

Quest for a Chugach Ram

I say a short prayer as I step into the backseat of the Super Cub bush plane that will take me into the great Alaskan wilderness on a trip I have dreamed of for too many years to remember. I'm not afraid of flying mind you; it's just that I have never been in anything so small going where we are going to go so high. Although the flight is relatively short, and our pilot, Mike Meekin of Meekin's Air Service has years of Alaskan bush experience, I'm still unsure of how or where we are going to land. The Super Cub is equipped with "tundra tires" allowing the plane to land on just about any *relatively* flat surface that can be found in the remote real estate called sheep country. I'm not sure if I am as curious as I am just plain nervous.

Earlier, as I watch the small plane make the first trip into camp, taking Neil Webster, my guide along with part of our gear, I can't help but notice how quickly the plane seems enveloped by the monolith of mountains at the end of the runway. In the distance, the Super Cub looks like a bird circling the skies.

Waiting alone on the runway at the edge of the Alaskan wilderness, I contemplate my first foray into hunting in Alaska. Neil and I will be alone with rifles and a back-pack, virtually isolated from civilization and out of contact for the next 10 days. I can't help but think of the words I read a long time ago in Teddy Roosevelt's *The Wilderness Hunter*, written back in 1893. TR said in part;

In hunting, the finding and killing of game is after all but part of the whole. The free, self reliant, adventurous life, with its rugged and stalwart democracy; the wild surroundings, the grand beauty of the scenery, the chance to study the ways and habits of the woodland creatures - all these unite to give the career of the wilderness hunter its peculiar charm. The chase is among the best of all national pastimes; it cultivates that rigorous manliness for the lack of which in a nation, as in an individual, the possession of no other qualities can possibly atone.

As for bighorn sheep, the chase of no other North American big game animal ranks greater or more thoroughly tests the skills of the hunter which pursues them. Simply put, there is no higher pinnacle in big game hunting to my mind, and I am willing to do whatever it takes to get my ram, if I have to wear my knees down to the bone to do it. I may never do it again, but I am here and am committed. With a little luck...

Sheep hunting in Alaska almost always involves flying into a remote camp in one of these seemingly fragile airplanes. The bird's eye view is thrilling in every way and more than worth the price of admission. As we quickly gain altitude and bank right, the first view of the great Matanuska Glacier comes into view, looking more like a white capped highway cut through the cragged mountains of the rugged Chugach range. The mountains look rougher than I had imagined, and I knew from my research that the Chugach range, relatively young in geological terms, is about as rugged as it gets. Nothing would come easy on this trip and that is perhaps as it should be.

Neil and I are hunting a remote glaciated valley that serves as a tributary of the main glacier below and as I fly into camp with my gear in tow, I quickly realize the formidable, almost foreboding terrain called sheep country. I am awestruck from the view and a little intimidated by the country we will call home for the next ten days. The U-shaped valley has a glacier stream running through it to the main glacier down below with ice jetting out at the top of the pointed peaks on both sides of the valley. The Spoon Valley is remote and protected by cliffs and rocky ridges reaching seemingly forever into the heavens retreating into the glaciers that have been there for who knows how long. The mountains are so beautiful it is painful. I look forward to the sheer challenge of the upcoming hunt even if I dread the “getting done” of it. Being that this is my first real foray into sheep hunting, I wonder if it will be my last; the task will be daunting to say the least.

As Alaska game regulations stipulate, hunting on the same day as flying in is prohibited. Neil and I arrive early on Saturday and begin setting up camp and settling in for the days ahead. We'll spend the rest of the day looking around for bears or sheep from camp and catch a nap to pass the time. Opening day is not until Tuesday, which gives us a couple of days to acclimate to the altitude and look for a grizzly bear as well as scout out the mountains for our ram. Due to the unseasonably warm temperatures, upwards of 75 degrees in the heat of the day, we have no luck with the bears after two days. As we are here in early August, they haven't had the time or inclination to move this high up yet. We do however see groups of sheep in the distant mountains. Our first spotting is encouraging to say the least, as we watch 18 ewes and lambs feed across a grassy slope on the distant horizon. The previous winter had been a mild one according to Neil, the lamb crop was up and the rams should be strong this year.

Monday evening we are hunting the lower elevations for a bear when we spot a lone ram making his way across the crest of the forbidding mountain across the glacier stream in front of us. He is not the first mature ram we have seen but as we watch him for the better part of an hour or two, it is more than obvious that he is exactly what we were looking for. More than a full curl, he has above average mass with tips that flare out at the ends. Any mature ram is a magnificent trophy and this one is certainly no exception. We bed him down for the night and decide to make plans on him in the morning as we make our way back up the valley to camp for dinner and hopefully some sleep. The days are long in Alaska with the sun going down somewhere around midnight. Tomorrow we will need all the rest and energy we can muster for what will surely be our longest day yet.

Opening day began with yet another ram sighting on the high grassy slope of a mountain outside of camp. Not a full curl ram but hopefully a good omen of things to come. After breakfast, Neil and I load up our packs and head out for the ram we bedded down the night before. He's no longer where he was, but we set up and glass for the better part of an hour when I finally make the spot. He has joined up with two younger rams and we keep close tabs on him for the better part of another hour or so until he finally beds down for the day. As Neil and I discuss our options, I realize that the mountain we have been looking at for the last few days is going to have to be climbed. Full of excitement and dread all in the same moment, there are but a few places we will be able to position ourselves for a shot.

The middle of the edifice is utterly unapproachable, which is precisely why they have bedded down there; we will have to approach from the end of the mountain and wait for a break. The sheep, with any luck, should move out of the fortress to feed in the early evening and Neil's plan is to take the rest of the day to get into position and wait 'em out.

Although the creamy white pelage of Dall sheep is relatively easy to spot against the deep gray rock of the cliffs, getting into position to make a shot is an entirely different matter altogether. This country looked more like goat country than sheep country, the edifice of the top 1/3 of the mountain looked like a jagged saw tooth knife with rocky chutes in between crags of rocky outcrops and shale. The sheep moved along with little or no trouble defying gravity with each step across the talus slopes. Our trek would be much more difficult and considerably less graceful.

As we make our way down the side of the mountain, our first of many obstacles appears in the form of the glacier stream running the length of the valley. Although it looked rather benign from above, our first attempt at crossing the turbulent stream resulted in water rushing over my hip boots, striking real fear in me for the first time. I carefully retrace my steps back and get out, pouring the ice cold water out of my boots, thankful to not have fallen in. As there is absolutely no way I can go on with wet socks, I will have to make my way back to camp and get changed. After meeting Neil back at the stream, which we still have to negotiate, we diligently work our way up the valley until we find a suitable place to cross. After doing so, we slowly begin the arduous journey up the end of the slope in search of a ram hopefully still where we left him by now several hours ago.

Some six hours later, Neil and I make the first crest at the end of the mountain with the summit in sight for the first time, it being obscured by the seemingly endless rolls of the lower half of the steep grade. Our first real opportunity to stop and rest for a while comes as we glass the crags of the gothic cathedral that I'm hoping we can avoid, looking for our ram. The view is reminiscent of our plane ride and simply indescribable. It is now after 5:30 pm and my feet more than anything need a break. Taking the first aid kit out of my pack, I make use of the moleskin for the hotspots on my feet. We have a most comfortable rocky outcrop to rest on with spongy moss cushioning our seat and the rocks blocking the wind. We eat a sandwich as we watch for any sign of the sheep. Neil decides that they will probably move in our direction and that we should go no farther. Patience, which is not my greatest asset, apparently is Neil's. His confidence and knowledge, not to mention years of experience settles me down and besides the rest feels good.

It would be unbelievable if the three rams move our way but as Neil predicted, we catch a glimpse of the white coats around 8:00 pm as they make their way over the crest in front of us. Watching the rams through spotting scopes, the biggest of the three finally skylines himself as the sheep begin making their way down the grassy slope in front of us feeding. Unfortunately, we cannot risk moving now and they are too far to do anything but wait and see what they do. Full of anticipation, my heart sinks as the rams lay down at 10:00 pm. They are still over 500 yards away and we cannot risk losing the opportunity for a realistic shot by taking a long shot and missing.

At this point, Neil and I begin discussing our options, which includes sleeping on the mountain and waiting for a better chance at first light. We hadn't planned on sleeping out

and brought very little in the way of extra food, clothing, sleeping bags etc. In fact, we were down to only two bottles of water with no chance to refill our supply anywhere close. One thing was certain, it had taken us the better part of the day to get on the high side of the mountain, and we weren't going back to camp without the ram. With overnight temperatures in the low 40's, I began preparing myself mentally for a long sleepless night. When all hope of ending the chase before dark began to fade, for some unknown reason they got up and began moving again. "A storm must be moving in", Neil whispers, "sheep normally don't feed this late into the evening".

As luck would have it, the sheep continued across the rocky chute slowly making their way in our direction. They finally disappeared below us until it was time to move into position. Our patience and my faith in my guide is apparently about to pay off. With another 45 minutes of light remaining, we should be able to get into position before the remaining light disappears. "250 yards", Neil whispers. Having climbed an additional 200 yards up the ridge to get into position, I try to control my heavy breathing and calm down. As I raise my rifle and scope the ram, I begin shaking and realize that I am losing all senses; I can't believe this is really going to happen. The first shot is a clean miss but I re-chamber and connect on the second. As I reload, the ram makes a move back across the rocky chute and starts making his way up the mountain, limping from the shot but apparently not fatally hit. A third shot, missed, a fourth, missed until finally the fifth shot finds the lungs and the ram tumbles down the shale laden 60 degree slope, stopped only by a small boulder from literally dropping off the face of the mountain.

Relief and gratitude sets in. I realize how lucky I was to get my Dall. Lucky to have the rams close the distance and give us a reasonable shot, lucky to overcome the heavy breathing from climbing and ram fever, lucky to in fact overcome some pretty poor shooting, but that's sheep hunting. You don't always have a nice easy rest to shoot from. Besides, if you can't get excited about something as magnificent as a Dall sheep, you might need to check your pulse. I also realize how remarkably lucky I was to have picked the right guide. Although I have considerable experience in big game hunting, I'm not sure I would have been patient enough to wait for the opportunity. I later learned from our pilot, who taxis most of the sheep hunters in the area that upwards of 75% of the hunters in this unit go home sore, broken hearted and empty handed.

By the time Neil and I retrieve our packs and make our way over to the ram, it is almost too dark to take pictures. We get a few however, and field dress the ram as darkness falls over the mountain. We will have to wait until tomorrow to pack the ram out and get him off the mountain, it's going to be dangerous enough as it is getting off and back to camp in total darkness. We still have that glacier stream to cross, this time with no hip waders, but make it back we do – sometime around 1:30 am, relieved to say the least. Sleep comes easy, especially as rain begins to fall outside our camp. I guess we were lucky not to be on the mountain that night. Tomorrow, after some much needed rest and food, we will tackle the mountain again, this time for good....I've got my ram.

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