

Twice Lucky
by
Mark Thomson

The red message light on the phone was blinking when I arrived home that December evening. “Hi Mark, this is John Legnar, President of the Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society and you’re the lucky winner! Give me a call.” Winner of what? Is someone playing a joke? When I dialed the number and John told me that my name had been drawn in the RMBS raffle for a 10-day guided Alaska Dall sheep hunt with Tom Shankster of Alaska Trophy Hunts, I could hardly believe it – this kind of thing just doesn’t happen, at least not to me. Once lucky!

Hunting the white sheep had always been a dream of mine, but I had pretty much given up on it as one of those dreams that we all have where you keep telling yourself.... maybe someday, but for one reason or another that someday never quite comes together. Before you know it you find yourself suddenly “celebrating” your 50th birthday. Then, like a ton of bricks it hits you, your “somedays” are getting limited. Now, by the luck of a draw, this particular “someday” of mine was really going to happen. I’m going to Alaska!

Working behind a desk I knew that I needed to get serious about getting in shape if I was going to have any chance at being successful. I started right away on the Stairmaster and walking with my loaded pack five times a week. I figured I already had about every piece of equipment a guy could possibly need for hunting – and then some. But, as I went over my gear and researched what was recommended for a backpack sheep hunt in Alaska, it quickly became apparent that I needed some new stuff! Researching and buying the items I would need, from new boots and a lightweight sleeping bag, to trekking poles, hip waders, and on and on, was a lot of fun. After several months of burning up the Internet and my credit card, I figured I was outfitted pretty well.

Before I knew it August was here and it was time to go. I felt pretty good about the shape I was in. There was no way that I would be beating my guide to the top mountain, but I felt pretty good that if I went at my own pace and was mentally tough I would do okay.

I met up with Mike Duplan in Anchorage on August 7th, whom it turns out had booked the same hunt with Tom. I had met Mike at a Boone & Crockett measuring course we both had attended in Vegas the previous summer. It ended up that we were stranded together for a couple of days in Anchorage waiting for the weather to clear at Tom’s base camp so that our charter flight could get us in. Mike had a rental car and it was fun checking out Anchorage with him. I even bought a cheap \$20 rod and reel and a one-day

license from Wal-Mart and got to go fishing for spawning salmon while we waited to fly out. I was quickly falling in love with Alaska.

Finally on August 9th the Cessna 206 left with Mike and I headed for Tom's base camp. I was in total awe of the gorgeous scenery the whole way. It was abnormally clear and you could see the top of Denali poking through the clouds in the distance. The mountains were beautiful, but viewed through the eyes of a sheep hunter who would soon be climbing them; they looked extremely tall, steep, jagged, and ominous. We landed on a short gravel strip, shot our rifles, and before I knew it Tom and his Super Cub were shuttling my guide and I to our spike camp about 5 miles up the valley. Tom had spotted a group of seven rams down "low" about three miles upriver from our spike camp the day before. That was where my guide Chris Cork and I would be heading in the morning. "Cork", as he preferred to be called, looked like a sheep hunter; 32 years old, lean, 5'-10" tall and 165 lbs of blue twisted steel, as Tred Barta would say. I hoped I could keep up with him. Cork was a lot of fun and we got along great from the beginning – as a whole, hunters are just good people. We spent the evening arranging our gear, ate our first Mountain House, and crawled in our bags, ready to begin our adventure in the morning – opening day of sheep season.

We left camp that first day at 6 am, little did I know that it would be seventeen long hours until I saw my soft air mattress and fluffy down bag again. Of course the "low" rams were gone when we got there, so we headed up the valley where we figured they most likely went. As I put my waders on for the very first time to cross the first of many glacier fed streams, it really hit me - I'm here, I'm in Alaska, and I'm sheep hunting! Soon we began climbing up the side of a mountain opposite a glacial bowl where we thought the sheep might have gone. We hadn't gone too far when Cork spotted rams; they were a long way away at the head the bowl near some large patches of snow. We dropped back down and began our stalk ...our nine-hour stalk. Those mountains are STEEP, but I seemed to be doing fairly well at keeping up, although I'm sure Cork was taking it easy on me.

What I dreaded most was side hilling across the steep slide chutes. The spot I was tentatively making my way across now had me pretty well puckered up. My mind wandered to the book Cork had been reading in our tent called "Oh No! We're Gonna Die" by Bob Bell. It's about the author's close calls in the Alaska wilderness and in it he says, "Alaska has a full arsenal of ways to do you in. She can get you with weather; she can get you with terrain; she can get you with water and her most exciting method is to sic her critters on you." As I watched a rock I had jarred loose bounce, tumble, gain speed, and seemingly roll down and down forever, I thought about Alaska's arsenal and had no doubt that if I wasn't extremely careful right now I could easily get to experience firsthand one of her "terrain" methods of doing a guy in.

To make a long day short, when we finally got to where we had seen the sheep they had vanished. We were confident that they hadn't seen us, but for reasons known only to a sheep they had decided to mosey over the backside of the glacier bowl and out of this hopeful hunters life. It was a very long hike back to camp and we were flat worn out when we finally crawled into our bags about 11:30 pm.

The next several days were a mixture of steep climbs, long days, wading rivers, sittin' in the tent listening to the rain and starin' at the fog, breathtaking scenery, nursing blisters, and drying clothes. We had a couple of close encounters, but just couldn't seem to quite put it together on a legal ram. Legal in Alaska being either full curl, double broomed, or eight years old. I did get to experience another one of those "ways in Alaska's arsenal" while crossing a very swift glacial river when a volleyball-sized boulder being swept along by the current hit me in the shin leaving a throbbing bruise. I had seen and heard much larger boulders rushing with the current and guess I was "fortunate" that the one that hit me was one of the "smaller" ones.

Day six found us in our tent fogged in with it spittin' rain. With the weather the way it was we were both surprised when we heard a plane. Tom had found a window in the weather and had flown to our spike camp to give us another option for my hunt. Mike Duplan had taken the first sheep of the camp, a beautiful 37" picture perfect ram. During his hunt Mike and his guide had seen and passed on an old ram with a "gimpy" front leg. They saw it in the same general area on two different occasions and were pretty sure that we would be able to find it again if I was interested. Gimpy? Old? Sounds perfect to me, let's go!

Cork and I got to spend that night in base camp and had a welcome change from our usual Mountain House. Home made spaghetti-using meat from Mike's ram. It was delicious. We would also have a welcome addition to our party in our expedition for the ram tomorrow. Tyson Troyer, a 21-year-old college student who was helping Tom out during hunting season would be a packer for us if we were successful. Seems Tyson had lost his .44 pistol two days earlier climbing the same mountain we would be heading up to look for the ram and he was anxious to tag along with us and try to find it. Cork called Tyson "The Linebacker", and as we got to know him it turned out that indeed he had played linebacker in high school. I was glad to have him along.

The three of us left camp early the morning of my seventh hunting day. The weather looked iffy and we hoped it would hold long enough for us to find the ram. The mountain we had to climb looked nasty, but actually turned out to be no more difficult than anything we had already faced earlier in the hunt. The toughest part was the alders. We made a wrong turn somewhere along the way and I got to experience the alders in all their glory. I had read about them, but it's just hard to convey in printed form how evil they can be until you have actually spent time fighting them yourself. The alders were soaked with rain from the night before and as I fought my way through them I felt as if I

was slogging through one of those kids play area ball pits at McDonalds while a bunch of six year olds hung on my arms and legs while at the same time being sprayed down with a fire hose. All the time spouting expletives that I didn't even know I knew. When I finally broke free from the devil bushes about an hour and a half later, I found Cork and Tyson waiting for me on a sunny patch of grass and laughing at my "disheveled" appearance. I was already beat and we really hadn't even started our climb.

The rest of our hike was relatively uneventful except that Tyson found his pistol about two-thirds of the way up the mountain. He was very happy and I took it as a good omen for our hunt. When we arrived at the top about 4 hours later, I thought our luck had ended. The clouds had moved in and we could only see about 50 yards. The only thing we could do was wait and hope things cleared up. Fortunately about 45 minutes later it cleared enough that we could begin slowly creeping along just below the ridgeline, searching for the ram we hoped was nearby. When we reached the end of the ridge about an hour later and peaked into the last basin where the ram could be, I was heartbroken, he wasn't there. As Cork and I glassed a distant peak looking at some ewes and discussing our options, Tyson came scrambling back. He had spotted a patch of white in a fold in the basin we had all just looked at. The spotting scope confirmed it was "our" ram; he was double broomed and had a limp. My heart was racing as we made a plan. Tyson would stay back and keep an eye on the ram while Cork and I would sneak across the shale field above him and try to close the distance for a shot.

Before I knew it we were in position and Cork was ranging the ram at 300 yards. I had a rock solid rest across my pack and at the shot the ram simply rolled once and lay still. I couldn't believe it. I finally had my Dall ram! As I sat there staring at that distant white spot I started to cry. In the many years that I have hunted I had never done that before, never felt like that before. I don't believe it was any single thing, but sitting there on that pile of rocks, staring down at what has to be one of the most special animals in North America, thinking how lucky I was to win the raffle to even be here, the preparation, the physical exertion, the mental battles to keep going, new friends, and a tremendous ram taken in what had to be the twilight of his life, all the emotions just flooded over me ... as did the tears.

It took a while to reach the ram and I savored each and every step as we got closer and closer to him. The ram was old and battle scared with a front leg broken at the "elbow", double broomed, and twelve years old. He was beautiful. I couldn't have been happier.

I'll save you the details of the pack out, other than to say, "Thank goodness for Tyson!" We did manage to miss most of the alders on the way down and made it back to camp at 1 am.

As I crawled into my sleeping bag, swallowed a handful of Advil, exhausted, with every bone and muscle in my body cussing me, I looked down near the foot of my bag to see

the shadow of the rams' horns – at that moment I felt that I must be the luckiest person in the world. Twice lucky.