

Dall Sheep in the Mackenzie's

As the verdant farmland of Alberta below the 727 relinquished to potholes then vast oligotrophic lakes, I knew we were approaching Norman Wells, the hub to the Northwest Territories.

Following a short layover at the small Norman Wells airport located in the water-laden Mackenzie Valley, I along with seven other hunter adventurers boarded a twin engine plane destined for Stan Simpson's renowned sheep concession. The flight over the pastel green and gray Mackenzie mountains was exhilarating, and the occasional sighting of white sheep elevated my adrenalin rush to another level. Finally, after many stops and plane changes, we were in sheep country, and although our passage was effortless, I knew it would change dramatically once on the ground.

Engrossed in the beautiful yet rugged looking Mackenzie's, time passed swiftly, and before I knew it, we descended upon a rough shell strip paralleling the roaring Kiel River.

With gear piled in a heap, the pilot made a 180, then a short run before levitating above the shell and pebble-covered shoreline, just clearing the tree tops followed by an abrupt turn in front of the south facing mountainside, and disappeared. We were now on our own.

Within moments, the sound of the river's swift current was interrupted by excited yells of several hunters pointing to a solid black-colored wolf exiting the river bottom heading for high ground. Following this episode, six long, anxious hours passed before the drone of a float plane interrupted the ubiquitous sound of rushing water.

Five hunters were transported to various camps, but my partner, Colorado resident Don Waechtler, and I, along with Brian Balak from Pincher Creek, Alberta, were to be ferried by jet boat some 20 miles down river to our base camp.

Several more hours passed following the departure of the others before the struggling motor of a jet boat could be heard battling the swift current of the Kiel.

Wasting little time storing our gear into the aluminum boat, we ventured down the ice cold, rocky-bottomed Kiel River.

The two-hour boat ride down the river carried us through breathtaking country, but our arrival to a quaint log cabin situated in the timber not far from the shoreline was a welcomed sight.

Shortly after arriving, we checked our rifles and prepared for a backpack adventure up the mountain ironically named "Texas". Following a hearty meal of caribou backstrap, we enjoyed some of the best cinnamon rolls I have ever tasted.

Sleep was difficult, but not because of discomfort. Our log cabin was warm, dry, and clean, but the fact that our hunt was to begin in the morning was overwhelming.

Rising early, we redistributed our gear in the fog drifting off the water, making sure that all resources were evenly distributed. The possibility of remaining on top for ten days required much in the way of food. Fortunately, modern freeze-dried food is lightweight.

By mid morning, the fog dissipated, and we sped further down river. Around two hours later, we arrived at our jumping-off point. We dragged the heavy boat painstakingly high upon the bank in the event of rising water and initiated our ascent.

The excursion up the boulder-ridden mountain with 40 pounds on my back was strenuous, requiring many breaks. Sporadic rain showers forced us to pause frequently and pull out our rain tarps and simply lay underneath them until the ephemeral shower passed.

At one point, I was so tired, I negotiated a steep slope laden with ripe, red-raspberries on all fours. Taking time to engulf the succulent, sweet fruit, I spotted a grizzly doing the same on the opposing slope. A prolonged rain storm sometime in the late afternoon forced us to set up camp shy of the zenith, allowing additional time to rest.

We rose inside a cloud the next morning, day two, but I relished the additional rest. The short, steep climb up to the mountain top was accomplished by mid afternoon, but disturbing sheep was a concern so we set up camp right on top of the mountain.

The following morning clear skies appeared, relinquishing a breathtaking view of the Mackenzie's and the river-laden valley below. Separating, Don and his guide traveled in one direction, my guide Richard, Brian, and I in another. Hiking over the yellowish-green caribou moss-laden mountaintop was effortless compared to the climb. It was not long before sheep were spotted. Bands of ewes could be seen on virtually every mountainside. Even though Richard and Brian could spot sheep at great distances, I had a rough time seeing them, even when they were pointed out to me. The white sheep blended well, and it became obvious that my searching instincts had to be polished.

Most of our day was spent ensconced on a talus-covered mountainside glassing for rams. I enjoyed the panoramic vistas and relished the cool, brisk high country air. It was quite a contrast to the 100-degree temperatures experienced in south Texas. Later that evening, Richard located some rams crossing the talus rock-covered valley below us.

There were six rams in the group, one of which exhibited the kind of horns I had crossed the North American continent to pursue. Once the rams began moving up to feed on the vegetated side of the slope, we rapidly circumvented the rocky mountainside in an attempt to head them off. Breathing hard, we arrived at a ledge overlooking the verdant slope we hoped our sheep would feed. Dropping our gear, we cautiously crawled up to the edge and peered over. There they stood, feeding on the palatable mixed grasses growing between the many boulders strewn over the steep slope. We glassed the rams for a considerable time, simply enjoying a spectacle reserved for only the most privileged sportsmen. Once my decision to shoot was made, I rested my .270 on my jacket and with one well-placed shot, the regal animal collapsed.

Following the conventional hand shakes, we negotiated our way down to the sheep. As I held the 37-inch-long horns, I only wished I could slow time down a bit to relish this cherished event longer.

A short time later, a minor shale slide preceded Don and Richard's arrival, and a joyous event was celebrated. It was 10 p.m., and fatigue should have existed, but after the ram was in my arms, all seemed irrelevant. After meticulously caping and quartering the animal, the real work began as we slowly hiked back to the top of the mountain and to camp where we enjoyed "the ultimate high country delicacy", sheep tenderloin.

The following morning, August 9, Richard, Brian, and I broke camp and descended to the Kiel River. Before descending the mountain, I paused to absorb one last breathtaking view of the majestic Mackenzie Mountains. As sheep grazed on distant slopes, below us the Kiel River flowed like a silver ribbon in the wind. I now understood

what intrigued my good friend, the late Gordon Eastman, about this true northern wilderness.

Arriving late at the river's edge, we set up camp for the night, and prepared for the trip upriver to base camp the following day.

The combination of heat and mosquitoes placed a quietus on sleep, and by 7:45 a.m., we were negotiating boulders and the turbulent water upriver to camp. Following a delicious dinner of sheep backstrap, camp cook Connie Blaschk's 12-year-old son Frank and I fished for Grayling and Dolly Varden. It was unquestionably a holistic outdoor experience as the fish were extremely obliging.

Enjoying clear skies the following morning, I boarded a float plane destined for Simpson's headquarters, Godlin Camp, where I would remain for a day or so, enjoying the scenic bluish-gray mountainsides hovering over camp.

On the seventh day of my adventure, I boarded a large, rubber-wheeled Piper Cub heading for a golf-green-looking plateau located midway up a distant mountainside in search of caribou. The next few days was spent glassing caribou, one of which warranted a long, arduous stalk before my .270 once again interrupted the placid mountain atmosphere. With 55-inch-long beams, a 48" inside spread, and rough-scoring 412 Boone and Crockett points, it was the largest-antlered ungulate I had ever seen, alone collected.

While photographing my trophy, curious cow caribou would approach to check us out. Once they detected danger, they would literally stand on their hind feet, emit a loud whistle, and clumsily run off only to return and check us out further. We were getting some great photos of the curious onlookers when Jeff unexpectedly spotted a wolf. I

grabbed my rifle and swiftly negotiated the rough mountainside behind Jeff for some 200 yards before I saw the animal. At 80 yards and obviously unaware of us, the wolf turned, running in our direction. I dropped to one knee and fired, and a most unique trophy collapsed. I was on a roll—nothing I ever imagined as a youngster could have matched the experience I was privileged to enjoy.

Once again, I operated on overload as I packed the horns and cape, while Jeff and Brian packed caribou meat plus the wolf back to the elevated plateau upon which we set up camp.

Our time was then dedicated to caping the caribou while entertaining occasional glimpses of sheep above us and caribou below.

The following day, we awaited the plane as the pilot checked on us daily in case we enjoyed success. However, heavy rain prohibited a landing.

Following supper, our guide Jeff entertained us with some rather gruesome grizzly bear stories, and from the sound of his voice, this young man definitely feared the animals.

Settled in our sleeping bags, raindrops pilfering the tent served as therapy and sleep came easy, but sometime during the twilight hours of two and three a.m., a curious mountain grizzly appeared, setting on his haunches at our tent flap.

Alarmed, Brian cautiously woke me but had a difficult time waking Jeff. When he did, all hell broke loose as Jeff lost it, screaming “Grizzly!” Fortunately for us, the bear dropped down on all fours and parted into the semidarkness.

August 14 found us anticipating our return to Godlin, but the rain turned to snow, preventing the plane from landing. The plane flew over only to drop additional food

supplies for our extended stay. Amusingly, a note accompanying the drop informed us that the Don had taken a 40" sheep and that a grizzly was spotted near our camp the day before!

The remaining time was spent moving and aligning rocks in order to mark a potential air strip in case the plane had to land in conditions less than ideal.

The weather cleared somewhat on the fifteenth, and the plane landed. Although relieved to get off the mountain, I was disheartened as my time in this fabled high country had run out, but the memories of my quest in the majestic Mackenzie's will last forever.

Captions for slides. All photos by Bob Zaiglin.

1. It was 10 p.m., and fatigue should have been overwhelming, but after the ram was in my arms, all seemed irrelevant.
2. The most rewarding aspect of high country hunting is one's ability to meet the physical and mental challenges the mountain represents.
3. This caribou was not only a substantial trophy, it was the largest-antlered ungulate I had ever seen.
4. Participating in the harvest is as rewarding as the hunt itself.
5. The ultimate transport in the MacKenzie's is the float plane, replaced by one's own stamina once the climb up the mountain is initiated.
6. Rivers full of Dolly Varden and grayling only added to the ultimate high country experience.
7. The breathtaking view of the McKenzie's erased the strain of reaching the mountain top.