

## QUEST 13

# ROCKY MOUNTAIN BIGHORN SHEEP

## MY ROCKY MOUNTAIN BIGHORN SHEEP HUNT WAS THE MOST DIFFICULT I HAVE EVER DONE.

A coveted Canmore, Alberta, bow zone sheep tag lets bowhunters trek into trackless wilderness and hunt bighorn sheep during the November rut. You won't find a better opportunity to arrow a great ram than the Canmore bow zone. During the rut, huge rams make forays from the rugged Banff National Park, traveling snow-covered peaks and ridges in search of estrous ewes. With incredible sheep numbers, the rut in that area is intense, and new rams often filter into the hunting area every day. But that's just the good news.



*Somewhere out there is a bighorn ram with your name on him. Go get him.*

The bad news isn't printed in tourism brochures. The ominous mountains of Canmore are foreboding. During November, the steep slopes and jagged cliffs of every hunting unit are iced with a coating of Georgia-esque freezing rain and covered with 20 inches of Utah-like sugar snow. The mountains are steep, like the summit approach to the Matterhorn, and Canmore's sheer rocky cliffs scream Yosemite.

The average temperature at 10,000 feet during the sheep rut is minus 10, and strong winds constantly turn arrow flight into a Byron Ferguson trick shot. It's not uncommon to have a blue-sky morning on the mountain turn into a 100 mph blizzard in less than an hour.

All sheep hunts are grueling, but Canmore is grueling, brutal and dangerous. If you add frostbite,



ice climbing, horseback hunting and winter tent camping, that pretty much sums up one day during a Canmore bow zone hunt.

### BACK WITH LENZ

My bighorn guide was Chad Lenz. He and I had hooked up on my Canadian moose hunt and formed a friendship that continues today. After that hunt, Lenz and I decided to try our luck in Canmore. Lenz knows Canmore very well and has been guiding the bow-only area with excellent success on trophy rams. Canmore's bow season culminates in November with the bighorn rut. As the month progresses, rutting activity will increase, which attracts more rams out of the high country and, hopefully, into the area we planned to hunt. Big rams also trek down from the towering peaks of Banff National Park. The park was established in 1885 and encompasses more than 2,500 square miles of some of the most rugged terrain in the world. It's also a refuge for huge Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep.

Just before my sheep hunt, I had completed several TV hunts. The travel and wear and tear had decreased my resistance, and as I boarded a northbound flight from Tampa to Calgary, I was not feeling well. Cold- and flu-like symptoms wracked my body, sucking my strength and enthusiasm for the sheep hunt. I had worked hard to get into shape mentally and physically for my Canmore hunt, but sickness can be brutal. With a cough, fever, chills and a raw throat, I was bedridden, and Lenz told me there was no way he was taking me into the mountains. We rested for three days, and I pumped myself with meds. That was not how I planned to start my first sheep hunt.

### FROM BOTTOM TO TOP

After three days, I felt healed enough to at least push into camp. Lenz, cameraman Jeff Parker and I unloaded horses and our camping gear at a snow-covered gravel parking area of the trail head. Saddling up, we rode the horses through snow on a trail that wound up Pigeon Mountain. Three hours later, the horses veered off the trail at the mouth of a small pup (creek). Our hidden lair was about 50 yards into the spruce. Lenz had set up a wall tent weeks before, but now everything was cold and covered in 10 inches of snow. We beat the snow off the tent, unloaded the pack train, lit the cook stove and scrambled into a 12-by-12 frozen canvas box that would be home for a couple of weeks — or until I could

## ROCKY MOUNTAIN BIGHORN SHEEP

### RANGE MAP AND INFORMATION

The king of the sheep subspecies, the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, (*Ovis canadensis canadensis*) is the most widely available sheep, with its range extending throughout most of the western United States, British Columbia and even parts of Alberta. The most commonly studied and well-known subspecies, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep are known for their heavy, full-curl horns and tendency to rear up on their hind legs and crash headlong into one another to establish dominance.

Rams can weigh 300 pounds. They live in bachelor groups until breeding season commences. Then, dominant males do most of the breeding. Breeding occurs in fall, and lambs are born each spring.

Highly adapted to their environments, bighorns feature split hoofs that are rough on the bottom. That lets them seemingly defy gravity as they ascend and descend nearly vertical cliffs. Bighorn sheep also possess acute vision, which lets them pick out natural predators and escape quickly. In areas with severe winters, bighorns might migrate to lower elevations to scrounge for grasses and plants.

Although bighorn sheep populations were high at the beginning of the 19th century, they have dwindled greatly since. Today, several states have re-established populations, but tags are highly limited, and allotments often go solely to state residents. Hunters can apply and earn preference points in several states, but the chances of drawing are very low.

For the chance to bowhunt a bighorn sheep, Canada is the best option, but the opportunity will not come cheap. Either way, any bowhunter who receives a bighorn tag should research potential hunting areas and possibly outfitters. Bighorn hunting often requires a serious trek into backcountry, which limits but does not rule out do-it-yourselfers. If you want to take the best advantage of a highly coveted bighorn sheep tag, the best bet is to book with a reputable outfitter, which can greatly reduce scouting time and provide pack horses or other methods for reaching sheep territory.



*Fighting bighorns are the quintessential kings of the mountains. I remember watching Wild America with Marty Stouffer and his film footage of wildlife, as well as his classic open with the bighorns fighting. That was likely a catalyst to my beginnings as an outdoor TV producer and big-game hunter.*

arrow a good ram.

To say that conditions were miserable on the first day would be an injustice to future conditions we would encounter. Snow and cold temperatures greeted us, but they were nothing compared to the conditions Mother Nature would dish out as the season progressed.

That evening, we grew cozy warm by the fire, drank coffee and plotted strategy. Our protocol would be to get up in the dark, light the fire, feed and saddle the horses, have a hot breakfast, pack a lunch and ride out in the darkness of morning. We were camped 2,000 feet below the bald summit and could ride the horses an hour before tying them

up at tree line. Then, we'd have to hike another 45 minutes to the weather station on the peak of Pigeon Mountain, where we would glass for sheep as the sun's glow inched up and over the horizon.

You might think we were pushing the hunt a bit much to rise so early and trek to the top under the cover of darkness, yet Lenz's strategy was threefold. First, the sheep often moved onto the sunlit side of the mountain at daybreak. The warm rays of the sun felt good on my frozen face, and I realized why sheep would gravitate toward sunny slopes after a bitterly cold night. That meant we would see sheep walking early and might have an opportunity. Second, Canmore is open to public hunting,



and anyone with a tag for that unit could hunt our mountain. Lenz's philosophy was that if we were visible on top at daybreak, it would deter other hunters from climbing up and competing for a ram. Last, we couldn't kill a ram from the tent, so getting up early got us motivated and let us use all the daylight we could to hunt at sheep altitude. We could always nap at noon if nothing was happening on top.

If we spotted sheep, we would hot-foot it downhill to their position. Usually, we would lose sight of them and never relocate them again. Following fresh tracks sometimes helped, but the best hunting strategy was to be above the sheep and wait for an opportunity. The bottom line was that every failed attempt was an exhausting exercise, and afterward, we had to climb back up to glass again. Do over.

The first three days, we saw several sheep per outing but couldn't close the distance to bow range until we stumbled across a big ram with a harem of ewes. As we side-hilled toward him, the ram saw us and led his ewes away, dropping into a huge valley. We took off as fast as we could across the slick terrain and deep snow to head them off, which, miraculously, we did. At 55 yards, I drew, aimed and shot. I can still see that arrow hooking in the wind and clipping the front leg of the ram. We found a little blood on the snow, but it quickly disappeared. After scrutinizing the video, we decided the arrow had just grazed the ram and caused a flesh wound, and the ram was alive and well.

My shot was disappointing, and it weighed on my mind every day. The only conditions I had hunted that compared to that hunt were frigid days on the ice in pursuit of musk oxen. Of course musk oxen don't live in mountains. Hunting on slick slopes 8,000 to 10,000 feet high meant sucking wind almost with every step and falling down every 10 steps because of the icy rocks hidden beneath a white blanket of snow. Those rocks, as you can imagine, don't give much when you hit them. It's like falling on lumpy ice. A few days into the hunt, Lenz, Parker and I were covered

## ALTERNATIVE HUNTING METHOD

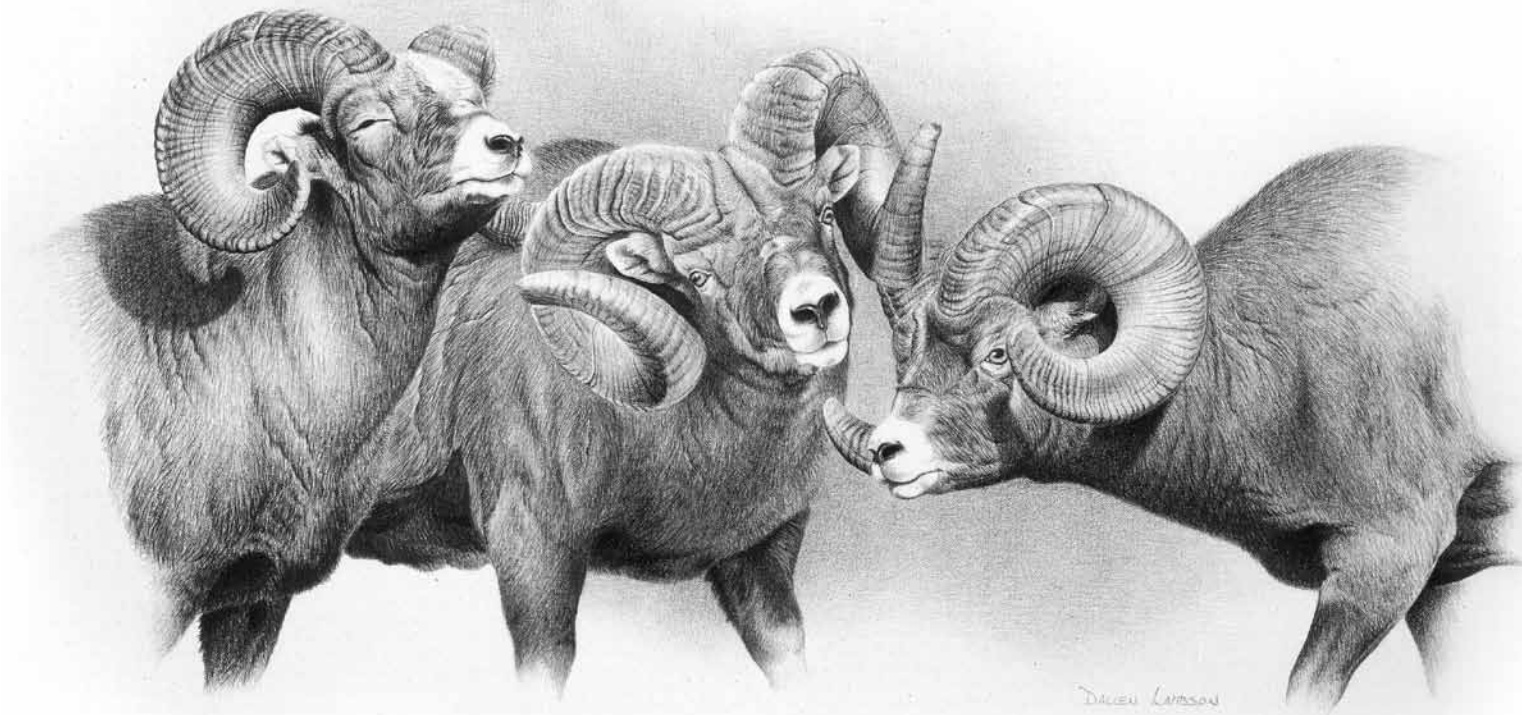
It would be difficult to find a North American animal that represents tough mountain hunting quite like the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. We romanticize sheep hunting with thoughts of full-curl rams standing atop rocky outcroppings staring over deep valleys and green, high-country basins. But reality differs. Sure, sheep live in such places, but getting to them is a supreme challenge. Getting to their altitude and sneaking into their core areas day in and day out goes beyond what most hunters will experience. It's a true test of mettle.

If you find yourself neck-deep in the misery that can be sheep hunting, there is an alternative to spotting and stalking. It involves careful observation, planning for wind currents and extreme faith in your decision making. Blind-hunting at travel routes, or more specifically, pinch points, is an effective way to fill your sheep tag when done correctly. Done incorrectly, it's like setting fire to a large pile of money and wasting the hunt of a lifetime.

As with any planned ambush, blind-hunting sheep requires plenty of scouting or observation. Sheep trails in the high country are fairly obvious, but identifying where sheep travel is not enough. The route needs to be used frequently and must be conducive to a blind setup. Also, I prefer to be above the sheep. Rocky Mountain bighorns, along with other subspecies of sheep, don't expect danger from above. They are extremely vigilant to threats from below, but they might ignore you if you're above them on the mountainside.

Of course, just being above them isn't enough. To take a sheep from a blind, you must be hidden. Depending on where and when you hunt, mountain or snow camouflage will be your best bet. If you're hunting areas like I did in the Canmore, there will be plenty of mountain cedars to create a blind. Hinge-cut branches to surround yourself, making sure you cover your backside so sheep won't catch your movement.

To increase the odds, set up where sheep must walk through. It might seem like even sheer cliffs won't funnel sheep movement, but they will. In sheep territory, a trail might be carved between basins or wind through rocky scree. The sheep will almost always follow that route, simply because they have to. It can be hard to stay alert and ready when overlooking a trail in the vastness of sheep country, but the click of hoofs on rock will be one of the most welcome sounds in your life. From that point, it's a matter of keeping your composure long enough to deflate a ram's lungs.



in jaundice-yellow and brownish-purple bruises.

Then, of course, there was frostbite. I had one heck of a time keeping my fingers warm. I think it was because I was holding a cold aluminum bow riser all day. Parker struggled to keep his feet and toes warm. Even today, he claims the frostbite he suffered on Pigeon Mountain stung him so much he gets chronically cold feet on every winter-weather hunt since Canmore. Additionally, my bow suffered some serious damage from the falls. I had no fiber-optics left on any of the pins. Every day, I took a few practice shots to ensure that my rig hadn't been knocked completely off by one of my many tumbles.

### BRUSHES WITH DEATH

If the simple routine of hunting weren't bad enough, there were times that made us feel like the Fates had conspired to keep me from filling my sheep tag and actually kill us.

For example, at one point, we came to a slide, a steep area of the mountainside that's often covered in loose gravel. Slides are where avalanches occur. During November, a slide is covered with snow and is dangerous. In pursuit of a lone ram, Lenz

decided that instead of wasting time going around the slide, we would cross it slowly and carefully. Lenz went first, and after he had covered 20 yards, he turned and motioned for me to follow. As I did, the ground gave way and caused one of the most pucker-inducing moments of my life. It wasn't recreational sledding. A giant 20-by-40-foot slice of the mountain and I were screaming down the slope. Just 350 yards below was a 6,000-foot sheer cliff. In other words, it was sure death.

"Throw your bow and roll out," Lenz yelled.

That's what I did, ending up just outside of the slide as it continued down the mountain and disappeared soundlessly into open air. I didn't even have time to collect my thoughts when I looked up and saw Parker start to slide. As he roared past me, he heaved the \$80,000 TV camera in my direction. A 25-pound camera sailed 25 feet through the air and into my arms. Unbelievably, his aim was true, and I caught it. Also unbelievably, he rolled out of his slide safely before the avalanche ride took its cliff dive. It was a big wake-up call about how quickly things can change for an adventure bowhunter.

As if the slide incident wasn't enough of a reminder that the Grim Reaper might reach out to



Byron Ferguson is a talented archer, trick shooter, avid bowhunter and friend. His archery demos and trick shots build interest and credibility in our sport.



COURTESY OF BYRON FERGUSON



COURTESY OF WALT PALMER

Super Slammer Walt Palmer displays his great Nevada bighorn. "The challenge of the Super Slam will bring you closer to nature and more dedicated hunters than you will ever dream."



COURTESY OF TOM HOFFMAN AND JACK FROST

tap you on the shoulder at any moment, another day we were on the mountainside when the wind kicked up. I'm not talking about gusty, cold wind. I'm talking hurricane-force winds. You couldn't stand up without getting blown over, so we had to lie face-down in the snow and let the wind cover us with snow, like sled dogs in the Arctic. The most severe winds gusted like a microburst, with such force that even the most seasoned Weather Channel reporters would have thrown in the towel. At one point, the wind abated enough for us to attempt to make it to a weather station built into the hillside. When we reached the station, we opened the heavy-duty steel door, and the wind ripped it off the hinges. After the hunt, we learned the wind had blown up to 120 mph, flipping semis on the highway to Calgary below us.

The only respite we got from the mountain came on Sundays. When

Here are two of the world's most famous sheep hunters: Ovis award recipient Tom Hoffman, right, and Dr. John "Jack" Frost. Frost was the first archer to complete a Grand Slam of North American wild sheep, Hoffman was the second Archery Grand Slammer.

I hunted at Canmore, it was illegal to hunt on Sundays in Alberta. Every Saturday night, we would quit a little earlier than usual and travel down the mountain to Lenz's truck. Then, we drove into Canmore and spent the night in a motel. We spent Saturday nights and most of Sundays lounging, watching TV and eating hot food. It was a relief to not hunt, but it was impossible not to worry about missing a day of hunting every week. In a way, Sundays were torture, because they gave me 24 hours to relive the rigors of the hunt, knowing I had go back up the mountain. Of course, each day meant one less day of hunting and the end of the month, which signaled the end of the season.

### MIND GAME

Every day of the hunt was a mind game. My body was tired, the weather was brutal, and my muscles were sore and cramping. About every two days, I was able to attempt a



COURTESY OF RICARDO LONGORIA

Expert bowhunter Ricardo Longoria displays his awesome Dall ram, taken in the Mackenzie Mountains. He's a world-renowned bowhunter and one of four bowhunters who have accomplished Safari Club International's World Hunting Award. The other three recipients are Gary Bogner, Byron Sadler and Archie Nesbitt.

## EQUIPMENT ESSENTIALS

Bighorn sheep territory differs greatly. During some early-season hunts, heavy-duty clothing and staying warm aren't concerns. During my hunt in the Canmore, clothing was a major concern. We hunted through thigh-deep snow and freezing temperatures to connect on my ram. It didn't take me long to realize that one of the most important pieces of gear for a sheep hunt was something I did not have: a good-sized pack.

Sure, I had backpack I figured would hold everything I would need for a day-long trek into the high country. What I didn't account for was the severe cold, which forced me to wear a heavy winter jacket when we were stationary. When we climbed, the jacket turned into a furnace, so I had to shed it every time we gained elevation.

The first time I took off my jacket, I realized I didn't have enough space in my pack for it. I had to try to lash an over-sized winter coat to the outside of my pack every time we climbed. It was a pain in the neck and made me realize the inconvenience of a slightly larger pack is almost always worth it. You'll always have space if needed, but you don't have to use it. It doesn't work the other way around. Allowing for an extra 200 to 400 cubic centimeters might make all the difference on your hunt and will let you stay more organized, operate more smoothly and prevent the headaches of fumbling with gear when you should be hunting.

The deep snow and blustery conditions warranted a heavy jacket for much of my hunt, but the thought of trying to climb into sheep country with ultra-heavy, super-insulated boots was not too appealing, even though those boots were much-appreciated during down time and glassing, when we didn't exert ourselves. I opted for a pair of hiking boots that were better suited for safe mountain travel and then paired them with water-proof gaiters. Hiking boots are short in height, meaning snow can quickly fill the uppers, which is where the gaiters proved their value. Gaiters also help keep your pants much drier, which is tantamount to comfort in the snow-packed high country.

Any little piece of gear that doesn't add much weight but wards off moisture and heat-sapping cold is a plus during a high-country hunt. That's something you'll appreciate after a few days of hiking into sheep territory, and then returning exhausted and mentally drained to your tent for a few hours of sleep — and the prospect of doing it again the next day.





Cameraman Jeff Parker and Chad Lenz relax after a long day on the mountain. Tough hunts can make you happy to be back at camp.



The rugged Canmore bow zone is rough country in winter. Here's the view from camp.

stalk. Often, those stalks ended as a standoff with a ram at 70 or 80 yards and no shot opportunity. Or some ended when I spooked a closer ram that ran to 80 yards, turned and mocked my long-range shooting ability. Ah, the life of a Randy Ulmer or Darren Collins, archers who can ace shots at those distances. In my world, 50 yards was a poke, and the proof

came in my futile attempts at some longer shots, where the arrows sailed low, high, left or right. The wind often caught arrows and hooked them away. The mind game of misses and the extreme stress of expense, weather and exhaustion made every day Groundhog Day. *Deja vu.*

Just climbing out of that warm sleeping bag in the morning was tough. We always had a thick layer of frost inside the tent in the morning. When you were up and moving, it wasn't bad. However, that first brush with cold pants and boots was miserable, and we didn't look forward to it. The hunt was quickly getting old in many ways.

### WE MEET AGAIN

Fourteen days into the hunt, we were working as a well-oiled machine, except we were also ready to strangle each other. A hunt like that is so difficult, and no matter how sound you are mentally and physically, it takes a toll on you. Each of us was frazzled, but we also knew that it would only take one stalk to change everything. Because we had worked so hard for so long, there was no giving up. We were a team, and everyone was in it until we killed out or the season ended.

With two days left, we were watching the sun drop near the mountaintops to signal the end of another day when we spotted three rams with a hot ewe. We had been following another group of sheep when we cleared a rise and saw the trio and their gal pal. The foursome headed into a patch of timber. Our interest quickly switched from the band we were trailing to the closer rams, and we planned to make our way down and across 500 yards of mountainside to get into a better position.

Lenz was confident the sheep would eventually follow the same trail out of the timber, so we hustled to where they had disappeared from view. Just as we were getting close, the rams walked out of the timber, busted us and turned to trot uphill. It was a mad scramble for the camera, an arrow and a range-finder. When I came to full draw, Parker mumbled, "Which one?" I was focused on the first ram because he was the biggest, so I said, "Lead ram." But Lenz intervened. "Too far," he said. "Shoot the last ram. He's a good one."

It was a severe uphill angle and longer-than-average shot, but I settled in and aimed.

Lenz barked "65 yards," and I adjusted slightly and touched the release. As the arrow arched toward the ram, the group began to move away. That



Layering is a must on the mountain. Hiking up means peeling off clothes. Glassing on top is a cold time, and extra clothes are a must. Notice my hand-warming muff. Susan Hinbo's Raven Wear is the polar fleece of choice on hunts like this.

split second of movement put my arrow farther back than my aim point, and it hit the right rear ham and angled up into the ram's body cavity. That's why longer shots aren't usually a good idea, as an animal can move during the time it takes the arrow to hit home.

The arrowed ram took off across the mountainside as the group split like a covey of quail. My ram stumbled down the mountain but then regained his feet and started to walk away from us.

We knew the ram was done, but we thought it was best not to push him. At about 250 yards, the ram turned downhill and ran into the trees. With light fading, I recommended that we flag his trail and return in the morning. Lenz agreed. Of course, there's always the concern of overnight snow or wolves feasting on the kill, but pushing the ram would have been worse. I was nervous. The next day was the final day of the season, and my dream was that a big Canmore ram might be dead in the snow.

I only enjoyed restless sleep that night. In the

Here's a look behind the scenes of our TV production on Canmore. Parker rolls tape on our hero shot, which was the climax to an awesome adventure.





morning, we barely spoke as we ate breakfast. Silently, we climbed the mountainside, eyeing the pines until we spotted the flagged trail. It hadn't snowed, which was a blessing, and the ram's tracks and frozen blood were readily visible. After trailing for about 150 yards, we found the bighorn stone dead in the snow.

While we celebrated, I looked at the ram's front leg and saw a clean slice across his knee. He was the same sheep I had shot at and nicked 10 days earlier.

We had done it. We had captured 14 days of tough bowhunting on video and finished strong with a great Canmore ram. Everyone was elated, and the quiet morning of wonder and worry was now full of celebration.

There on the mountain, standing over my Canmore ram, Lenz and I made a pact to go for the Grand Slam. It was a moment of bonding and friendship that only occurs in one of a thousand hunts.

That was the hardest hunt I've ever undertaken. Temperatures ranged from 10 degrees to 40 below. The wind was never-ending, and it was simply a grueling, physical and mental test to hunt every day. The Canmore bow zone separates hunters into two categories: those who can and those who can't. It's that simple.

Many detractors of Super Slam hunters say, "It's simply a rich man's way to stroke his ego. Most hunters could kill the North American 29 if they had the money and the time." To that, I will say with confidence, "A Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep hunt in the Canmore bow zone would shut most of those people up."

To finish such a hunt, you need to be in shape and mentally prepared to suffer like never before. To stare up at that mountainside every morning — knowing that you're going to travel up and down, while falling and banging up your body, and fueling up solely on power bars and beef jerky — is enough to test anyone's mettle.

Such hunts define the adventure bowhunter. The sweet success of a grueling, tough hunt neatly tied a ribbon around the true gift that is bowhunting. Of course, appreciating such a gift is one heck of a lot easier when the ram's horns are tied to the packhorse and you're feasting on campfire-grilled sheep loin. **1**

## FROM THE DVD



November in the Rockies means rough weather. A horseback hunt and tent camp make the Canmore, Alberta, bow zone hunt a real adventure.



Wind on the mountain was constant, and blowing snow made visibility tough and caused arrows to fly off target.

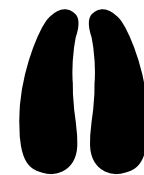


Rams often take estrous ewes to lower elevations and into the trees. This area is where I was able to get on my ram.



The hunt for my first ram taught me volumes about myself and was actually the defining moment to my path toward the completion of the Super Slam of North American big game.

## ROCKY MOUNTAIN BIGHORN SHEEP HUNT STATS



**Quest 13:** Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep

**Date:** November 2006

**Outfitter:** Savage Encounters

**Location:** Canmore, Alberta, Bow Zone

**Guide:** Chad Lenz

**Transportation:** 4-by-4, horseback

**Cameraman:** Jeff Parker

**P&Y score:** 163-0/8

**Shot distance:** 60 yards

**Shot angle:** Quartering away and moving

**Impact:** Liver

**Pass through:** No

**Animal ran:** 400 yards

**Hunting days:** 14

**Time of day:** Midday

**Weather:** Sunny, 20 degrees

**Hunt cost:** \$25,000

**Number of same species taken with a bow:** One

**Type of hunt:** Spot and stalk

**Camo:** Realtree Hardwoods Raven Wear

**Bow:** Mathews Switchback

**Broadhead:** Muzzy

**Arrow:** Carbon Express 300

**Savage Encounters**

[www.savageencounters.com](http://www.savageencounters.com)