

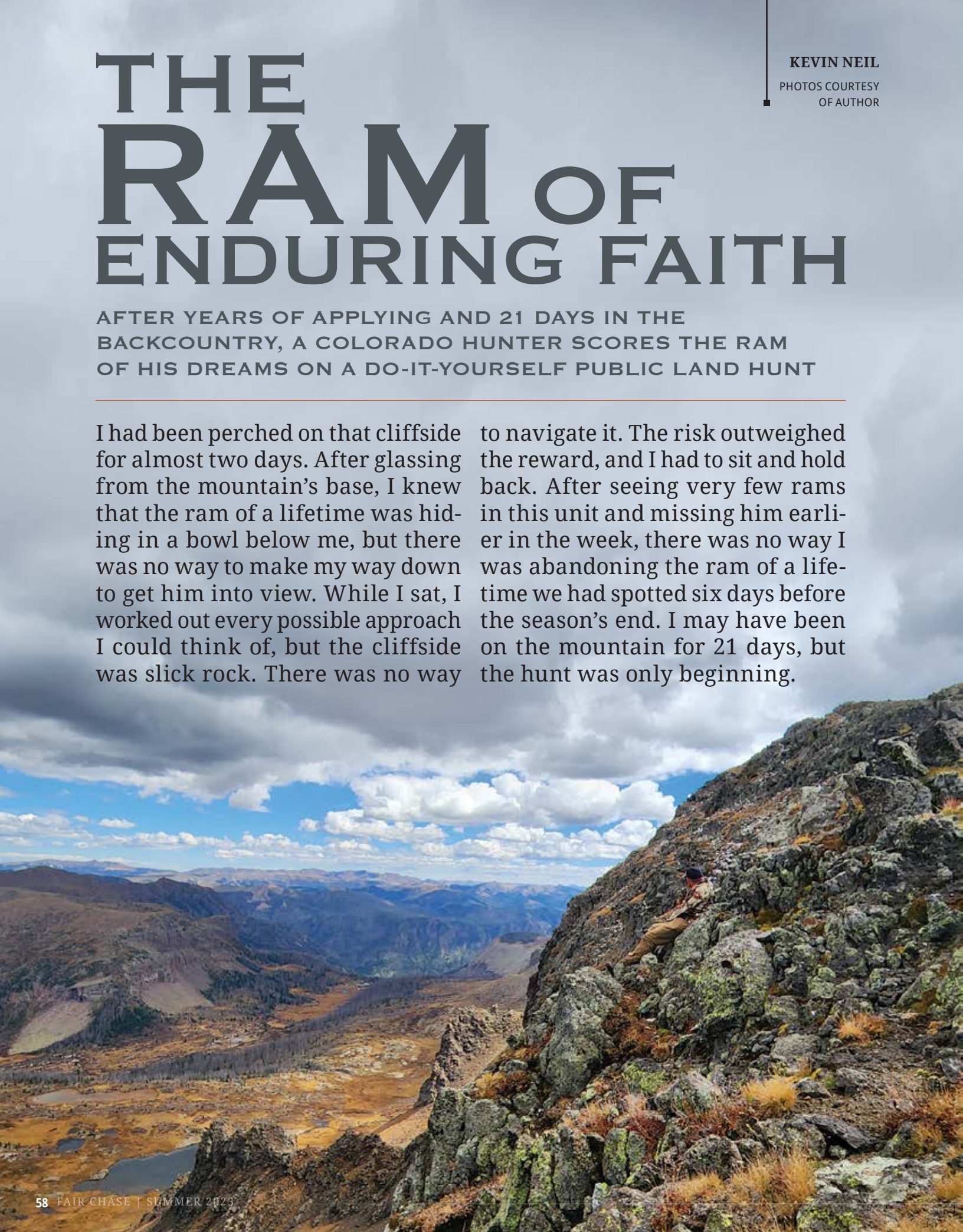
THE RAM OF ENDURING FAITH

KEVIN NEIL
PHOTOS COURTESY
OF AUTHOR

AFTER YEARS OF APPLYING AND 21 DAYS IN THE BACKCOUNTRY, A COLORADO HUNTER SCORES THE RAM OF HIS DREAMS ON A DO-IT-YOURSELF PUBLIC LAND HUNT

I had been perched on that cliffside for almost two days. After glassing from the mountain's base, I knew that the ram of a lifetime was hiding in a bowl below me, but there was no way to make my way down to get him into view. While I sat, I worked out every possible approach I could think of, but the cliffside was slick rock. There was no way

to navigate it. The risk outweighed the reward, and I had to sit and hold back. After seeing very few rams in this unit and missing him earlier in the week, there was no way I was abandoning the ram of a lifetime we had spotted six days before the season's end. I may have been on the mountain for 21 days, but the hunt was only beginning.



LUCK OF THE DRAW

My hunt began in March with the annual draw. I had been applying in another unit for several years with no success. After looking at past draw results and talking to a good friend, I contemplated trying my luck with a new unit. Another friend had successfully hunted in the unit I was considering and told stories of a large, full-curl ram that would appear before the season, then vanish once the season commenced. This unit was not known to have the largest rams, but the draw odds were better than the unit I was putting in for, so I decided to go for it.

Unfortunately, April is one of my busiest months due to the start of hay farming season. Combine that with my full-time job, and I entirely forgot about the draw on April 19. However, I saw the results when my wife texted me to check my email. To say I was excited was an understatement. I should have just taken off work early because it was hard to focus on anything else for the rest of the day. I had been dreaming of this hunt since I was 13. I could not wait to start preparing.

RAM RECON

I intended to get out and scout a few weeks each month throughout the summer, but Colorado weather is unpredictable. The summer of 2022 was undeniably that. It was much wetter than usual, which made glassing complicated. Plus, hay season went on for what seemed like forever. Finally, the weather

cooperated in August, and I could get out into the wilderness to scout for sheep. The first scouting trip only lasted a few days, but it helped me learn firsthand about my pack weight, the area, and the terrain. I glassed quite a few ewes and lambs. A few weeks later, I headed back out, taking an alternative trail around the back of the mountain, intending to find a band of rams, but once again only spotted ewes. I was slightly discouraged, but with hunting season approaching in under a week, I did not have time to be unproductive.

I spent the next few days mapping out multiple areas I wanted to glass and hike. I also chatted with those I knew who had hunted in the area previously. Before I knew it, opening day was a day away, and I was finalizing my pack weight (not an easy task) and placing everything in the truck.

OPENING WEEK

That day, my friend John and I hiked five miles into the mountains to our first camping and glassing location. Thank goodness for the uphill hike, or I may not have slept at all that night due to excitement. Opening day, we glassed from camp and once again only spotted ewes. It was hard not to be disappointed, but we regrouped. Later that day, we hiked six miles around the far side of the mountain, hoping to find a band of rams. Unfortunately, all we glassed was an immature ram. We glassed from base camp the next day and



WE FOCUSED ON A FEW MOUNTAINS WE HAD ONLY PREVIOUSLY SCOUTED FROM THE BOTTOM. BY THIS POINT, I HAD BEEN HUNTING FOR 17 DAYS AND HAD HIKED OVER 150 MILES.

returned home to resupply and regroup.

A couple of days later, my cousin Ben and I headed up the mountain in the pouring rain. We had waited out the worst part of the storm and wanted to be at camp to glass when the weather finally cleared. The next day we remained close to camp due to fog that did not lift until a little after noon. While glassing later in the day, we spotted a band of rams worth a closer look and headed four miles up the mountain. After three hours, we stalked within 500 yards, and I got a better look. Three rams hung together on the cliffside, but two were barely over half-curl. I debated whether the largest ram in the band was worth my tag. He was only a three-quarter curl, and his position on the cliff was not the best.

Nevertheless, we decided to close the gap and came within 250 yards of him. After observing him for some time, the end of the legal shooting light was quickly approaching. Ultimately, I opted not to take the shot due to the risk of him toppling off the cliff edge where he was perched and the fact that it was still early in the season. God was working in the background that day because my hunt might have ended if he had been in a better location.

Since we had little luck in our area, we left base camp and headed further into the wilderness to glass nearby drainages. After only observing elk in the area, we set up a tarp and our sleeping bags for the night, following 11 miles of hiking and glassing. At first light, we scouted the nearby drainages and then hiked to the top of the mountain for a better vantage point, hoping to spot a shortcut back to base camp. We descended the drainage and came within two miles of camp. Unfortunately, immense cliffs and jagged rocks blocked us at every turn. We backtracked, making for a

dark, 12-mile hike around the mountain. The next day, we stayed in camp and glassed the nearby drainages again before heading back out for a resupply.

After locating very few rams during the first two weeks of the hunt, we continued to scout new drainages throughout the unit. Finally, we spotted a band of four rams in the distance just before nightfall and hoped they would still be there in the morning. Regrettably, our luck remained unchanged, and the band of rams vanished. We continued the search for the rest of the week but never spotted them again. Later in the week, we tried a different location in the unit. I had previously hiked this trail during my scouting trips and figured it was worth a try. We hoped to get up the trail early enough in the day to glass. Unfortunately, it had been raining most of the week, and we could only leave for the trailhead in the late afternoon. Departing late made the steep, four-hour hike even longer due to the wet and muddy conditions. We made camp in the dark and hoped we would have some luck in the morning. Once again, we only spotted a bunch of ewes and a few elk. Truthfully, it was hard not to start getting discouraged. I wondered if I had made a terrible mistake in choosing this unit. But my friends and family reminded me to keep the faith since it was still relatively early in the season and that my luck could change at any moment.

THE UNTHINKABLE

Sunday brought fresh snow and frigid temperatures. After warming up by the campfire, we braved the cold, windy, and wet conditions and hiked up the mountain to glass one more time before heading out. This time we focused on a few mountains we had only previously scouted from the bottom. By this

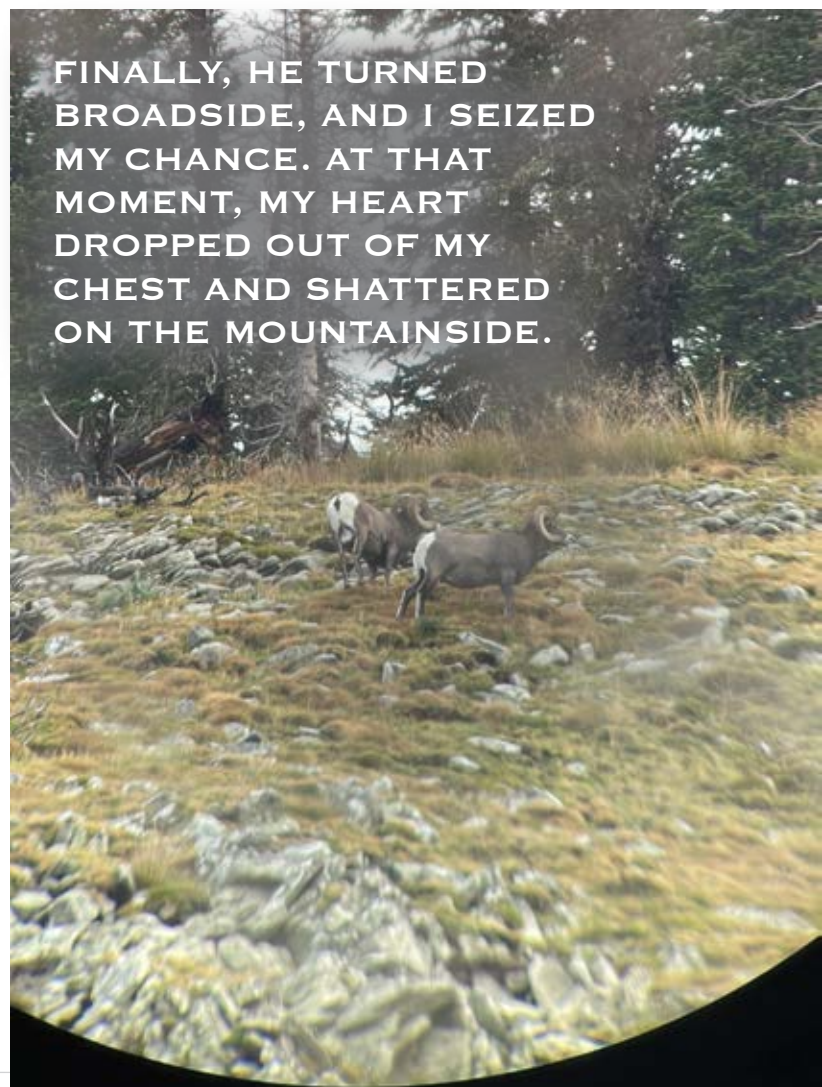
point, I had been hunting for 17 days and had hiked over 150 miles. Little did I know that I would spot a band of mature rams in the most unlikely place. Three mature rams were on the side of a mountain, in a draw less than five miles away, as the crow flies. We packed up and hiked the 11 miles back around the mountain, hoping to get out before dark so we could glass them at less of a distance. We made it out in four hours, but the mountains were bathed in dark shadows, which made glassing impossible. After setting up a game plan for the morning, I headed home for a restless night of sleep.

Morning came, and we headed up the mountain we had glassed the day before. After a long, steep hike, I spotted them through the trees and realized they were all mature rams. I studied the

two out in the open before the largest ram stepped out of the timber. I quickly realized that this was no average ram. His curl was complete, and his mass was substantial, even from a distance. I knew then that I would spend every waking minute on that steep mountainside until I brought him home. We quickly formulated a plan of action, and I crept through the dark timber, within shooting range, and waited.

More than an hour elapsed before he presented me with an opportunity. Finally, he turned broadside, and I seized my chance. At that moment, my heart dropped out of my chest and shattered on the mountainside. I had miscalculated the yardage due to the steep angle of the cliffside and shot cleanly over his back. Quicker than I could reload, he vanished. I

FINALLY, HE TURNED BROADSIDE, AND I SEIZED MY CHANCE. AT THAT MOMENT, MY HEART DROPPED OUT OF MY CHEST AND SHATTERED ON THE MOUNTAINSIDE.





Weeks in the backcountry brought with it every weather pattern imaginable, complete with emotions ranging from mountain-peak highs to valley-bottom lows. With good friends by his side and a whole lot of faith, Kevin Neil (far left) eventually connected with the ram of a lifetime.

refused to believe it and hiked up the cliffside to confirm. An opportunity had presented itself, and I had blown it. We stayed on that mountain for some time, glassing and hoping to glimpse where they had gone, with no success. I honestly thought that would be the last time I would see him. On my way back down the mountain, I could not help feeling like I had let my friends and family down after this long month of hunting.

We spent the following two days behind the glass, searching for him. There was no way I was going to give up that easily. I knew he most likely had not traveled a great distance. By Wednesday evening, I finally spotted him not far from where I had missed. We looked at the maps, made a game plan, and decided to head in at first light. The following morning, we began the stalk and approached them from below on another craggy ridgeline. We watched them for hours, waiting for them to move into a better location. Unfortunately, while waiting for a shooting opportunity, they were spooked higher up into the

jagged cliffs by a black bear sow and her young cub. We waited eight hours, hoping they would work their way back down and within range. Darkness finally fell, and we left for the night.

FAITH RENEWED

I was up early on Friday morning, eager to proceed up the mountain. Before leaving, my wife told me that she had dreamt of me shooting a monster of a ram and that I needed to trust and have faith in God's timing. I left the house with that on my mind and prayed that today would be that day. Once out on the mountain, we took some time to find them. They had moved into a steep bowl, and we knew an approach from above was our best option. We began the long, steep climb. By 10:30, we were within 100 yards, but we could only catch a glimpse. They were only visible for a moment here and there when one wandered up toward the bowl's top. We spent the next five hours struggling to find a way onto the slick cliff edge to gain a better vantage point, but the risk was too great. Then the weather shifted.

With it came icy sleet, colder temperatures, and swirling winds. I feared the rams had winded us as they became restless and started to move out of the bowl. Luckily, they were moving our direction. I quickly aligned myself in the only viable shooting lane and knew I would have a short window to take my shot.

One hundred yards below us was a minor breach through the timber. I fortified myself as I observed one of the smaller rams walk through the break in the trees. As soon as the monster ram stepped through, I squeezed the trigger and tracked him as he blew through my small window. I instantly lost sight of him. I knew the hit was good, but I shot another round after glassing and spotting him down a cliff 50 yards away. I wasn't going to risk him getting up and running into an area where he would be unattainable. As he tumbled and dropped down the mountain, I prayed he would stop in a location where I could get to him.

We watched him come to a stop. Then we started our descent. After the longest 45

minutes of my life, I put my hands on him. I knew he was large, but I could never have prepared myself for his massive size. Even Ben was in disbelief. He was enormous and full of character. I phoned my wife to tell her the news, and my kids were celebrating so loudly in the background that she could not hear me recount the story. After hanging up with her, I called in reinforcements. It took four of us long into the frigid night to cape, debone, and pack him and my gear on an arduous hike back down the mountain.

I cannot express my gratitude enough to those who helped me during this month-long hunt. Without their support, guidance, and pep talks, I could not have accomplished this. After a long 60-day wait, I was finally eligible for official Boone and Crockett scoring. His final score came in at 200. I harvested the ram of a lifetime, indeed. All those disappointments, hours of waiting, hiking, and glassing were just a reminder that amazing things tend to happen right when you are about to give up faith. ■