

A CAUTIONARY TALE

This adventure demanded more of the author, physically and mentally, than any other big game hunt in his worldwide hunting career.

By John Wootters



Be warned: This is not just a fond reminiscence about a long-ago hunt. It's a tale of success and failure. It began badly and ended badly. But, in between, oh, in between, there was one unforgettable, shining moment when I steadied crosshairs on the shoulder of a splendid Stone ram and then caressed the trigger.

The tale began when an Air Canada 737 decanted us at Watson Lake, Yukon, the jumping-off place for all the fabulous Stone sheep range in northern British Columbia. "Us" consisted of Billy Ruger, the son of the founder of Sturm, Ruger & Co. Inc. (and recently retired as Chairman of that firm), my old compadre and fellow gun writer the late Skeeter Skelton, and me.

It was August 1972. We were there to hunt Stone sheep with one of the most famous outfitters in Canada, in the Toad River country of the Cassiar Mountains. Those were magic names to readers of Jack O'Connor.

From the looks of things, so was everybody else on the 737. The tarmac was a bedlam of outfitters and their excited dudes hooking up. We claimed our duffle and waited as our fellow passengers paired up with guides and the pickups

rolled out, carrying the hunters off to their adventures.

Finally, we were all alone, and it became obvious that we had been stood up—by a man who stood to collect almost \$9000 by our presence!

At last, someone took pity on us and gave us a lift to the Watson Lake floatplane base, where our outfitter was raised on the radio. We could hear his bleary voice on the office loudspeaker saying, "Oh, yeah. I forgot about those guys. Well, just fly 'em in to my base camp on Dall Lake."

That was all. No excuses, no apology, no information. We had to hitch a ride into "downtown" Watson Lake to purchase hunting licenses for every species of British Columbian game on which a season would be open during our stay—but with no idea of which animals might be found where we were going.

Then back to the floatplane base to board a DeHavilland Beaver for the flight to Dall Lake. We arrived too late for the pilot to make the return flight, disappointing a party of three hunters awaiting a ride back to Watson Lake. They had three mediocre sets of ram horns and three average goats, but their success was not reflected in their attitudes. It quickly became apparent they were not happy campers. A sullen, heavy

atmosphere of hostility hung over the camp. Supper in the cook tent was eaten in icy silence. Nobody was talking to anybody else, including us newcomers, so we could not know the cause of the resentment. This lack of information did nothing to relieve my sense of foreboding about our own hunt.

The departing group lifted off early next morning with no handshakes and no goodbyes. And the camp staff turned to making up the pack string for our two-day trail ride to our hunting camp. I watched the preparations, noticing that the horses seemed jaded and saddles and other tack in rough shape, sure signs of outfitter indifference—or negligence.

My spirits lifted a bit at the news that our hunting area had not been visited for several seasons, and when we hit the trail I reveled again in the feeling of a good horse under me and the sense of freedom and excitement typical of pack-train hunts.

Trailing in was uneventful. We spotted no game along the trail, but the scenery was spectacular and the weather delightful. Our three guides

were Indians of the Tahltan tribe, famed as mountain hunters, and seemed competent and pleasant enough. But when we reached our campsite, even a greenhorn could see that talk of an uncharted area was fantasy or a lie. The valley was crisscrossed with recent horse tracks, and the spruce boughs used as mattresses by our predecessors—whoever they were—had not even turned brown.

Still, I knew that vast areas can be covered on horseback, and that recent use of the campsite did not necessarily mean that we couldn't be hunting fresh country. So I held my tongue.

Next morning—the first of our hunting days—got off to a slow start. After breakfast, the guides borrowed our good binoculars and sat down to glass all the country visible from camp. After a couple of impatient hours of wondering what we were doing still in camp looking for game in an obviously hard-hunted area, I ducked into the cook tent for a cup of coffee.

Suddenly, I heard a flurry of excited conversation outside. Something of in-



A pack-string based hunt offers a wonderful sense of freedom. The party is entirely self-contained, needing no outside support. You can camp anywhere there's a level spot for the tents and grass for the horses, and you can pursue game on whatever mountain you find it.

was along mostly to wash dishes and gather firewood. We rode for a mile or more across the valley, where we dismounted and tied the horses out of sight of the sheep above. Then we started up.

Mountain sheep hunting is not easy. It's not supposed to be. I've heard that the hard-earned trophies are the most treasured, and I agree. At the time of this hunt I was in my early 40s and in about as good shape as I'd been since I'd gotten back from Army service in Korea. But those sheep demanded more of me, both physically and mentally, than any other big game in my worldwide hunting career, before or since.

As we climbed, I was remembering Jack O'Connor's prime directive of mountain sheep hunting: Never try to stalk a ram from below where the hunter's scent can be carried to the sheep by mountain thermals.

Here I was: a thousand feet below two rams, neither of which I was certain I wanted to shoot, following a guide I suspected might have no more experience stalking or judging rams than I had, which was none. My confidence level wasn't soaring sky-high, which

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made the climb that much harder, but I kept on struggling up that mountain. It was a pride thing. If Charley could make it, I damn sure could. But, I told myself, one of those rams had better be worth all this pain and panting.

After what seemed like hours of climbing, Charley belly-crawled up the steepest pitch yet as I caught my breath at the foot.

He peeped over the crest and suddenly ducked and frantically gestured

interest had been spotted. Dashing back outside to retrieve my binocular, I looked where I was told to look, and there, to my astonishment, were two tiny sheep images. They were too far away to be sure of horns, much less make any judgments. But Billy had a spotting scope, and it was quickly set up and focused. After more hard squinting and mumbling, the head guide pronounced one of the animals shootable and asked who wanted to go for him. I was skeptical about locating a trophy ram from camp at midday on the first day and did not volunteer.

But Skeeter had twisted his knee and couldn't make the climb, and Billy already had a fine ram from an earlier hunt. So I gathered my gear while my horse was saddled, and off we went.

The guide chosen to lead me was an affable young Indian, improbably called Chicken Charley, an apprentice guide of whom it was my impression that he

Float-equipped light planes like the workhorse DeHavilland Beaver are ubiquitous throughout the north country and indispensable to modern hunting in Canada and Alaska.





for me to join him. I scrambled up the last few yards to a position alongside him. I cautiously raised my head and found myself staring at two majestic Stone rams not a hundred yards away! One was lying down and the other was on his feet—and both were staring straight back at us.

“Quick!” commanded Chicken Charley. “Shoot that one, the one on the right!”

Just then, the reclining ram rose to his feet in a single fluid movement.

Any idea I had entertained of coolly evaluating the two heads was whipped away like mist on the mountain breeze. Even without binoculars, both animals were breathtaking in the late-afternoon sunlight. I was prone with the rifle pushed out in front, and I forgot about trying to get into the sling. Cheeking the butt, I found the ram in the scope and somehow managed to take my eyes off his horns and concentrate on the reticle etched black against his iron-gray shoulder. I knew he would go at any second, but long habit took over and I eased off the trigger. Slowly, slowly. At last the 7mm Magnum barked and bucked in the mountain silence, but I didn't hear it. What I did hear was the blessed, solid *Thwop!* of the bullet strike drifting back as I saw the ram's slow-motion collapse.

We quickly reached him, and I was stunned by his

beauty. I'd not dreamed of shooting such a creature, and in fact, I had not realized what a glorious animal I was hunting. I made Chicken Charley go away and leave me alone with my ram, and I sat in the mountain dusk for a few minutes, with my hand resting on one of those great, tapering curls. When I let my guide approach again, he taped the curls at 40 inches and the bases at 15 inches, and predicted a final Boone and Crockett score of 166 points.

I could not have cared less.

Charley also showed me the radial grooves on the horns that told of survival of 11 winters of mountain storms, avalanches, and wolves. It was long after dark when we rode into camp in triumph with the cape and meat.

Mine was the only trophy of that hunt. Skeeter shot a mulligan moose near camp on the fifth day and treated us to fried moose liver *a la Skeeter*, a welcome change, you may be sure, from the camp cuisine up 'til then.

Seven fruitless and frustrating days later we returned to the base camp on Dall Lake to learn that the outfitter insisted that we go to Watson Lake via a substantial—and expensive—side trip to his home camp to pay the bill. His manager at the Dall Lake base camp couldn't accept the check and wouldn't explain why, except to say that the outfitter needed to record our license numbers.

A Beaver picked us up the next morning and ferried us to the outfitter's home base, where we found that gentleman face down on a couch in his office, dead drunk. He did not check our licenses. He did not say hello. Did not ask if we had a good time. Did not ask if we had shot anything. Did not ask if we had been taken care of. In fact, he didn't say anything, not even goodbye. He simply took the \$8800 check and rolled over to sink again into his alcoholic haze.

As we walked back down to the plane for the final leg of our flight back to Watson Lake, we saw why it had been so necessary to go out of our way to pay up: A man was helping our pilot unload a drum of aviation fuel from the De-Havilland. Of course, the charge for hauling the avgas went on our bill.

And now, as they say, you know the rest of the story—about all those glamorous, deluxe, free hunts on which you hear about us writers constantly getting invited.

As a postscript, the outfitter in question eventually lost his license and concessions and is now dead. I hasten to add that our experience is in no way typical of treatment clients may expect from outfitters in the Canadian Rockies, most of whom work very hard to deliver value for their pay. But the story should serve as a cautionary tale for prospective clients: *Check those references carefully!* ©

After the most demanding stalk of his life, the author collected this fine Stone ram. His rifle was a Ruger Model 77 chambered for 7mm Remington Magnum and topped with a Leupold 3.5-10X scope.

