

Backpack Sheep Hunting – Keys to Success

The 7/8 curl ram chewed his cud, content in his bed high on the wall of a mountain cirque. I was watching through a spotting scope from 500 yards away near the valley floor. As I watched, a small ½ curl ram approached the larger ram and began kicking him with a front hoof, tentatively at first but with increasing fervor. The large ram merely ignored this upstart, who for some reason thought that particular bed would be better occupied by him. Like a teenager who doesn't know any better, kicking morphed into pushing with horns. I began to seriously question the big ram's ability to stand up for himself. Why are you letting that pipsqueak push you around? No sooner had the question passed my mind when, in one explosive, violent motion, the larger ram rose, wheeled and solidly head-butted the upstart square in the side. It's the only time I've ever witnessed a live ram cartwheel down a mountain, as my high school football coach would describe "ass-over-tea kettle." I laughed out loud. In the next moment the conquered ram righted himself, the larger ram was back to chewing his cud and the band's dominance hierarchy was firmly re-confirmed.

I didn't get a ram that hunt. But I gained a memory that still gives me a chuckle every now and then.

Small rewards like this are common to those hardy enough to venture into the mountains after the fabled Dall rams of Alaska. Certainly nature touches non-hunters as well, but for me there seems to be some deeper connection when I'm not just in nature but being an active part of it. I walk quieter, look sharper, smell deeper. The sixth sense of a hunter kicks in and I'm more attuned to my environment.

To kill a mature ram is sometimes regarded as the ultimate big game hunting achievement in North America. To do so on a do-it-yourself, walk-in backpack style hunt, makes the accomplishment all the more sweet. Most sheep hunters use small bush planes or ATVs to penetrate deep into sheep territory. Using the marvel of the modern combustion engine they save countless hours of hiking, distance themselves from competing hunters, and sometimes locate their trophy before even putting boots to shale. In some places, there's just no other reasonable way to reach a trophy ram. The dedicated walk-in hunter, those using just a pick-up truck and the "quads God gave them" to consistently tag trophy rams are a rare breed.

So what does it take to pull off a successful walk-in hunt and why even try? Shouldn't we use every advantage at our disposal? Sheep hunting, even with the conveniences of motorized access can be a brutal test of endurance, fortitude, even survival and an intense journey into self-discovery. Why make it harder? For some, it's the only economical option. For others it's for the challenge. If you're going to go for it, here's what you'll need:

Mental Toughness

When I parked the truck I couldn't even see the mountains. My maps told me they were there, and good source of intel told me there were rams in them. So I began hiking. Hours later I topped a tundra ridge and finally got a glimpse of my destination. The mountain range floated blue in the distance like a sail boat about to slip over the horizon. The distance was supremely daunting and I considered turning back. How would I ever get a ram back even if I got one? But I steeled my nerves and plunged into the sea of spruce and willow thickets. Two days later I laid eyes on several full-curl rams. But that's a story for another campfire.

Sheep hunting is full of these personal struggles against yourself. Distances seem too long, the wind too brutal, the snow too deep, the brush too thick. Thoughts of family, a hot shower, a soft bed tempt you back toward the trailhead. These test the resolve of the hardest sheep hunters. I don't know if mental toughness can be taught. It seems to be one of those things you've got or you don't. Often you don't know until you're in the midst of a tight spot. One thing I have come to understand though is if you've got the mettle, it can be honed. Put yourself in controlled, less than ideal conditions. Go hiking during a storm, camp out on a sub-zero degree night, hit the gym at 6am even when you've been up all night with a sick baby. Experience and success in these small tests will give you the confidence you need to exercise that mental toughness within you when you most need it.

Physical Fitness

The sheer joy of doubling up on heavy, double broomed rams had faded on that first 1000' climb. We were now on day three under 130 lb packs, still miles from the truck. Our legs and weary backs having resigned themselves to the endless step, step, step drudgery. We'd dry camped the night before, the map promising a small spring just a ¼ mile out of camp. It lied. It was hot. We plodded close to delirium toward the next water, a small pond a few miles ahead. Willpower kept us going for sure, but without months of intense conditioning we might not have been able to safely reach that next water hole.

There's no getting around it. If you're going to successfully hunt sheep on a walk-in hunt, you've got to be in top physical condition. Sometimes on an ATV or fly-in hunt you can manage that one climb to put yourself into position for a chance at a ram. I have guide friends who have accomplished amazing feats with overweight, elderly and disabled hunters. But if you want to be successful year in and year out you've got to dedicate yourself to fitness, especially if you are solo hunting or both you and your partner plan to take a sheep. The older you get, the more of a lifestyle it has to be. In my mid-20's I could turn it on and off, stepping up the effort a month or two before the season. Now it's pretty much a year-round effort. You don't have to be an Ironman Triathlete, but lugging a 130 lb pack for miles over several days is definitely a top

caliber athletic achievement. Check with your doctor and develop a program that works for you. For me I've become very acquainted with Shaun T of Insanity and Tony Horton of P90X fame. Oh, and THOUSANDS of feet of climbing each year with a weighted pack.

Creativity

"You crossing the river?" The camo clad moose hunter asked me as he pulled his ATV to a stop next to me. I nodded affirmative as he shook his head and quipped, "good luck," as he motored away. I was on foot, in a heavily hunted mountain range. It was near the end of sheep season. Torrential rains had the river swollen so that even the moose hunters on their ATV's wouldn't attempt it. I scoured the river banks, I waited. Finally I found a place to semi-safely cross. Once on the other side, I had the rest of the world and a large band of rams all to myself. I killed a 38" ram on that hunt and "discovered" one of our favorite ram hide-outs. We've taken several rams out of there since. All because I used some creativity to get somewhere others couldn't go.

When researching sheep hunting spots, phrases such as "too deep," "too much brush," and "too far," make my ears perk up. If you're going to successfully chase road accessible rams, you've got to get creative. Find unusual ways to get into places others won't go. Think outside the box. Sometimes you have to hike 20+ miles to find legal rams from the road, but sometimes you don't. Think mountain bike, pack raft, technical climbing gear. Who says you can't cut a secret trail through the alders prior to the season? When you limit yourself to non-motorized access, you've got to develop a bag of tricks.

Gear

Whoosh – Boom! Yes, wind can boom and that's exactly what snapped us fully awake as our tent laid over flat, tent stakes pulling loose, the roar of wind and rain deafening our ears. We struggled to hastily stuff gear into our packs while we held the poles and rainfly off of us with our feet. We had to yell at each other, half an arm's reach away, in order to hear what the other was saying. Gear packed and rain gear donned, we stepped out into a black hurricane where minutes earlier a serene mountain pass had been. It was 1am when we said a prayer and started off the ridge top, down steep slippery rocks by head lamp into the valley where the wind wasn't as fierce. It was 4am when we finally got back into our sleeping bags for a short nap before the new day started.

So our tent isn't bomb proof and making it even less so, we use just the rain fly and poles to shave weight. There are heavier duty tents out there that will withstand whatever Mother Nature wants to throw at you, but they come with a price – both dollars and weight. With gear, keep this in mind: you don't always need the latest and greatest. The hunting industry thrives on new and better gear and gadgets - a lot of it worthless and impractical. Our suggestion is to pick up the best gear possible within your budget restraints and slowly over time update to

newer, lighter and better quality. Always keep “less” in mind. Backpack sheep hunters walk a fine line between comfort and survival in regards to their gear and the necessity to keep pack weight at a minimum. The most important pieces of equipment are your boots, optics (binoculars and spotting scope), and backpack (one capable of hauling 130+ lbs). Put most of your money towards these items and make do with the rest of your gear. Don’t let a lack of the latest whiz bang gadgets keep you from the sheep mountains. There are a lot of stories out there of old timers hunting in blue jeans and flannel shirts. But if you do use inferior gear, you’ve got to be smart about it, like not camping in the middle of mountain passes.

Scouting

I’d spent the better part of the day on a slippery, muddy, ATV trail with more knee deep standing water than I cared for only to find out the trail ended miles before I thought it would in a mad jungle of 8 foot high willow brush and scattered spruce trees. Continuing on, while possible, would have been a miserable tromp that would eat up a lot of precious time on the upcoming sheep hunt. I had to figure out another way in. Back at the truck, my back up plan had me headed in the direction of a new access route. A couple hours later I was trekking through the tundra high above tree line as I made my way to the first of a couple mountain passes that led me to those same far blue mountains in the distance and hopefully some sheep, much quicker and easier than my initial attempt.

When planning your hunt, keep in mind that everything looks good on paper. Stats from Fish and Game’s website can give you false impressions, ridges that look good on a topo map may be impassible, trails that once existed may be impenetrable. While all the research and knowledge gathered about an area on paper is extremely valuable, it doesn’t equate to firsthand, in the field experience. Boots on the ground, especially regarding access, is some of the most crucial information necessary to maximize your hunt. Knowing how you’re going to get to there by spending weekends backpacking in the summer will be worth its weight in gold when it comes time for the actual hunt. It’s also a great way to try out new gear and work on your fitness because nothing prepares you better for hiking in the mountains, then hiking in the mountains.

Of course the most exciting thing a scouting trip can provide is a glimpse of sheep and possibly even some legal rams. But even if you don’t find rams, don’t despair. We’ve done more than a few hunts where we’ve hunted blindly and returned after much effort with packs full of meat and horns.

Character and Honor

We were at the tail end of an hour long stalk and two hours behind the glass on the last big ram in the mountains...only to realize he was Falta Leche. Falta Leche means “short milk” in Spanish

and is a quirky way we've taken to calling rams that aren't quite full-curl. After 20 miles on the boots and four days laying in a tent waiting out bad weather, we had to head back to the truck with empty packs. Rain beat down, subjugating us further to the already dreary duty of hiking back empty handed. Despite the unsuccessful hunt, we could hold our heads high knowing we did the right thing. The three best rams we pursued, had horns that were *almost*, but not quite legal, rams that sometimes get killed by over-anxious hunters. Letting those rams walk that year was tough. We had hunted hard, done what it takes to earn a ram. Harvesting two of them the following year was a great reward for doing what was right... and left us with a clear conscience.

Aldo Leupold stated, "A peculiar virtue in wildlife ethics is that the hunter ordinarily has no gallery to applaud or disapprove of his conduct. Whatever his acts, they are dictated by his own conscience, rather than that of onlookers." Sheep hunters of old were some of the most noble of sportsmen. These days the lure of being part of the sheep hunting fraternity is blurring some of those traditional ethics. More and more hunters just want a notch in their belt so they can call themselves a sheep hunter, letting their desire to harvest a ram overcome their good judgment. Don't fall for that trap. Your character, which is so much more important than any accolades that might come from harvesting a ram, is at stake. Honor yourself, the game you hunt and the hunting community by making absolute, 100% certain that ram is legal. If in doubt let it walk. That's the right thing to do. And like us on that unsuccessful hunt, you'll be able to hang your head high. In my book, that's the kind of hunter I'd welcome at my campfire. And better sheep hunters means a better sheep hunting experience for everyone.

A Heart that Celebrates

The ram crumpled at the whump of the bullet. With that shot all the anxiousness of the past year, like a great weight, lifted off our shoulders. We'd done it! It seemed like we could now actually enjoy the hunt without worry - would there be legal rams? Will there be other hunters? Will the weather cooperate? All these things had gone wrong on previous hunts. We had our Kenai Mountain rams. The feeling of relief after so much hard work the past few years to take rams from this mountain range washed over us. We retrieved Steve's ram first, both of us butchering to get the job done quickly. Then we moved onto mine. As the sun faded, headlamps illuminated knives as we went to work on my ram. Butchering finished, we loaded our packs, held onto the mountain and strained our eyes to see the dark outline of the ridge against skyline high above that marked the end to the daunting hike yet before us.

Firm footholds propelled us up the mountain as a harvest moon crested the peaks and flitted in and out of scattered clouds. It was a steep hike. We found ourselves sweating-not from the hard work, but from the realization of how far we'd tumble if we slipped. It was best to just watch your feet. Vertical cliffs loomed up out of the darkness on three sides trying to hem us in

and force us to back track. But our head lamps illuminated the one narrow path that would lead us through – verses from the Bible of God directing your steps came to mind as we continued on. The cold of the clear night, the heavy packs, climbing a mountain in the low glow of a headlamp, moon and stars overhead and a great hunting partner to share it all with – it was glorious. It was the stuff that makes up the stories that men share when campfires are burning low, and I was living it. I was alive and my heart was filled with awe and thankfulness to my creator.

You see, the truth is that you should never come home from a mountain hunt empty handed. Oh, you might not always have horns strapped to your pack, but the mountains hold countless treasures for the hunter with an open heart – a heart open to celebrate. I've never come back from a trip without having been touched by nature in some way, by God Himself it often seems. Don't get me wrong – a sweeping curl of horns and 60 pounds of the finest meat ever invented can't be beat; but it's those moments like the one above that compel us to return to the heights year after year. If you take that attitude into the mountains as well, you'll enjoy a 100% success rate. Like Babe Ruth said, "Don't let the fear of striking out hold you back." So lace 'em up and get on out there. Good luck. Light Hearts and Heavy Packs.

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