional "combo license" has been split up, and there are outfitter set-asides... and still the competition for available licenses increases.

DRAW!



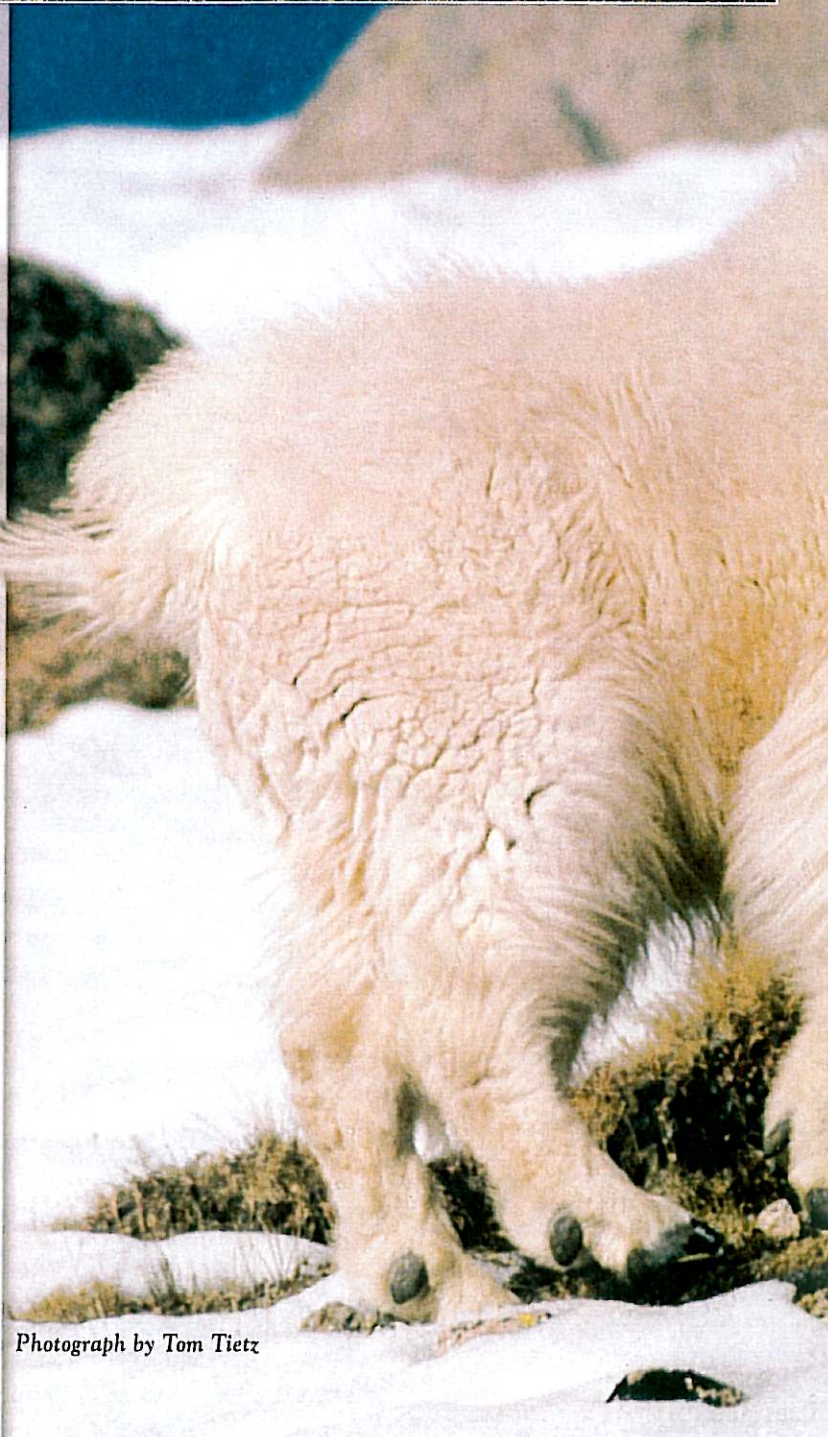
Photograph by Denver Bryan

SHIRAS MOOSE PERMITS ARE ALMOST AS HARD TO DRAW AS SHEEP PERMITS, PARTLY BECAUSE OF INTENSE COMPETITION WITH RESIDENTS WHO VIEW THE MOOSE AS A FOOD SOURCE. THE BEST ODDS LIE IN STATES WITH ESTABLISHED QUOTAS FOR NONRESIDENTS.

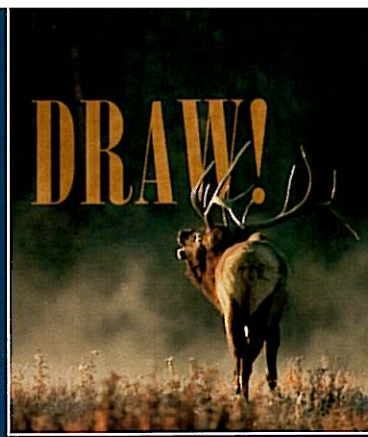
Many western states, Colorado included, have tried to maintain a dual system of limited-entry "quality management" areas along with general season "quantity management" areas. This dual system still exists here and there in the West... but not where there is a viable outfitting industry, nor where nonresident participation is a significant economic force.

In Colorado, the nonresident's hunting dollar is critical to game management funding—and despite ever-shortening seasons, there is an active outfitting industry. Mind you, Colorado's efforts are not slanted toward nonresidents, far from it... but their economic impact is far too great to ignore altogether. Years ago Colorado "divided" the state into limited entry and general season units. They have experimented with shortened buck hunts and antler point restrictions in a valiant effort to maintain "over the counter" licenses in as much as the state as possible. This is now ended. In 1999 Colorado joins all of the other primary western hunting states in being an across-the-board "draw" state. This event is probably not a huge milestone for most of us. We've become accustomed to planning early if we want to hunt in Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, or wherever. Utah and Colorado were sort of "backup states" in case no tags were drawn. Utah went to drawings a couple of years ago, leaving Colorado as the lone ranger. With mule deer numbers—and quality—continuing to dwindle in western Colorado, the decision was inevitable.

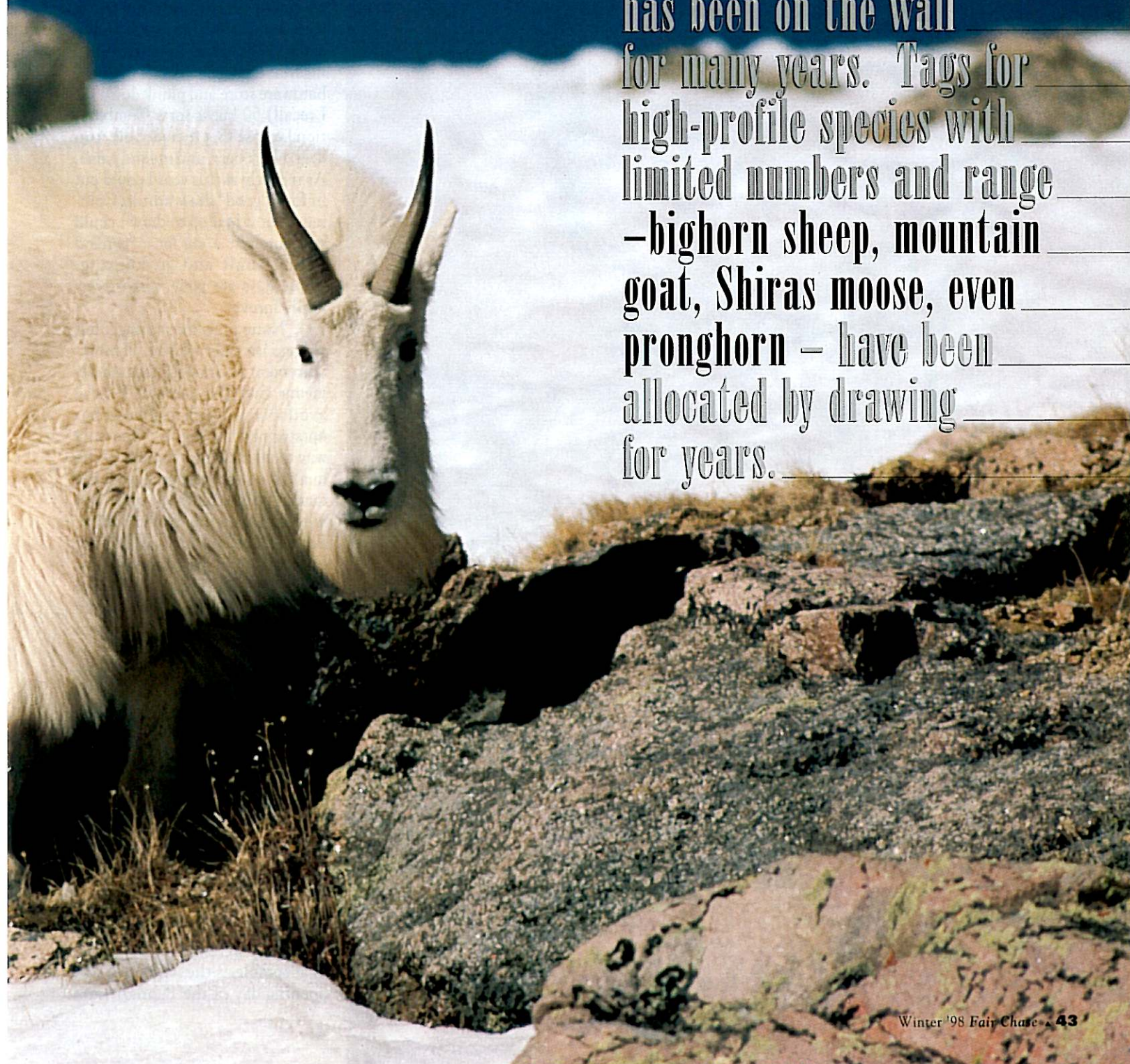
Actually, the handwriting has been on the wall for many years. Tags for high-profile species with limited numbers and range—bighorn sheep, mountain goat, Shiras moose, even pronghorn—have been allocated by drawing for years. Most of us hunting today have grown up with that system, but most of us hunting today also grew up with more-or-less "over

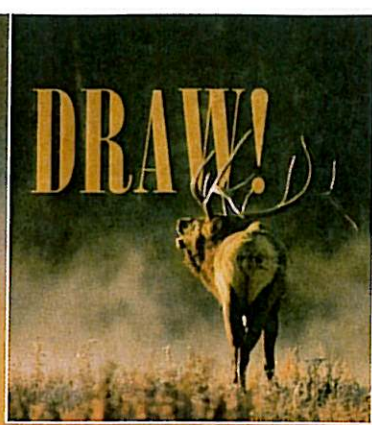


Photograph by Tom Tietz



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the counter" licenses for the bread-and-butter species, deer and elk. I believe Arizona was the first western state to shift to 100 percent draw for deer licenses. The rest of the West has followed slowly, and now Colorado makes the shift almost complete.

I would be among the first to say that I don't like it, but what I like least about it is that it seems such a change from those elusive "good old days." Even back in the 1960s, when Dad first took me hunting in Wyoming, we had to draw for our pronghorn tags—but we could go into any hardware store and buy our deer tags. In the early 1970s, when I started hunting Montana, I could walk into any hardware store and plunk down (as I recall) 50 bucks for a Combination License that included elk, two deer, black bear, and upland game. As recently as this year I could put in for a "good" draw unit in Colorado, but if I failed to draw I could still purchase a tag for a "general season" unit and go hunting. Those days are gone, almost certainly forever.

None of us like change, but change isn't always bad. The requirement to draw for tags simply means that the demand for the available wildlife resource has outstripped the supply. The only way to maintain (or enhance) the quality of the resource and the quality of the hunting experience is to limit hunter participation. Period. The end result is that not everyone will be able to hunt their favorite mountain range each and every year—but when they do, the quality of experience should be enhanced.

Our wildlife resources in the West are much more fragile than in the East. There are many reasons for this. The West doesn't have the intensive agriculture and water development of the East, so wildlife tends to be much more migratory. Human development sometimes blocks migration routes or occupies critical winter range. With higher altitudes, winters tend to be more severe in the West. Predators play a greater role. Most western species are not as adaptable as the whitetail. On opening day of the Pennsylvania

Photograph by Tom Tietz

PRIVATE LAND TAGS ARE ONE WAY OF BEATING THE DRAW. DEPENDING ON THE SPECIES, PRIVATE LAND HUNTING MAY NOT BE SUBSTANTIALLY MORE EXPENSIVE. THIS SUPERB PRONGHORN WAS TAKEN ON A LANDOWNER'S PERMIT IN WEST TEXAS.

deer season fully one million hunters take to the field, and yet the whitetail deer continues to thrive. With a base of far fewer hunters (and much more difficult terrain) some South Carolina counties offer 150 days of deer hunting with no limit on bucks—and yet the whitetail deer continues to thrive. No western state or wildlife resource—including the western whitetail—could withstand this level of pressure. Limited tags are here to stay.

I would much rather be able to buy a tag and know for certain I can go hunting. Those days are over, but we should all appreciate that limited entry does greatly improve the quality of the hunting experience when (and sometimes if) we can draw a permit. Nevada is a good example. Although the most arid of our western states, Nevada also has one of the smallest human populations. Despite a limited deer herd, the light hunting pressure enabled Nevada to resist “across the board” deer drawings for quite some time. Ultimately they made the shift—more than 20 years ago now. As always, the residents were initially outraged . . . but after just a few years Nevada’s mule deer harvest was comprised of more than 50 percent “four-by-four-or-better” bucks. Since then dry years have eroded this record, but Nevada still offers perhaps the highest average antler quality of any western state.

We’ve seen this in Colorado as well. For the last several years I’ve either hunted or guided other hunters on the eastern plains, country that has been limited entry for a number of years. The decline of the mule deer herds in western Colorado is a complex issue, with hunting pressure just one factor. However, it’s a fact that, during this past decade when deer have steadily declined west of the



Rocky Mountain Front, we have seen them increase dramatically on the eastern plains. No, I don’t like drawing for a tag. But I do like quality hunting, and if the quotas are managed right limited entry units do offer better hunting than is possible in a “free for all” situation. In any case, drawings aren’t going away. If we want to hunt, we must learn to deal with them.

A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH.

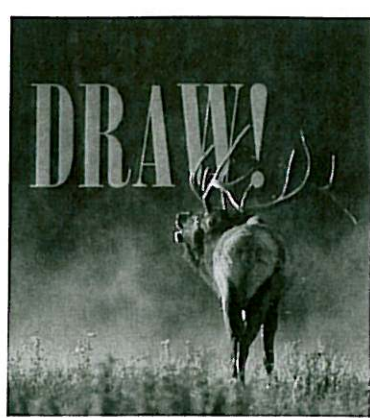
It isn’t possible to beat the odds, per se. The odds for drawing tags are what they are, and there will be both winners and losers. If there are 40 tags in a given unit and 100 people apply, then there will be 40 winners and 60 losers. Excepting states that offer bonus or preference points, luck is no more cumulative in drawing tags than it is in Las Vegas. If you apply for the same unit the following year and there are the same 40 tags and 100 applicants, there will still be 40 winners and 60 losers. Your personal chances have not improved.

While you can’t beat the system, there are ways to deal with it. If you are bound and determined that you must hunt in a given area during a certain season, that’s fine . . . but you are placing your hunting plans altogether at

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the mercy of a most unmerciful computer. There are two primary means for improving your odds, and both take a bit of research.

Virtually every state game department will provide data on how many hunters applied for tags in a given unit. You may find that some areas are much more difficult to draw than other hunt units in the same general area. There may be reasons for this—traditional game movement, access, terrain. But there may not be a clear-cut reason, and even if there is you may be able to figure out a solution.



ALL HUNTERS WOULD PREFER TO SIMPLY BUY TAGS AND GO HUNTING, BUT IN THE WEST THE DEMAND FOR QUALITY HUNTING HAS OUTSTRIPPED THE SUPPLY. LIMITED ENTRY MEANS TAGS ARE HARD TO COME BY — BUT ALSO ASSURES A HIGHER QUALITY HUNTING EXPERIENCE.

Similarly, many states offer stratified seasons. The season closest to the rut may be much more difficult to draw than an earlier season. One season may indeed be a great deal better than another... but rarely is this set in stone. Your luck in drawing hunting weather may be as important

as your luck in drawing a tag. Our eastern Colorado hunting is a good example. The early rifle season normally starts in late October, a bit ahead of the whitetail rut. The late season usually falls in early December... normally just after the rut. In most plains units it is at least twice as difficult to obtain a late rifle tag as one for the early season. I simply don't understand this phenomenon. Post-rut is always a difficult time to hunt whitetails, and besides that otherwise fine racks are often spoiled by points broken in fights. The early season can be too hot, and that makes it very difficult... but it can also catch the first snow, which makes it glorious. In any case, given a choice

reality you must face is that, in states with across-the-board drawings, even lifelong residents are no longer assured of getting tags for even the most common species.

This is especially true if you're looking for trophy-class animals. There are very few "secret" hot spots for trophy animals. Known trophy-producing areas will always be more difficult to draw. Generally speaking, the better the area the longer the odds... and of course, the fewer the tags the longer the odds. Arizona has a high human population with a large number of hunters. This state also has a lot of wonderful wildlife habitat, but it's an arid state so game populations fluctuate quite a bit. Their game department is generally conservative in the number of tags issued, so Arizona offers very high quality hunting for virtually all of her species, if you can get a tag. Many Arizona hunters have long since faced the reality that they can't have even a deer tag—especially not in a good area—each and every year. This is now happening elsewhere in the West. We aren't creating more habitat, so as human populations grow the situation can only get worse. Applying in neighboring states as well as your own gives you additional chances.

The other way to expand not only your horizons but also your opportunity to go hunting is to turn to archery and muzzleloader seasons. Many of the western states offer some of their very best hunting opportunities in primitive weapons seasons. This is particularly true with elk; there are very few bugling rifle seasons, but there are lots of bugling seasons for bowhunters and blackpowder hunters. Provided you are willing to give up your rifle and try something else, there are also some superb opportunities to hunt rutting mule deer, and Colorado even offers some archery hunts for bighorn sheep.

The theory, obviously, is that hunter success is lower for archery and blackpowder hunters, so they can be allowed to hunt at the "best" times without excessive impact on game populations. While



Some situations, especially with the sheep, are far worse than one in a hundred. The reality is that a hunter could apply for an entire lifetime and never draw.

I'd take a pre-rut hunt over post-rut any old time.

The other means for increasing your odds is to expand your horizon. Let's say you want to hunt mule deer, and you know you'd like a good buck. Hedge your bet by applying in more than one state. This means investing in multiple nonresident license fees, which can get pricey—and may seem particularly onerous if you happen to live in a state that has good hunting for your chosen species. Obviously the choice is up to you and your budget. Unfortunately, the

it's true that overall hunter success is much lower in primitive weapons seasons, you don't care about overall hunter success; you only care about your hunter success. With hunting skill, lots of shooting practice, and adequate time to hunt you can beat the odds. Most of the archery and blackpowder seasons are much easier to draw to than rifle seasons.

THE TOUGH ONES

This business of having to draw for all elk and deer tags is new. There is a lot of opportunity, and if you do your homework you will find numerous areas throughout the West where drawing a tag is almost a sure thing. On the other hand, even for the most common species there are especially good areas that have long been very hard to draw. For mule deer, Arizona's Kaibab and Utah's Paunsagant are good examples. For elk, any rifle season in Arizona is hard to draw—and worth drawing if you can. Pronghorn tags have been available primarily through drawings throughout my lifetime, but there are many areas in Wyoming and eastern Montana that are “sure-thing” draws. However, relatively few areas consistently produce big pronghorns. These areas are known, and are hard to draw. Good examples are Wyoming's Red Desert and northwestern Arizona.

Then there are the “prestige” animals. There are no easy draws for Rocky Mountain bighorns, desert sheep, Shiras moose, and Rocky Mountain goat (in the Lower 48). Some situations, especially with the sheep, are far worse than one in a hundred. The reality is that a hunter could apply for an entire lifetime and never draw.

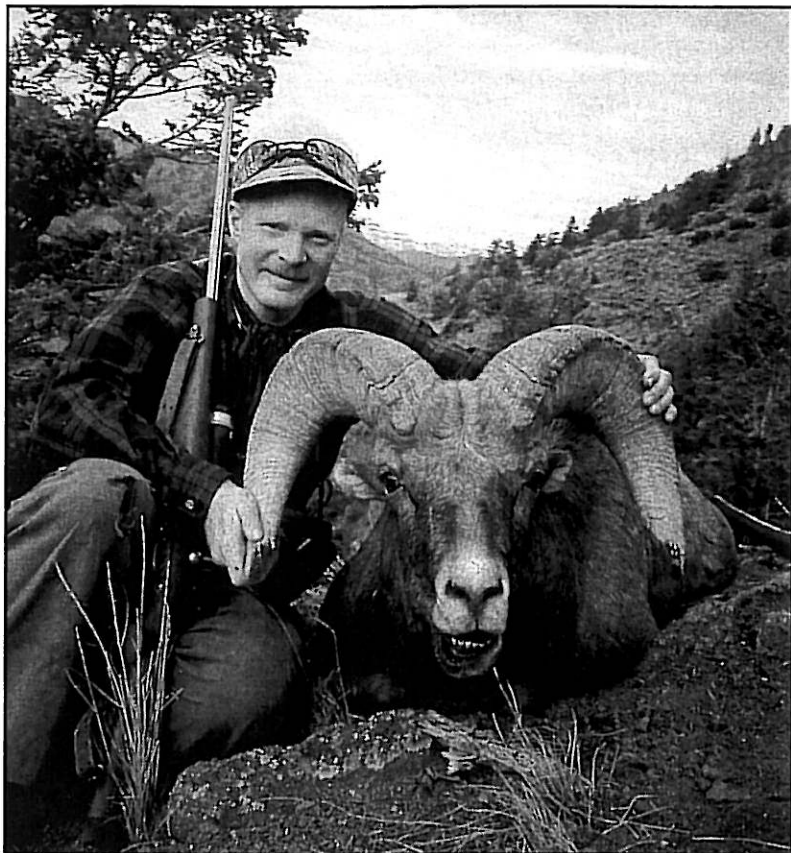
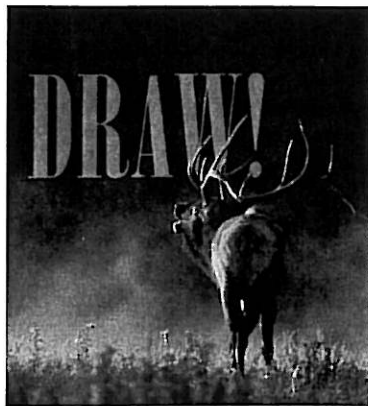
When it comes to premier tags, whether for the most-prized species, or especially good areas for more common animals, there are two things to remember. First, some lucky hunters draw these tags each and every years. Second, if you don't apply you will never be among them!

Given the odds, I think it would be foolish to base all of your hunting plans around drawing an Arizona desert sheep tag or a Mon-



Photograph by Neal and Mary Jane Mishler

I HAVE APPLIED FOR SHEEP IN NUMEROUS STATES FOR MANY YEARS - AND THE SYSTEM WORKS. THIS WYOMING RAM, TAKEN WITH OUTFITTER RON DUBE IN 1998, WAS THE SECOND TIME I'VE BEEN BLESSED WITH A SHEEP TAG.



As tags have gotten ever more difficult to draw, more and more western states have instituted systems of bonus points and preference points, theoretically giving better odds to hunters who continue to apply.

tana bighorn tag. Or, for that matter, a really prime mule deer tag. But if you want to experience one of these special hunts, you must apply. If lightning strikes and you draw, then the smart thing to do is drop everything else you have planned and allocate the entire season to that tag.

When it comes to the tough ones, I think the best thing to do is forget about specific states and areas and apply everywhere. If you want a really great mule deer, then do your research and locate the very best trophy-producing areas in several states. The odds may be long, and you may never draw—but your chances are better if you apply in several states rather than tying yourself to just one area.

I guess a huge mule deer isn't all that important to me, so I have never applied to hunt in Arizona's Kaibab or Utah's Paunsagant. I have also applied for relatively few Shiras moose permits, and even fewer "Lower 48" goat tags. The opportunity to hunt sheep is important to me, so I have applied for at least some sheep permits in some states for more than 20 years. This can require a lot of money, and there have been many years when I couldn't possibly afford to apply for all the sheep tags in the all the states. So I've prioritized. First priority has always been Nevada and Arizona for desert sheep, followed by Montana and Wyoming for bighorn. Depending on whether I could afford it or not, I have been less consistent in applying in Idaho, Oregon, New Mexico, Utah... and the list goes on. This last group has been on my "B" list based on either poorer trophy quality or numbers of permits. The best approach, of course, is to apply in every state each and every year, but you can

prioritize if you must based on your own research.

Has my system worked? Yes and no. I haven't yet drawn a desert sheep tag, and perhaps I never will. But I have drawn two tags for Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, one in Montana in 1994, and another in Wyoming in 1998. Both times I cancelled plans as required so as to give proper attention to these wonderful opportunities, and I took two very nice rams on the two tags. So you bet I believe in applying!

Hitting all of the deadlines and applying for the right areas (based either on trophy quality or chances of drawing) is complicated and takes a lot of research. Over the years I have missed quite a few application deadlines here and there. There are several folks now offering computerized tag application services. The fees over and above application fees are very low, and the simplicity and assurance of not missing a deadline are worth every cent. I turned my own applications over to George Taulman in Taos, New Mexico (1-800-845 9929) in 1993. It's worth mentioning that George's computerized service has drawn both my bighorn tags, plus an Arizona elk tag and a couple of good deer tags. So you bet I believe in letting someone else do this for you!

PREFERENCE POINTS, BONUS POINTS, AND SPECIAL LICENSES

Most of us probably don't like the sound of this, but you can beat the tag drawings if you can afford it. Colorado, New Mexico, and California have varying private land management situations that allow (under some circumstances) private land tags that are exclusive of the drawings. Many of the Indian reservations throughout the West also have hunting programs, and of course Indian lands are exempt from state-controlled hunting seasons and regulations. Depending on the circumstances, costs for these "guaranteed" tags range from a bit higher to a

whole lot higher. The hunting is not automatically better than on public lands, but it can be.

Some states also offer a certain number of tags at higher prices than the normal fee. Needless to say, if you double the price for a permit you will greatly reduce the number of applicants! I don't particularly like this concept, but it is a way to increase your chances of drawing a tag and going hunting. Wyoming puts a percentage of their deer, elk, and pronghorn tags in a special drawing at a higher price, still not a sure thing but much better odds than drawing for the lower-priced tag.

There are also outfitter set-asides here and there, plus you must always be on the lookout for special opportunities. For instance, South Dakota offers a few deer tags at \$400, versus the normal \$150 non-resident fee. That didn't seem like much of a deal to me; it's sometimes very difficult to get the exact hunt unit you want, but nonresident tags aren't that hard to come by in that state. Except that this higher-priced tag was good for any unit west of the Missouri River. That made it a great deal, so I sent in my money and got a tag. I'm leaving tomorrow!

As tags have gotten ever more difficult to draw, more and more western states have instituted systems of bonus points and preference points, theoretically giving better odds to hunters who continue to apply. In general I like these systems very much, but it's important that you understand them.

A preference point system means that you receive a preference point for each unsuccessful application. Applicants with the most points will draw. This works pretty well with deer and elk. In Colorado, I know that I can get a good plains deer tag every second or third year, and a darned good elk tag every third or fourth year. If I wanted to hunt one of the great areas, I may have to "save" my preference points for seven or eight years, which I'm not willing to do—but some people are.

"Pure" preference point systems run into trouble when there are far more applicants than available tags, especially as time goes on. Wyoming's preference point system is quite new. I had been applying anyway, so got in on the ground floor—which is largely why I drew a bighorn tag in '98. Mathematically, if you started applying for sheep right now in Wyoming's better areas, it would take some 29 years to have enough preference points! This makes it seem futile to even apply, and if you started right now it would be. However, these systems are subject to revision and modification...and you're always better off to be in on the ground floor.

Colorado recognizes a maximum of just three preference points for bighorn sheep and goat. This effectively means that you must apply for three years and receive three preference points to have any chance at these drawings—but then the odds aren't that bad. At some point in the near future Wyoming will almost certainly "cap" the number of allowable preference points, or change from preference points to bonus points.

Within reason, as in Colorado's system, I prefer preference points to bonus points. Bonus points, however, give hope to those applying for the first time. A bonus point simply means that your name is entered in the draw an additional time for each point you have. If the odds are one in 100 and you have three bonus points, then you have three chances in 100 rather than just one. It is a very fair system, but on tags that offer extremely long odds bonus points don't help all that much. Still, they're better than nothing!

Game regulations are ever more complex and more difficult to understand, but knowledge is critical. The more research you do on areas, seasons, and odds for drawing the better off you are—and you may as well get used to it. Western big game tags will only become more difficult to obtain as time goes on—but the bottom line is that you must apply in order to get drawn. ▲▲▲



Photograph by Neal and Mary Jane Mishler