

Carefully sliding down the steep, yet verdant rock-laden mountain side towards a forty-plus-inch ram, the adrenalin rush was overwhelming. There was little time to savor the last moments of a well-planned stalk. A lifelong dream was about to become reality, and the only thing separating us was seven mature, dark-colored rams bedded around the ram I hoped to collect. Focused on their reaction, my guide Dale Drinkall and I slowly slid down the slope on our backsides in an attempt to ambush the most beautiful ram I had ever had the privilege of seeing, alone have a chance to shoot.

The theater was the spectacularly beautiful yet rugged Rockies of north central British Columbia. My quest for stone sheep had been a goal of mine for many years, but this was not my first adventure in the high country for these regal animals. I collected a 38-inch Dall sheep in the McKinzie Mountains of the Northwest Territories on a marathon backpack hunt in 1986 and a bighorn in Colorado in 1985 on my initial hunt for North American sheep. I enjoyed the physical challenge of high country hunting, and this hunt was actually my second attempt to take a stone.

My first stone sheep hunt was in 1993. With outfitter, guide, and friend Claude Smarch of Teslin Outfitters, I enjoyed the breathtaking beauty and game-rich environment of the Pelly Mountains in the Yukon. The October mixed bag hunt proved quite successful as I collected a tremendous interior grizzly the first morning, followed by a black bear, a double-shovel 390-class caribou, and a 55-inch moose. We located over 20 rams, two of which were large enough to warrant a stalk, but our attempts to cut the distance and get a shot proved futile. I parted Fire Lake camp and the snow-covered Pelly Mountains, anticipating my return to the high country in pursuit of my ultimate dream—a trophy stone ram.

Within a month of returning home, I was pursuing another prestigious animal—the whitetailed deer. As a private lands wildlife biologist in Texas, one of my responsibilities was to oversee some large landholdings, with the bulk of it located in the brush country of South Texas. Over the course of the Texas deer hunting season, I remain extremely busy, but take time to enjoy the pursuit of trophy class whitetails. Well, 1993 turned out to be a great one, as I collected a whitetail buck that netted 171 3/8 points Boone and Crockett, which would later be recognized as the third largest buck taken during the '93 Texas hunting season.

Feeling quite lucky, I began to research another hunt for a stone sheep. I spoke to several renowned sheep outfitters, but my decision as to whom I would hunt with was based on government harvest figures. My desire was to hunt an area exhibiting a light harvest with few, if any, of the sheep removed being less than eight years of age. My choice was narrowed down to three outfitters located close to Muncho Lake with Folding Mountain outfitters owned by Glen and Dale Drinkall surfacing as my top choice. I booked the hunt in November, 1994 for the following August, 1995. The nine-month wait was filled with anticipation, forcing time to pass sluggishly, but before I knew it, I was boarding a plane in San Antonio, Texas on July 28, heading for Fort Nelson, British Columbia.

My first stop was in Dallas, where I met up with my long-time hunting partner and best friend, David Shashy from Ocala, Florida. David and I have amassed a great amount of hunting memories in the past, but this was David's first sheep hunt.

The second stop was Vancouver where we spent the night only to catch an early morning flight to Fort Nelson via Fort St. John.

Following touchdown at Fort Nelson, like most hunting parties, we anticipated the arrival of our luggage which arrived promptly, a good portent for things to come. Upon picking up my first bag, I looked up to see a stout young man with an aura about him which induced me to say, “Dale Drinkall?”, and the gentlemen in a Canadian accent said, “Sure am”, and the conversation ceased. While loading our gear, I tried to compose myself, or at least camouflage my excitement with silence, but I broke down and had to ask, “Seen anything good?” Dale responded, “We will talk in the truck”.

Moments later, we were absorbing the spectacular scenery complemented by abundant sightings of moose, caribou, even young sheep on the two-hour drive up the Alaskan Highway to ranch headquarters. Not long after our departure, Dale began to talk about a dark ram pushing 40 inches that he and I would pursue, while David’s guide had located a heavy broomed ram that warranted another look. If we were not excited enough by then, those few words magnified the intensity of our excitement.

The drive passed swiftly. Dale’s beautiful and spacious log lodge was quite a spectacle, nestled in a valley surrounded by steep mountainsides.

Upon arrival, we were introduced to Sandra, Dale’s wife, and Lynn, a lady we found out was a terrific cook.

The rest of the first afternoon I toured the ranch with Dale while David visited with his guide, Tom, back at the lodge. The game plan was for David and Tom to depart the next morning, while Dale and I would venture back into the bush the following day, which was July 31, the day before the season opener.

At twilight the next morning, July 30, Dale and I assisted David and Tom with their horses, and sent them on their long horseback ride to spike camp.

The following morning, July 31, we were up at 5 a.m., wrangled the horses, and headed to our take-off point. In order to locate the big sheep Dale had spotted earlier during his scouting forays, he felt we should hunt from our backpacks instead of out of a spike camp. Thus, with backpacks on, we horse backed up through the black timber, then through head high alder, until we reached a point where we could begin our ascent by foot to the mountain range Dale saw the ram last. Once our horses were properly cared for, Dale and I began our climb to the mountain peak. The ascent up the precipitous slope was laborious at first, but the muscle strain was eclipsed somewhat by positive thoughts of seeing mature rams on top. With ease, Dale walked swiftly sure-footedly ahead of me as I lethargically but aggressively attacked each step. For a flatlander, it was tough, but before I knew it, I reached the summit, to find Dale ensconced on the crest of the mountaintop, searching for sheep. Stealthily, we negotiated the next saddle and peered over the ridge. Sheep, “rams”, began to appear scattered all along the steep, pastel green colored mountainside. I couldn't view any one of them long enough as I was like a kid in a candy store—rams were everywhere! It was unquestionably one of the highlights of my hunting career, viewing such a cherished animal in its native pristine habitat that has remained the same since the ice age.

Within minutes, we both spotted an obviously large ram approximately three quarters of a mile away, bedded and facing us. His deeply-curved heavy horns dropped well below his chin with his lamb tips rising above the eye. Even at this great distance, it was easy to see that the ram was huge. His appearance made the annoying periodic rain showers inconsequential as all thoughts of discomfort dissipated. He was definitely what I traveled across the United States to see and hopefully have an opportunity to hunt.

The remainder of the day was consumed in observing not only the magnificent ram, but other rams that would satiate the demands of the most discretionary trophy hunter. Our game plan was to negotiate the opposing mountain slope and get as close to the big ram before dark as we could, but the other rams randomly positioned along the mountainside forced us to remain still. At one point between showers mixed with snow flurries, the sun broke through the clouds, creating a spectacular rainbow that actually terminated on the mountainside upon which my sheep bedded. I remember mentioning to Dale that “a treasure of a lifetime indeed lies at the end of that rainbow”.

We moved with the satellite rams all day until we found ourselves nestled in a shallow coulee just above the grass-covered slope occupied by the big ram, but upon peering over the lip of the mountain, the rams were nowhere to be seen. It was at this time that I began to really appreciate Dale’s guiding skills. Losing the ram momentarily, I am sure many guides and most hunters would have continued to move in closer, only to jeopardize the hunt. We remained stationary and waited. With this type of hunting savvy about him, I realized how this young man had guided 96 successful sheep hunters before me.

By 9:30 p.m., several 3/4-curl rams appeared along the horizon, then a broomed, extremely heavy-horned ram that accompanied our target ram appeared. As I strained my 10x40’s, hoping to spot my ram, I began hearing the unmistakable crack of rams colliding head on. Panning the distant rocky slopes in the direction of the sound, I observed several young rams standing on their hind feet, only to drop their heads just before colliding head on into each other at full throttle. It was a memorable sight that I

will never forget. With so much activity taking place, I failed to notice how cold I was as snow flurries whipped over the mountaintop upon which we were perched.

By 10 p.m, additional rams appeared, and then my ram showed up right below us. I was some 150 yards from my dream. He was unmistakably larger than the others, and his heavy, dark chocolate brown horns looked to be 40 inches. Matter of fact, Dale said he would go 39 to 41 inches, and score 165 to 174 Boone and Crockett points.

Observing the huge ram for close to an hour, we decided to back off and get some sleep. After all, darkness was settling in, and we were confident he would be right where we left him in the morning.

Traveling light, we engulfed a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for supper and crawled into our bivvy sacks. We slept, or at least I tried to sleep, right on top of the mountain and no more than 400 yards from the rams.

At daylight on the season opener, we were glassing the same mountainside anticipating a relatively easy stalk, but within moments, we discovered that our ram had moved off with two others and was now on the opposing side of the mountain. To make things worse, he spotted us, and ran the length of the mountainside only to pause before disappearing. Fortuitously for us, we remained motionless, and the big ram, only a few feet from disappearing, bedded down.

Again, we found ourselves exercising patience in hopes of getting a crack at this monster ram. Luckily, we had an excellent opportunity to circumvent the mountain, come back up over the top, and descend to the ram, but we were faced with the same problem we dealt with the day before. The scattered band of rams inhibited any movement, thus we had to sit tight until all the sheep moved off. Another hour passed,

and although most of the rams had drifted off, two mature full curl rams remained below us. We had to make a decision, and it was unanimous that we move and hope that the rams would run in a direction other than toward our bedded ram. It worked, and two hours later, we successfully negotiated the rocky mountainside and began our descent. Excitement was nearly uncontrollable as I slid down the steep, partially grass-covered slope to my ram, now accompanied by seven other rams bedded around him.

Within 125 yards of the ram, I could see a young ram glaring at us, yet I could not see the adult rams. We laid down and slid further when suddenly before me stood all the rams at less than 100 yards. Upon verification of my ram, my 7 mm was set into action. My shot looked like, and even sounded like, a clean miss, yet I didn't know how I could have blown the shot. I was cool until that happened. Suddenly excitement turned to despair, but within seconds, Dale whispered, "He's hit!", and I anxiously watched as one of my lifelong dreams plummeted to the ground and into my memory bank forever.

As Dale climbed back up the slope to gather our packs, I slowly walked towards my ram trying to make this most enjoyable event last even longer. Once my hands fondled the horns, I knew I had realized an incredible privilege. All I could do is stare at those tremendous horns. Within moments, Dale arrived and pulled a tape measure out of his pack. My ultimate goal was to take a 40" ram, but the tape indicated 41 2/8 inches, with 14 5/8" bases, which surpassed all my expectations.

Following a short photo session, Dale caped the animal and I quartered it. The precipitous climb back up the mountainside was strenuous, but with a record class nine-year-old ram on my back, each and every step was worth it.

Back at camp, Dale's brother, Gary, an official scorer for the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, green-scored my sheep at 173 1/8, indicating that my ram would enter into the Boone and Crockett record books, another unexpected event.

My excitement was assuaged somewhat when David arrived back at camp several days later without a ram, but with enough stories to entertain another trip in the future.

Once again, I reluctantly parted the mountains of the North, knowing full well the thoughts of Jack O'Connor when he said that "sheep hunting should be conducted by those who value it as a privilege"—for that is indeed what it is.

Captions for slides:

1. Much of our time was spent ensconced on a mountainside observing sheep in some of the most spectacular country in North America.
2. The ultimate reward is one's ability to overcome the physical challenge posed by the rugged, thin aired elements of the high country--a stone sheep is simply the ultimate privilege.
3. The author's stone ram was the silver medal recipient at the 1996 FNAWS convention and entered the Boone and Crockett record book at 172 6/8.
4. Unique to sheep hunting is the bond formed between guide and hunter that endures forever.
5. The theatre was the rugged mountains of Northern British Columbia, a region that remains in a pristine state.

Photos by Bob Zaiglin. Please return upon completion.