

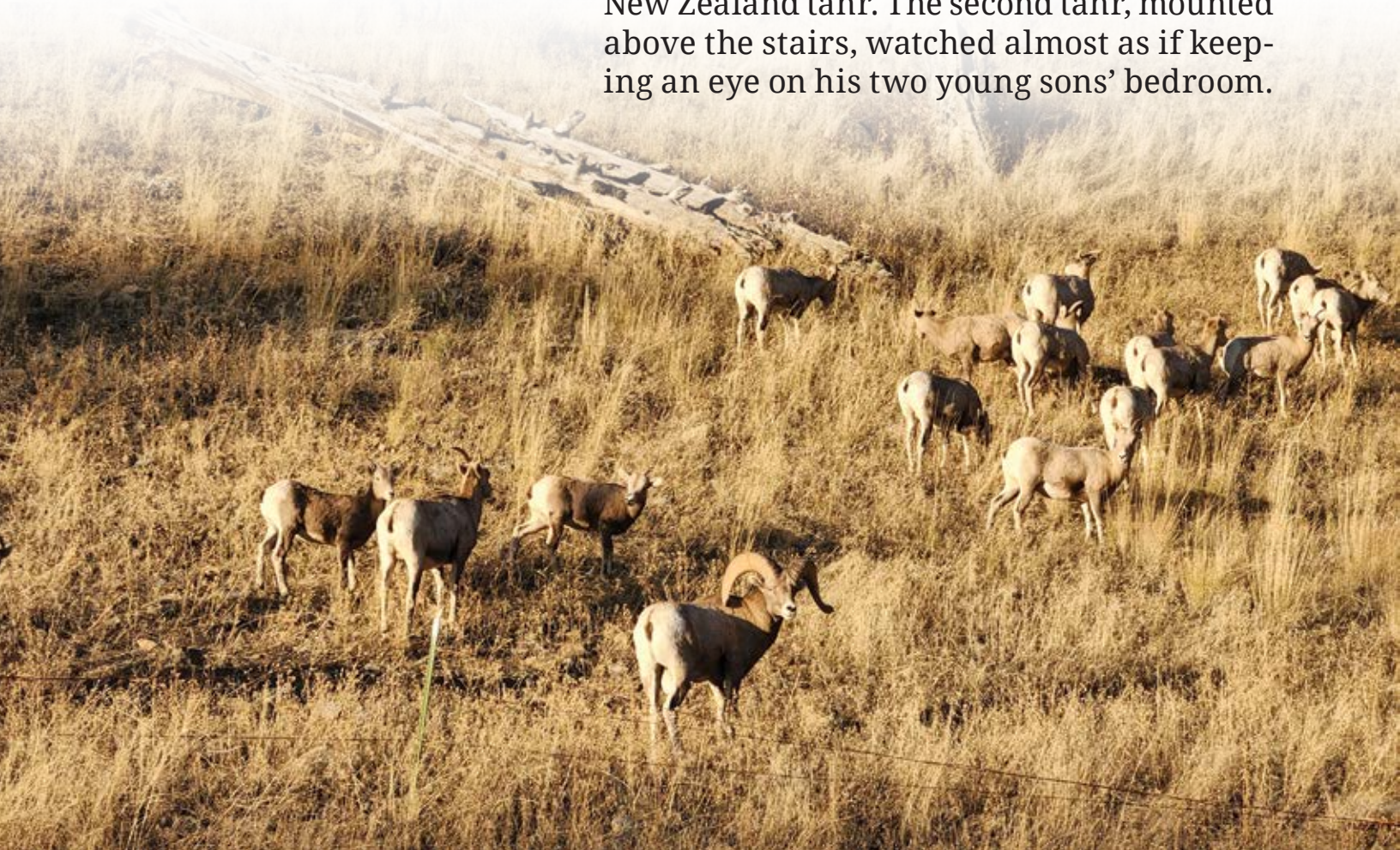
CAVAN WILLIAMS

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AUTHOR  
AND ADAM ONSRUD



# MONTANA BIGHORN

David Sager sat at his desk editing the video from a recent work shoot. A 10-point white-tail watched him from the wall above. Down the hall from his office, his family room sat under the sentry gaze of a bull caribou and New Zealand tahr. The second tahr, mounted above the stairs, watched almost as if keeping an eye on his two young sons' bedroom.





David Sager (right) and Adam Onsrud (left) work their way into a bowl nine miles into the backcountry.

At 44, life was a far cry from his days of filming hunts in the long grass of Africa and windswept mountain slopes of Alaska, British Columbia, and New Zealand. As a cameraman for hunting shows, he has filmed other hunters on five continents. Occasionally, he would go hunting himself—except for bighorn sheep. He was always behind the lens for those until the fall of 2022. That’s when he got a phone call from Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. When the phone rang, he didn’t recognize the number and let it go to voicemail.

**MONTANA IS KNOWN FOR ITS RECORD-BOOK BIGHORNS. IF YOU’RE LUCKY ENOUGH TO DRAW A TAG, YOU DO EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO MAKE THAT HUNT HAPPEN.**

**IT HELPS IF THE UNIT WHERE YOU’RE HUNTING IS JUST A FEW MILES FROM YOUR FRONT DOOR.**

“Hi, David. This is Fish, Wildlife, and Parks calling. We noticed that you had not picked up your sheep license and wondered if you still wanted to get it. Again, you did draw a sheep tag, and we just want to know if you still want to get it.”

While Sager remembered to apply for his special permits, he got so caught up in life that he forgot to check the results. “It was just, holy shit; this is real. This isn’t a hoax, a mix-up. This is real,” he said. He logged onto the FWP website, bought his tag, and called his seven-year-old

son into the room to celebrate with him.

Sager’s hunting season instantly transformed from a year with too little time into a lifetime opportunity. Schedules were rearranged, the inlaws planned to fly in to help with the kids, and Sager was about to cash out his parental capital. Full curls were now a priority.

#### **SCOUTING THE UNIT**

Sager’s tag was for unit 270, and the odds of drawing a hunt here are not good. Montana awards three tags for the unit; in 2021, just over 1,000 hunters applied for it, giving the average hunter a .3 percent chance to draw. The unit almost exclusively encompasses the southern portion of Montana’s Sapphire Range in the state’s southwest corner. Dirt roads crisscross the front range of the unit, and a robust system of trails leads stout hunters deep into the mountains. And the best part? The unit was just a few miles from Sager’s house.

Having only been behind the camera on sheep hunts, Sager immediately contacted the region’s state sheep biologist. Unit 270 does not have world-class rams like the Missouri River Breaks, but the biologist assured him the unit could

produce a record-book ram. She told Sager the unit held between 100-120 sheep and informed him how soon he needed to get a sheep validated after the kill.

And then he turned to his fellow hunters for advice. Sager started asking around about others who had previously drawn the tag. He would normally be hesitant to ask someone the location of a trophy harvest, but he soon found a strong community of information. The beauty of a special tag is that most hunters get one shot in their lifetime. Because of that, they are more willing to help. Friends, friends of friends, gas station employees, and total strangers were all willing to tell him where they had seen sheep. One hunter whose daughter drew the tag years before suggested a chain of lakes where he and his daughter took a Boone and Crockett ram.

“When word got out that I had drawn a tag in that area, many hunters were volunteering help and advice over social media,” Sager said. “I think that’s pretty unique in the hunting world and, more specifically, within the sheep-hunting world.”

Using a mix of Google Maps and hunting apps, Sager decided the high, open

country surrounding the lakes looked like prime sheep habitat. His friend Adam Onsrud jumped at the chance to help and offered to let Sager use his extra lightweight Bergara 6.5 PRC. The lakes are seven miles in by foot, and it took the two hunters most of a day to get to them. They scouted above the lakes and spotted two rams, one of which had dark chocolate horns and good mass. They could not, however, close enough distance on the ram and decided to come back when Sager had a full week to hunt. They marked the area on their GPS, stashed their tent and sleeping bags, and hiked out.

### SECOND-GUESS RAM

Almost two weeks passed before Sager could get back into the lake. It was October 16, and there was still no snow in the mountains. Late in the evening, Sager and Onsrud made the trek to the mountain lakes, this time by headlamp. They found their stashed gear, set up camp, and drifted off to sleep.

The late hike made for a late morning, but the two hunters cut their way across open meadows, dark woods, and deadfall to arrive back at a glassing spot. They immediately started covering every inch of grass and rock through binoculars and spotting scope. They saw no sheep by

midmorning. By noon, they began to get a sinking feeling. Maybe the rams are in a different drainage? Maybe they left for good? Maybe we should look somewhere else?

And then they heard it. “Crack”

The sound shattered the afternoon lull. The two hunters looked at each other with excitement. The sound of headbutting horns was unmistakable. Nothing else makes that sound in the woods. There were sheep somewhere in the drainage. They glassed until their eyes bulged from their heads, but they could never spot the headbutting rams. At dusk, they headed back to camp.

At dawn the following day, the hunters were in position. “I got something,” Sager said with his eyes still in his binoculars. There were two rams, and that’s all the two needed to see. The hunters hiked down a rocky trail and cut through the woods, perfectly hidden from the rams.

Sager made his way into an opening with a perfect

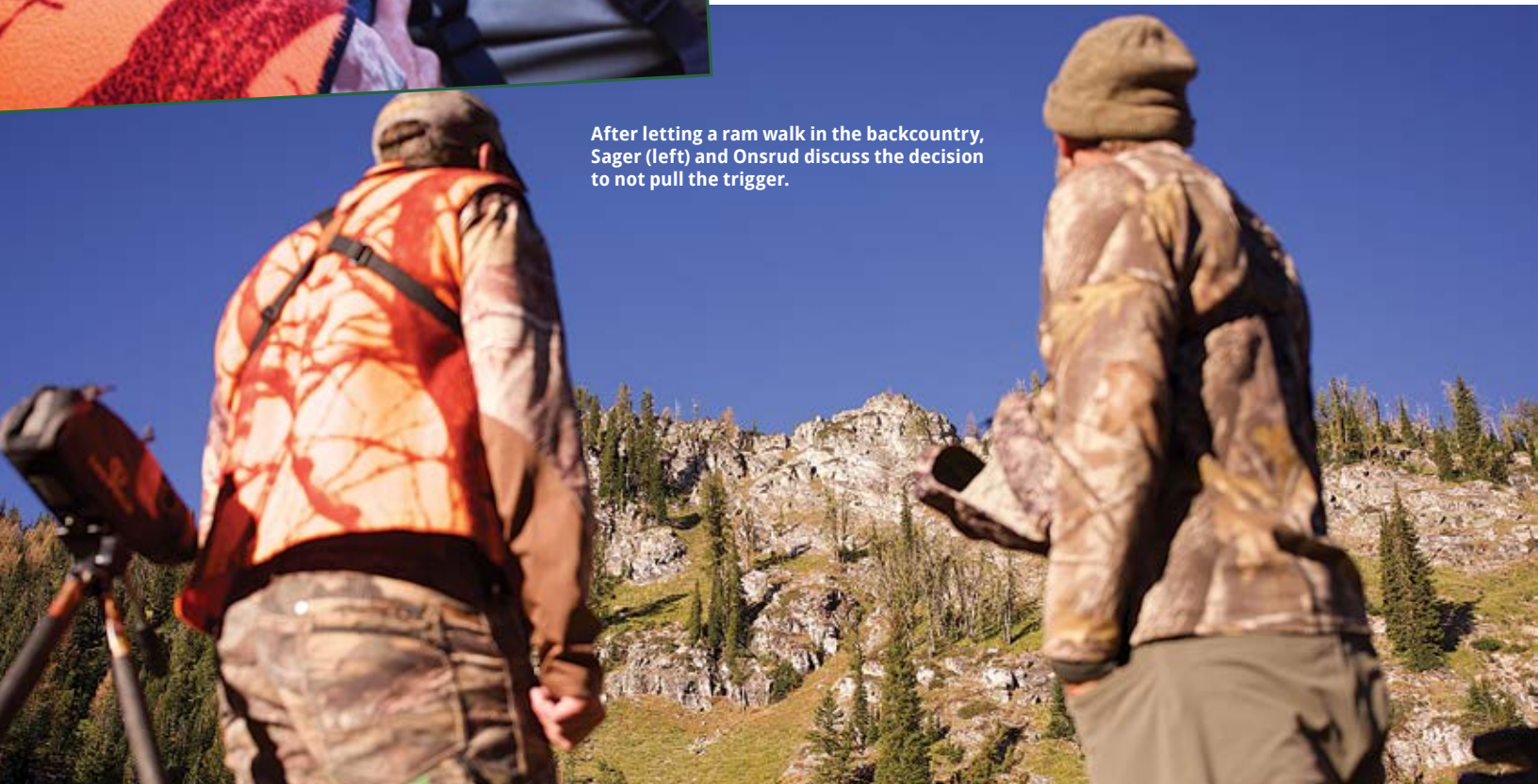
view of a meadow above. Boulders and patches of trees dotted the hillside. Amongst them were three rams. They set up the spotting scope and rifle and began staring at the details of each set of horns. The first ram didn’t have a full curl, and the second still had lamb tips. When the third came out, the dark chocolate horns and tight curl were a dead giveaway for the ram they had spotted two weeks earlier. At 240 yards, the ram was in range, but the more Sager glassed, the more hesitant he was to pull the trigger.

“I don’t like how tight his curl is,” he said. “I just don’t think he’s the one.”

A horn that curls tightly likely won’t score as well as a more “full-figured” set of horns. Sager would likely only have one chance at a record-book ram. He remembered getting advice from his colleague Bo Morgan, a world-renowned sheep hunter. Morgan told him to hide his bullets until November when the true giants come out of thin air for the rut.



After letting a ram walk in the backcountry, Sager (left) and Onsrud discuss the decision to not pull the trigger.



With patience and a slight sense of panic, Sager passed on the chocolate-horned ram.

“From the time we packed up camp and hiked out eight miles, I wondered if I screwed up by not pulling the trigger,” he said.

### THE FINAL PUSH

Another two weeks passed before Sager could get out into the field again, and the weather had turned. Snow now blanketed the valley floor. Temperatures stayed at, or below, freezing. It was November, and if the snow didn't drive more rams out of the backcountry, the promise of the upcoming rut surely did.

One Friday, when he had a small window of time, Sager took his seven-year-old with him for a quick whitetail hunt. While on the hunt, he received a text from a friend who had just taken a photo of a ram near where Sager was focusing his efforts. The ram was heavy, weathered, mature, and had a broken horn on one side. It was a shooter, without a doubt. He got home from the deer hunt and showed his wife the photo of the ram.

“What are you waiting for?” she said. “Go!”

He traded deer gear for sheep gear and set his sights south. He hadn't been in the area in two weeks, and the scenery was vastly different. Bands of rams covered the hillsides. Most were too small for consideration, but it was clear the rut was right around the corner.

Almost immediately, he glassed an old, heavy ram from the road. It piqued his interest, but he was still confident the large ram from the photo was up the road. He jumped back in the truck and soon spotted another old, heavy ram up on the hillside. This one was half a mile away, looking over a band of ewes. At that distance, Sager didn't think too much of the ram, even through his spotting scope. He instead drove back

to have another look at the first one. After being convinced the first ram wasn't the stud he initially thought, he went back toward the second.

By now, the band of ewes worked their way down the hillside toward the road. The ram followed. The sheep stepped behind some willows, and Sager tried to cut it off for a better look.

When the old ram finally stepped out, he knew he'd found the one. A quick look at his mapping software proved problematic, however. The ram was firmly placed on private land and showed no signs of coming off. Light was fading, and Sager knew he had to leave.

He couldn't make it back out until Sunday, but this time he was there at first light and with a crew of four hunting buddies, including Onsrud. They spotted around 40 sheep at first light but couldn't find the one from Friday.

Onsrud suggested they hike above the band of ewes and small rams. The rut was heating up, and they all agreed the old ram would not leave this many ewes.

If you have any DIY hunts you would like to see featured in the column, please email Karlie Slayer, [Karlie@Boone-Crockett.org](mailto:Karlie@Boone-Crockett.org) for details.

ADVENTURE  
AWAITS



The country was bare but folded with different drainages you can only see when you're on the mountain. The four hunters crossed the open country carefully into the next drainage. They glassed another herd of around 30 ewes and small rams. Above the cluster of ewes and small rams, they spied a bedded band of 15 mature rams.

The hunters carefully picked the 15 rams apart with spotting scopes and binoculars for close to 30 minutes. One by one, the rams stood and began feeding. The old ram with the broken tip was pushing around younger rams as an act of dominance.

The hunters were out of range but used the contours of the hills to cover themselves as they worked toward a rocky outcrop. It was as close as they could get without fully exposing themselves to either herd.

At 296 yards, this would be Sager's longest shot on an animal, but he was still comfortable with the distance. He found a rest and put the old ram in his scope. At

first, sheep filled the backdrop. He didn't have a clean, broadside shot. Minutes felt like hours.

"That was the most nerve-racking part, waiting for him in the crosshairs," Sager said. "I had this sinking feeling that something was going to go wrong after so much work."

Sager focused on lowering his heart rate and calming his breathing. Finally, the ram stepped out and turned broadside as the other sheep filtered out of the background.

"Okay guys, here we go," Sager said.

He took two deep breaths. As he let out the second breath, he squeezed. He watched the bullet make contact. The old ram immediately crumpled and fell. "I've been on a lot of emotional hunts behind the camera, but now that it was my turn, I didn't know how to feel," he said. "My thoughts went back to my dad, hunting in Wisconsin, and when I moved to Montana. I welled up a bit. I've never experienced anything like it."

It wasn't until he collected himself and started high-fiving and hugging his hunting partners that the true nature of the situation dawned on him. "It hit me that it was over. Something I'll likely do only once in my life," he said. "The whole two-month period was everything I could have asked for in a hunt."

The foursome caped the ram, packed up the meat, and headed toward the trucks. Under the weight of the 10-year-old ram's horns, Sager walked back toward his life of family and commitment. After years of traveling across five continents as a hunter and cameraman, the greatest hunt of his life ended only 30 miles from home. ■

## TAG SPECS

### COST

RESIDENT: \$125, PLUS \$10 APPLICATION FEE

NONRESIDENT: \$1,250, PLUS \$50 APPLICATION FEE

### APPLICATION DEADLINE MAY 1

### SEASON DATES (ROUGHLY)

ARCHERY: SEPTEMBER 3 - SEPTEMBER 14

GENERAL: SEPTEMBER 15 - NOVEMBER 27

## MUST HAVE GEAR

10X POWER BINOCULARS ARE A GREAT ALL-AROUND CHOICE. A SPOTTING SCOPE BETWEEN 45-60X POWER WILL HELP YOU SPOT INDIVIDUAL ANIMALS AND PROPERLY JUDGE THEM BEFORE MAKING THAT FINAL STALK.

RIGHT: Coming out heavy, Sager navigates a snowy hillside in November with the weight of his freshly killed ram. BELOW: David Sager (center) takes his ram to a Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks check station.

