

ALBERTA SLAM RAM



HUNTERS: DOUG HARTZLER
 SPECIES: ROCKY MTN BIGHORN SHEEP
 LOCATION: ALBERTA

In March of 2019, Steve Lewellen, a patient and good friend, casually inquired during an office visit, "Do you know anyone who might want a Rocky sheep tag? The winning bidder at the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep banquet could not legally hunt in Alberta and the backup bidder is already booked in 2021 with the same outfitter, André van Hilten of Willow Creek Outfitters." My staff gets nervous when a hunter/patient shows up since my schedule gets somewhat behind swapping pictures and stories. This time, it was short. Within five minutes, Steve had made a call and the tag was mine at a fraction of the winning bid.

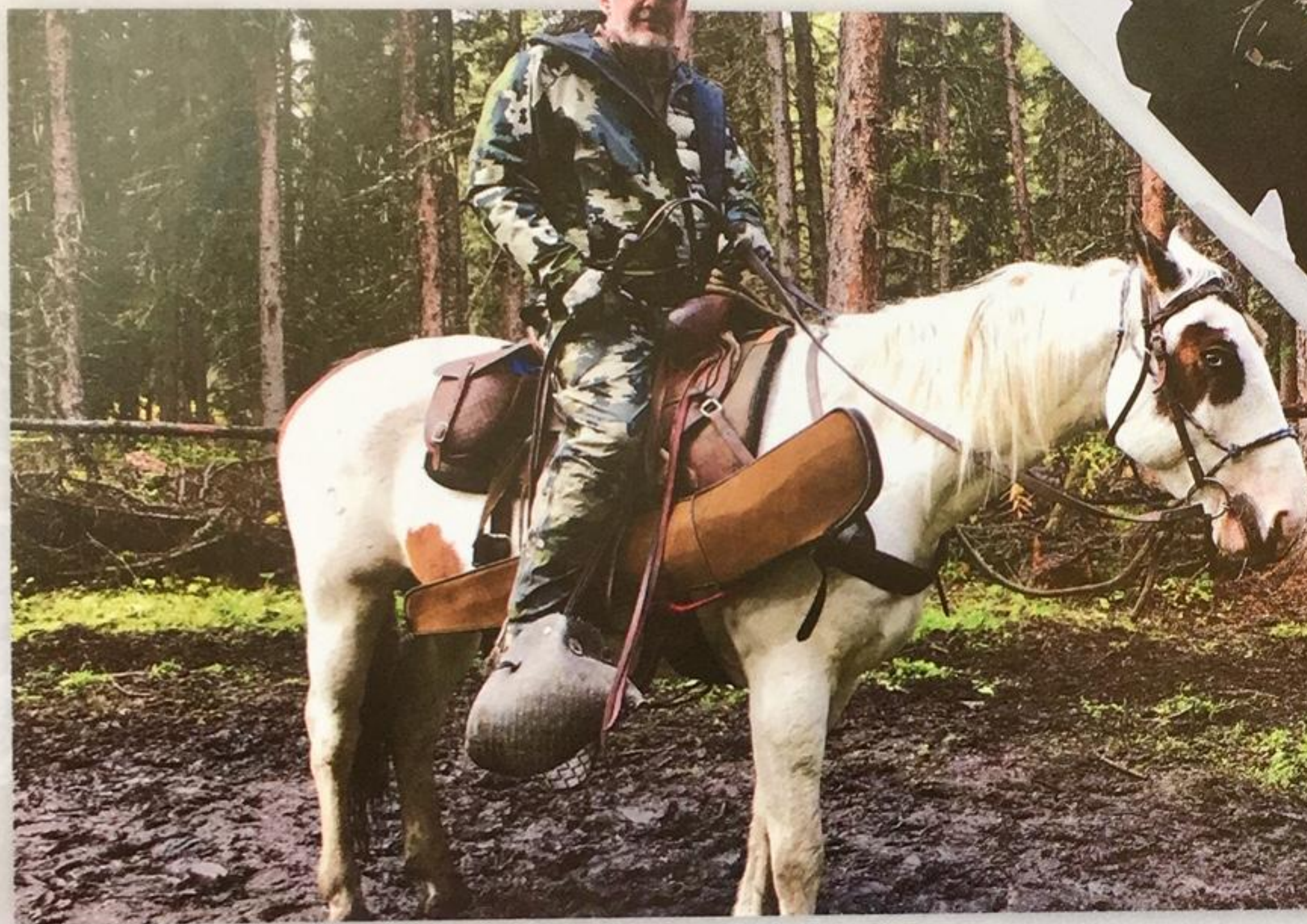
They say sheep hunting is a young man's sport. I disagree. Mental toughness, desire, and a love of the outdoors gives anyone, regardless of age, a chance. My story starts in 2005 at the age of 51 when I drew an Arizona Desert bighorn sheep tag. Prior to that, I had never given sheep much thought. I finished an 18-day marathon Desert hunt in a wildlife area closed to vehicles where I was introduced to what sheep hunting is all about. At that time, my quest officially began for a grand slam of North American sheep that ended in 2019 at age 64.

My Desert hunt was guided by Yellowhorn Outfitters, Jim McCasland, and Pete Cimerello. I harvested a 9+ year old ram as the sun was setting on the second to last day of the season.

It was 4 a.m. to 9 p.m. every day, a challenging hunt to say the least, especially after Arizona Game and Fish transplanted 30+ ewes out of the unit six weeks before the season started. They did a good job of scattering the sheep.

After three trips and 28 days of hunting at Arctic Red River in NWT with Kelly Hougén and Tavis Molnar, I finally connected in 2010 with a 12+ year old Dall that included a two-day, 20-mile pack out. After that, my guide, Mike Schroeder, and I built an airstrip so we could get picked up. Passing on numerous trophies that were less than 10 years old, I got to enjoy three sheep hunts for the price of one! Unless you have backpacked in sheep country, it is impossible to understand what it does to your soul.

In 2018, after raising five children, I booked a moose hunt with Big Time Hunts in British Columbia. In April, I called Scott Mackenzie, the outfitter, and upgraded to a Stone hunt. I just had to get back to what motivates me like nothing else. On day four, I harvested "Old and Heavy." He was a 13+ year old ram that was with a band of seven other mature rams. After a two-day pack over two



mountains to base camp, Carlo, my guide, and I found the ram on the backside of a third mountain. We encountered all extremes of weather, routine sheep stuff.

In March of 2019, I started my sheep training for the September hunt in Alberta. Still physically in shape after my 2018 Stone hunt, I upped my training pack to 60 pounds and got my hunting pack and gun weight down to 42 pounds. I talked to André several times on the phone. We were reassured that the other knew exactly what they needed to do to make this hunt successful. The success rate for outfitted Rocky hunts in Alberta is approximately 50%. André, with his meticulous planning, without a doubt did what he needed to do. My mind was made up that I would not be the reason for failure.

I arrived in Alberta and met André and his brother Hans, my guide, for the September hunt. We took a casual two-day ride to base camp, and the next day, we left for a nine-hour ride to the furthest part of André's hunting concession. George, a Kiwi, joined us as an assistant guide/packer as did Quade, a camp helper. We arrived at the satellite camp as another hunter, Jeremy Tripp, and his guide, Quinn, packed out Jeremy's huge bodied ram. They left the next day with four fresh horses that

we trailed in, and Quade stayed at the satellite camp to watch our remaining seven horses. Hans, George, and I left with our packs the next day to climb to our hunting area.

We climbed 3,500-4,000 feet to a small basin and set up camp 1,000 feet below a saddle that led to a huge basin. Hans and I climbed to the saddle and glassed the large basin where we saw three rams and 11 ewes and lambs. The rams fed and bedded until 3:40 p.m. when they got up and walked off. We couldn't judge them well due to the distance and poor lighting. That evening, we met George and moved camp closer to the saddle to lessen the climb to access the basin.

The next day's rain turned to snow with intense wind, the kind that blows your tent over even when you are in it! We spent most of the day in our tents. Despite the wind and cold, we climbed back to the saddle to glass on day four. We saw the rams briefly walking on the skyline along a ridge on the far side of the basin. They disappeared behind a long ship rock that towered over the basin below. They did what we were trying to do – get out of the 40+ mph wind and blowing snow!



STONE SHEEP - 2018



DALL SHEEP - 2010

DESERT BIGHORN
SHEEP - 2005

My heart sank with what I saw next. Across the basin were three resident hunters sneaking up to a knob and glassing the ship rock. They were 1,200 yards below the rams at the opposite end of where they previously disappeared. At first, Hans and George thought I was seeing things. Fifty miles in, where did they come from? Fortunately, they were pinned down with a large open expanse between them and the sheep. It was now midday and we knew the rams previously got up at 3:40 p.m. The conditions were worsening; however, we had no choice but to go for it. Luck was with us since we could do a two-mile stalk around the backside of the ship rock and hope for the best. We got a better look at the rams on the skyline and one was a shooter.

Without seeing the resident hunters, we would never have attempted a stalk in the developing blizzard conditions. A curse became a blessing. The rams ended up bedding on the leeward side of the rock formation on a ledge with a severe slope below it. We climbed the ridge the rams walked down and still hunted along the backside of the ship rock not knowing where they were until Hans spotted a smaller ram bedded 70 yards away. Without the 40+ mph wind dampening our sound, it is doubtful we could have gotten that close. It was approaching 4 p.m., and we were exposed in the wind but patiently waited until 5 p.m. when the rams stood up. While waiting, Hans could see portions of one of

the other rams but was unable to judge it as he peeked over a boulder in front of us. I could see the further small ram if I leaned to my left; otherwise, I was stuck watching Han's backside. George moved a few feet to the right and could see the nose of a bigger ram bedded closer with his right horn extending above his nose. He mouthed that the ram he saw was the shooter. Hans quietly said, "Chamber a round." Thirty minutes later, he slowly slid back off the rock with intense eyes and said, "Shoot that ram!" I climbed onto the rock and released the safety. Standing 40 yards broadside in full view at the top of the world was the end of my quest for the slam – a heavy full curl 7+ year old Rocky. In less than two seconds, the shot dropped him in his tracks on a bench that dropped off 600 yards in all directions.

We contemplated whether the resident hunters heard my shot or if they were even still out in the blizzard. Most normal people would not be. We hastily took pictures, processed the ram, and hiked back to our tents as darkness fell. The next day, the storm cleared to a beautiful day. I survived the pack to our horses and the 50-mile ride to the trailhead over the next three days. I was energized by the taste of fresh sheep, incredible scenery, and closure on a 14-year journey. Now I know what brought Jack O'Connor back to the same country to hunt. I can't thank André, Hans, George, Quade, and Quinn enough for their help finishing one journey and hopefully starting another. **HF**

