

the king's castle

by Scott Ungar



We clambered up the near-vertical rock chute that lead to the very pinnacle of the nameless mountain.

Well-worn rocks told me that this was the escape route that generations of rams had used to slip away from danger. Once they were over the top and across the valley, they were out of the Yukon, and in the Northwest Territories.

Ben, my guide, was moving slowly and deliberately, taking great care not to dislodge any rocks that might alert the great Dall ram that we had spotted in the morning. A wall of jagged rocks blocked our ascent. Ben dropped his pack and I did the same, knowing that there was no turning back now. Ben was quick and monkey-like, finding handholds and toeholds and hoisting himself over ledges. He waited at the top of a big ledge, offering a hand. I declined, and clawed my way up

the face of the mountain, more like a sloth than a monkey, with sweat running off my brow. I flopped my rifle, pack, and body over the ledge.

Now a jumble of giant refrigerator-sized rocks were all that stood between us and the kitchen-sized plateau that was the top of the mountain. We stayed low and wormed our way to the edge of the dizzying cliff that dropped off the backside of the mountain. It is both breathtaking and gut-wrenching; the chute on the backside is about as rugged as you can find in sheep country.

We glassed hard. Every nook and cranny was picked apart, one by one. Four hours earlier, Ben and I had watched the ram work his way over the top of the mountain. He climbed up the same chute we had, and there should be no reason for him not to be bedded up at the top...somewhere. His droppings were there, and were still warm

to the touch. The strong scent of sheep lingered in the air. We had to be close—very close.

I looked over at a six-year-old ram that stood about 500 yards away. Through the binoculars, he appeared to be staring in our direction. No, wait he was staring at something directly below us. I inched my way closer to the edge of the 600 foot cliff. While I can sleep away most the afternoon 60 feet off the ground in a Saskatchewan aspen, I'm not exactly crazy about hanging off the edge of a cliff. But the prospect of a ram will make a hunter do strange things. Next thing I knew, I've inched my way up to the edge and I'm glassing over a hidden shelf 200 yards underneath us. In contrast to the brilliant sun-dappled south side of the mountain, the north side was dark and shaded and it's hard to see. I glimpsed movement and instinctively jerked my head back. "Shoot!" I whispered hoarsely to Ben.



“He’s right below us!”

Days earlier as the Turbo Otter touched down on the shimmering emerald waters of Goz Lake, Yukon, my heart thumped with excitement. It seemed like it was only yesterday that I had flown out of here with my first hard-earned Dall ram in hand. It was certainly one of those experiences that defies description.

The Turbo Otter roared at full power as it turned and taxied toward the dock. Hunters and guides were lined up on the dock with hands covering their ears. Guide outfitter Chris Widrig was there, as stoic as always in his light, down-filled jacket. I sat up front with the pilot and grinned like a ten-year-old kid for most of the trip. I was relieved to see that my guide from last year, Ben Stourac, was also there. I secretly hoped that he would be guiding me again this year.

I shook hands with Chris, Ben and Brady Lough, and then all hands were on the gear, first unloading the Otter with our stuff then the two weeks’ worth of food for us, and oats for the horses. Wanting to take advantage of the late afternoon sun, the pilot moved swiftly, reloading the Otter quickly and methodically with gear, and hunters for the return trip to Whitehorse.

I stowed my gear in the cabin as we would not be trailing out until early the next morning. As I made my way over to the cookhouse, ptarmigan scattering in front of me, and I ran into Ben. I didn’t want to bother him about hunting because I know how important downtime is after you finish a twelve day shift. Especially considering he had already spent over fifty days in the bush this year.

But Ben was ready to talk. “Hey Scott,” he said. “I’m taking you out after that ram my last hunter missed. He’s a beauty, and get this: he’s in the same valley as the ram you shot last year!” While my yearning for adventure begged for new country—new mountains and foreboding canyons—common sense told me that last year’s valley was definitely worth returning to, because we had left two super rams there, as well as the one that Ben’s hunter had missed this year.

The next morning we were up early, and by 8:00 a.m. we had packed three horses plus a spare, along with the two saddle horses. The nine hour ride down the river and up a valley went without incident. It was a beautiful day, sunny and warm—maybe the cursed rainy season was finally over. The horses crossed the valley creek without missing a step; it seemed that they were embracing the late August sun themselves. We set up camp about a mile upstream of the old camp, where there were more stunted spruce for firewood and an excellent vantage point to glass right from camp.

After supper we stowed all our gear and broke out the binoculars to see if we could find some rams for the next morning. All we spotted were a few ewes and lambs as the sun dropped behind the mountains to the west. I can tell you though, between the scent of the silver willows, the rush of the icy stream a couple of steps from the tents, the clanging of the horse bells up in the basin, and the pungent pine smoke from our campfire, it seemed as if we hadn’t missed a day here, even though exactly a year had passed. Both Ben and I hit the tents early. It had been a full and productive day.

I awoke to the jingling of tethers. Ben already had the horses tied

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up when I stumbled out of the tent and dropped down to the creek to splash some water on my face. The sky was pinkish red in the east and it looked like it would be a cloudless day. We wolfed down bacon and eggs, geared up, and were riding before the sun had broke over the mountains that separate the Yukon from the Northwest Territories.

We rode for about an hour before stopping to glass a slope where one of Ben's hunters had taken a record book caribou the week before. Sure enough, the carcass had been claimed by a good-sized grizzly. Ben glassed the north side of the valley, while I unsuccessfully tried to get a photo of the grizzly through the spotting scope. It wasn't even thirty seconds later when I heard Ben grunt, "Ram!"

The ram was easy to pick out. He stood on a green bench very near the top of a mountain that looked like a king's castle, with lookouts and cliffs and caves all over. The ram's horns looked perfect. He was definitely past full curl, with his tips flaring far out to each side. Ben looked excited. "That's a real good ram up there...what do you think?"

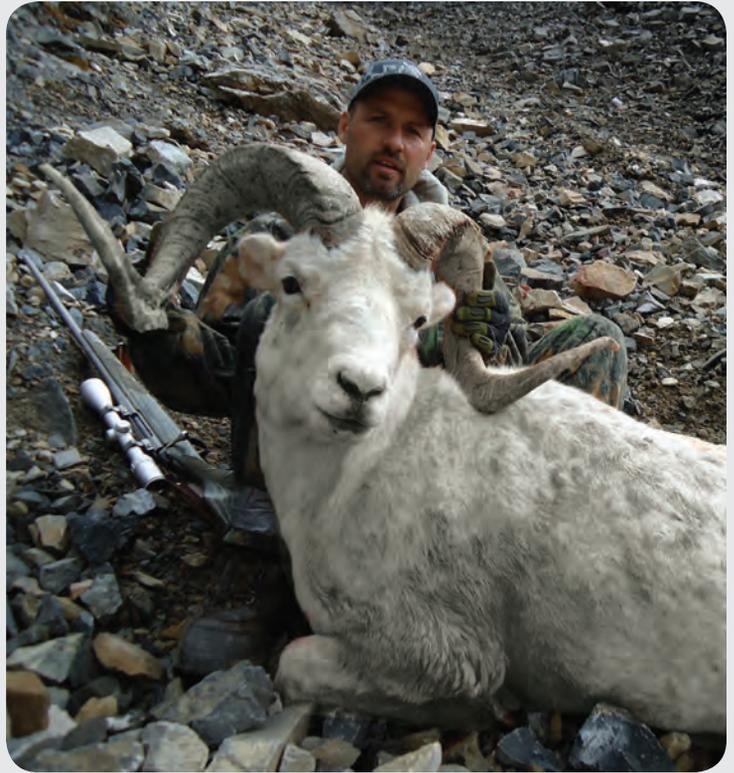
I grinned. "I think we should get up there and see if we can make a move on him." I kept glassing the ram, partly out of disbelief. In the year before, we had gone a full eight days without even a glimpse of a legal ram. As all sheep hunters know, seeing the ram is one thing, but getting to him is another. After summiting several times and glassing the gigantic bowl on the backside, we were running out of vantage points, with no ram in sight. We skipped lunch, side-hilling further east, to the chute that went right to the very peak of the mountain. Suddenly, it was quite clear: this is where the ram had climbed over.

The ram had me pinned from the moment I stuck my head over the cliff. I'm not sure if a downdraft carried our scent, but I knew we had to act fast. "Ben, the camera!" I whispered quickly. The video camera was in my pack 50 feet down the mountain behind us. Ben snuck a peak over the cliff and said, "Never mind the camera! That ram is going to blow out of here, get ready to shoot!"

"How far?" I asked. Ben read the rangefinder: 191 yards. Since the ram was directly below us, I had a heck of a time getting him in my sights. "Hold my legs, Ben!" I whispered as I wiggled out over the edge. Only once my armpits were clear of the cliff edge was I able to drop my crosshairs down onto the ram's heart. The ram cocked his head sideways like he was listening to us and I sent the first shot on its way. Maybe it wasn't needed, but the second shot was on its way before Ben confirmed that the first one had found its mark.

Our jubilation quickly turned to horror as the ram started to flip end for end, catapulting down the mountain. It must have gone 500 yards at full speed, and would have gone a lot further if it hadn't gotten hung up on some sharp rocks. Ben slapped me on the back saying, "Congratulations—nice shot!" All I could muster up was one nervous sentence: "There's no way those horns survived that fall!"

We sat on the top of the mountain for about 20 minutes, half enjoying the incredible view, and half afraid to go down and see how



messed up the beautiful ram was. Finally, we started making our way down the treacherous north side of the mountain, taking a good 30 minutes to make it to the ram's side. Digging the ram's horns out of the loose shale, I was relieved to find that both horns were still intact. One of my shots had drilled the right horn and caused some damage, however.

He was a beautiful, wide-flaring ram, with perfect matching 38 inch horns, but Ben and I had both misjudged him; he had a very tiny body. We had originally estimated him to be a 40 incher. The ram was 9 ½ years old and was still showing good growth each year. He was a direct opposite of the ram I had shot the year before, but I was still ecstatic with my trophy. I know in the future I will have many nights filled with dreams of white rams in the king's castle.

Four days later Ben and I stalked and downed a magnificent mountain caribou in full velvet, and captured great video of the hunt. This left us five full days to relax, eat tenderloin, prepare hides, and swap stories. It is often these times that end up being the most memorable. I would like to thank Ben Stourac and Chris Widrig for their outstanding service. Chris has an exceptional commitment to keeping his outfitting area in the Yukon wild, untouched, and properly managed. If you're looking for a quality Yukon hunt,

I highly recommend Widrig Outfitters.

EDITOR'S NOTE

You can reach Widrig Outfitters at
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