

**Last April**, I went on my fifth hunting trip to Mexico for desert sheep. The last time I hunted Mexico was the late 1970s, and really, little has changed except the price of the hunt. This time, I spent nine days hunting without success. I was in an area of the Baja Sur that had just been opened for legal hunting, the first time in many years. Unfortunately, the area should not have been opened. Disease, poaching, or habitat deterioration had taken its toll on a limited sheep population. I saw three young rams and less than a dozen ewes and lambs in nine days of hard hunting. My hunting partner, Larry Bucher, was also hunting in a newly opened area about 40 miles north of my base camp. He hunted for nine days without seeing a single sheep—male, female, or lamb.

It was during my first hunt for Mexican desert sheep in 1975 when I learned just how tough the Baja can be. I had flown from Hermosillo, Mexico, to Bahia de Los Angeles, located on the shores of the Sea of Cortez, in late September. It was 117° F when I landed. My pilot taxied up to a small stone building near the beach that was used as a base for sport fisherman. Later, as I lounged on the porch of a tiny hotel, I looked at my pocket thermometer and it indicated 105° F in the shade. I was wringing wet sitting absolutely still in the shade wearing a light, cotton, short-sleeved shirt and shorts. The heat was so incredible, I completely lost my appetite.

BACKGROUND PHOTO BY  
MICHAEL FRANCIS

I spent most of the next day waiting at the little hotel for my guide to show up. Later in the afternoon, I met a New Jersey hunter, Steve Mihal, who came here to hunt desert sheep with the same outfitter I was using. We had a nice visit while quietly hanging around in the shade, watching the locals move in super slow gear. Everyone was suffering from the intense heat.

Steve and I spent the afternoon, evening, and the next day trying to find out where the people in charge of this hunt were hiding. We discovered we were waiting for two federal wildlife biologists to arrive from Mexico City. On the way to our room that night, Steve and I crossed the terrace where the hotel holds wedding celebrations, and saw probably two hundred cockroaches skittering across the dance floor. I felt the hair on the back of my neck raise up as those little critters rattled around and over my open sandals. They turned out to be our constant companions in the desert as well.

On the next afternoon, we finally caught up to the wildlife biologists and our guides, who didn't act like they were in any hurry to get the hunt rolling. We tried to impress upon our hunting guides, both in Spanish and English, that even though they will give us 10 full days of hunting starting the first day we get to camp, we had commitments back home and could not start hunting when it suited their schedule. A short time later, my guide Ramon came roaring up in his little station wagon and waved his hands at a gathered group of 11 men who were going to be our support staff. I learned that Steve and I would be together in camp, which

pleased me greatly. We had become good friends in the last few days, and I found him to be a pleasant, positive, and straightforward guy with a great sense of humor. We threw our gear into the vehicle, and our large entourage departed for the hunting camp.

So, three days after the hunt should have started, we were finally organized and on our way looking for sheep. The guides propped me up on a burro, and I found my feet only four inches off the ground. Thank heavens it was a calm, patient animal, so everything worked out just fine. I had one guide, one tracker, one biologist, and one burro and mule wrangler, and Steve had an equal complement. Our guides insisted on having the trackers carry our rifles. I guess they wanted to protect the sheep population from us.

Absolutely no breeze was stirring in this barren, mountainous terrain. It was extremely hot in the sun, and the air was stifling as we steadily climbed into the mountains. My pocket thermometer read 109° F. I was damp from head to toe even though I was not working, just riding a burro. We reached a good glassing area where we could look off into the distance and see the Baja highway and the Pacific Ocean. We saw three groups of sheep, but no rams worth further inspection. That night, I had fun assembling my folding cot, setting my sleeping bag on it, and watching everyone else just lay on blankets on the ground. About 2:00 AM, a scorpion slipped into bed with me and stung me on the right thigh. I bailed out of my zipped-up sleeping bag faster than you can say "scorpion," yelling in pain. I scared Steve half-to-death, and I was pretty shook up over the experience as well. The bite was

BY P.D. WEBSTER  
B&C REGULAR MEMBER

# 3° NORTH OF THE TROPICS EXTREME

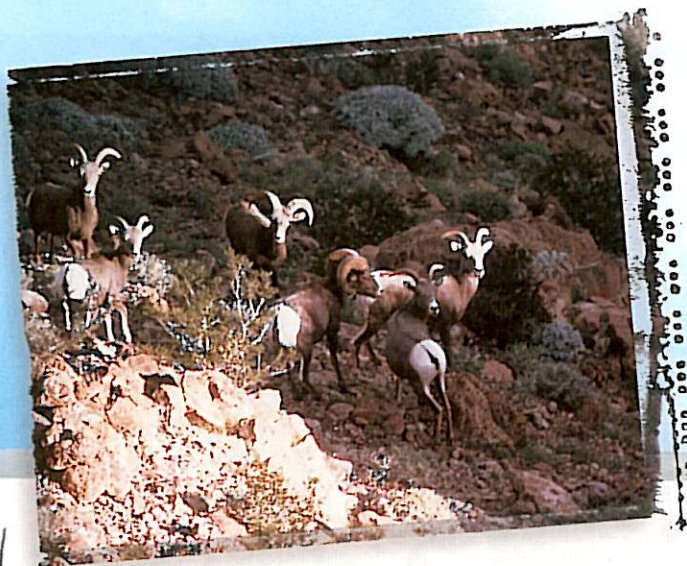
painful, and I didn't sleep much the rest of the night. I developed a temperature, and the bite stayed a mean-looking reddish blue color for the next six days.

Steve and I split up each morning with our respective guides and support staff to look for sheep for the next several days. Ramon and I found a ram that looked promising, but we didn't have a chance to make a stalk because of shifting winds. Later that day, one of my trackers spotted another good ram about three miles away. The wind was against us, so we had to circle around three mountains and then come up over the top of a ridge in order to get within shooting range. We finally crept up to an isolated ridge from which we were going to scan the area, and almost crawled out on top of him. Unfortunately, the ram spotted us at the same time we spotted him. He trotted a short distance away and began to graze again, keeping a close watch on the three ewes that were keeping him company.

We followed our path back through the cactus, crawling on our hands and knees, for maybe 200 yards. Then we dropped down into a draw, and spent a half-an-hour getting positioned to make another stalk on the ram. We were able to close to within 75 yards of the ram. I carefully laid my rifle on a rock for a shot, squeezed the trigger, and heard the bullet hit with a distinctive thud. The ram's legs locked and his body started to sag. He was obviously hit very hard. The ram stood motionless for two or three minutes, then slowly staggered away.

We trailed the animal for almost an hour, following a fresh, heavily blooded trail. Then it was time for lunch, and Ramon and the boys needed a siesta. They weren't concerned about losing the ram;

they "knew" he was dead and lying just ahead. By the time we resumed following the trail of blood, it had dried and disappeared, blending perfectly with the color of the rocks. The country was so vast and it was all the same color: the sheep were the color of the stones, which were the same color as the sand and the brush. Even the growing things were brown. Only the sheep's white rear stood out against the mountainside.



**ABOVE:** Ramon and the other guides glassing for sheep in the desert heat. **INSET:** While, the author did not take a desert ram, he did managed to take this photo of a nice ram with his harem.



# PIC OF CANCER HUNTING



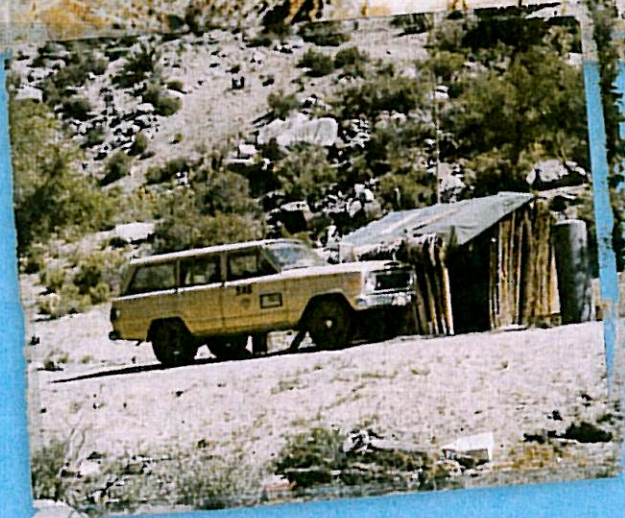
drinking looked like stirred-up mud. It was thick and ugly tasting, and I never understood how the little white purification pills I brought along could do more than just float on top of the sludge. I was the only one with drinking water left in my canteen. I had not been able to wash my hands or face (or anything else) for three days. Our little water hole, which we had been using since we arrived, was dry. Now we were forced to move camp to find more water.

The temperature that day had reached 121° F. Climbing mountains and coming back down in that kind of heat really saps your strength. I was completely done in at night, not from the fatigue of exertion and sore muscles, but from the extreme heat and being baked in the scorching sun. Steve told me that evening he had come close to passing out a couple of times. We didn't know how many more days in a row we could take this kind of hunting. Both of us were very discouraged. It just didn't seem right that the hunting trip should start three days late, we should run out of water, eat bad food, sleep with cockroaches and scorpions, endure oppressive heat, and then have each of us get good shots at rams and strike out.

Three days after I lost my ram, Steve met me on the edge of the camp, fit to be tied. He had shot a beautiful, full-curl sheep, hit him in the rear end, and flipped him over completely. The ram was down for some time, then jumped to his feet and staggered off. Steve spent the rest of the day looking for him but never found him. When he got back to camp, Steve checked out his rifle and found it was shooting three feet to the right. Obviously, one of the boys assigned to carry the rifle had banged it against something. Steve spent a considerable amount of time and ammunition getting it zeroed-in again.

By now, camp water was in short supply. The water we were

The next morning, no one seemed to be in a hurry to break camp, so Steve and I visited the water hole where the men had been collecting our water for the past several days. It smelled like a cesspool and was a creamy, chocolate brown in color. It wasn't surprising that all the men in camp had been asking me for my white pills to put in the water (even though they enjoyed teasing me about the "poison" pills that gave the water a mineral taste). Since the men had not taken any liquid since yesterday evening when we ran out, a tracker was sent back to the main camp for water. He brought back a



**ABOVE:** The author atop one of the many mountains he had climbed in the sweltering heat in search of sheep.

**INSET:** The old Jeep shook, rattled and vibrated, but somehow managed to get the group from the mountains to camp.

## 3° NORTH OF THE T

pot of coffee, of all things, with a lot of cream dumped in it instead.

Over the next two days, we headed west and north, climbing all the time. The mountains here were between 4,500 and 4,800 feet above sea level. Ramon and I had been following some ewes for almost two hours when we found fresh sheep droppings. I immediately got my rifle from the gun bearer and chambered a shell. We then started to sneak along a ridge, glassing as we went, trying to see through some scraggly pine trees that covered the ridge. As we reached the end of the ridge, we froze in our tracks. Ramon had spotted the ewes just a hundred yards ahead.

All of a sudden a clatter of rocks below us revealed the position of eight ewes, three lambs, and one gorgeous ram, who broke out of the bottom of the ravine and started up the hillside opposite from us, about 175 yards away. The ram was hanging behind the ewes, butting every rock and cactus he could find as he ran up the hill. He was an eight or nine year-old with horns in the range of 33". He did not have a full curl, but was heavily broomed, and a truly beautiful animal. "Don't shoot," Ramon told me, "This ram is too young to shoot."

As we headed down the mountain toward camp, I kept my eyes on the trail, head bent down, checking every step of the way. I had learned my lesson about cactus the hard way. My arms, legs, and hands were covered with little festering sores where the cactus spines had stuck into my skin. The darn things were able to penetrate my heavy blue jeans with only the slightest pressure. I don't know the names of the different types of cactus, but one kind had two-inch long spines that penetrated deep into my skin. The spines had barbs that made removal almost impossible without good tweezers. An-

other brand of cactus had tiny spines that you couldn't see, but could feel—like a little piece of glass or metal in your hand that you were constantly digging at, trying to figure out what it was. A day later, you found your hand had started to fester and you had an open sore, so you tried to dig out the invisible spine with a pocketknife.

The next morning, Steve was off with his hunting group to find the ram they had spotted the previous evening, just before dark. They would stay in a spike camp, if necessary, in the high country. Ramon decided to take me back to base camp, get out the four-wheel drive, and go back to search for the ram I shot a couple of days ago. He was convinced, as was I, that the ram would have died just a short time after he was shot. Ramon thought he could find a crevice or depression where the ram had finally fallen. We searched for the animal all day without success.

We headed back to base camp that evening, driving down the paved highway in the dark like a bunch of maniacs. Everybody but me was leaning out their windows like grade school kids. Ramon piloted the old Jeep station wagon, swerving down the road as if he was following an imaginary slalom course. The speedometer read 80 km, which translated into something like 50 miles an hour. The old Jeep shook, rattled, and vibrated. The front seat was completely broken, and supported itself by leaning against the knees of the occupants in the back seat. We were significantly overloaded, the muffler didn't work, the exhaust manifold header pipe was broken off, and the water keg was uncorked and splashing water all over the inside of the car, *but boy, were we having fun and going like hell!*

The next morning, our camp activity started the way it always did:

Ramon gargling water that sounded like the launching of the Titanic. We spent the morning scouting the mountains right behind base camp, where I picked up my third set of dropped ram's horns that had been beautifully weathered by the harsh climate. On our return to camp, I was coming down a dry creek bed with two men ahead of me when a rattlesnake nailed me. My leather boots, mid-calf high, stopped the snake from doing any damage. One fang got stuck in the denim of my blue jeans, but thankfully missed my flesh. At that instant, I really wasn't aware of what had happened. I thought I was dragging a stick or some brush with my leg. When I looked down and saw a rattlesnake hanging off my pant leg, I jumped straight up in the air and raced around until I was able to shake the rattler loose.

When we arrived back in camp, we learned that Steve had taken a beautiful ram, approximately 165 points green score. When a heated discussion among the biologists and the guides ensued, my limited Spanish enabled me to figure out what the problem was: the sheep that Steve had shot was the one Ramon would not let me shoot three days earlier because it was too young. Although some of the Mexicans were obviously bothered by the turn of events, I was not. I was delighted for Steve. It was his second grand slam, and he deserved this nice trophy.

The next day, I returned to the little hotel in Bahia de Los Angeles before flying back to Tucson via Hermosillo. I was so taken with the novelty of having running water that I took **two** showers, one right after the other. I gave my regards to the cockroach that scampered up through the drain hole as I turned on the water. *Adios amigo and viva Mexico!* ▲▲▲

# TOPIC OF CANCER

# HUNTING

