

The Ultimate Pursuit in Hunting: Sheep

Permits to hunt bighorn sheep are auctioned for hundreds of thousands of dollars — and that money has helped revive wild sheep populations and expand their territory.

By JOHN BRANCH FEB. 16, 2017

ROCKY BOY'S RESERVATION, Mont. — For the herd of bighorn sheep, the rocky cliffs were a safe place, with 360-degree views and plenty of nooks to blend into the gray rocks. The ground was sprinkled with scat, and the air carried a scent like a barnyard. Thousands of feet below, the landscape unfurled into a smooth checkerboard of ranch land that stretched to the horizon. The only threat up here would be to newborn lambs, susceptible to being plucked away by eagles.

Crouched behind a stand of rocks last spring, Brendan Burns, a 38-year-old with a growing reputation as sheep hunter and guide, peered over the edge, careful not to be seen or heard. Wild sheep have acute senses, and when they spook, they bolt as one, like a flock of birds. But the sheep were not home. Amid the panorama below, Burns spotted a constellation of tiny dots in a faraway meadow. The horns gave them away.

“There aren’t a lot of circles in the wild,” Burns whispered. “When you see something curved — and they kind of shine, they have this kind of glow to them — you learn to pick them up. You just train your eye to it.”

He pulled a high-powered Swarovski scope from his pack and aimed it downhill. Eight years before, there were no sheep here. Then 21 ewes and five juvenile rams were transplanted to the Rocky Boy's Reservation of the Chippewa Cree, which straddles part of the Bears Paw Mountains, an islandlike rise on the plains.

The herd quickly grew to 100, and 40 were relocated to South Dakota. It has again grown over 100, and another 40 are likely to be transplanted this spring, part of broad attempts to replant sheep populations that are a fraction of what they once were in the West.

"There's obviously no coyotes around, for them to be that low and feel comfortable," Burns whispered. "This is a nice day to be a sheep."

There were more sheep on a closer ridge, but in this group, Burns counted 38, including 11 rams.

"That gray one in the middle is the oldest one," he said. "We'll probably come back and hunt him in the fall."

A man from Michigan had paid \$100,000 for the year's only chance to hunt one sheep in the herd on the Rocky Boy's Reservation. Burns brought him there in October, and the men traipsed through the steep and rocky terrain for days before getting themselves in position for a clean shot. The ram was 10 years old, with a scar on its forehead, a cloudy eye and several missing teeth.

Its massive horns and about 80 pounds of meat were hauled back to Michigan. In exchange, the Chippewa Cree tribe at Rocky Boy's received the \$100,000, which was used to fund two tribal game wardens overseeing wildlife on the reservation.

It is a paradox of hunting, rarely so conspicuous as with wild sheep: The hunters are often the primary conservationists. In 2013, a permit in Montana sold for \$480,000, still a record. Burns assisted on that hunt, too, over 18 days in the Upper Missouri River Breaks. The result was a large ram, and hundreds of thousands of dollars that went into the budget of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

"As far as sheep-hunting being a rich man's sport, that's absolutely true," said Vance Corrigan, 84, who lives along the Yellowstone River in Livingston,

Mont., and is one of the most accomplished big-game hunters in the world. “But if it weren’t for the rich man, those sheep wouldn’t be there.”

Non-hunters often presume that the biggest prize in North America is something large and fierce — some kind of bear, perhaps, or an elk, a moose or a mountain lion. But the widespread belief among serious hunters is that rams are the ultimate pursuit.

That is for two reasons. One, opportunities to hunt sheep are scarce, and often prohibitively expensive. Two, the hunts are among the most difficult, often lasting weeks in some of the most remote regions on Earth.

“For 100 years, it’s been somewhat at the pinnacle of big-game hunting, especially in the United States,” said Bob Anderson, a hunter and author of books on sheep-hunting. “But there weren’t a lot of people or sheep on the mountains. Now it’s become a cocktail party of sorts. Some well-to-do people have gotten into it, and they’ve driven the market up.”

‘A Rich Man’s Sport’

At the Wild Sheep Foundation’s convention each January, single hunting permits from various states, provinces and Indian reservations are auctioned off to the highest bidders. Most go for well more than \$100,000.

“People who pay \$300,000 for a tag, they just paid to recover 30 sheep to places that haven’t had sheep in 100 years,” Corrigan said. “Lewis and Clark saw sheep on every ridge. Those people buying tags are helping put sheep back where they were before we arrived.”

Globally, there are dozens of species and subspecies of wild sheep, many in Central Asia. The Wild Sheep Foundation, based in Bozeman, Mont., considers there to be four primary wild sheep in North America: the **Rocky Mountain bighorn**; the **desert bighorn** (in the American Southwest and Mexico); **Dall’s sheep** (commonly called Dall sheep, in Alaska, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories and the Yukon); **Stone’s sheep** (or Stone sheep, in British Columbia and the Yukon).

Dall's and Stone's sheep are considered thinhorns, in contrast to bighorns. Another subspecies, the Sierra Nevada bighorn, is federally protected, with population figures in the hundreds.

Some have estimated that there were millions of wild sheep in North America 200 years ago. But by the 1950s, squeezed out by people and livestock and decimated by diseases (especially carried by domestic sheep), the wild sheep population dwindled into the tens of thousands.

Conservation efforts saved the sheep and have expanded their territory again, often by transplanting herds and greatly limiting hunting opportunities. It is estimated that there are now nearly 200,000 wild sheep in North America.

The privilege of killing one (or "harvesting" one, in a hunting euphemism) remains limited to the very few. It requires a lot of money or a lot of luck.

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that there are more than 10 million big-game hunters in the United States. But only about 2,500 wild sheep are hunted each year across North America, a fraction compared with nearly every other animal.

"They're like the collector's edition Ferrari," said Lance Kronberger, who owns Freelance Outdoor Adventures in Alaska and guides big-game hunts of all kinds. "There's 200 of them made, and you have to get lucky to get one."

Generally, there are two ways to hunt wild sheep. One is hunting's version of the lottery — pay a few dollars and apply for one of the limited number of licenses that are restricted to certain territories and raffled off. Odds of winning can be infinitesimal. In Montana, 19,439 applications were submitted by state residents in 2015; licenses went to 111, a success rate of about 1 in 200. Nonresidents have a tougher time.

"I've been putting in for a sheep tag since I was 12 years old and never gotten one, and I'm 67," said George Dieruf, whose father opened Powder Horn Outfitters in downtown Bozeman in 1946. It is now part of Schnee's, another outdoors institution, and Dieruf oversees the hunting department. Its high walls are crowded with taxidermy animals the family has collected from all over the world.

"I've had moose tags," Dieruf said. "But I'd trade all four for one sheep."

The second way to secure a chance at a wild sheep is to spend a lot of money. While residents of Alaska and those in Canada generally can hunt sheep within their own state, province or territory, nonresidents are required to hire a registered outfitter. The laws of supply and demand push the price of hunting a Dall's up to about \$25,000 and a Stone's sheep to about \$50,000. Hunts in Mexico, through outfitters or private landowners, can reach \$100,000.

A wealthy few go beyond that. They bid on exclusive permits that are auctioned off annually to raise money for states, provinces and Indian reservations, seeing their lavish spending as a charitable donation, a tax write-off and a chance to capture one of hunting's premier trophies.

"Some rich people are into yachts or floor tickets to the Lakers," Burns said. "Some sheep-hunt."

What they are not buying is an easy trophy. Sheep live in steep and treeless terrain, above the timberline in the mountains or in the rugged hills of the desert. Sheep hunts can take hunters into places few humans have gone, and can include weeks of trekking and stalking.

"For the true hunter, you can't buy them behind the fence," Kronberger said. "You have to climb the mountain. The fat, rich guy is going to have a much harder time. Anybody can kill a bear if they sit on the beach or along the stream long enough. I could take a guy in a wheelchair and get him a bear. You can go and get your deer, get your elk. You can't do that with sheep. You have to go and get it."

All that can be hard for non-hunters to understand. Those who have trophy rooms filled with a wide selection of mounts, like Corrigan and Kronberger, said that guests are rarely attracted to the sheep at first, instead taken by the more glamorous and fearsome animals. It is like a litmus test for hunting credibility.

"If I brought 1,000 people into my trophy room, almost all of them would go to the bears and say, 'Wow, look at the bears,'" Kronberger said. "Only a few know to go to the sheep — the other sheep hunters. Half the time, people call the sheep a goat."

Bidding at the ‘Sheep Show’

Brendan Burns sat in a padded stackable chair in the Tuscan Ballroom of the Peppermill Resort Spa Casino in Reno, Nev. It was a Friday night in January, and there were about 1,000 people sitting at 100 round tables, having just eaten the one entree offered: steak. A convention of hunters was no place for a vegetarian option.

On stage was an auctioneer. The next item for bid, No. 15, was the California Desert Bighorn Sheep Permit. The year before, it went for \$165,000, a state record.

Burns, a former wrestler at Ohio State, grew up in Montana. He is lean, as if still making weight, and keeps his hair to little more than the stubble of a three-day beard. Away from the hunt, he often wears crisp, untucked oxfords, and when he stands, he stuffs his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and rocks on his sneakers.

He wears few signs that he is a world-class hunter or an executive for KUIU, a fast-growing gear and apparel company. Named for an island in southeastern Alaska and pronounced KOO-yoo, it has, in just a few years, positioned itself as a Patagonia or The North Face of the camouflage set.

Burns held his phone to his ear. The voice on the other side belonged to Jason Hairston, KUIU’s 45-year-old founder. A former linebacker at the University of California at Davis, Hairston long ago saw a business opportunity for high-end gear marketed specifically to hunters. In 2005, he and a partner launched Sitka. It grew exponentially and was sold, leaving Hairston in 2011 to start KUIU, a direct-to-consumer maker of expedition-ready gear designed to handle the worst elements a hunter might face — something like a sheep hunt.

The first person Hairston hired at KUIU was Burns, whose title is guide and outfitters program director.

Among Hairston’s friends is Donald Trump Jr., a son of the president and an avid big-game hunter.

It was why Hairston missed the sheep convention for the first time in years. He was in Washington, as a guest of the Trumps. The night of the auction for the California permit was the day of the presidential inauguration.

Hairston wanted the California permit. He saw it as a way to pay back his home state and an appropriate place to finish his “grand slam,” the term applied to those who have killed all four types of the North American wild sheep. (Grand Slam/Ovis officially tracks grand slams — it has documented more than 1,500 legally taken grand slams — and claims rights to the phrase among hunters.) A year earlier, he was the last one to drop out of the bidding.

Hairston was in a tuxedo at an inaugural ball at the Trump International Hotel. He handed the phone to his wife, Kirstyn, who wore a white strapless gown. Afraid that her husband might drop out and be left disappointed again, she wanted to do the bidding through Burns. She took the phone to a quiet corner and left Hairston alone to wait for the result.

Donald Trump Jr. approached Hairston moments later and asked where Kristyn was. Told that she was bidding on the California tag, Trump waited, too, curious to know how it turned out.

The auctioneer opened the bidding at \$100,000. Patrolling the floor, wearing cowboy hats, were a dozen bid spotters. One parked himself in front of Burns, who had his phone to his ear and no expression on his face.

Four other bidders quickly took the tag to \$135,000. Burns whispered into the phone, then nodded to the spotter. Hundred-and-fifty, Burns mouthed, and the spotter shouted it back to the auctioneer and the crowd let out a cheer. Burns hoped it would end there.

But the price nudged up, \$5,000 at a time, until it was Burns and one other bidder somewhere in the back of the huge ballroom. Eyes forward, face in poker mode, the price already a record, Burns nodded to \$180,000, then to \$190,000. The person in back kept delaying, testing the auctioneer’s voice and patience, before ratcheting the price farther.

At \$195,000, Burns turned to see if he could see whom he was bidding against. He could not. He put up two fingers for \$200,000. “Ladies and gentlemen, \$200,000!” the auctioneer shouted. “Let’s keep it going!”

The pace of his opponent slowed. Burns was decisive. After he nodded to \$235,000, there was no response from the back. The tag, going once, going twice, was sold. The crowd applauded. Burns ended the call and people shook his hand.

“That was more than she wanted to pay, but she never hesitated,” Burns said.

In Washington, Hairston hugged his wife and high-fived Trump, who asked if he could come along on the hunt.

“There’s a particular sheep that we know about, and that the outfitter working with the other bidder knows about, and it could be a state record,” Hairston said a few days later. “That drove the price up. But he’s old. He’s 11 or 12. The question is whether he’ll still be alive, if he’ll make it through this winter. And then the question is whether we can find him.”

Sheep hunters sometimes stalk their future prey for years. That familiarity, rare in hunting, leads to enough of a connection that hunters often name rams that they hope to someday hunt. Hairston called this particular one Goliath.

“There are no guarantees,” Hairston said. “The hunt starts Nov. 1. That’s about when the rut starts, and during the rut he sometimes moves out of the area where you can hunt. That’s been the challenge with this sheep in the past.”

Where the Money Goes

Whether he gets a ram or not, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife receives 95 percent of the auction price — in this case, a record \$223,250. That is fed into a general big-game budget of about \$10 million, according to Regina Abella, California’s desert bighorn sheep coordinator. The money pays for sheep-specific employees and conservation efforts, like helicopter surveys and captures to test the animals for disease and collar them to track their health and movements. (Another major funding mechanism for American wildlife conservation comes through the Pittman-Robertson Act, which taxes hunting goods, like rifles and bows.)

No other game tags come close to creating the kind of revenues that the sheep tag does, Abella said. The elk tag might attract \$30,000.

“The sheep tag, it’s a whole other level,” Abella said.

The 30 or so tags auctioned annually at the convention tend to draw bids from a small circle of wealthy hunters, perhaps 25 of them. Many have someone else do the bidding for them, even if they are in the ballroom, too.

Such anonymity helps keep other potential bidders from knowing whom they are competing against for a coveted tag. More important, perhaps, it helps avoid the publicity that can fuel hunting's critics.

"Some of the big donors are C.E.O.s and presidents of large companies," Hairston said. "I don't think anybody, as a hunter, has a fear of saying that they're a hunter. But in their role professionally, the concern is how it potentially affects their business."

Jimmy John Liautaud, founder of the sandwich chain that bears his name, is a frequent bidder for sheep tags, including the one for British Columbia that he bought this year, by phone, for \$210,000. Liautaud found himself in the sights of anti-hunters in 2015 when pictures from five years earlier surfaced showing him with dead elephants, a rhinoceros and a leopard shot in Africa. He has since said that he no longer hunts big game in Africa, but he does make frequent trips for sheep and other animals in Asia.

He successfully bid on the Montana Governor's Permit four times since 2009, for a total of more than \$1 million. In 2013, he lost out to Douglas Leech, a former bank executive from West Virginia, who paid \$480,000 for the tag, still a record.

Like Liautaud, Leech declined to be interviewed.

Combined, the auction of about 30 permits over three nights in Reno raises about \$3 million annually. The Wild Sheep Foundation adds money to that total and, last year, gave about \$4.7 million to conservation efforts, mostly through state and provincial game departments or directly to Indian reservations.

Donations come in other forms, too. Liautaud recently spent about \$3 million for a three-mile fence near the Taos Pueblo reservation in New Mexico, according to reservation officials, along a stretch where sheep from a growing herd were getting hit on a highway.

But the conservation efforts have created a Catch-22. Sheep numbers are on the rise, leading some states to raise the number of permits available through the lotteries, to cull old rams and help keep populations down in specific areas. In turn, more hunters can increase competition for top rams, which can lower the price the wealthy are willing to pay for an auction tag, thus hurting the budgets of those involved in conservation.

It's a concern for those, like Bob Anderson, the historian of hunting, who have witnessed all the positive changes over recent decades.

"There's some fear," Anderson said, "that sheep hunting will strangle on its success."

Ray Alt, a slight 76-year-old with his shirt tucked into his Wranglers, opened the door to his stone house in Livingston, Mont., where he was born and raised. The heads and horns of three sheep were mounted high on the living room wall. Around a corner and down some stairs was a trophy room, which used to be the garage, its walls filled with animals that Alt shot, with a bow or rifle, over a lifetime of hunting. The first animal he got as a boy, with a bow, was a porcupine. His favorites, though, are the sheep. He has eight of them.

"It's sheep fever," Alt said. "I don't know how to explain it. It's the love of the curly horns, I guess."

Despite his fascination, it took Alt 46 years to get one of each kind in North America, the last a desert bighorn in 2014. The first ram he got was in 1968, snowshoeing through the nearby Beartooth Mountains, a vast and wickedly rugged landscape just north of Yellowstone National Park. The Beartooth Mountains are the only place where hunters in the lower 48 states can buy a permit over the counter, for \$125, and try their luck at sheep hunting. But it's a daunting exercise, one of the toughest hunts possible. The area is nearly a million acres, with perhaps just 10 rams of legal age and size.

But in 1968, Alt shot one with a bow, a ram so big that it held up as the record for 12 years. It hung unblinking in his trophy room. The fat horns were ringed, one for each year, which is how hunters determine a ram's age, and the tips were battle-worn and ragged, or "broomed" in hunting parlance.

“When you get to an older, broomed ram, they are special animals,” Alt said. “As they grow, they are closer to a full curl and bust off the ends of the horns. An older broomed ram, he’s like a monarch.”

Burns grew up in Livingston and considers Alt a mentor. Like Alt and other guides, Burns has assisted on many hunts but could not afford to buy a tag at auction. For years, he applied for tags through the lottery system, to no avail. He said he spent about \$4,500 a year to enter drawings.

The Hunt of a Lifetime

In 2012, a friend sent Burns a photograph of a magnificent ram he had seen during a deer hunt in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, more than a million acres of forest and granite straddling the Continental Divide south of Glacier National Park. Burns made the photo his screen saver and the ram his quest. He repeatedly applied for one of that area’s two annual tags, and had about a 1-in-30 chance of getting it.

His name was drawn in 2015.

“The big question was if he was still alive,” Burns said.

That fall, Burns spent 22 days wandering the Bob, as it is called, carrying a bow and searching for his sheep. He figures he walked about 150 miles.

“I equate finding a big ram with walking into a big gravel pit, looking for a diamond,” Burns said.

He found 36 rams in his first 18 days, but not the one he was looking for. He made mental notes, thinking which one would be his second choice or his third. But the three-year-old photo he carried also showed two younger rams in the frame. To Burns and other sheep hunters, each ram looks different than others, the way identical twins are easily distinguished by family and friends. He had not seen any of those in the photo.

“I was missing one band of rams,” he said. “I figured my ram was in it.”

He found them on Day 23, after he heard the clash of butting heads over a ridge. He saw the ram he wanted. Using a satellite phone, he called the friend who first

spotted the ram three years before and asked him to come. The friend hiked 10 hours overnight to be there for the kill.

That morning, Burns silently slipped himself into position, looking for the right angle. “With rifle hunting, they say that when you’re 200 yards away, it’s game over,” Burns said. “With a bow, the game’s just starting.”

He managed to get closer, but the herd smelled him before he could get an open shot. The sheep shuffled away and settled again. Burns positioned himself within about 80 yards. Back home, Burns practices from that distance daily with his bow, shooting into a life-size Dall’s sheep made of foam. The arrow travels about 300 feet a second, and Burns rarely misses.

“I literally told myself, ‘I shoot this shot every day,’” Burns said. “I got it.”

The arrow pierced the ram behind the front shoulder. It ran about 100 yards, dropped and died. Burns and his friend skinned and cleaned the animal. They packed out nearly 100 pounds of meat, 50 pounds of the skull and horns, and the sheep’s full cape. They left behind just bones and guts, sure to be cleaned quickly to nothing but a white skeleton by wolves or coyotes.

The ram was 13½ years old, the oldest of the more than 100 rams killed in Montana in 2015. Its horns, measured with a formula that combines length and mass, scored 189⅝, believed to be the biggest ram killed by a bow in North America that year. At the Wild Sheep Foundation’s show in Reno, Burns won the award for “top archery bighorn,” proclaimed on a big belt buckle presented in a wooden case.

A few months after the hunt, several pounds of the ram’s meat sizzled on the backyard barbecue, and the skull and massive horns sat on a garage workbench. The skull was still red and unbleached. Burns figured he would someday get it mounted, but said that the prize was the memory, not the trophy.

“It was the greatest hunt of my life,” he said. “Every time I see him, I smile.”

Correction: February 16, 2017

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article referred incorrectly to a gun being held by a model. It is a shotgun, not a rifle, and it was part of an auction, not a raffle.

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