

By Bruce Fox  
Photos by the Author

My hunting friends tell me I'm an unbelievably lucky guy. I heard this again when I drew a mountain goat permit for the 2008 hunting season. And, I can't argue with them when it comes to drawing tags, but that's not the entire story.

One of the great things about drawing a special tag is the anticipation between the time you draw and the actual hunt. My goat permit was no different. However, the timing of my hunt had to work around the wedding of my daughter Jesse, which was planned for October 18th, the weekend before the general season opener in Montana. I did raise her well enough so she didn't plan her wedding on opening weekend of the general hunting season!

With the wedding in October and the potential for an early snow to make the goat hunt more difficult than it would already be, I settled on the third week of September for my hunt. Several friends had indicated they would be interested in going with me, and I knew better than to attempt a goat hunt solo. But the timing of my hunt didn't work for the friends that wanted to come along, so I was still looking for a sidekick. I asked my wife Barbara, and she suggested I ask my daughter Jesse, who had accompanied me on other hunts and proven to be a great hunting partner. She excitedly accepted. It would be our last father-daughter hunt before I gave her away.

Before we knew it, the time had come and we were turning off the highway with a loaded truck and horse trailer, staring at the rugged Crazy Mountains as we continued to our trailhead. It was 2 p.m. by the time we reached the trailhead and 4 p.m. by the time we were packed up and in the saddle. Still, I felt we had plenty of time to get to where we would camp well before dark, given we were only riding in about six miles. Wrong!

The ride in was just one of those trips where nothing came easy and everything seemed to be a fight. As we worked our way

around a downfall in the trail about a half mile from where we eventually camped, the packs on one of the mules rolled, which took a good half-hour of daylight to repack and load. By the time we hit the meadow where we would camp, the last vestiges of daylight were leaving fast. We broke out our headlamps, put up the highline, fed the horses, and put up the tent in the dark. We were both so exhausted by then we just crawled into our sleeping bags and didn't bother with supper.

Next morning we slept till daylight. We needed to take it easy today, get organized, get our heads on straight, and do some scouting in preparation for our hunt. We finished setting up our camp, and after a hearty breakfast, we saddled up the horses, trailed the mules behind my saddle-horse, and started up a side drainage just below our camp. We had to climb a very steep face for a mile or so which then opened up into a small meadow with a lake at the very head end of the drainage. We tied up in the trees and walked into the bottom of the main meadow. We hadn't glassed the surrounding slopes for five minutes when a little white puffball appeared in my binoculars, bedded on top of a ridge. No question it was a goat. I broke out the spotting scope and dialed in the goat. About the time I got the scope on him, he got up from his bed, took a few steps and urinated. No question now that this

indeed was a billy. He walked back to his bed and lay down. While I had only intended to do a recon today, the hunt was on!

He was bedded on a lateral ridge that poked out into the drainage. A distinctive, red-needled pine tree was just above where he was bedded. The slope below him was an open talus rock slide from the edge of the meadow to the top of the ridge. But we figured, we could work our way to a group of pine trees below where he was bedded, then climb to the base of the point while keeping those trees between us and him. I still didn't know what we would do from there. The contours on the topo map told us the meadow was at 8,050 feet and the goat was bedded at 9,550 feet, so we had some climbing to do.

The climb was hard and steep. But from the day that tag showed up in the mail, I prepared for this day. While the slope would take my breath away, recovery came fast with rest and my legs were strong. Jesse had the benefit of legs and lungs that were 30 years younger than mine, and she was huffing and puffing right along with me! I looked at her, smiled, and quipped, "We're red-lining the old fun meter now, ain't we?" She smiled back and laughed.

Looking at my beautiful daughter, my mind drifted back to an evening around our kitchen table some 15 years earlier. Fall was approaching, and our family's post-dinner



# The BILLY and the Bride



**LEFT:** Years of water pouring through had scoured it smooth from bottom to top. **BELOW:** Father and Daughter enjoying the trip.



conversation centered on my upcoming deer hunt in eastern Montana with my two sons. Jesse was 9 or 10, and as we discussed our plans, Jesse set her little fists on the table and defiantly demanded to know when she would be able to go hunting with us. I had started taking my boys deer hunting when Jason was 9 and Tyler was 7. It hit me right between the eyes—not that she was demanding to be included, because she was never timid about telling us what she thought, but because of my own blind spot—I hadn't even considered my daughter would want to go hunting. My stunned silence at her reaction gave way to feeling a little ashamed of myself, and when I finally spoke, I said, "I guess it's time you went with us!"

Her presence on our hunting trips forever changed all of us and only for the better. The testosterone level dropped significantly. A dad's over-exuberance might work on his sons, but it was a no-starter with a daughter. She was there to see we had a good time, not just hunt till we dropped! Jesse went with us for a couple of years before she was old enough to hunt. I will never forget that first year she was able to hunt. We went out the first morning and bumped a doe and large fawn just above the road. We stopped about 75 yards away and set Jesse up to shoot. She was looking through the scope, ready to shoot, but nothing was happening. I whispered to her. "Go ahead and squeeze the trigger." Still, nothing. Finally she raised her head from the stock of her rifle, and announced, "I only kill the male of the species!"

Two friends were hunting with me and we all howled! We knew the unspoken truth was that she didn't have the heart to take that mother away from her baby, and you never saw a dad more proud of his daughter. She caught up with "the male of the species" later that trip, taking a little two by two buck, perfect for a 12-year-old.

We resumed our climb in pursuit of the billy and after an hour and a half reached the base of the ridge. To the left of the ridge point, we would be right underneath the billy with the wind taking our scent directly to him. To the right was pretty much a solid rock wall. But during the climb, I noticed a crevasse in the rock wall to the right of the ridge. When we got to the mouth of the crevasse, neither of us could believe it. Years of water pouring through had scoured it smooth from bottom to top. It looked like a huge waterslide tube without the top half of the tube.

We climbed up the slide, probably a couple hundred yards. Soon we popped out of the top of the crevasse in a ravine behind the billy instead of underneath him. We continued to climb up the ravine, thinking we had more distance to cover to get above the billy. I worked up to the crest of the ridge and peeked down towards the red-needed tree we'd seen from below. And there was that puffball of a billy goat again!

As soon as I peeked over and saw him, I drew back, because I wanted to get Jesse up with me so she could watch and possibly video the shot. When I looked back, the billy had stood up and was looking up at me. I figured I'd better not hesitate, so I drew down on him. The goat was only about 75 yards away, but all I could see over the crest of the ridge was the very top of his shoulder, his neck and head. So I held at the base of his neck and fired. He dropped like a ton of bricks, and I thought it was all over. But just as fast, he was back on his feet, launching himself over the next ledge below. I fired again, putting a round behind his right shoulder and up through the left shoulder. The billy tensed with the impact and jumped over the next ledge. *These goats are tough!* I thought to myself. I worked my way through the rocks above him till

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I could see him again. He was still moving, but hurting. I sent the final shot on its way. He finally came to rest in a little draw of the rock slide about 200 yards below. I wondered if he would have any horns left after that tumble. But we had our billy goat!

Unfortunately, Jesse had missed the whole shooting sequence because she was still below me in the draw behind the ridge. But she caught up with me on the ridge and we gave each other high-fives. We worked our way down to the billy and fortunately his horns were still intact.

We didn't dare move him much, (not that we could have, anyway) for fear of him continuing to roll downhill. He was in a good spot to field dress him so we caped out the hide for a full body mount and quartered the carcass. We worked our way over to the edge of the rock slide and stashed the quarters at the base of an alpine fir and covered the meat with pine boughs. We would come back tomorrow to bone out the meat and pack it out. With the cape on my pack frame, I had all I wanted to carry. We carefully worked our way down the precarious rock slide to the meadow some 1,500 feet below us. Part-way down, Jesse told me to

**The author pictured below with his daughter and the billy.**



stop so she could take a picture of me skylined with the drainage below as the backdrop

As I posed for Jesse's picture, I couldn't help but recalling another trip when Jesse nearly gave me a heart attack over a picture. We were in Gardiner, Montana, on Jesse's first cow elk hunt. A cow tag for the Gardiner area was a good way to start out a kid hunting elk. As we traveled, I was in my normal high-testosterone mode, explaining where we would hunt, how we would hunt, and putting the full press on Jesse to get her first elk. Jesse listened to my babbling for awhile, then explained matter-of-factly that we were on this trip to have fun first, and to kill an elk second, and that there wasn't going to be any death marches with her! The first morning, just as it was getting light, we were sneaking along the top of a draw when Jesse excitedly whispered, "Dad, look!"

I went into hyper-drive trying to see the elk she was looking at, but I couldn't see it. "Where, Jesse?" I whispered. Then she pointed—up in the sky. The sun was peeking through the most amazing cloud formation drifting across the sky. "Can we take a picture, Dad?" We took off her pack, got her camera out and she took pictures. Then we just sat there and watched the sunrise. With the clouds ambling across the sky while the sun rose over the mountain, it changed constantly. It was breathtaking, and I would not have experienced it if it hadn't been for my daughter. I realized then that Jesse was teaching her old man something I needed to learn. "Stop and smell the roses." The next day Jesse killed her first cow elk.

The mood in camp that night was festive. Jesse had planned her favorite—fried chicken, potatoes, and gravy—as our celebratory dinner when we killed our billy. The next morning we rode back to retrieve the meat—only to find one of the front quarters had been dragged out into the rock slide and devoured to the bone. I had never had an animal bother meat this soon after a kill. I surmised that the most likely culprit was a wolverine. (My suspicions were later supported by a wildlife biologist in the Bozeman office when we stopped to check in the goat. He shared that the Crazy Mountains have the highest density of wolverines in the state.) I proceeded to bone out the other quarters and told Jesse that the wolverine was a blessing for her—less meat for her to carry!

Given that we were fully loaded on the trip in, I decided we would make a trip out to the trailhead the next day and pack out the meat, cape, and any other non-essential gear. The ride out and back in

was gorgeous. It was one of those beautiful Indian-summer days, and with the pressure of the hunt and other worries over, we were able to enjoy the fall colors, scenery, and weather. When we got back to camp, Jesse got her camera out and went on a little hike to collect pictures. While she was gone, she picked some wild raspberries for our pancakes the next morning. That night we discussed whether to go out the next day, or stay another day and hike up to the lake at the head of the drainage about two miles above our camp. We were having so much fun, it wasn't a hard choice.

Next morning I got up just before daylight to two inches of fresh snow! Those wild raspberry pancakes were a great start to set out on our breathtaking, snowy hike. Along the way we cut a fresh moose track and followed it for awhile—up the hill, down the hill, around the hill, but never saw him. We got to the lake about noon and while the fresh snow and rugged peaks were beautiful, the wind was howling. We took pictures and then found a spot out of the wind to have our lunch. Afterward, as we descended back to camp, the sun came out and the snow became mini-waterfalls across the rock ledges. It was spectacular.

The next morning I baked Jesse cinnamon rolls for breakfast, then we broke camp. After packing up the gear inside the tent, I went over to saddle the stock while Jesse began taking down the tent. All of a sudden I heard this squealing coming from Jesse's direction. I walked around a tree to see what the commotion was all about and there stood Jesse, doing a modified stationary panic, (jumping up and down, waving her arms while going nowhere!) and squealing in the process, as a big ol' bull moose walked up the trail no more than 20 yards from the tent. I finally recognized the squealing as "Daaaaaaaaaaaad, Daaaaaaaaaaad!" About the time I cleared the tree to see what was going on, the moose became unnerved by the squealing and trotted off the trail into the trees. Jesse then began squealing, "Where's the camera?" at me, to which I replied, "In your pocket!" She had gotten so

**The big day – the author with his daughter on her wedding day.**

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excited at seeing a moose so close she forgot she was carrying the camera. Unfortunately, by the time she gathered her wits, the bull had moved up the hill into the timber and we never got a good picture. I laughed so hard I could hardly stand. It's gratifying to watch a young person get so excited about seeing wildlife. It makes me proud that she appreciates those things as much as I do. We packed up camp and headed back to the trailhead.

Three weeks later, I was standing in the entryway of the church with this beautiful young woman, radiant in her wedding dress, holding onto my arm. The doors opened, the wedding march began, and we entered the church. About a third of the way up the aisle, I whispered to Jesse to stop. And on cue, the wedding photographer stepped out into the aisle and took our picture. I had given the photographer explicit instructions. There was one picture I wanted—of me walking my daughter down the aisle—so I could put the picture in the article I was going to write, called "The Billy and the Bride."

It was a beautiful wedding and I gained a son-in-law who is anxious to experience some hunting trips with his new wife and father-in-law.

Now we return to the beginning of this story. I am a very lucky man, and not just in terms of drawing tags. I'm lucky to live where I do and to be able to do the things I do. I'm unbelievably lucky to have a wonderful family. I'm lucky that my kids wanted to spend time hunting with their dad. And I am especially lucky to have a great daughter for a hunting partner, to learn what I needed to teach her, and for her to teach me the things she has. My friends are right, "I am" an unbelievably lucky guy. ■

