

7 Rams, 7 Mountain Ranges, 2 Legs

I killed my first ram in 1998 on my very first sheep hunt. Miraculously, I drew the premier tag in the entire state the first time I applied. Despite a paucity of Alaskan hunting experience and appropriate gear, I was successful. Honestly, I hadn't a clue what I was doing. I'd never killed anything bigger than a spike buck up to that point. I know that ram was a gift from God that helped set me on a path I didn't know I needed to walk.

My next serious attempt at sheep was in 2001. A couple more years of Alaskan wilderness experience and sheep knowledge gave me more confidence heading into the mountains, but I knew I was still a newbie. I managed to take my second ram and felt like I halfway knew what I was doing. Maybe I could be a sheep hunter...

In 2002 I hunted the Kenai Mountains. I couldn't find a legal ram and the momentum from the year prior began to wane. Little did I know at the time the role the Kenai Mountains would play in my journey.

2003 was the turning point of my hunting career and in some respects, my life. I received a sure-fire tip about a spot in the White Mountains that held legal rams. The kicker -- I'd have to walk over 30 miles to get there. It would be a test. Did I have what it would take? If I could succeed on this hunt, I could truly place myself among the ranks of accomplished sheep hunters. The hunt for that ram was the toughest thing I'd done up to that point. I was now fully on this sheep hunting path, the wheels were in motion for an awesome friendship, and a unique sheep hunting goal was brewing.

As I prepared for the 2004 season I began giving serious thought to my identity as a sheep hunter. I wanted to do something big. What could I do to become an elite sheep hunter? And how could I hunt in a way that I felt was respectful and honored this magnificent animal I had grown to appreciate and so identify with? I knew I didn't have the resources to target exceptionally large rams or go for the coveted "Grand Slam" (the taking of all four species of North American sheep). Over time, an idea began to take shape...

Former Alaska Department of Fish and Game Dall sheep researcher Wayne Heimer's research played a prominent role as I built my knowledge of sheep biology. A paper Heimer wrote comparing horn growth between rams from Alaska's seven major mountain ranges -- the Wrangells, Alaska, Brooks, Talkeetna, Kenai, Chugach and Tanana Hills/White Mountains stirred something inside me. I also thought about how so many sheep hunters are successful by going to the same place every year and by using ATV's, airplanes and boats to penetrate deep into sheep country and to separate themselves from the competition. Although I didn't necessarily have a problem with others using them, these motorized access tools were unavailable to me at the time. All my rams so far had been from different places and taken by hiking in from the road. This realization and the seven mountain ranges concept coalesced into a supreme Dall sheep hunting challenge that, to my knowledge, had never been achieved. Could a hunter without aid of a motorized vehicle (besides a pick-up truck to get to a trailhead) and without scouting ahead with an airplane, kill a ram from all seven of these mountain ranges? I'd already bagged a Tanana Hills/White Mountains ram, arguably the hardest range from which to take a walk-in ram. The challenge resonated with me. It would be the Alaska Slam. To prove that a hunter could, with enough dedication, kill a ram from anywhere in Alaska, and on the rams' terms -- on foot. I decided then. The Quest was on.

In 2004, I returned to the Kenai Mountains. Again, I could find no legal rams. I abandoned the hunt partway through. With only a couple days left to hunt, I needed to go somewhere else. So I headed back to the location of my 2001 ram in the Wrangell Mountains. I killed the 48-hour ram. Forty-eight hours from truck to truck with a full-curl. It felt like quite an accomplishment within the scope of the larger goal. Two mountain ranges down. But the Kenai Mountains continued to vex me.

My future hunting partner Scott, on my tip, went to my White Mountains spot in 2004 and was also successful. After Scott's successful audition, we teamed up for the first time in 2005 for an attempt at the Brooks Range. We found only one legal ram. I'd killed three, Scott only one. I wasn't able to check off the Brooks Range that year, but we solidified the kind of friendship that rarely comes along in a man's life.

In 2006 my name came up again for the famed Tok Management Area, the only place in Alaska specifically managed for large-horned rams. Scott and I had put in on a party tag. By now Scott was on board with the mountain range goal. It was the first time we doubled up on rams. We now each had three ranges checked off. Me: White Mountains, Wrangells, Alaska Range. Scott: White Mountains, Brooks and Alaska Range.

In 2007 my streak continued as I drew a very rare tag in the Hunter Creek drainage of Chugach State Park, outside of Anchorage. I hunted solo this time. I had thought my 2003 White Mountains hunt was hard. This was more survival than hunting. It took me five days to pack that ram out on bleeding feet, after enduring a storm that would have made CNN had it occurred anywhere in the Lower 48. Chugach range: check. Over halfway there.

2008 found Scott and I back together north of the Arctic Circle attempting to secure a Brooks Range ram for me. I took my best ram ever, a 12-year old broomed monarch. Scott got a good one as well. Only the Kenai and Talkeetna Mountains remained to complete my goal. But a long, sweeping pair of horns that got away kept us dreaming of the Brooks all year long. We put the seven mountain ranges goal on hold in 2009 for a "Return to Ram Nation" and an attempt at that haunting ram. It was a good decision, as Scott killed him and I killed another great broomed ram.

For 2010 we were back on track for the goal. The Kenai's had been my nemesis. Diligent summer scouting by Scott turned up several very promising rams, but the hunt proved otherwise. Several were oh-so-close to being full-curl, but we couldn't bring ourselves to pull the trigger on any of them. It's the only time we've gone home empty-handed, but we learned a lot about ourselves as hunters and our personal ethics. Scott did a late season run to the Wrangell's and bested my 48-hour ram by one hour.

Fourth time was the charm in 2011 for the Kenai Range. Back to the same spot as last year, facing impossible odds, we doubled up on not just legal, but really nice Kenai rams. A walk-in/double on the Kenai rarely occurs. The Kenai Mountains had become such a burden. It was with light hearts only a heavy pack can bring that we hiked back to the truck that year.

2012. Somewhere in the Talkeetna Mountains the ram that represented the culmination of my goal grazed unaware. It took 65 miles of hiking and 30,000 feet of climbing to find him. Scott, though it was his turn to have first shot, deferred to me (as I said before, a once-in-a-lifetime friend) in order to complete a goal ten years in the making: seven mountain ranges, seven rams, two legs.

For 2013, we had a late season hunt planned for the Chugach Mountains with the goal of getting Scott one ram away from completing his slam. But he couldn't resist the mountains and on an opening weekend scouting trip to the Talkeetnas was gifted with a massive full-curl that put his most challenging range behind him. The Chugach Mountains will still be there in 2014.

We were back on track in 2014 for our Chugach hunt, now two years in the making. It was our most epic hunt ever. The first time I've been truly intimidated by sheep country. We spent three nights in a blizzard on a 5000' ridge. There were near death experiences. Missing a great ram on day 9 was a low point in both of our sheep hunting careers. The redemption of the ram on day 10 is a treasure we'll never forget the feeling of. There was much celebration in the mountains that day.

We're likely the first two sheep hunters to ever complete the seven mountain ranges goal. It is fitting given our work together on this, and fitting that the final ram came with such a story.

The accomplishment of such a goal brings great satisfaction. But as I reflect over the past decade I can't help but linger more on the path the pursuit has led me on. I have heard the voice of God and seen His nature revealed more clearly in the mountains than anywhere else. I've made life-long friends that I wouldn't have otherwise. I've been confronted with my biggest weaknesses and greatest strengths. I've learned lessons in handling conflict and adversity. I've learned when to sacrifice for others and when to stand up for myself. I've been given confirmation that things I hoped were in me, really were. The mountains have humbled me to my knees when I started to get too cocky and then blessed me with rewards I didn't deserve. I've had the privilege of witnessing others' personal journeys as I helped them pursue their sheep goals. I know that the man I am is much different than the man I would be had I not taken up the pursuit of mountain sheep, and that is the real trophy value in every set of horns I've collected.