

# YUKON GOLD

*ONE LAST CHANCE FOR A TROPHY DALL SHEEP  
ON A LONELY PEAK IN CANADA'S YUKON.*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DIANA RUPP

I had taken only a half-dozen cautious steps down the ravine when I realized it was a lot steeper than it looked. The loose rocks were the real problem; they rolled under my feet with each step. I also had to balance the new weight in my pack. The fresh, boned-out meat felt warm against the small of my back, and adrenaline still coursed through my bloodstream.

"It's really not that bad," Dan said encouragingly. His pack was at least three times heavier than mine, with the thick horns of an old Dall ram curling out of the top. As he spoke, he shifted slightly and dislodged a softball-size rock. We stood stock-still on the mountaintop in the gathering dusk, listening to the rock bound and crash, picking up speed as it hurtled down the slope—down and down—into seeming infinity. We looked at each other, wide-eyed.

I turned to glance back up the ravine—several hundred yards almost straight up to where I'd shot the ram two hours ago, all of it covered with the same loose rock. Not even the fear of the unknown below could convince me to go back up. I grinned weakly at Dan and commenced a glissade down the rockslide,

descending ten feet much more quickly than I had intended. I stopped myself with a panicked jab of my walking stick.

Dan slid down beside me in a small avalanche of rocks and dust, the weight of his pack tipping him backward at the last minute; he rolled sideways and caught himself. "Eight point five," I said. "You need to work on your landing."

"Looks like I'll get a lot of practice on the way down," Dan said. "Let's go, eh? We don't have any time to waste." He didn't need to elaborate. The vista of endless Yukon wilderness spread out below us was already starting to dim with the imminent arrival of darkness.

## Sheep Country

For years I had dreamed of hunting Dall sheep, the beautiful wild white rams of the far North. And I always knew exactly where I wanted to do it: Canada's Yukon Territory, a 186,000-square-mile region of mountains, rivers, and muskeg. The Yukon makes Alaska seem crowded—the entire territory has less







Strong, sturdy mountain horses took the hunters and their gear from base camp into the beautiful Yukon backcountry.

than half the population of the city of Fairbanks alone. So when the floatplane skated to a gentle stop near the Devilhole Outfitters base camp on Kusawa Lake last September, I could hardly contain my excitement. The next morning, astride an enormous quarter horse/Belgian cross named Hunter, I followed my guide, Dan Morner, and three packhorses up a narrow trail through a stunning panorama of northern fall color and the snowcapped peaks of the Dezadeash Range.

Born in Germany, Dan had come to the Yukon nearly a dozen years before for reasons that, like mine, involved a heavy childhood exposure to Jack London. He's now an experienced wilderness guide who can pack horses, judge sheep, and concoct a mean burrito on the Coleman stove.

For seven days we rode, glassed, hiked, and glassed some more. We hunted out of one spike camp for a couple of days and then packed up the tents, rode over a high pass, and pitched them in a new location. We rode long miles every day on the horses, tying them to boulders and climbing windy, rock-strewn peaks to glass hidden basins. The sunny, cool weather held, and we peered over cliffs, glassed stunning vistas, rock-hopped, and floundered through crusted snow on the five-thousand-foot peaks.

One day I realized with satisfaction that I hadn't seen or heard a single airplane since the floatplane had dropped me off at base camp. Planes have become nearly ubiquitous in much of sheep country, often used for scouting and locating rams before clients arrive and sometimes even during the hunt. I'd chosen Devilhole in part because I wanted to avoid this. We'd find the sheep ourselves, or we wouldn't find them at all.

And we did find sheep, dozens and dozens of them—but only ewes, lambs, and groups of young rams. Each night I'd crawl into my sleeping bag nearly dead with exhaustion, but each morning would bring buoyant optimism and the surefire knowledge *that this would be the day!*

Twice, it almost was. Each time we spotted a group of rams halfway down a cliff and each time we crawled to the rim above them and glassed them carefully. But each time, after long and agonizing study, Dan determined that the rams were not quite legal. In the Yukon, a ram must be full-curl or eight years old, and Devilhole Outfitters further asks clients to shoot only rams eight years or older, regardless of curl. That suited me anyway—I hoped for a Methuselah of a ram. But so far, we'd seen nothing that fell into the legal category. The clock on my nine-day hunt began to tick down, and although Dan and I remained optimistic, an edge of anxiety entered our sheep-strategy discussions. Where were all the big rams?

There was a particular mountain we could try, Dan told me one afternoon as we hiked back to the horses, one that, as far as he knew, no one hunted. We wouldn't be able to use the horses—it was accessible only on foot, and there were no trails. It would be quite a logistical challenge: We'd have to ride back to base camp, borrow a boat, and use it to get across the lake and up a river. From there we'd leave the boat and tackle the peak. We'd have to hike fast and light, and be prepared to spend a night out if necessary.

I was intrigued by the idea, and we put the plan into action. Fortunately, Philip, the senior guide, was back at base camp when our little packtrain clattered in, having guided his hunter

to a beautiful ten-year-old ram on the third day. His enthusiastic help and vast knowledge of the country was crucial in planning our new expedition. The next morning I reloaded my daypack and Philip took us across the lake in his 16-foot aluminum boat, then turned the vessel over to Dan for the run up a clear, slow-moving river. By the time we beached the boat on the riverbank in the shadow of a wedge-shaped mountain, it was noon on my second-to-last day.

## The Peak

It was sunny and warm, almost hot for the Yukon, and sweat ran down my face as we fought our way through deadfalls in the thick timber of the lower slopes and then up brush-covered cliffs. After a two and a half hour climb, we reached the rocky ridgeline, but we still had a long climb up the spine of the ridge to the distant summit. I was hot and thirsty, and as I gulped water from my Nalgene bottle, I noticed with alarm that it was already half empty.

We spent a long afternoon working our way upward, keeping just off the ridgeline to avoid skylining ourselves but moving back and forth to glass both sides. The ridgeline became narrower and narrower, and soon we were threading our way along a rocky spine. My leg muscles ached, and despite a raging thirst I took tiny sips of water, trying to conserve my supply. But despite our marathon climb, there didn't seem to be a single sheep on the mountain.

We were nearly at the top—only a single rocky finger jutted above us. We stopped to glass, but I was suddenly overcome with fatigue. I sank to the ground and sipped water. After a solid week of maintaining sunny optimism, I was suddenly certain I was going to go home empty-handed from my long-dreamed-of sheep hunt. I reminded myself I'd been fortunate to have one of the finest experiences in the hunting world, and that should be enough.

Dan put the glasses away and started up the last part of the peak. He didn't seem tired at all. I heaved to my feet, wondering aloud why he thought there might be sheep up there, when there hadn't been any elsewhere on the mountain. Dan shrugged. "So where else would they be?" His logic was irrefutable, and I slogged up the windy scarp in his wake. At the top he belly-crawled to the edge with the binoculars. And then, in an instant, everything changed. Dan slid back from the cliff, an enormous grin on his face.

My doubt vanished. I surged the rest of the way up the peak, dropped my pack, and wormed my way to the edge. Dan was whispering excitedly. "Several rams—a good one with them—but they're in a difficult place. Maybe even impossible."

The view from the top was like a scene out of *Lord of the Rings*. A cliff of black rock appeared to hang in midair below us, and on this secure and sheltered perch, invisible to most of the world, several white rams were bedded. They stood out brilliantly on the black rock, their horns glowing golden in the afternoon sunlight. One of the rams was



The author with her eleven-year-old broomed Dall ram, an old "mountain warrior," on a peak in Canada's Yukon. Eight days of tough but rewarding hunting, not to mention a return trip down the steep canyon in the photo, made this hunt an unforgettable experience.





The hunters spent many hours each day in the saddle. When the terrain got too steep, they'd tie the horses to rocks and climb the rest of the way.

### The Ultimate Sheep Rig

For serious mountain hunts, you need a rifle that is lightweight and well balanced, that will stand up to the elements, and of course, one that is dependable and very accurate. After a lot of research, I settled on my rifle of choice for the sheep hunt: The Damar Rifle from Ed Brown Custom. Its hand-bedded McMillan graphite stock is lightweight and super-strong (I can attest to that after falling on it numerous times coming down the mountain). The match-grade 23-inch stainless Shilen barrel has a black Gen III coating for superior rust protection. Ed Brown's specially engineered Model 704 controlled-feed action is strong and reliable and designed to be exceptionally accurate, and the adjustable Jewell trigger is tuned for a light, crisp pull. Without scope, the rifle weighs 6.2 pounds.

Now the only decision I had to make was the caliber. With all due respect to Jack O'Connor and his favorite .270 Winchester, I think the .280 Remington is the ultimate caliber for sheep hunting. I've used the .280 for years, including on a hunt for mountain goats, and I always intended to take one when I finally got the chance to go sheep hunting. But I hang around with a lot of rifle nuts, and whenever I lauded the .280, they'd bend my ear about an even greater caliber—the .280 Ackley Improved, so I decided to take the plunge and have my Ed Brown chambered in this caliber.

Developed by P.O. Ackley and standardized by Nosler in 2007, this cartridge is capable of driving a 140-grain AccuBond at 3,200 fps. Essentially, you're getting close to 7mm Remington Magnum velocities with superior accuracy in a low-recoiling non-magnum cartridge. What's not to love? (You can read more details about my .280 Ackley in Chub Eastman's Rifles column in an upcoming issue.)

I scoped the rifle with Swarovski's AV series 3–10x42 with the new BR reticle. It's the lightest 3–10X scope on the market, featuring a 1-inch tube and Swarovski's excellent glass. The BR reticle is an ideal choice if you might have to make a long shot. Using Swarovski's online ballistic calculator, simply enter your rifle's caliber and load data and the program will give you measured distances for each mark on the scope's lower cross hair. Used in conjunction with a rangefinder, it takes the guesswork out of where to hold at longer ranges.—D.R.



heavy-horned and Roman-nosed. It was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen.

I pushed back from the cliff, speechless. "Wow!" was all I could manage.

"Tough, eh?" Dan said, assuming I was commenting on their seemingly inaccessible location. "But I've been looking at the terrain, and I think we can get to them. Come on." He shouldered his pack and dropped back down the cliff. This time I was right on his heels.

We clambered over rocks and edged around pinnacles, dropping to the base of the rocky finger and around the far side, until Dan crawled to the edge of another cliff. I shed my pack, pulled out my rangefinder, and chambered a round in my rifle while he glassed the rams. The sheep wouldn't know we were up here, so there was time to be methodical and get things right. I took the extra jacket out of my pack and rolled it up to use as a rest.

I belly-crawled to the cliff edge and handed Dan the rangefinder. Lying flat on my stomach, I scooted forward until my head hung over the edge, and then I could see the rams almost straight below us. "143 yards," Dan said.

I'd never shot at anything straight down, but 143 yards was much closer than I'd dared hope we'd get. I wrapped the rifle sling around my arm, mostly to avoid dropping the rifle over the cliff, and padded it with my rolled-up jacket on the cliff edge. Despite the ungodly angle, I felt comfortable. The black cross hairs were sharp and steady on the white ram. The rams were on their feet now, and the big one had moved toward the edge of a dropoff. One more step and he could be out of sight. Dan was urging me, quietly, to shoot. I squeezed the trigger gently and the ram stumbled, then I shot again and he went headfirst off the cliff and into a narrow, rocky canyon.

Quickly gathering our gear, we rushed down the backside of the mountain to the mouth of the canyon. It was a nightmare, steep and hazardous and filled with loose rocks. Caution overcame my overwhelming desire to see the ram and I picked my way down carefully. Dan got there first, shouting up to me, "He's an old mountain warrior!"

Finally I got down there to look—and he was indeed an old warrior. I put my hands on his thick old horns. They were beat up and broomed from many fights.

Dan said he was in his twelfth year, probably near the end of his life—not a classically beautiful or high-scoring ram, but magnificent to me, the best trophy I'll perhaps ever be privileged to take, in all the ways that really matter.

It was after 6 p.m. There wasn't much of a choice regarding how to position the ram for photos, as we could barely turn him over without sliding down the mountain. Then we started the work of caping and boning out the meat. I tried to hold the ram while Dan worked, but we kept sliding. By the time we'd finished, we were at least a hundred yards below where we'd started.

In less than an hour it would be dark. We'd come a long way from our starting point—a six-hour hike—and retracing our steps back across the narrow ridgeline in the dark was not a prospect either of us wanted to consider. The canyon we were in seemed to drop straight down, but we had no way of knowing what was below us. It might end in a sheer cliff. Still, it seemed our best option.

### Descent

Famed mountaineer Ed Viesturs once remarked that summiting a mountain is optional, but getting back down is mandatory. The same could apply to sheep hunting, and Dan and I focused all of our energies on descending safely. There were some cliffs, but there was enough brush edging them that we were able to grab branches and ease ourselves down. At full dark we stopped for a break, agreeing cautiously that we were through the worst of it. We turned on our headlamps and proceeded slowly down a steep, forested slope full of deadfalls, thick brush, and low branches.


Eventually the ground leveled, and we were off the mountain at last—but hardly out of the woods. The side of the mountain we'd descended was much farther from the river than where we'd gone up, although we didn't know how far. We'd both run out of water hours ago, and raging thirst drove us on. Taking a compass bearing dead east, we walked on through the thick, dark timber. At 2 a.m., we heard running water. With incredible relief, we threw our packs down on the grassy bank and plunged our water bottles in, gulping

glorious, ice-cold draughts from the aptly named Champagne River.

The rest should have been easy: we just had to walk downriver to where we'd left the boat. As it turned out, we still had many miles to go. Beyond fatigue by now, we left the packs on the riverbank, marking their location with a waypoint on the GPS. I staggered through the forest on legs of cement. At 5:30 in the morning—almost twelve hours after I'd shot the ram—we at last burst through the riverbank brush and stumbled upon the boat.

Philip arrived shortly afterward, ecstatic at our success, and the guides took the boat upriver and retrieved our meat-filled packs. A steady rain arrived with the sunrise, and thick fog descended to

obscure the mountain. It seemed we'd been right to get down when we did.

Back at base camp that evening, Dan and I recapped our adventure to Philip over delicious sheep chops. The veteran guide was impressed not just with the old mountain warrior, but with what we'd undergone to get him and bring him back. Only then did I realize what I had not yet known in my moment of doubt on the mountaintop: It's the challenge of going as far as you can, and then beyond, that makes sheep hunting the finest adventure there is. 

*For information on this hunt, contact Kevin Olmstead at Devil-hole Outfitters/Prophet Muskwa: 250/789-9494; info@prophetmuskwa.com; www.prophetmuskwa.com*



On most days, the hunters would ride to likely spots and glass the surrounding peaks. If sheep were spotted, a stalk would commence on foot.



The packhorses hauled tents for hunter and guide as well as a cooking fly and Coleman stove, so spike camp was quite a comfortable affair.