

My Dall's Sheep Hunt in Alaska

By Roscoe Blaisdell

Not long ago I returned from another adventure. It all started the early 2009 in Las Vegas, Nevada as I was the high bidder for a Dall's sheep hunt at the Grand Slam Club/Ovis auction. I buy many of my big game hunts this way since there is usually a decent savings for interesting hunts. I have also purchased hunts by auction through the Safari Club and the Rocky Mt. Elk Foundation.

After my successful bid, the hunt donor, Jeff Chadd of Majestic Mountain Outfitters, approached me, described the hunt, and gave me a list of gear to bring. Since this was to be a back pack hunt with no horses in the rugged terrain of the Wrangell Mts. of Alaska, he suggested I get into the best shape of my life. I had never been on a sheep hunt in North America before and had always heard of how difficult the hiking would be. But I had hunted Dagestan tur in the Caucasus Mts. of Azerbaijan a few years earlier with Walt Prothero and Peter Spear and got by just fine.

As a Land Surveyor, I'm always doing a lot of walking through difficult wooded terrain and felt I was in good shape but I wanted to be in sheep shape, so during the summer I climbed ten NH mountains 4000' to 5000'+ in elevation with a heavy pack. I went with Peter who was also getting into shape for his upcoming hunts in Alaska and Asia. He has been a bad influence on me, getting me to go on many hunts in off-the-wall places. A few years ago I put my foot down and told him I wasn't going to hunt in Pakistan with him (during the aftermath of the president being overthrown). He said we could probably get a good deal as all the hunters were making cancelations. He may be right, but I didn't want to be a trophy in someone's game room! We had already survived some close calls in places like this.

I arrived in Fairbanks on August 15, spent the night at a hotel, then took a long van ride southeast to Tok the next day. In Tok I met a state Land Surveyor working on the side of the road. He was having issues with his GPS but unfortunately I wasn't able to help him. That evening we slept in the bush pilot's bunk house.

The following day I was to fly out at 6:00 am with the other hunter. As in many hunts with flights in the wilderness we had to "hurry up and wait". Due to the low clouds and fog the pilot wasn't able to fly until 3:00 pm. You just have to bear with it and hope for the best. We knew that many bush pilots have crashed during bad weather so we let them make the decision on when to fly even though we were missing valuable time in the bush.

The clouds finally cleared and we made the 1 hour flight to the first base camp. Upon landing, everyone was in a big hurry because of the delay. The previous hunters needed to get out quickly and we needed to fly to the next base camp. They rushed me to the firing range where I put the bullet 2" high at 100 yards. Perfect! No damage in flight.

They next rushed me onto another plane, this one only big enough for 1 passenger, and flew me to base camp #2. The plane had to quickly return to the first base camp to take the other hunter to his area. In this territory about 20 miles from the Yukon border I would spend the next 7 days with my guide and packer. Since it was getting late in the day and we had to hike 6 miles up mountains and valleys with heavy packs we left immediately. My gun was kept unloaded as one cannot fly and hunt the same day but the guide and packer were armed in case any mean critters crossed our path.

The guide had 15 years experience and a great success rate with his hunters but I soon found out that he had a nasty attitude towards his hunters and everyone else. I put up with it knowing that my best chance of getting a good sheep was to be agreeable with him, even though he was constantly intolerable. He reminded me of the guy that got hacked up in the end of the movie "Sling Blade". He did like most of my jokes but didn't like "What kind of wood doesn't float?" Answer: Natalie Wood (You have to be over 40 years old to get it). He is no longer employed with this outfitter.

I told him that I had done a lot of hiking to get into shape for the hunt for which he seemed grateful. The hunter the previous week was not in shape and refused to climb any of the mountains, even though sheep were spotted up high. He would only walk in the valleys where he would have virtually no chance of getting one. He went home with nothing.

I was able to constantly keep up with the guide and he said he has had only one other hunter that could keep up with him over the years (There goes my ego again). The training paid off. We were able to reach areas he had never reached before and have a better chance to spot a good sheep. But he again got irritated with me when he asked me if I was achy and tired after climbing all day and I said I was fine (I was, he wasn't). As a result, he made me start carrying more gear!

Each day we would get up around 3:00 am and return around 7:00 pm. All day long we walked with our heavy packs, occasionally stopping a few minutes to glass for sheep, then walk again. The white sheep show up so good with the gray background we didn't have to glass long to see them. Some days would have periods of heavy fog up high so we would have to wait for it to clear before we could resume walking. The sheep were usually at the steepest nasty areas near the tops of the 8000' mountains. They needed to be there in order to avoid the bears and wolves. The guide said "If the sheep can get there we can".

We had to cross stream beds with water over our boots at least one hundred times in 7 days. It took too long to keep putting the waders on and off each time so we just plowed through the water. Our feet were wet and cold all week.

One day we explored a glacier. It was covered in shale and had a stream running under it. We went way inside the tunnel made by the stream and took photos. We could have walked from one end of the tunnel to the other but it was wet and we had sheep to

kill. The guide said the glacier has been getting bigger each year. Could Al Gore be wrong?

Our packer, who also guides elk hunting in Montana, started to have knee problems and blisters 3 days into the hunt. We could see he was in great pain as he lagged behind us further each day. He was supposed to spend the next 5 weeks packing for this outfit but it is unlikely he did. One week is enough for me.

When on the tops of the mountains we could see the far off mountains that we had come from (11 miles away), and the next mountains we would have to negotiate. It can look a little overwhelming but you get there eventually (Like an ant making an ant hill).

I almost met my maker on one mountain. I was going through a steep rockslide and an avalanche of shale almost put me over a high cliff. I got off about 20' from the edge just in time. Yes, I was scared.

One day the guide almost made "The big fall". He was standing at the edge of a 500' cliff and the rock he was standing on gave way as he left. He looked a little pale when he got up to me. The previous year he made "The little fall", (40'), but was able to keep on working through the season in great pain.

On the 6th day we finally were able to find a legal ram. We were in this spectacular valley (like Shangri-La) and there were groups of sheep everywhere. The guide had never been to this spot before so we had to backtrack a few times when places became impassable. We suspected to find a few rams in a small depression where we had seen one disappear into. As we approached the depression we found 10 rams at 50 yards feeding. Immediately the wind changed and they became fidgety and took off. Which one do I shoot? To be a legal ram it must have a full curl. Sometimes it takes time to positively identify if the ram is full curl and the consequences for shooting one with horns too short are not good. The rams stopped at 190 yards and got ready to take off again. Finally the guide said "Take the last one". I asked him if he was positive it was full curl and he said yes.

At the shot the ram slid down the shale slide and it was over quickly. As we approached the ram I still had this bad feeling as I had been told lots of stories about shooting the wrong ram. The guide got there first and declared him to be 3" over legal curl. The pressure was over! If an animal is wounded the hunt is over. If you shoot through an animal into another there is a big problem. If your ram is too small there is lots of trouble.

He was the best of 70+ sheep seen over 6 days of hunting on a 7 day hunt. The next day was foggy so this was probably the last opportunity I would have gotten to shoot one. Several times I have often gotten my game on the last day, sometimes the last minutes of the hunt. This can be very stressful after all of the planning and expense of the hunt. What a relief!

After photos and celebration we got him butchered and started the long pack out. As we climbed down the steep mountain, the packer who was 200' above us dislodged a 50 lb. rock that rolled down and missed the guide by 3'. This kind of thing happens constantly with the unstable rocks. He probably would have been killed (but with my land surveying skills, I knew my way back to camp).

The guide told me of a hunter he guided recently that had a smaller rock hit him in a similar manner. Then the next day as they were climbing near some cliffs the guide dropped his water bottle over a cliff by accident. It was so high they never heard it hit bottom so the hunter had enough and freaked out - "I'm going home now!" The guide also had lots of grizzly encounter stories to tell besides all of the "scared hunter" stories.

We had sheep back straps over a fire that evening. It was very tasty, similar to venison. It was a great change in our diet. We had been eating freeze dried meals all week which are good but it gets old. I brought the remainder of the meat home with me and will be very selective with whom I share it with.

The next day we took the long hike back to base camp #2, and then I was flown back to the first base camp. The other hunter also arrived back that evening. He had seen plenty of rams, none full curl, but seemed to still be in good spirits. His packer had been flown out several days earlier due to bad legs.

The next morning the airplane scared a grizzly off the end of the runway as I was eating breakfast. It was necessary to have an electric fence around the parked airplane because grizzlies like to eat airplanes and their contents. It was apparent that the other packer (with alleged bad legs) was extremely afraid of the grizzlies and would not stop talking about them. He did not want to deal with the grizzly deprived of his airplane meal. They have a big turnover in packers. Need a job?

The next morning was the day to fly back to Tok. It was similar to our first day of flying. Our 6:00 am departure became a 12:30 pm departure due to the fog. Upon arrival I got my ram registered with Fish & Game who put a numbered metal plug in the horns for proof of registration.

We had an interesting ride back to Fairbanks as celebrity hunter Bob Foulkrod of the Outdoor's Channel shared the van with us. He had been hunting caribou nearby and was being filmed for an upcoming show. Bob hunted in British Columbia the previous year with Greg Williams Outfitting the week before I got there for my goat hunt. I guess we like to suffer and have fun (?) at the same places.

Alaska is a great place to visit and gives you the opportunity for as much adventure as you desire. This was my fourth trip there. I will be back.