

Challenge the Canadian Rockies

By Ron Spomer

It's been said North America's mountain goat is the poor man's mountain sheep, and I guess that's true. You hunt in mountain habitat and pay outfitters a lot less for the privilege. Gravity extracts about the same price.

While it's true they sometimes shoot goats from the surf along southeast Alaskan cliffs, most climb for their white trophies. From Colorado to Alaska, you hike and gasp and scramble hand overhead to reach your dreams. And you see sights to move poets - peaks standing above peaks, purple to the horizon; rainbows arcing over tundra basins green as Ireland and just as treeless; rivers born of glacial ice, dripping, seeping through talus slides, bubbling up in pools reflecting the royal purple of fringed gentians. You drink of it freely, knowing you're above pestilence, but slowly for it is cold as ice. You sweat as your legs tighten, sit on a frozen boulder to rest them, shiver as a glacial gust pushes wet shirt against back, duck inside a shallow cave as rain pelts down, half ice or snow.

In goat country snow is imminent - old patches of it rotting into tarns; long troughs lying on north slopes perfect for glissading; delicate new flakes drifting hesitantly like tiny butterflies, afraid to land; determined blizzards flying horizontal across ridges, riding updrafts out of defiles, swirling to rest with you behind sheltering cliff walls.

Then there is the wildlife - marmots fat as buddas whistling as you climb; ground squirrels standing like miniature stumps; pikas squeaking, their mouths stuffed with hay; water pipits flitting from rock to rock like wind-blown leaves; golden eagles jousting with red foxes; ptarmigan the shape and color of lichen-covered rocks; grizzlies erect on their hind legs; wolves crooning in the distance and leaving tracks the size of your hand.

Surrounding it all is air so pure and vast you can feel it, a glorified silence, the echo of wilderness. Here you climb. Here you quest for the silent, hump-shoulder white buffalo of the high places, the North American mountain goat.

"We'd better look around the other corner before we drop down," lanky Bryan Martin shouted above the wind. He popped the last chunk of a Snickers bar into his mouth, pointed north into the clouds and snow, pulled up his hood, leaned into the wind and started hiking,

Assistant guide Todd Kelly stood and followed, ducking so his cap wouldn't blow off. Aliya Jacob, wrangler turned packer, brushed snow from her legs and tightened her pack strap. "You ready?" I looked one last time at the incongruous green tundra in the basin below.

The three billies we'd been glassing stood out like golf balls. One may have carried 10 inches of horn, but there was no hurry to shoot him. We'd reached the summit and crossed the divide only an hour earlier, and from base camp the previous day we'd seen 22 goats on this mountain. I shouldered my pack, picked up my rifle and turned into the gusts.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Back up." Bryan crouched and waved us back. "Big billy. Big one." "Where?" I found it with my binocular while Bryan was setting up the spotting scope. It was as yellow as old newspaper, lying below snow line on the crest of an outrider ridge, smack on a trail like some olfactory marker wolves had been urinating on for generations.

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The hoof-packed trail led down from the peak on which we hunkered, tracing the crest of the side ridge, leaning and bending before petering out on lush alpine pastures a mile away. Beyond lay the broad river valley, dark with spruce, fir and pine. "Look at the mass on him. That's gotta be an old goat, close to 10 inches. Check it out." Bryan leaned away from the spotting scope and Todd peered through it. He concurred. I took a look. It was the yellowest mountain goat I'd ever seen, and I'd seen more than a few. The lone male I'd watched in Idaho's Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness for a week in 1986 was yellow. So was a rutting billy I'd photographed in Montana in 1989. The young billy I'd shot in southern British Columbia in 1988 had a yellow cast, but it was like cream compared to this pumpkin.

"Looks pretty heavy, but I can't get a read on its length," I said. "Too much of a down angle. Need to get on his level."

"Can I see?" Aliya asked and leaned into the spotter. Then we backed away,

gathered our gear and hiked back to the saddle to get out of the wind. A chimney lead into a steep chute that opened into a rock slide spilling onto the green tundra 1,000 feet down. We could get down but would be exposed the whole way.

"We'll have to wait." I ate a granola bar and some nuts, then a Cliff Bar. Bryan ate his third candy bar of the morning, having already burned the calories of two-dozen pancakes and peanut butter he'd had for breakfast. "Want some jerky?" he offered. Todd and Aliya tore off chunks of the dark meat and chewed while I chipped ice from the neck of the water bottle I'd filled at a spring two hours earlier and 800 feet lower. "Pretty cold for the first week in November." I dug my

down vest out and put it on, then my second stocking cap. I couldn't understand how Todd could just sit there in his baseball cap and buzz cut. He certainly wasn't insulated by any body fat. The snow fell harder. "Maybe it'll cover us until we get to the bottom?" I suggested. "More likely it'll stop, and we'll be pinned down in that chute." "Yeah. I guess."

After an hour Bryan thought someone ought to step out of our protected little grotto and check the flank of the mountain. I was closest. "We never did see over the top, and there's a major trail comes around there," advised Bryan softly. "Go careful."

I didn't, and when I saw the goat it was already running - a billy. It must have been walking toward us just above the grotto wall. It paused a time or two to stare back as if disbelieving we were there in its stormy fortress. Todd and Bryan got to see it well enough to confirm it was no record - a 9-inch horn, but not heavy. It must have alarmed other goats when it walked over the far ridge because a pair of billies popped over, heads up, looking for trouble. These were bigger, two veterans that might have gone 10 inches. They didn't hang around long.

"That makes seven billies already," Bryan pronounced, "in one basin." He was pleased. We wriggled back out of the wind. "Hey, old Yeller is up," Aliya said. From new angles his horns still looked good. Then, like a trucker after his mandatory stop, he pulled out of his parking lot and back onto the trail, walking steadily toward the pastures.

We glassed until dark, returned to the tents to boil water for cocoa and freeze-dried stew. I ate two handfuls of M&Ms for dessert. It had stopped snowing.

We watched until he disappeared around a corner. Then we, too, loaded up and started down, picking our way, testing slippery, black slab boulders before committing our weight, brushing snow away to check hand holds before lowering ourselves. Several rocks and two boulders broke free and went crashing and bounding as if to show the way, but there were no sustained rock slides. Halfway down the gravel lay deep enough that we could stamp little ledges with the outside edges of our boots. Toward the bottom we began bouncing down, riding the deep scree until it packed tight, then jumping to sink in the loose gravel again until it settled.

I could see the pair bedded near the top of the highest peak on the north side of the north basin, high above the tarn now reflecting deep blue sky. The image vibrated too violently to judge their horns.

We put up the tents on a bench in the northwest corner of the basin above a brook running over boulders bordered by yellow saxifrage. At nine o'clock it was still light enough to climb the ridge where Old Yeller had lain. We found his bed and his tracks cut deeply in the muddy gravel and, on the north side of the ridge, another basin, deeper than the one we were camped in. It was eroded farther back into the black mountain, its flanks broken and littered with shelves, cliffs and chutes. A narrow waterfall poured from a tarn through a trench lined with green tundra where a nanny and kid were foraging. Two billies were picking their way along the face of the opposite mountain, nearly at its top. "I think those are the two that popped over the ridge earlier," I said. "Naw. Too far away." "I don't know. If they were spooked they could have gotten that far easily." We glassed until dark, returned to the tents to boil water for cocoa and freeze-dried stew. I ate two handfuls of M&Ms for dessert. It had stopped snowing. Dawn brought glorious golden light and the hissing of Bryan's mountain stove - instant oatmeal and hot coffee. We

climbed the ridge to glass. By midmorning snow squalls were sweeping through, and I was hungry again. You could see the snow start over the peaks to the west, deep gray clouds rolling over and down to cover the sunlit rocks in cold shadow, then the highest stringers of green. The distance grew indistinct through the fog of flakes. Then the first ones touched down, innocent, ephemeral things that quickly grew menacing in numbers until you turned your back and huddled behind a boulder, wrapped in winter. And then the snow would stop and the sun would shine a golden respite over the mountains until the next squall poured over the peaks. I ate granola and nuts. Aliya offered me sticks of spicy jerky.

We waited for the yellow billy to show himself. "I think he's bedded or feeding just below this ridge," Bryan said as we stood where his blocky hoof prints disappeared in the grass. "I think he fed here last night and crossed over to bed this morning. There's a lot of hidden shelves and crannies lower down." We slipped along the crest then, following the ridge out as it climbed up and down two minor peaks. We peeked over, stepped up, scanned new terrain that opened, alert for a patch of white, watching for gleaming black horns, finding rocks. "Did you hear that?" "Sounded like rocks rolling below."

"That's him. That's the billy," Bryan hissed. "Get ready." I shucked off my pack and sat atop a knoll jutting above the defile, the rifle on my knees, commanding the slope for hundreds of yards. Anything that broke from a hidden chute below would be in range. Nothing came out. After 15 minutes Todd stood. "I'm going to go around and peek over from that other side there. See if I can spot him." He pointed to a knob on the main ridge to the east. "I'll wave if I spot him." He never waved. "Must have been rocks melted loose by the sun."

We continued working along the ridge, but there was no yellow goat. We spotted the three billies that had been feeding in the first basin the evening before. They'd moved to a cliff near the middle of the basin, isolated from the highest peaks but with enough steep terrain nearby to feel safe from wolves. A nanny and kid crossed from this cliff to the high mountain ridge, passing a few hundred yards below our tents. By noon we were near the end of our ridge where it broke toward the valley forest. Bryan didn't think the goats would go that far. He began glassing back into the basin,

hunkered against a gale funneled along the ridge. Aliya and I retreated to the lee slope and ate jerky in the sun.

"Got two billies. Up high. Come see." Todd, coat sleeves flapping, led me to Bryan and the spotting scope. "Take a look." I could see the pair bedded near the top of the highest peak on the north side of the north basin, high above the tarn now reflecting deep blue sky. The image vibrated too violently to judge their horns.

"Hey, I've got Old Yeller." Bryan pointed up the canyon. "He's bedded in those black benches. See? And there's three nannies and a kid, I think, below him. One might be a young billy."

We hurried back up the side ridge to our morning's lookout above the camp. "I think we could get to Yeller from there," I said, pointing to a ridge. "Get behind this ridge, follow it to that broken peak, ease along the back of that slide and come out across from him."

"That'd be a long shot," Bryan argued.

"I don't know. Three fifty?"

"More like four hundred. Or five," Todd countered. "I don't know. I think those two up high are bigger than Yeller anyway," Bryan said. "I think we should just sit tight and wait until evening. They should come down to feed." The wind had quieted and the sun was out. We sat and watched. Bryan ripped open a Milky Way and a bag of M&M Peanuts.

It was a long wait, and I was fantasizing about the stove and freeze-dried dinners when Old Yeller began to move. "Man, look at him go," Aliya said. "It's like he's late for a date."

"He's seen those nannies down by the creek." "If he keeps coming on that line, he might pass underneath us close enough for a shot." "I still think those two way up there are bigger. Let's wait and see if they come down," Bryan argued. They didn't, but three new billies filed out of a secret cove and picked their way down a boulder slide toward the tarn. Old Yeller intercepted them before they all disappeared in the waterfall trench. The sun dropped behind the mountain and fresh clouds rose over its top. "I'm going down there to compare them side by side," Bryan volunteered. "I'll signal you if one's worth trying for."

An hour later a wall of flying snow obliterated my guide as he lay behind a rock, peering through his spotting scope. Ten minutes later the rest of us were running scree slides down toward the waterfall, climbing old rock slides tied together by patches of tundra roots, then belly crawling up behind Bryan.

"Watcha got?" I asked.

"Keep your heads down. There's one above the lake. Just came out. The other three are right under us. Hundred fifty yards. Old Yeller fooled us. He's a dwarf, maybe two thirds the size of these others. His horns look huge compared to his face and body, but the others are bigger."

I window-shopped through the scope. All the horns looked good, but Yeller was noticeably smaller. Todd took a turn. "The high one is slightly shorter than the best one below us, but he carries his mass farther. He'll score the best." That goat had seen us and was standing, staring, trying to figure us out.

"What do you think, nine and a half inches?" Bryan asked. "He won't make fifty, but he'll go forty eight at least." We compared inches in urgent whispers, Bryan arguing for the two billies still high on the mountain.

A successful goat hunt requires a lot of hard work. More often than not, the shot you get is not the same as shooting off a bench.

They were up feeding now but hadn't moved any lower. The lowest goats were foraging in happy ignorance. The billy on the rock slide was nervous. The consensus was he'd probably measure less than 10 inches, the Holy Grail of goat horns, but score at least 49 points due to his mass. I rolled away from the spotting scope and wriggled up to a tundra hummock: "What are you doing? Are you going to shoot?" Bryan whispered. "I'm taking the far one. Whadya figure, 350 yards?" "About that. But I still think those two on the mountain may be bigger." It was eight o'clock and the fourth day of our hunt. I was beyond nit-picking about an inch of horn. The hunt had been good, the stalk clean. We'd studied numerous billies and earned this shot. It was time.

The little rifle was surprisingly loud in the vast basin. The first shot hit too far back, the second completely missing behind the animal's rump. I compensated by holding ahead of its brisket for the third shot, and that punched through both lungs, ending it. It took nearly an hour to reach him. A stiff wind funneling down a side chute explained the errant shots. The range had been at least 350 yards, long for a goat. In their broken habitat you can

usually sneak much closer, but we didn't have time. As it was, there was barely light for a picture. It was full dark by the time we got him caped and butchered, the meat distributed among four packs, mine, thankfully, the lightest.

There were no wolves howling as we hiked back to camp, but stunning peaks stood black against the moonlit sky, and clouds sailed shadows over the silent tundra. Rivulets and brooks burred underfoot and gravity pulled and resisted our efforts to climb out of the basin, just as it would have if we'd been hunting sheep. From atop the ridge the whole world curved around us, empty and new.

THE GEAR

Any wilderness mountain hunt requires dependable gear, the lighter the better. I used a 4-pound, 4-ounce Kifaru 7mm-08 Remington rifle shooting Federal High Energy 140-grain Trophy Bonded Bear Claws. The short-action rifles save weight because they carry less material and reach adequate velocities with shorter barrels, lighter cases and lighter bullets. Rifle accuracy and knowledge of trajectory are a lot easier to carry than a 10 pound magnum rifle.

I dressed in layers with polypro underwear (forget cotton), micro fleece polyester pants, wool socks, fleece shirts, down vest, fleece stocking caps and gloves, fleece neck gaiter and Cabela's MT-50 micro-fleece Gore-Tex jacket and pants. By mixing and matching, these items were comfortable at every temperature, although one more layer of insulation (fleece jacket, perhaps) would have been nice during those long waits on windy ridges. Boots were Cabela's lightweight but stiff-soled, rugged and durable Gore-Tex lined Mountain Hunter with 400 grams of Thinsulate. No blisters, cold toes or wet socks. Excellent support and grip. Perfect.

I carried everything in a Kifaru backpack with a unique, quick release rifle carry strap built into the shoulder strap and a backrest/seat that kept my butt off the mud and snow, providing a comfortable chair plus stability for shooting from the sitting position.

EPILOGUE

Although we undoubtedly left larger goats on the mountain, the billy green-scored 49% B&C points, more than sufficient reward for my efforts. Despite nearly 50 years of wear and tear, my body performed pretty well and pulled through with no trauma, few aches or pains.

Despite our isolation in far north British Columbia, reaching goat range was not too difficult. Outfitter Bryan Martin of Canadian Mountain Outfitters (online at: www.canadianmntnoutfitters.com)

provided horses for the eight-mile ride to the base of the mountains. From there we were in goat habitat within a mile. Once on top, only an average of 7,000 feet, hiking was more a matter of caution and balance than strength and endurance. Take your time and you can earn a good shot at a good billy without heroics. Twenty-nine year-old Bryan and his young guides are all iron and rawhide, and they'll virtually carry you in addition to the 70- to 90-pound packs of gear they haul. In addition to goats, we hunted black bears, mountain caribou and moose and never saw sign of another hunter.

Jack Atcheson & Sons directed me to Canadian Mountain Outfitters. They have more than 50 years experience in matching hunters to outfitters, and it doesn't cost you anything. For complete and expert advice on setting up a mountain goat hunt, contact them at www.atcheson.com.