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WILD SHEEP™

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THE “PJ” RAM

BY ALEXANDER SHARIF

“For those who have heard the clarion of the high places and have seen the magnificent silhouette of a ram on the skyline, no other sport will ever provide the same physical challenge nor the same esthetic exhilaration and the delight that is found in a wild sheep hunt.”

— JOHN BATTEN

It was late June, 20C degrees outside and I was lying in bed with 40C degree fever when my dear wife Eneida came to my rescue with a teapot full of hot chamomile tea and asked, “Honey, how could you get sick in the Summer?” Little did she know I had gotten my annual spell of ovine fever, also known as “Sheep Fever”! This malady, as my good friend, Dr. Raul Valdez, has put it, is not just a simple fever, but a maniacal obsession with anything to do with wild sheep, alas.

Joking aside, I have been chasing bighorns in my home province of Alberta since 1993 and have spent many days and nights hiking, glassing, but never actually bringing home a legal ram. I have always also said that there is a reason why



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residents can still buy an over-the-counter tag for bighorns in Alberta; they are not easy to find, and by some accounts, are the hardest trophy to connect with amongst the FNAWS lineup. Having horses, knowledge of the sheep habitat and their movement patterns, being prepared to hike the impossible, staying in shape, and finally, having mental toughness increases one's odds.

This year, I was finally able to convince my good friend, Rick Guinn, to spare a few of his horses, and more importantly, his son, Jonas. Jonas is not only a friend, but a hell of a sheep guide and has been on countless sheep hunts as a hunter and as a guide. On top of that, he is just about the perfect dude to share

a campfire with. Humorous, hard working, blessed with falcon eyes and a mountain man frame with a can-do attitude makes him one of the top sheep guides in this part of the world.

In late July, Jonas and I spoke briefly about our plans and agreed to attempt a late-season hunt close to the rut. This could mean snow—and lots of it too—but then it could also mean catching one of those old boys who venture out of their comfort zone for love. I was prepared for whatever the sheep gods were going to throw at me.

After an eternally long summer with 35 hikes/scrambles and a heavy pack under my belt as well as a lot of shooting and load development that I do anyway on a regular basis, I was on a countdown for my expedition. I

like to call it as such because it was not just a hunt to me. It was to be the type of pack train expedition that the late Jack O'Connor talked so passionately about in his numerous books and articles, regarding them as the most enjoyable hunting experience on the planet. Knowing my odds of success were statistically low (around 8%), I went with the attitude of having a good time, yet doing my best to harvest a ram. When the conversation rolled around to the type of ram I was after, I told Jonas; an old geezer past his prime and I could care less about his horn length or his score sheet.

Now that we are discussing the subject, I would like to see more encouragement from organizations like the Boone and Crocket club to promote harvesting of mature rams; and by this I mean including a score for the ram's age in the overall scoring system. To me, having four old busters with broomed horns on a wall, versus having four young "book" rams is a lot more meaningful and prestigious.

We had some early season snow in

town, but thankfully by the time my departure date arrived, the snow was limited to the mountain peaks, the sight of which reminded me of the quote from my mentor/dear friend, Dr. Valerius Geist, who eloquently phrased it in his book "*Mountain Sheep and Man in the Northern Wilds*":

"The first snowstorms dusted the mountain tops with white. One could stand outside and smell the fall coming. It is a scent that sends shivers down the spine and awakens a primeval fever to hunt and provide."

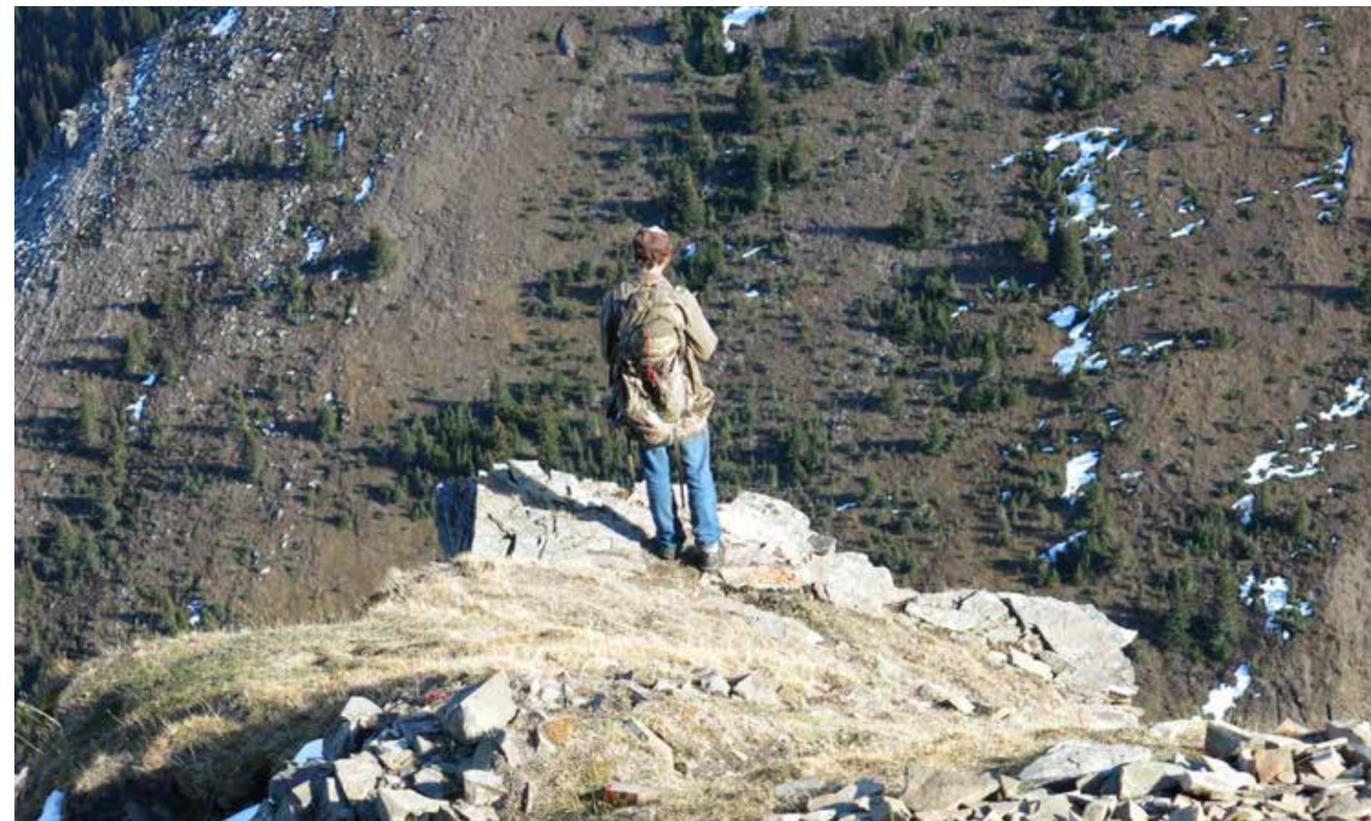
Finally, on October 20th after a beautiful drive through the mountains, Jonas and I saddled up our horses with gear and supplies and were trail bound towards our main camp. Setting up camp was a joy, and I tell you, my toosh and knees were sore because of my limited riding log.

Day two of our hunt had us saddling up the horses again and heading up to the high country to tie them and hike up to several drainages to glass. We saw only ewes on that day and returned to camp around sundown, which is around

7:00 P.M. in late October. With a passion for food, I had told Jonas that I would cook all the meals during our hunt, leaving him to do the cowboy chores that were beyond me. Pork tenderloins, potatoes with caramelized onions and vegetables is what was served for supper; and prayers that the third day would put some rams on the radar screen.

When you hunt for sheep, you need to make a mental adjustment. Sheep hunting is not like a whitetail hunt where you could see 200 deer in a single day. There are an estimated 50,000 bighorns in all of North America. Divide that number by the range they occupy and you will get a very low density count. This I say and regard as part of mental toughness for anyone attempting a sheep hunt: don't get discouraged and keep hiking and glassing in the right places. Remember that stubbornness is a sheep hunter's best friend!

Day three was another fine day of sheep hunting without seeing a legal ram. We saw ewes, goats and a banana ram that acted like he was the king, but was in fact a



coward who got turned away by the ewes. There were wolf tracks in the valley bottoms through the muskeg, which explains the scarcity of sheep and other game. Incidentally on my drive in, I had come across a beautiful white wolf that was standing broadside on the side of an abandoned railroad track. Not sure of the provincial park boundary, I elected not to shoot, but found out later that he was in fact fair game. Oh well, he lived to see another sunrise and kill a few more sheep!

Most who subscribe to *Wild Sheep*TM know enough about the taxonomy and anatomy info on bighorns, but I shall include a short one anyway for the novice. Our North American bighorn (*ovis canadensis canadensis*) belongs to the group of wild sheep called the "*Pachyceriforms*", distinctively different from the "*Moufloniforms*" and the "*Argaliforms*" of Europe and Asia. They are descendents of the snow sheep (*ovis nivicola*) of Eastern Russia and the Kamchatka Krai, and crossed the Bering Sea into North

America over 30,000 years ago when the land bridge existed. Contrary to the mouflons or the argalis which possess antelope-like long legs suited for running in undulating terrain, their anatomy with their short and muscular legs is designed for climbing. They possess no neck or shoulder ruff, no saddle patch and have homonymous (bent in a single positive curvature) horns with a chromosome count of 54. They are what Dr. Valdez et al refer to as the "New World Sheep", and depending on where they settled and the type of diet they consumed, evolved by changing their pelage, horn configuration and size to what we recognize today as the bighorns and the thinhorns.

Back to our sheep hunt. It is now day four, I am still jazzed and energized and we decide to change course and head in a completely different direction. So far the Indian Summer has sustained, but we see clouds and feel the moisture coming. During a sheep hunt near the rut, this type of weather is usually a good

thing as it starts to shake the rams up to move. We rode an extremely steep hill up, tied up our four-legged friends and started to climb, settling on a saddle that allowed us to glass for miles in each direction. The 60 power Swarovski tube went to work and we scanned the landscape like Marine snipers looking for the enemy. The spot could not have looked more ideal as far as sheep habitat and our vantage point. For the first time after we left the truck, I started to see one bar on my cell and took the opportunity to send a text to my wife and some close friends who were awaiting news from my end. I am no tech junkie, but do appreciate the comfort the text message has brought along, sending OK and SOS messages that can save one's life.

Ewes, lambs and goats we saw, but no rams. We changed drainages, glassed more talus slopes that had thousand-year-old sheep trails stamped on them and were hopeful something would show up on our radial vision at some point. After lunch, the scent of willow leaves and

There was no way to approach the ram without being seen, and all we could do was to wait him out.

the bog birch in the air put me in a mood for a “mountain siesta”, one which I have no words to convey. My old man and uncle who are both in sheep heaven now made a point of it when they took me out hunting in the mountains of Persia in the early 70’s and taught me how to enjoy ALL aspects of a mountain when out hunting. That, I am thankful for and shall preach the same to my sons.

The snow storm did not materialize and the fading light called for a return back to camp. I made grilled chicken with Basmati rice and saffron that night, and the feeling of a full belly sleeping under the stars made for a great ending to day four.

On day five, we rose bright and early to clear skies again and the combination of cowboy coffee (which is all I now make at home) and french toast with fruit broke our fast and fueled us proper for another long day in sheep country. We decided to approach a basin we had looked at on day two, but from a different angle. Who knows, may be the brief cold spell lured the monarchs towards the ewes we had seen earlier. As we set up on top of a slope above the alpine which had sparse patches of snow on it, we noticed a critter bedded on an impossible knoll some three kilometers

away. Close examination thru the spotter confirmed a ram with a nice curl—and not only legal—but majestic looking. There was no way to approach the ram without being seen, and all we could do was to wait him out. In the meantime, we took the Jetboil out, made coffee and enjoyed another mountain sashay while we kept the ram under our watchful eyes. From 1:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M., the ram rose a few times, looked around, had a nibble or two and basically anchored himself where he was. I guess his testosterone had not kicked in to high gear yet. I had the crazy idea of spending the night on the mountain, but we had no sleeping gear and a snowstorm in late Fall in the Canadian Rockies is not a joking matter when you are four hours away from camp and grub. We thus grabbed our horses, walked down the

steppe and rode back to the camp in the dark. During the night, my entire thought was with the ram, and I could hardly wait for the daylight to break so we could go back and see if he had moved to a more attainable location.

Day six started with a crimson red color on the eastern skies followed by the bright goldish-yellow rays of sunshine, bringing the peaks to life. Since my rifle had been in and out of the scabbard several times in the past six days, I decided to check its zero. All of us hunters including yours truly like to talk guns and ammo, and let me tell you about my rig. For this hunt, I had taken along my custom-built, 280 AI which I have nick named “EFF7” (meaning an efficient 7mm). This trued, stainless Remington-actioned beast wears a Lilja #3 barrel, a B&C Medalist stock and tops the scale at 7.5 lbs with a

When you are done glassing, glass some more!



Yours truly taking a “Mountain Siesta”.

Leupold AR tube in 3-9x40. It shoots my favorite 150-grain Swift Scirocco bullets at a sizzling velocity of 3,250 fps out of its 25” pipe and prints little bug holes on a consistent basis. When I built it, I was to prove to my 7mm RM aficionado buddies that I can equal (and in this case exceed) their performance out of a standard 30-06 beltless offering.

Well, the EFF7 punched his usual rag hole where he was supposed to and we started our approach to yesterday’s basin. Along the way, my thoughts were with the ram, imagining the possible scenarios to approach and shoot him if he had moved. We arrived at day five’s spot precisely at noon. We sat down and saw no sign of him. Geesh, where had he gone? Had he moved out of the country away from us or had he closed the distance towards us? There was one way to find out— and that was climbing the next mountain that was across the valley from us. We gathered our packs and started hiking down and then up the mountain.

Midway up, I sat down to have a

bite to eat and took out a handful of cashew nuts out of my rucksack. I immediately thought of my younger son, Miguel, who tells me I like cashew nuts—not because of their taste—but because they look like sheep horns. As the Spaniards say, this child is “Enmantillado”, meaning he is blessed with an enormous amount of luck, and I had asked him to put a prayer for Pa to the sheep gods for a favor.

We slowly neared the top, and unfortunately, were carrying our scent up with us with the wind that was blowing uphill, as it always does in the mountains during the day. Then cautiously, we peeked over. There he was with two ewes some 150 paces below us. They had obviously gotten our scent, had risen to their feet and were about to put the afterburners on as I tried to chamber a round. They bolted like lightning and disappeared behind a ridge. Two scenarios were possible: They had either gone down—which we wouldn’t be able to see until they rose cross canyon—or they had

flanked across and would re-appear further north on the adjacent ridges. Both scenarios were equally possible, but knowing that sheep usually stay high to avert danger, I took the gamble and opted for the latter. I immediately laid down my pack, cranked up my scope to 9X power, knowing that I might have to take a long shot, and waited for them on the upper ridges to the north. I also asked Jonas to give me a range as soon as they would appear. A minute or two went by and the sheep gods answered Miguel’s prayers. The ram appeared where we had anticipated for just a split second and Jonas was able to get a reading on his Swaro lens at 361 yards. I knew my trajectory by heart, and my first mildot was to be a dead ringer at 396 yards based on my Sierra program’s algorithm. As the ram reappeared again on the next ridge, I guesstimated him now to be at roughly 400 yards. He made a cardinal sin and stopped for just a fraction of a second to look back at what had spooked him. I dug my heels in to the soft dirt, kept both



Here it is, the “royal” game!

eyes open, and with my first mildot a trifle behind his shoulder, slowly squeezed the trigger, launching the spicy Scirocco spitzer towards his chest, which was only partially broadside to me. The echo of the bullet finding its mark was perhaps the most pleasant sound I had heard since my son’s first cry after birth. He collapsed on impact and went down like a gunny sack full of potatoes. Jonas was in awe, so was I, and I cannot even begin to describe the “joie de vie” moment that I had just experienced. This was by and large “the shot of my life” and I am thankful to the good Lord for keeping my head cool enough to put this all together. I jumped up, grabbed Jonas and we began screaming, high-fiving and fist-throwing like children. I had done it! I had finally gotten the holy grail of all North American sheep, the royal game; a trophy bighorn ram many hunters can only dream about.

We stabbed straight across the talus

slope which was between us and the ram. It felt like walking on 10,000 dinner plates. The ewes rose out cross canyon, indicating that the ram had traded security for love by climbing to the higher grounds; smart but no contest to a high-powered rifle that can reach and touch him that far. We arrived at the ridge he had collapsed on, which was next to a 60-degree, narrow couloir—and here was the mystery—there was no sign of sheep, no blood, no hair, and basically, no evidence of a sheep kill whatsoever. What the heck?

Quickly, I dried the cold sweat off my forehead and sat down with Jonas to re-evaluate the situation. It took us a good ten minutes before we could locate him 1,000 feet down the mountain. He had obviously fallen in the couloir, rolled down at the speed of light and catapulted off a 30-foot cliff that was further down, coming to a stop amongst the rocks. We zigzagged down to his beautiful corpse, now laying motionless

and still. Upon arrival, the usual sentiment of grief that Jose Ortega y Gasset has masterfully described in his book *Meditations on Hunting* set in. I kneeled down to my ram, holding his massive horns at the base and looked towards the Creator for gratitude. How lucky and blessed was I to be here and beat the odds? All those years of dreaming about having a bighorn had come to an end, and I was sitting next to him, admiring his gorgeous, dark-chocolate coat and his battered, broomed horns. He was a 10½-year-old ram, heavily broomed on both sides and wore the scars of battle on his face. He was exactly what I had hoped for and then some. After the picture session, I opened a small bottle of scotch I had taken along and had a toast to my old man and uncle who had instilled the love of the great outdoors in my karma at an early age. I am sure they both saw it from up there in the eternal sheep pastures.

We caped and deboned the ram in about 90 minutes. Because he had

descended at least 1,500 feet from the cirque where we saw him first, it made no sense for us to haul him up the mountain to get him to the horses. Instead, I loaded all his meat and his cape/horns in my X2 pack, gave my personal belongings to Jonas, and we made plans for him to climb back up alone to get the horses. I walked down to the valley bottom, and eventually, towards our camp. Alone, but with a big joy in my heart, I arrived at camp around 8:30 P.M. in the dark. Along the way, I had to deal with a steep precipice, a ton of bushwhacking, and at least a dozen creek crossings which I stumbled in a couple of times; the weight of a 120 pound pack on my back and my rifle in hand. None of this bothered me as I now had my ram in my possession. Jonas showed up with the horses around 9:00 P.M. and we had another superb meal of sheep tenderloin tacos by the fire. Sleep never felt so good!

The next morning, we tore down our camp, loaded up the pack horses

and rode the six-hour ride back to the truck. I was at the back, Jonas at the front and my ram cape/horns on top of a tame, white gelding in between. That sight is etched in my hard drive and is something I think about every day. It was out of a western movie, except that this time, I was the Lone Ranger and not the spectator. On my drive home, I was on cloud nine; singing, cheering and reliving the past seven days in the wonderful Canadian Rockies wilderness—and except for the ribs—I packed out all his meat and brought it home with me. We have all been devouring his Kobe-flavored, lean flesh every weekend, including his mountain oysters. More organic and scrumptious it doesn’t get.

Sheep hunting is just about the most rewarding yet mystical hunting experience there is. There is no better feeling than standing on top of a steep basin surrounded by native fescue grasses and wildflowers; a place where the rams roam, lie down and

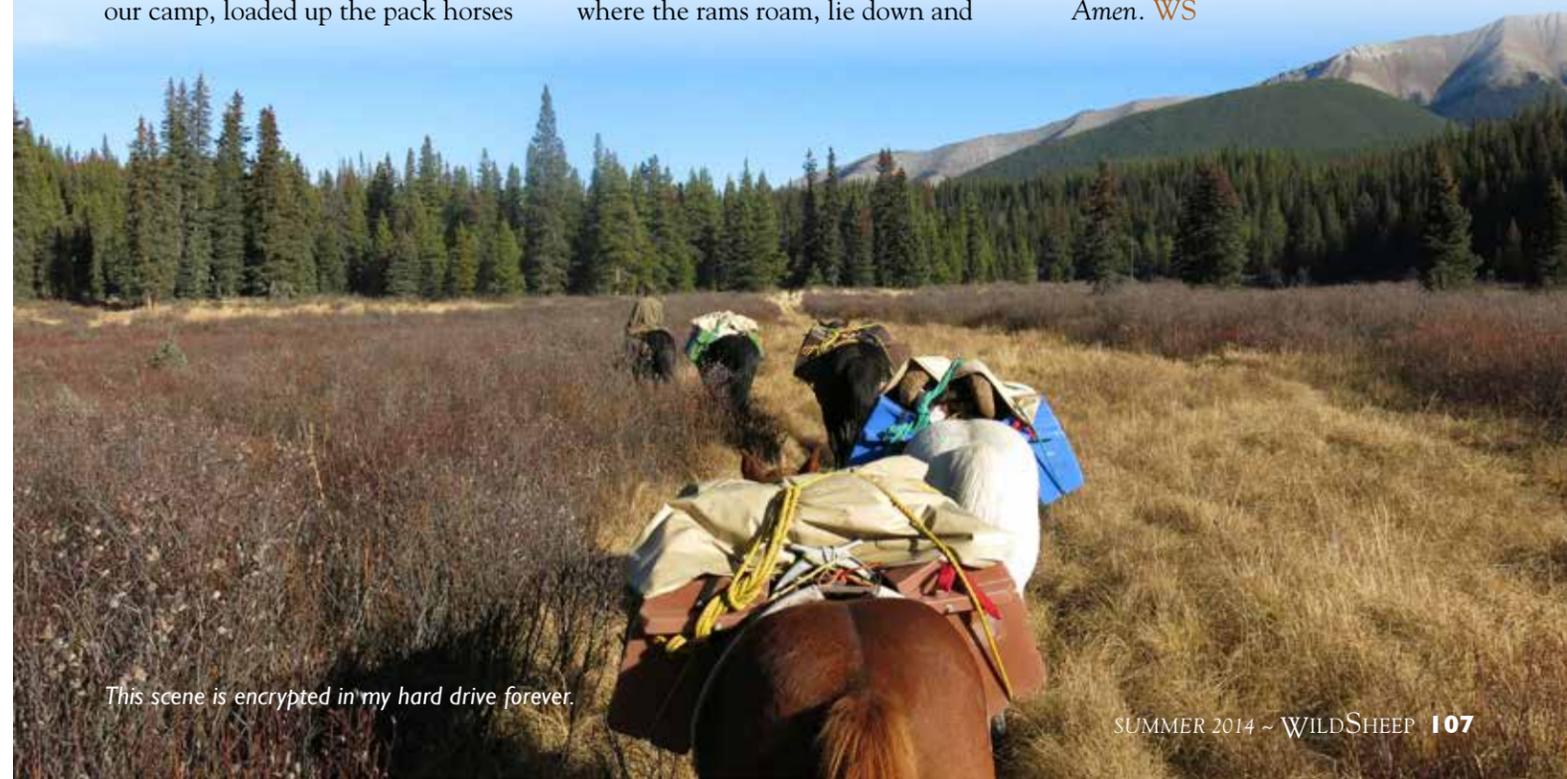
The echo of the bullet finding its mark was perhaps the most pleasant sound I had heard since my son’s first cry after birth.

chew their cud while they look for two-legged predators. I certainly hope I am blessed to continue hunting sheep here in North America and elsewhere into my golden years.

I am certain that by now you are wondering about the title of the article. It is something that will stay between me and Jonas, pardon our secrecy!

In conclusion, I want to thank my dear wife, Eneida, who has supported my outdoor passions and puts up with my sheep fever all year long, and my two sons, Sergio & Miguel, for their unconditional love for Pa. I hope I can be your guide/cook/hunting partner some day on a sheep mountain. Rick and Jonas; you guys are both gentlemen of the first class, and I am proud to be amongst your friends. I also want to extend my gratitude towards our province for issuing sheep tags, and the country of Canada for its spectacular natural scenery and its diverse ecosystem. The world needs more Canada!

Amen. WS



This scene is encrypted in my hard drive forever.