

Adventure in Billy Basin

By Ron Spomer

An hour before dark another snow squall came sweeping over the mountain crest. Within minutes the two yellow billies high on the opposite peak disappeared the way Jackie Gleason used to on our RCA TV in 1960. We'd been watching those B&C contenders between snowstorms all day from a ridge dividing two tundra basins. We could have circled behind their mountain and shot one, after which it would have bounced a thousand feet, so we waited for them to come down. They didn't, but when the basin fell into shadow, four others did.

"I'm going down for a closer look," Bryan Martin announced. "I'll signal you if one's worth shooting."

A half-hour later my lanky outfitter was bellying up behind his spotting scope 400 feet below, assessing the four goats as they fed in a narrow valley beneath a waterfall that poured from a glacial lake the color of green M & Ms. Then the wall of flakes obliterated him. Magnified eight times, windblown snowflakes look like little darts. Those near Bryan were rushing downhill, left to right. But when I focused my Leicas closer, the white projectiles switched direction. Halfway back they drove straight toward me. Closer yet they ran uphill, right to left, while just behind me they fell like Silent Night. This radical mix of air currents was a warning I should have heeded.

Of course, by this time-five days into my hunt deep in the vast British Columbia Cassiar Mountains-I'd been ignoring warnings for months. Until July I'd brushed off Bryan's warning to get into backpacking shape. That left me seven weeks to convert six months of office flab into mountain muscle, no easy task at age 48. Then I had to ignore aching knees and a pulled hamstring while escorting a 60 pound pack around my rural neighborhood. Cars slowed when I mowed the yard with the pack strapped on. I continued to ignore red flags while organizing my gear, leaving my PUR water filter behind despite 25 years of wilderness experience. But at least I was smart enough to drive the 1,300 miles from Boise to the float plane base outside of Smithers. This would prove one of my more prescient decisions.

Just reaching Bryan's camp in the Finlay River drainage was an adventure. A Cessna 185 hauled fellow hunter Denny Brundage of Oregon and me two

hours north through layers of snow-capped tundra peaks before banking and gliding onto Black Lake where a Beaver, its pilot Clarence, and our camp cook, 25-year-old Heather Steffey, waited.

"The 185's not powerful enough to take off from where we have to go," Clarence explained as we transferred gear. "It's just around the corner. A 5 minute trip." And off we roared, the big DeHaviland engine whumping like a helicopter through my foam earplugs. A half-hour later Clarence turned the plane through the last mountain pass and set it on the swift current of the Finlay River where 19-year-old guide Todd Kelly bobbed in an eddy with a flat-bottomed river boat. Another transfer of gear, a short ride downstream, and Todd curved the boat into a tributary just above the start of a whitewater canyon. Here 23-year-old wrangler Aliya Jacob caught the bow and 25-year-old guide Kent Robertson led us on a mile walk to the cabins. "Water's too low to get the boat up without wading," Kent said. "They'll bring your gear up." That was Day 1.

From a spike camp deep in the remote Cassiar Mountains, the author and his crew scaled peaks and dodged snow squalls and finally encountered a goat they called "Old Yeller."

Now this would have been quite the trek had it ended there, but it didn't. The next morning we packed and saddled 14 horses for a 4-hour ride to the base of an unnamed mountain in the Sifton Range. We set up a roomy tent camp just before the rain fell-in preparation for our final assault. Denny spotted 19 goats on the mountain less than a mile away. There were fresh moose and bear droppings in the willows, purple fireweed blossoms, deep blue monkshood flowers, purple daisies, plenty of firewood, tables, chairs, and lots of hot food. That was Day 2.

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A migraine hit me the next morning so I stayed in camp while Bryan and Kent led

64-year-old Denny up the mountain. This former Sears store manager had gone to college on a football scholarship and hadn't lost much muscle since. They left at 9 a.m. and returned in the rain at 5 a.m. the next morning with a 9-inch billy in their packs. They'd seen 40 goats. Denny shot his at 5 p.m. with a Browning A-Bolt .338 Win. Mag. and a 200-grain Ballistic Tip bullet at 187 yards. Kent and Bryan climbed for two hours just to reach the carcass before spending three and a half hours skinning it for a full-body mount and boning the meat. They started back at 10:30 p.m., plodding through snow and rain all night. That was Day 3.

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Bryan slept until 11 a.m., reloaded his pack, and led us back up the mountain. Todd went along to help guide and pack. Aliya went along just because she wanted the experience of packing out a goat. That was okay with me. The three of them waited for me at the top of the mountain in a narrow gap through which the wind passed at, oh, 30 mph or so. I was about 10 minutes behind them. Though I carried 20 pounds less than I had while mowing my lawn, this hurt worse. The tundra slanted uphill more sharply than does my lawn. We huddled behind a downwind rock until the sweat dried, then pulled on jackets, neck gaiters, and gloves as snow began to fall. It felt like December, but below we could see summer-green tundra and farther out dark green willows and a nearly black spruce forest flowing into the Rocky Mountain Trench that divides the Cassiars rising up behind us clear to the Pacific. Mountain peaks blanketed 360 degrees as far as we could see. Not a sound but the wind.

Bryan and Todd walked around the mountain to peek through another gap while Aliya and I took pictures of the Arctic landscape. When we caught up with them they were sizing up three billies through Bryan's Nikon spotter at 60X.

"These are the same three that ran off when Denny shot his last night," Bryan said. "Two are bigger than the one he shot. One might go 10 inches."

"Why didn't he shoot one of them?"

"They were way down there and his was right up here."

I had to admit that dropping 1,100 feet to shoot a goat and carry it back up seemed a steep price for an extra inch of inedible horn, but this wasn't your annual backyard whitetail hunt. We had plenty of time, an entire mountain range to

ourselves, and just one tag. I'd try to make it count. "Let's check some more spots."

Following Bryan in single file, watching our footing in the snow-covered boulder field, we fetched up against one another like Keystone Cops. "Back. Back!" Bryan hissed. "There's a huge old billy." He pointed down a long ridge, and even with our naked eyes we could see the yellow animal lying in its gravel bed far below. We crouched out of the wind back in our first saddle and sized him up. Heavy black bases swept up and curved back like exclamation points punctuating their own prominence. Problem was the goat lay on a knife's edge ridge overlooking both basins. We couldn't move closer so we waited. And while we did yet another billy nearly walked into us. As he fled, two more huge goats popped over a nearby mountain just long enough to convince Bryan they might both be bigger than anything else we'd seen. Finally, well after sunset, our ridge sentry rose and walked away, freeing us to pick our way down a narrow chute to a thousand foot boulder slide that ended at a tundra bench where we erected two small tents, fired up the MSR stove, and reconstituted our freeze-dried supper. We'd seen seven billies with at least 9-inch horns. That was Day 4.

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We climbed the ridge and found the yellow goat's bed right after breakfast. His big, square tracks led down the ridge before disappearing in the rocks off the north side. Intermittent squalls continued all day as we stillhunted and glassed. It blew a gale. We ate jerky, granola, dried fruit, nuts, and candy bars. We covered up when it snowed and opened up to soak up the sun when it didn't. Slowly we located goats—a nanny and kid in the bottom, a young billy following them, and the two big boys high on the opposite mountain.

At 2 p.m. we found Old Yeller. "Look at that yellow old goat back on those black ledges," Bryan said as he slid away from the spotting scope. "That's gotta be the same one." The scope was shivering so hard in the wind I could barely make out the horns, but there was no mistaking that dirty coat. Like the two high billies, Old Yeller would be safe until he dropped to gentler terrain. We watched him stretch and snooze, one foreleg extended, then the other, until the sun slipped behind the mountain. Finally he rose, stretched, urinated, and practically raced down to the

tundra, joining three other billies that had slipped out of crevices and crannies to meet below that waterfall.

"He's a dwarf," Bryan said when Todd, Aliya, and I finally crawled up to him. The snow had quit and Bryan had studied all four goats for nearly a half-hour while the rest of us dropped down to rejoin him. "Look how small his body is compared to the others. It makes his horns look bigger than they are. He'll still go over 9 inches, but that billy by the boulder field is older and better. What do you think, Todd?" Todd studied each goat through the big scope. "Definitely the top one. Carries his weight farther up. Heaviest bases. He'll score the best. Over 48 I'd say." "But I think those two still up on the mountain are the best out here. One will go over 10 inches," Bryan argued.

"Yeah, but we're not up there and they're not coming down here," I whispered as I bolted a cartridge into the chamber. "I'm taking this one." Given another day or two I knew we could probably bag one of those high goats, but I also knew that weather could sock us in, all the goats could disappear on a whim, or I could come down with Giardiasis. (I eventually did, and did that ever put a cramp in my activities!) Besides, I had tags for caribou, moose, and black bear and just five days remaining to hunt them. It was time to strike. "Call my shots," I said as I nestled behind the little rifle and settled its stub by fore-end stock into the tundra ridge. The crosshairs held steady on the goat's shoulder. "What do you put it at? About 300 yards, 325?" I asked. "Maybe 350, but a lot of that's downhill." According to the ballistic charts, my 140-grain Bear Claw bullet would drop about 7 inches at 300 yards on the level. "I'll hold high on the shoulder," I said. The wind was hitting me in the face, so I discounted wind drift, forgetting about the recent flying-snowflake warning.

"You hit him too far back. A liver shot," Todd reported as the "whump" of the impact sifted back on the wind. The goat began walking uphill. "Hit him again." I held a foot in front of its brisket and fired. "Behind his butt." The animal stopped. I put the crosshairs in front of its brisket again and dropped the third slug high on the shoulder. Only then did I notice the gully near the goat, an orthographic funnel pouring wind left to right, enough to blow my bullet at least a foot off course. The three remaining billies

walked back up the mountain as we picked our way across the rock slide. The two big boys up high just lay there.

It was a big goat, long and heavy with legs thick as a steer's. Its pelt was surprisingly luxurious for early September. By the time we had him caped, boned, and packed it was 10 p.m. and completely dark. Todd set the pace going out, stopping once to drink from an icy tundra rivulet. By 11:30, under a full moon peeking between clouds, we reached camp and that delicious freeze-dried food, ending Day 5 at midnight.

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A backpack hunt is not finished when you tag your game nor when you reach spike camp and discover you have at least a hundred pounds of meat and skin to add to the supplies you brought in. Bryan, 29 years old with legs that reached up to my waist, stuffed 90 pounds in his pack. Todd must have had 70 or 80, Aliya nearly that much, leaving me with perhaps 40. These kids were the toughest I'd ever seen. They could go all day in any kind of weather and never complain.

The sun was shining, the snow melting, and the marmots whistling as we started back up the 1,100-foot mountain we'd dropped off just two evenings earlier. It didn't look far to the top, but then it never does until you start climbing. I managed to stay within a hundred yards of Aliya most of the way, ducking stones she and Todd sent tumbling down the steep chute. Bryan started five minutes after I left camp, and within 10 minutes he'd passed me. That was okay because he's half pack animal anyway. Besides, he enjoyed a 10-minute rest atop the mountain while waiting for me to catch up. The four of us spent nearly an hour on the crest eating, drinking, joking, and admiring the view, but mostly taking it all in, loathe to leave the heights we'd achieved. Ahead lay a long hike back, then we still had to pack up camp, ride

to the base, and repack for an 11-hour horse ride to a completely different area where we'd hunt mountain caribou and moose, see a grizzly, ride beside shimmering mountain lakes, catch a fewtrout, and get stranded by the horrifying events of September 11, 2001, which grounded even float planes. On the 13th we were finally able to fly back to Smithers where my Subaru was the only transportation available for hauling three hunters back to the United States. And none too soon, because two weeks of drinking unfiltered water had finally caught up with me. Beaver fever.

There's a lesson in all this. Maybe several. First, don't drink the water. Second, beware of tricky mountain winds. Third, don't hunt wilderness mountain goats by yourself. It's too much work and too dangerous. One twisted ankle and you're a statistic-if they ever find your bones. Even with four of us, Bryan carried a satellite phone. Fourth, hunt the mountains while you're young, strong, and resilient, but

if it's already too late for that, go anyway. Determination and dedication are more important than youth, as Denny proved. Just work up to backpacking condition slowly and take your time once you're there. Most importantly, go. Go while there is still a mountain wilderness, before heavy handed vegetarians and gutless politicians outlaw all firearms and hunting, before you become too frail or disillusioned to try. Go before you no longer feel the lure of wild and free country, before you fall prey to the easy, safe life of spectator sports. Go before some crazy zealot turns the world upside down.

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Contact Information: Jack Atcheson & Sons set up this hunt with Bryan Martin's Canadian Mountain Outfitters Ltd., providing their usual detailed travel assistance. Once again they matched me with just the kind of aggressive, enthusiastic outfitter I requested and quality game I sought. My billy green-

scored 49% B&C points, just a half-inch shy of the all-time record. Prior to the hunt, Bryan Martin mailed me the most complete set of instructions, equipment lists, and area and weather descriptions I've ever received from an outfitter, and his equipment, horses, and gear were top-notch. He and his guides were knowledgeable, energetic, tough, lighthearted, and fun. I think they'd have carried me up the mountain had I asked! For more information contact Jack Atcheson & Sons, Inc., at 406-782-2382 or www.atcheson.com.

Contact Bryan Martin at 406-585-7837 or www.canadianmtnoutfitters.com