

# Destinat

Mountain goats are one of North America's most magnificent big game animals.

## Why, then, do they get such little respect?

It was a cold November day somewhere back in the mid-1980s. Elk hunting in the frigid mountains outside Ennis, Montana, I glassed above timberline and saw some white spots that didn't seem to belong. Further inspection showed them to be mountain goats.

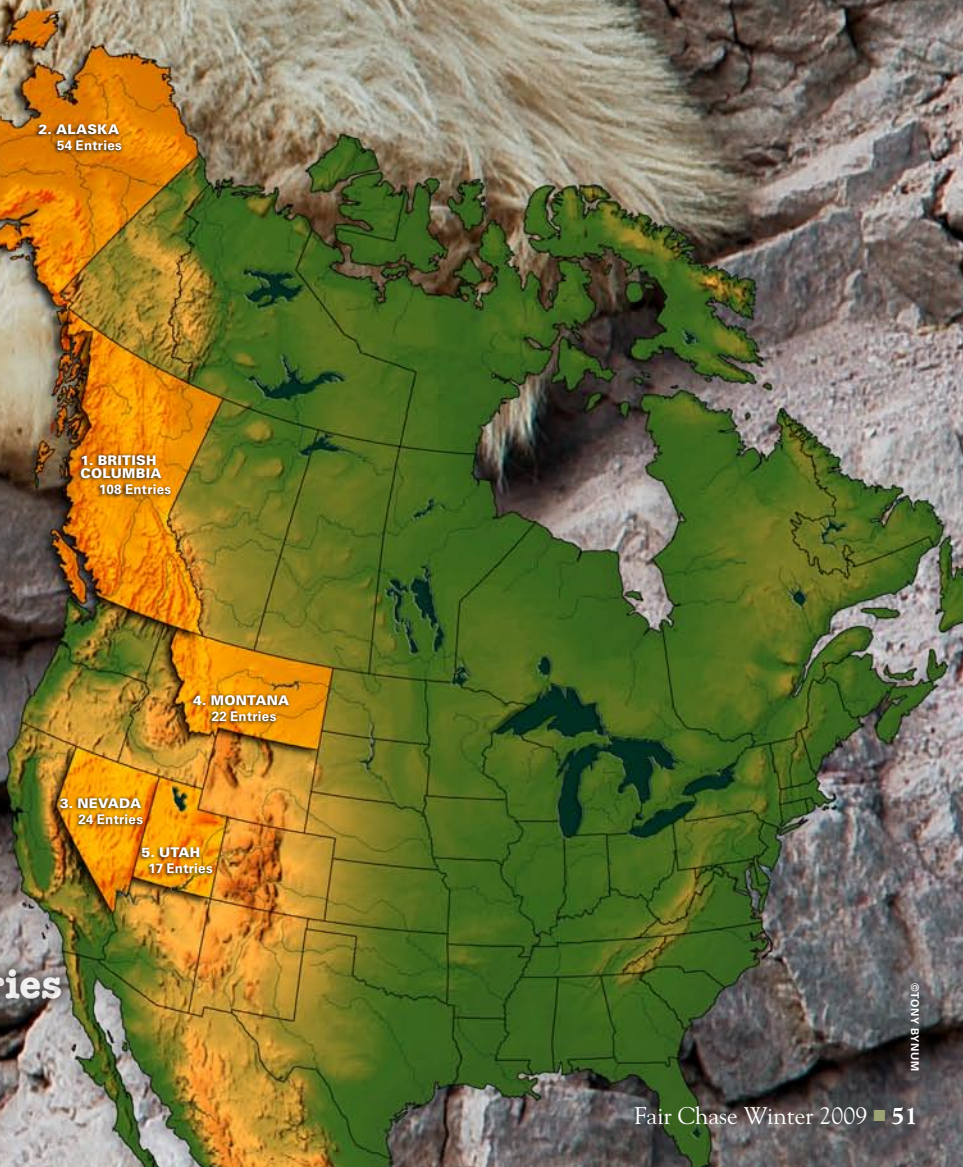
I had not known there were any goats in this area. So when I got home and found that these goats could be hunted if a guy could draw what was then one of the first limited-entry tags given out for western big-game hunting, I applied, never expecting to draw. As a youngster I had read the writings of such authors as Russell Annabel and Ralph Young, and their tales of mountain goat hunting had left a spark inside me. It was a complete surprise when I drew the very next year.

**By Bob Robb**  
B&C Professional Member

A couple of local Montanans supplied horses for the hunt, and in late October, up the mountain we went. On that cold, icy day I shot the first of my career-six mountain goats, I watched the billy take a horrendous tumble down a steep, shale slope before coming to rest on a small ledge several thousand feet above the valley floor. Cold, wet, and bone-tired, we got back to the little motel in Ennis about midnight. I was hooked.



# tion: Rocky Mountain Goats



**Top 5 States & Provinces  
Rocky Mountain Goat Entries  
1999 - 2009**

## WHAT THE "BOOK" SAYS

If you're seeking a trophy mountain goat, there's no better place to begin looking than the Trophy Search area on the Boone and Crockett Club's web site, [www.boone-crockett.org](http://www.boone-crockett.org). This subscription-only (\$40 a year for Associates) area allows you to quickly search the Club's big-game records program data, making it easy to ferret through the data until you have a clear picture of the trophy potential for any big-game animal in North America in any area in which they can be hunted.

First, what constitutes a record-book mountain goat? The minimum score to make the Awards Program records is 47; to make the All-time records book, the minimum score is 50. That's a giant goat! The current World's Record is a monster scoring 56 6/8 points taken back in 1949 by E.C. Haase in the Babine Mountains of British Columbia, one recently matched by the 56 6/8 brute taken in 1999 in the Bella Coola region of British Columbia by G. Wober and L. Michalchuk. To crack the All-time, top-100, you need to beat the 52 2/8 goat taken by Fritz Stork in the Taku River region of British Columbia in 1985.

A quick search of the records shows that the all-time leader in the production of book mountain goats is British Columbia, whose 529 entries is more than twice the total of the number two area, Alaska, which has produced 219. A distant third is Washington, 78, while Montana is in fourth place with 76 entries. After that it's Nevada (34), Utah (28), Idaho (23), Oregon (12), Colorado (10), Alberta (7), Wyoming (5), South Dakota (4), Yukon Territory (3), and an unknown location for one entry.

Of course, what was then was then, and what is now, is now. So when looking for a place where the odds are best at finding a true book goat, I looked at the records from the past decade. In the record-keeping period from 2000-2009, British Columbia still leads the way with 108 entries, followed by Alaska (54), Nevada (24), Montana (22), Utah (17), Oregon (11), Washington (9), Colorado (6), Idaho (5), Wyoming (2), and Alberta and South Dakota (1 each).

Good enough. But now we have to shrink our focus even further. British Columbia is a big place. Where, exactly, have all the book billies come from? In the scoring period 2000-2009, the Skeena River area has yielded six, the Kalum Lake and Telegraph Creek areas four each, and Atlin Lake, Copper River, Foch Lake, and Stikine River areas three each.

In Alaska, Kodiak Island and Revillagigedo Island have each produced four book goats, while the Cleveland Peninsula, Columbia Glacier, Horn Cliffs, and Misty Fjords have each yielded three.

Here's the hidden gem. Nevada, which gives out very few mountain goat tags annually, has produced 24 book billies in the 2000-2009 scoring period. All of them have come from Elko County. Where do you think you should hunt here?

In Montana, Park County leads the way in the past decade with six entries, while Chouteau County has given up four. In Utah, the leading areas are Beaver County (5), Utah County (4), and Duchesne County (3). If you want to hunt Oregon, Wallowa and Baker Counties have kicked out seven and four book goats, respectively. Washington's Kittitas and Okanogan Counties have produced two book goats each, while Clear Creek and Park Counties, Colorado, have also produced a pair of record goats.

This data is a great start in the planning process. Keep in mind that areas like British Columbia and Alaska have the highest overall mountain goat populations and are places where you can just go goat hunting without worrying about drawing a limited-entry permit. Lower 48 states have much fewer goats and permits are very difficult to draw, but the chances of actually taking a whopper billy just might be better in some of these areas.

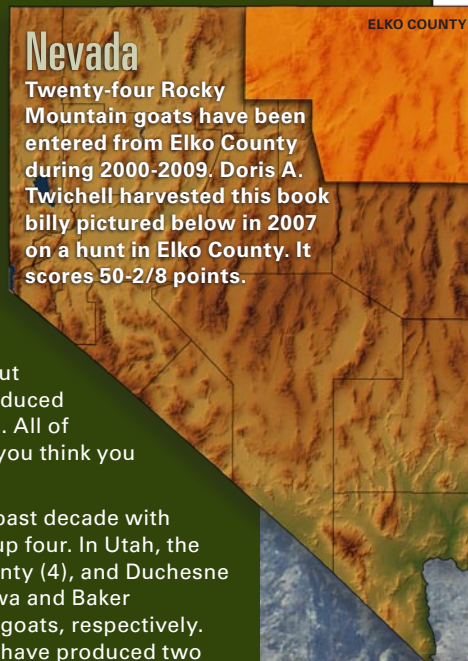
Since that day, I've hunted the Rocky Mountain goat in British Columbia and Alaska with both rifle and bow. Each and every hunt has been a true adventure. That's why it always amazes me that when the talk turns to hunting the game of the North Country, mountain goats rarely receive any attention or much respect. When hunted before the snows push them down to lower elevations and harvesting a good billy is more a matter of beating the weatherman than anything else, something always seems to happen. One thing's for certain—hunting mountain goats is always exciting!

### An Enigma

The mountain goat (*Oreamnos americanus americanus*) is something of an enigma. It's not a true goat at all, but a member of the antelope family that includes the chamois of Europe and goral and serow of Asia Minor. It lives where no other animal would, or even could; fattening up where others find the pickings slim. Its toughness is legendary, while its sagacity places it high atop many a hunter's wish list.

Mountain goats have a unique appearance, with a blunt, rather squarish body, and humped, muscular shoulders that are almost out of proportion to the rest of its body. A narrow head features pointy ears and a black nose. Mature goats are 60 to 70 inches in length, and 35 to 45 inches high at the shoulder. Billies are generally larger than the nannies, the larger males weighing upwards of 300 pounds.

That isn't to say there are no large nannies. On one hunt in southeast Alaska I crept within spitting distance of an old, dry nanny that had to weigh 300 pounds if she weighed an ounce, with horns nearly a foot in length. I was bowhunting, stalking along looking for a pair of billies I'd seen from across the valley earlier in the morning. The late afternoon thermals had turned, sending



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the winds uphill, which was perfect as I was trying to come in from above and behind the band of four goats. But just as I was about to close the gap from 65 to 40 yards, the winds mysteriously shifted, and they got a whiff of my four-day-old body odor. That merry little band left that hillside like a rocket ship. Don't ever let anyone tell you that goats can't smell danger.

## Trophy Quality

In terms of trophy quality, the two most important features a mountain goat possesses are its horns and its coat.

The horns are relatively short, slender, and shiny black in color, rising up off the forehead and sweeping back in a graceful, parabolic curve. Mature goats will have horns measuring between nine and 11 inches in length, with nannies tending to have longer but more slender horns than billies. The longest set of horns ever recorded was a nanny's at 12-4/8 inches. In terms of trophy quality, any mountain goat with relatively heavy horns (over a 5-inch circumference at the base) and more than 9 inches long is a good one. Those over 9-1/2 inches are very good, with anything measuring over 10 inches, exceptional.

Goat horns are tough but not indestructible. That's one reason you have to pick your spot for a shot carefully, or a long drop down a steep rock face might leave the horns in shreds. I shot my Montana billy as he was walking along a steep shale face some 300 yards below me late in the evening. The first shot from my .280 Remington took him through the front shoulder, taking out both lungs. Amazingly, that didn't seem to bother him much, so I shot him again, this time at the base of the neck. With that one he dropped his head into a neat little tuck position and went rolling like a circus acrobat. He hit a small rock and did a front flip, hit the ground and rolled again, hit another rock and did a double flip right over the edge of the mountain. He stopped on a ledge 500 feet below, where we found that he'd broken at least an inch off both horn tips. They still measured nine inches long.

The all-white coat of a mountain goat is soft as fluff, composed of an almost downy underlayer of very fine fur, and a longer outer layer of guard hairs. Goats also have a distinctive "beard" under their chins—in reality an extension of their neck hairs—which are more prominent on billies than on nannies. A prime mountain goat hide is one of the most beautiful of all North American big-game animals. Goats shed their coats during the hot weather of summer. It reaches its maximum length in late winter.



## THE HUNTER-SCIENTIST SERIES

To be launched in 2010

The Boone and Crockett Club is pleased to announce a new series of books headlined by world-renowned wildlife scientist Valerius Geist titled *The Hunter-Scientist*. Each handy guide includes riveting anecdotal hunting and research stories about individual native North American big game animals. From the ubiquitous whitetail to the ethereal mountain goat, *The Hunter-Scientist* series chronicles our continent's wildlife for the big-game hunter, scientist, and the inquisitive outdoorsman. North America's wildlife was restored by sportsmen's

commitment to conservation and their own tax dollars coupled with scientific research. *The Hunter-Scientist* series by B&C documents these efforts in this collection of single-species tomes.

- The first book in the series, titled, *Living on the Edge*, will focus on mountain goats. It's scheduled release is Summer 2010.
- Presented in a handy 5 x 7 guide with rounded corners that will fit easily into a backpack and not be damaged.
- Includes cutting-edge research that will give readers valuable knowledge when pursuing unfamiliar big game animals in unfamiliar habitat.



## British Columbia

Six Rocky Mountain goats have been entered from the Skeena River area during 2000-2009. The billy pictured above was taken in that area by Tod W. Graham during the 2008 season. It scores 47-6/8 points.

### Dumb To Approach?

Many of those uneducated in the ways of mountain goats believe them to be dumb creatures easy to approach. I don't buy it.

Because they normally live in the toughest spires and peaks of the continent's steepest, tallest mountains, mountain goats are by nature more trouble to get to than the average person can handle. For that reason, in some remote areas it may literally be years before a goat lays eyes on a person. To them, danger comes in the form of wolves and bears, predators with fearsome powers at close range but harmless at a distance of a football field or more away. Stalking into comfortable rifle range of a mountain goat isn't all that difficult if you watch the wind, don't make any unnecessary human sounds, stay hidden behind rocks and down in gullies as you stalk closer. Try to approach them from either their level or above them.

I vividly remember one goat hunt in British Columbia. My guide and I rode a pair of saddle horses two days into the wilderness. There were lots of goats around, and soon we were climbing after a pair of better-than-average billies bedded at the top of some steep cliffs.

As we worked our way up the

mountain we used the vertical rocks to keep us hidden, and soon we were peeking over the rim down onto the goats, which were bedded 200 yards below. I crawled to a small saddle, where I set up my spotting scope so I could look them over before deciding on whether or not to shoot. Just then a gust of icy wind whipped through the narrow saddle at about 40 miles an hour, swirling dust and chilling me to the bone. That wind blew my spotting scope clean down the mountain, where I watched it destroy itself on the sharp rocks a thousand feet down. We never went to look for it, nor did we get a shot at those goats. The wind must have chilled them, too, because they moved around the mountain to a sheltered cliff face so steep it was impossible to follow.

### Weather: Public Enemy No. 1

The weather is often your worst enemy when hunting goats. It often rains buckets, or the fog can be so thick you can't see your hand in front of your face. And, during the later part of the season, it can snow like a son-of-a-gun.

This wet, frozen weather can make hiking and climbing interesting, to say the least. I've started avalanches by hopping

atop boulders as big as battleships. Side-hilling on a slippery shale slide almost always leads to a bone-jarring slip, and care must always be taken not to slide over a cliff edge. Hypothermia is a real concern, one reason only the very best rain gear and a layered approach to dressing built around synthetic fibers is the only way to go.

On extremely low-visibility days, there's not much to do except stick close to camp and wait. Smart goat hunters bring a good book to camp to help them from going stir-crazy in a small tent during bad-weather stretches, even if the weight is cursed during the arduous climb. During such confinement you learn a lot about your hunting companions, and about yourself.

Once I was hunting goats solo in Alaska during what began as a beautiful week of sunshine and warm temperatures. I climbed 5,000 feet up the mountain from the beach into good goat country and was happy as could be. The next morning I awoke to ground fog and a heavy drizzle, which soon turned into some serious rain. Three days later—I only left the little one-man tent during this time to answer Mother Nature's call—it stopped for a day, and I took advantage of it by going out and shooting a nice billy. Then the rain and fog returned, and I was stuck in my tent for two more days before visibility increased enough so that I felt safe about going down the mountain once again.

### More Than Just Another Animal

The mountain goat is more than just another big-game animal to me. Rather than a carelessly carved notch in a hunter's rifle stock or arrow quiver, they are a symbol of the true wilderness. The peace and tranquility of their high-mountain homes is more apt to be shattered by the gurgle of a pristine mountain stream or the howling of a wolf than the vulgar sound of a ghetto-blasters or chain saw. The weather often changes by the hour, not the day or week, rewarding the prudent and mercilessly punishing those who carelessly leave equipment uncovered or in poor repair. For those who take the time to learn about the ways of the wilderness, it can be a cornucopia of ripe berries and tender upland birds. The sky is clear enough to see to the edge of the universe, the water pure, and together with the goats themselves the country serves to purify the souls of those who accept the challenge of hunting mountain goats on their terms in their high-country homes.

I feel less than full in those years when I don't climb after old *Oreamnos*, the all-American mountain goat. ■