

BUSKSKINS, BILLIES AND BOYHOOD DREAMS

BY T.J. SCHWANKY



August is a wonderful time of the year to be in the mountains. The wild flowers are in full bloom, with the red paintbrush, mountain fireweed and alpine forget-me-nots overloading the optic and olfactory senses. The western larches begin their transformation from the lush green of summer to the brilliant yellow of fall. The moose still carry the dark, blood rich velvet that has nourished their antlers from tiny buds in the spring. And the streams are running cold and clear from the heat of the sun warming distant alpine glaciers. There really is no better time to be in the Rockies.

And I'm sure all of this August splendour was transpiring right before my eyes on a recent hunt in northern British Columbia. That is if I could have seen it. A freak storm had blown in during the night and we were literally prisoners in our cozy little tent. The flowers and trees were covered by several feet of snow, the moose had sought refuge in the lower meadows and the stream's progress was heeded by rapidly forming ice along its delicate sides.

It had all started innocently enough. I have dreamed of hunting mountain goats for as much of my life as I can remember. There is something about goats that really epitomize the true meaning of the mountains. They lead a solitary life in an often times harsh and unforgiving land. They eke out an existence where

no other animal even dares to tread. To truly experience and hunt the mountains, one must pursue *Oreamnos americanus*.

The mountain goat is not a true goat but rather belongs to a group known as goat-antelopes and is most closely related to the chamois of Europe and Asia Minor. It likely made its way to North America across the land bridge in the Bering Straight and quickly established itself in the mountains from Alaska to Idaho. Mountain goats have always lived in the mountains. They did not retreat off the plains with the advancement of civilization like so many other ungulates. They are true creatures of the high country.

John James Audubon said it so well in his 1848 Journal. "The Rocky Mountain Goat wanders over the most precipitous rocks, springing from crag to crag, feeding on plants, grasses and mosses of the mountainsides, seldom if ever descending to the luxuriant valleys as the Big Horn does.

In these majestic solitudes all is on a scale to awaken the sublimest emotions and fill the heart with a consciousness of the infinite Being, whose temple is all space, whose altar earth, air and skies".

When the opportunity finally came to hunt mountain goats, there was no doubt in my mind that I would be heading for the

snow capped peaks of British Columbia. Nowhere else in North America is the opportunity so good to take a big, trophy billy. Over half of the top 20 goats listed in Boone and Crockett have come from this fair province.

rave reviews from Darwin). That, plus they've killed some of B.C.'s biggest goats over the years.

Darwin and Angie outfit north of Hudson's Hope in an area first opened up by Darwin's Dad in



There was also little doubt in my mind who I would hunt with on my British Columbia goat hunt. Darwin and Angie Watson of Christina Falls Outfitters are, as my Grandma used to say, just plain nice folks. They're country folks with a country heart. They have a bunch of kids (six to be exact), there is always an extra plate at the dinner table (just in case someone drops by unexpectedly) and there is always a pot of hot coffee on the stove (although Angie recently tried some flavoured coffee that met with less than

1959. He was one of the first commercial outfitters in British Columbia. Back then hunts typically ran 20 or 30 days, although at least 10 of those were just to get in and out of the bush. Things are a little simpler now. Darwin has a nifty little Piper Super Cub that bops in and out of the camps with ease.

And that is where my hunt began, in the back seat of Darwin's Super Cub, bouncing down his gravel driveway. "You just saw a Super Cub at its best",

Darwin said grinning as we skimmed over the trees at the end of the driveway and banked hard to head north up a valley.

My eyes almost popped out of my head. There were mule deer all over the hill behind Darwin's house, and some real busters to boot. "Yea there's some good mule deer around here," Darwin casually said, "but you should see the whitetails, they're huge".

The trip up the valley to the Christina Falls Ranch was amazing. There were moose with what looked like sheets of plywood glued on their heads casually browsing in the meadows, herds of elk and mule deer lazily grazed on a burned out hill side and stone sheep scurried for cover at the sound of the passing plane. "Do you hunt this area quite a bit?" I queried.

"No," Darwin responded, "The access is pretty tough and we have better areas."

Better than this I thought to myself. Soon we arrived at the Christina Falls Ranch where Angie was waiting with a typical ranch style breakfast; hot cakes, eggs, bacon, hash browns, toast and pots full of

black coffee. "Eat good" Darwin joked, "I'm not sure how Mac and Hank's cooking will be."

Hank was to be my guide for the trip and Mac was Darwin's 12-year-old son. He was coming along to wrangle horses and help out around camp. This was to be his first trip without Dad. Most 16 year old kids I know would not be able to handle 10 days in the bush, and here was Mac at only 12 taking on the responsibility of a guided hunt.



After breakfast it was back in the plane for another short flight to

a camp known as Big Meadow. Here I met Hank, Mac and Keesha, our three-legged camp dog. They had trailed the horses up earlier and had them all ready for our ride into goat country. It was about a six-hour ride to where we would set up our camp. Pack trains are a magical thing to me. Although we only had six horses, it still seemed to add that touch of nostalgia.

My father had never really hunted and my love of hunting grew out the pages of books by Jack O'Connor and Robert Service. These men lived in a time when pack trains were the only means of getting back into remote parts of the mountains. I had long dreamed of taking horses way back in the high

country. Sure this was only a day ride instead of five, but the magic was still there.

Riding a horse is a great way to acclimatize, to get into the right headspace. Coming from a world of fast paced automobiles and airplanes does not prepare one for the tranquil beauty and serenity that the mountains offer. The six-hour ride in was the perfect buffer. It was a way to ease into this simpler, quieter place.

We set up camp at the head of a valley with the afternoon sun shinning hot on our faces. I had chosen an August goat hunt purposefully. The weather is usually warm and dry, the goats are content to remain in one place and dine on lush, summer pastures and their white coats contrast sharply with the green and grey background, making spotting them a much simpler task. It was at 8:00pm that I spotted my first goats on a distant mountain. It was a nanny and kid, but there were undoubtedly billies close at hand.

It was early the next morning, however, that summer was cruelly snatched from us and replaced with the cold, wet snow that only an August snowstorm can bring. There was little sense in leaving camp. The mountains were encased in foggy tombs that even Superman's eyesight could not have penetrated. Even if the mountains were loaded with goats, there was no way of seeing them.

Sitting in camp on the first day of a hunt is a very difficult thing to do. It was like someone had just stolen my date at the prom. All the months of planning and anticipation were compounded into this single, dreary, wet day. I'd been stuck in camp before, but never on the first day of the hunt; never on the first day of a hunt that I had dreamed of all my life.

Day two improved little, although the falling wet snow had turned to a bone chilling rain. Hank suggested that we ride up to the mountain pass where I had spotted the goats two days earlier. We were all suffering a little from cabin fever and needed to get out and do something. The visibility was no better, the weather was no drier, but we just had to get out of our 12 X 12 prison.

Mac accompanied us to the base of the pass, but finally succumbed to the cold and headed back to camp. Looking back at it, he was the smarter of the three of us. There was no possibility of spotting a goat unless it crawled right in our saddle bags, but somehow this was better than another day in camp. Hank and I continued up the trail, pushing chest deep snow with the horses in places. Finally we made it to the top of the pass and realized the horses could go no further. The footing was treacherous and there really was no point.

We feebly attempted to make a fire but other than the fire starter, nothing would burn. The wind continued to howl out of the north as we ate a sandwich. Hank and I spotted as much of the valley as the low cloud would permit and soon resigned ourselves to another day in camp. The little folding stove was burning cherry red on our return. Mac soon had the water boiling and we settled in for another long night.

still no goats. I knew we were in good goat country and I was hunting with the finest guide I had ever had the opportunity of sharing a camp with. Surely the weather had to break and our luck would improve.

It was the fourth day when we finally saw some blue sky. It was short lived but still it was encouraging. The temperature had risen considerably as well, and many of



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The following day was a repeat of the previous two, although brief breaks in the clouds gave us teasingly short glimpses of the high mountaintops and alpine meadows that goats call home. We saw a couple of moose and caribou in the lower reaches of the valley, but

the north facing slopes began to shed their early covering of white. It was also on this day that we spotted goats. It was a nanny and kid grazing on a low avalanche slope. We rode right up to them and had to laugh at the antics of the small goat. He too was enjoying the sun and ran and kicked in celebration,

much to the dismay of his mother.

Goats are very stoic creatures and spend their entire lives eating, sleeping and chewing their cud. It was refreshing to see the youthful enthusiasm the young goat brought to the dreary but improving day. Finally his mother got his attention and they scampered up into the steep crags in a manner that only goats can achieve.

We saw a couple more bull moose that day and a nice bull caribou before the low clouds moved in and stole away our sunshine and our view. Again the rains came and it was a cold, slippery ride back to camp.

Day five started little better than the rest. In fact, the clouds seemed even lower, the rain wetter and the biting wind colder. But in his never-say-die manner, Hank was up at 5:00am catching horses, and young Mac had hot cakes cooking on the stove. It would have been real easy to get down and depressed during the four previous days of rain and snow, but my two companions would not let it happen. Hank was anxious to go each morning with renewed optimism, and Mac was always keen to hear about our day and to offer some encouraging remarks for the next. I too had hunted long enough to realize that the weather had to improve and that we would see some quality goats. Heck, we were in some of British Columbia's best goat country.

Hank suggested we ride a couple of hours up a drainage adjacent to camp and then climb over a very steep mountain to glass the slopes on the other side. It was some ideal goat habitat and since the goats were not where they were supposed to be, it was time to go searching.

As we made our way up the steep drainage, increased vision came with each foot of elevation gained. Soon we were looking at blue skies above and a socked in, fog chocked valley below. At the base of a long scree ridge that afforded an excellent view of the surrounding mountains, we tied the horses to some small balsams, and continued on foot.

Instantly I recognized the unmistakable forms of two grizzly cubs feeding on vetch roots below us. They were totally oblivious to our presence and continued filling their already swelling bellies. Soon the sow came into view and the trio etched a lasting impression on my mind that only grizzlies can do. I have been fortunate to see a great number of grizzlies over the years, but these ones seemed somehow wilder. We may have quite possibly been the first humans they had ever encountered. These bears wore no tags, no radio collars, they were grizzly bears plain and simple.

In other parts of North America, man

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has taken it upon himself to become the grizzly bear's keeper and has covered them with identifying marks, tags and tracking collars. While still wild bears, there is something not very aesthetically pleasing about a bear branded by humans. These bears wore no such scars and are permanently reminders to me of a simpler time; a time when studying and understanding animals meant actually getting out in the field and observing them. Today's technology has eliminated that personal contact. Tracking a bear's movements by satellite or reading an ear tag from a helicopter gives the observer no real understanding of the animal. You must walk among them to achieve that.

Bears have never frightened me; in fact they have usually brought good luck. My Alberta bighorn came right after a grizzly sighting. My wife took her first moose under the watchful eye of a big, blonde boar. Surely these bears would bring good luck to us in this remote alpine valley. Soon the sow gathered her cubs up and marched them right past us, only a hundred or so yards away. She showed no real fear, yet she bore no malice. She was a predator as were we, and there was plenty of room for both of us.

Even Hank, who has undoubtedly seen hundreds of grizzlies in his 17 years of guiding seemed touched by the experience, and neither of us spoke for quite some time. After several hours of



glassing we retrieved the horses and continued up the valley.

I remember looking at a cliff leading up to a grassy plateau and thinking that it would be quite a strenuous hike up there. But Hank never even checked his buckskin mare as we began the ascent, on horseback! There was no trail, save for a faint one in the scree used for millennia by migrating caribou. But with each carefully placed step, the horses neared the top. Good mountain horses are worth their weight in gold, and these were two of the best.

Hank suggested that we head up through a pass on the other side of the mountain and do some serious glassing. From there we could look at a whole new area and hopefully find some goats. I rarely wear a watch, but for some reason I had it on that day and remembered checking it. It was 11:00am, an hour until lunch. My stomach growled its disapproval.

The hike up the mountain was an arduous one. The route took us across a large boulder field. The rocks were as big as cars and the snow concealed the ankle wrenching cracks between them. Each step had to be carefully placed so as not to fall into a hole. While it only took an hour to reach the rugged scree pass that lead to an adjacent valley, we were both ready for a break. The view was truly magnificent. The snow capped peaks shone brightly in the afternoon sun,

while the valley below remained entombed in fog. Marmots whistled their eerie call, like sentinels guarding a sacred shrine. A lone set of wolf tracks made their way down off the mountaintop and through the pass. I had to stop and just take in the splendour.

As if on cue, the fog dissipated below, offering a panoramic view of a lush green valley. It wasn't long before Hank found a goat. It was about 2000 feet below us and all that was visible was its hind end. Still it was a goat. Quickly, I found another, pawing out a bed in the black shale slope. The dirty coat and heavy based horns indicated that it was a billy, and a good one at that. The goat that Hank had seen disappeared behind a cliff.

We planned a route that would take us around a very steep, scree bowl and to the ridge right across from the goat. From there it would only be a couple hundred yard shot and we would be out of sight for the entire stalk. The first half of the hike was relatively easy and I remember Hank saying how the scree slope ahead didn't look all that steep. Not for a mountain goat maybe. It was one of those places where the fall likely wouldn't kill you, but the landing sure as heck would. Safely across the scree slope, we hit an impenetrable wall, or so I thought at the time. But with a little encouragement from Hank and a helping hand here and there, I made it to the top of the ridge. I thought about my

wife's fear of heights and somehow came a little closer to understanding.

We slowly made our way across the ridge to a rock that would conceal our presence. Hank was the first to peek around the corner. He quickly ducked back down and motioned me up. My heart sank when I reached the rock. The goat was not 200 yards away like we had expected, but at least 400 and possibly more. Spotting scopes have a way of compressing distances at long range and the goat was twice as far as we had thought.

"Can you shoot from here?" Hank asked.

"I don't know. It's an awfully long way."

T

o compound the problem, there was a brisk breeze blowing and the goat was several hundred feet below us. I thought about every bump and bang my scope had taken during the several days

of hard riding and hiking. Confidence was one thing I had in the old pre 64, Model 70 Winchester. The 264 magnum had never once let me down, even at extreme ranges. But this was a long shot.

We surveyed the surrounding cliffs but they offered no suitable approach. Either



we would be in full view of the goat, or the terrain was just too steep to safely make it across. I extended the legs on the bipod and settled in for a look. Everything felt good. The crosshairs held rock steady on the goat's shoulder. "I'm going to try," I said with renewed confidence.

At the report of the magnum, the goat leapt from its bed, but his stance was not

very stable. A red spot began to grow, low on his shoulder. I quickly chambered another cartridge, moved the crosshairs slightly higher and touched off another

round. This time the big billy went down for good. We watched through the binoculars for a while, but there was no need to reload.

A good rifle is a treasured item. Mine bears the scars of many mountain mishaps. There is a huge scrape on the stock from a small rockslide I got caught in one day. There is a deep gouge in the scope where a horse took a slip and rammed it into a rock. There is even a little rust where the bluing has worn off from spending too many nights in the rain and snow with no protection. Sure I could repaint the stock, blue the barrel and replace the scope, but then it wouldn't shoot the same; at least not in my mind. I am not an Olympic hopeful for the biathlon team, but I have confidence in the rifle, and it hits what I aim at.

It took us the better part of an hour to reach the downed goat. He truly was magnificent. It was the culmination of a lifetime of dreaming. While even the biggest goat is a diminutive prize at best, it not only the size of the horn that determines the trophy. If that were the case, there would be little sense in hunting anything but caribou and moose. No, the quality of the trophy is judged by the experience of the hunt, and this was one of my finest trophies. He was a big billy, but that seemed irrelevant. It was just the right goat for me to take on this particular hunt. We had worked hard and succeeded.

We took our time photographing, skinning and boning out the billy. There was no hurry. It was going to be dark when we got back to camp no matter what. Hank's years of experience really showed in the way he handled the knife. I wanted to mount the goat life size and Hank agreed that it would make a handsome trophy.

There was no easy way back to the horses and with packs filled with goat meat and hide, it would be more difficult than ever. We decided it would be best to descend right to the valley floor and then make the 2500-foot climb up an avalanche shoot to the pass. If all went well we would make it to the horses before dark.

It took nearly six hours to reach our mounts and we were both physically taxed and exhausted. I tried to choke down a half sandwich, knowing that my body craved the energy it would provide. There was nothing wrong with the sandwich, I just felt sick from the climb. Hank eagerly accepted my offer of the other half.

The warm sun had turned the trail back down to the valley floor into a slick runway, just like a child's slide, but 2500 feet long. The only way down was to lead the horses. We lightened our packs and tied as much onto the saddles as possible. There was no easy way down and it was just a matter of letting the horses pick their own trail and staying out of their way when they



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began sliding. Thirteen hundred pounds of equine sliding down a slick, mud covered hill is good incentive to get out of the way.

We reached the bottom without incident, mounted the horses and made the two-hour ride back to camp. As usual, Mac and Keesha came running out to greet us. "Did you guys see anything today?"

"Naw, just a couple moose and a ratty old bear."

But Mac noticed the horns tied to the back of the saddle and quickly extended his hand to offer congratulations. He was genuinely happy for us, and proud too. The family tradition of providing quality hunts had just passed onto another generation. He had taken a giant step from boyhood toward manhood. I glanced down at my watch. It was 10:00pm, 16 hours since we had left camp.

The following day Hank completed the task of skinning out the goat and salting the hide. The rain actually held off for a couple of hours in the afternoon and allowed the hide some time to dry. But the precipitation started again early the next morning and lasted the entire six-hour ride back to Big Meadow.

Goat hunting is certainly not for everyone, but the magic of a pack train hunt in the

mountains is something that must be experienced. Even though the weather was miserable and the hunt was difficult, it stands out as one of my most rewarding. My boyhood dreams inspired by O'Connor and Service had been fulfilled. I did not want an easy hunt for a goat. I wanted a memorable hunt and I certainly was not disappointed.

Author's Notes:

Christina Falls Outfitters is first class all the way and offers some of the finest hunts in British Columbia for moose, elk, Stone sheep, mountain caribou, grizzly, black bear, mountain goat and mule deer.

Although my hunt was conducted during some of the worst weather conditions possible, it was by no means typical. The region actually offers a pretty inviting climate with lots of sunny, warm days. Goats are by far the most difficult species to hunt and I specifically asked for the type of hunt that I was on. Darwin



also hunts out of some very comfortable cabins situated throughout his area. The majority of hunts are by horseback, and moose is by far the most sought after species; and for good reason. Each year many bulls in the 55 to over 60-inch class are harvested.

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