

BEGINNER'S LUCK

A YOUNG HUNTER DRAWS
THE TAG OF A LIFETIME FOR
A DESERT SHEEP HUNT IN
THE MOUNTAINS OF CALIFORNIA.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY RORY WURFBAIN

The Los Angeles basin at night was beautiful. While looking out the airplane window on the approach into LAX in December 2009, the only thought that came to my mind was: *Boy, am I lucky!* I won the lottery of a lifetime by actually drawing a desert sheep tag for the Clark-Kingston Mountains of California. Of the 2,400 hunters who had applied for three tags, I was one of the lucky three!

My father was waiting for me in the arrivals hall at LAX. I had just finished my final exams at school, so not

only was I brimming over with anticipation for the sheep hunt, I was also glad to have finished with college chores for a while. I grabbed my bags and threw them into the Suburban. We were both excited about hunting a desert bighorn sheep. My father, who had been doing some pre-hunt scouting, told me that there were some good rams where we were going. After a six-hour plane ride and a three-hour time difference, I was tired, so I crawled into the back of the truck and slept all the way to base camp.

The Suburban crunched over gravel and it woke me up. We had arrived! California has some gorgeous mountains, and these were no exception. The Clark-Kingstons are steep and rugged, but have a beautiful edge to them. Sparsely covered with different types of cacti and other plants, the slopes are rocky and barren. They are as pretty as the Rocky Mountains.

Around five in the morning, my dad woke me up in time for breakfast, and I put my hunting clothes on and got myself together for the day. The Suburban was parked along one side of the trailer we were going to call home for the duration of the hunt. Perpendicular to the first trailer was another trailer. This is where we ate. I met our outfitter, Terry Anderson, and the cook, John Bates, also known as Cactus Jack, that first morning. The camp was set smack dab in the middle of semidesert shrubland.

Terry Anderson is one of the better-known sheep guides in the American West. We had met him at his home a few months before to discuss the particulars of my desert sheep hunt. He showed us different videos of the scenery and sheep. Following that, he brought out photo albums of sheep that clients had shot over the past several years for us to see. After reviewing the pictures, my father and I were duly impressed with the quality of trophies Mr. Anderson had found for his clients. He also showed us some desert sheep skulls. Some of these were superb heads of rams that had been found in the area where we would soon be hunt-

ing. Others were fine specimens that Mr. Anderson had helped clients to get.

After browsing the skull collection, we talked some more about what the hunt would be like in terms of the hours we would be hunting, the equipment we needed, and the rifle I should bring. (I decided on a .270 Winchester.) After learning how much (about twenty to twenty-five pounds) we had to carry into the mountains every day, I realized that this adventure was not for the faint of heart. He told us that the temperature would be cool, at best, and that we would need tough clothing in order to protect ourselves from the bushes and thorns. After my father consulted with Mr. Anderson, he turned to me to ask if I really wanted to do it.

I said, "Yes, I really want to do this." Was he kidding?

We talked some more until we all understood what needed to happen and we all agreed that the hunt would take place in about five months' time.

The first morning of the hunt, however, I was so tired that I only grudgingly got out of the Suburban and slowly made my way toward the main trailer where I met everybody involved in the hunt. When I entered the trailer, I saw, in addition to Mr. Anderson and Mr. Bates, Jake Franklin, Andy Pontious, and Colin Jewett, all of whom were guides offering their spare time to help me bag my sheep.

All the men there were older except for Jake, who was a nineteen-year-old training to be an outfitter. We all talked and ate breakfast before hitting the road half an hour be-

fore daybreak. We traveled on a dirt road that led toward the mountains. After getting out, we unpacked our spotting scopes to see if there were any sheep on our side of the Clark mountain range.

As day broke, we spotted what Mr. Anderson said was the largest number of mature rams he had ever seen together. We could see seven rams in the group and we decided to go for one of them. We packed our scopes away and quickly grabbed our backpacks for the trek. Mr. Anderson, Colin, and my dad were to go along with me to close in on the herd. The hike was as long as it was arduous. We spent about four hours walking, stopping frequently to keep track of the herd's every move. As we made it to the bottom of the valley, we could see the sheep walking to the other side of the ridge. This made the hike a little more frustrating, but uniquely challenging.

Around the sixth hour, we found ourselves on top of the mountain. Just then the wind changed. From our perch we could see the rams on our side of the ridge, a few hundred yards down the slope. By the time I got my gun off my shoulder and loaded it, the sheep had fled through the valley toward the next mountain. As it turned out, they didn't stop walking for several miles. We glimpsed them as they went over the ridge on the far mountain. We decided to stop and have lunch.

After lunch, we followed our tracks back to the pickup truck. At that point it was about three in the afternoon, and

we decided to drive back over the dirt road we had traveled that morning. This time, however, instead of going toward camp, we headed to where we thought the group of sheep might be. Everyone was counting on the rams bedding down, and we hoped to be able to find them in an area known to the guides.

After a couple of miles, we stopped and got out to glass the mountains where the group had disappeared. As it turned out, most of them were still there.

When we were up on the ridge, we couldn't get a good look at the rams. However, from our new vantage point, we got a really good idea of what they were like. Most of the rams were very good-looking trophies. As a matter of fact, three of them were extremely good. However, there was one that really caught my eye.

This was a very old-looking ram that had one horn partially broken off. The other was still intact, and, boy, was it huge! Mr. Broken Horn was off by himself and away from the main group. It was this ram in particular that I really wanted to shoot. Mr. Anderson said that it was likely the broken-horned ram would not survive the following summer because of his advanced age, and that made me even more interested in taking him.

By that time it was around five in the afternoon, and the sun was beginning to set. We knew we didn't have enough daylight to go after the rams, so we decided to make our way back to camp.



Outfitter Terry Anderson and assistant guide Jake Franklin glassed the group of sheep through spotting scopes and determined that there were several good rams in the bunch, including an old one with a broken horn.



The author's desert sheep was an old ram with one broken horn; the other horn had great mass and measured 37 inches. It was the oldest ram shot in the state of California in 2009.



A hot day for hunting in the Clark-Kingston mountains of eastern California.



Desert sheep use their horns to break open cactus to get at the moisture inside.



The author and his hunting crew did plenty of hiking before getting the ram.

That evening, we came back to the main trailer to feast on elk steaks and other fine goodies Mr. Bates had prepared for us. After that, we talked, laughed at each others' jokes, and recounted hunting stories. More importantly, however, we devised a plan for how exactly we would get my broken-horned ram. We concluded that we would get up extra early the next morning in the hope that we could find him again early enough in the day so we would have time for a stalk.

The next morning, we awoke early and had breakfast. It was still dark out. It was around quarter after five when we departed camp, moving in the direction where we had glassed the old ram the previous day. We waited until the sun began to rise. As the minutes ticked by, we were all getting rather apprehensive. By half past six, the sun was up, and we could finally see well enough to scope the next mountain. We trained our optics on the same area, and to our delight we found that old Mr. Broken Horn was still there! He was sitting on top of a mountain ridge, which meant that if we were to approach and pull off a good shot, we would have to trek through the canyons and get close without him seeing us.

After looking at the sheep and figuring out how best to get to him, we decided to drive to the next canyon over so that we could begin our stalk. Before we could do that, however, we talked about who was going on the stalk and who was going to stay behind and glass. We agreed that Andy, Colin, and my dad would come; Mr. Anderson and Jake opted to stay and glass both our stalk and the ram. We got into the pickup truck again and drove several miles to the next canyon, where we thought it would be a good place to begin our stalk.

I checked to make sure that I had loaded the magazine of my rifle, and we started through the first canyon. From that canyon we found our way to the top of a ridge. From that ridge, we had to go through another canyon in order to get into a position for a decent shot. Up the last canyon we went. This canyon was long and very rocky. We needed to be as quiet as possible,

but that was difficult because I kept slipping on the loose rocks. We pushed onward, or should I say upward, until suddenly we saw Mr. Broken Horn there in front of us!

We dodged behind some rocks. I took my .270 Winchester from my back and rested it snugly on top of a boulder. We were not far from the ram—only 120 yards.

I put the ram in my cross hairs and fired. The first shot went right through his chest, cutting an artery immediately above the heart. The ram stumbled a bit, ran to the right ten paces or so, and stood broadside. With the second shot, I hit the bottom part of his chest—again, in the heart and lung area. Mr. Broken Horn took a few steps and fell.

Although the hunt was shorter than I expected it to be, just experiencing the mountains and being with my father and all the guides had been a real thrill. It's true that one of the ram's horns was broken, but the other one measured 37 inches! What a whopper! It would be the oldest ram shot in California that season, earning me a prize from the California Department of Fish and Game.

The mountains, the sheep, and the guides provided me with one of the most memorable experiences I've ever had on a hunt. Never have I been on a more rewarding and fun adventure. Long before I ever went hunting for the first time, I always admired the trophies in my father's library. Among them is a collection of nice sheep heads, something I have always wished I, too, could get. Bagging this respectable old one-horned California desert ram finally put me on that path. 🐏



One of the guides packs out the ram.

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