

**Dall Sheep**  
**August 12, 2012 Alaska**

**Psalms 27:1 “The LORD is my *light* and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”**

“So your sister is backing you up on your Alaskan Dall sheep hunt, eh? I wouldn’t go posting that around on internet forums” a close hunting buddy chided. “Be careful knocking my choice of partners...after all you’re the one backing me up on our late winter Arizona Coues deer hunt!” I responded with a chuckle.

Since moving away from my birth state of Alaska, I’m unable to make it back home nearly as often as I’d like. But every year I dutifully apply for various hunts and often use successful tags as a catalyst to book a trip home.

With fond memories of an incredible mountain goat hunt accompanied by my sister and dad back in 2010, I was delighted to draw a Dall sheep tag for 2012. A lack of conflicting tags here in NM made it a no-brainer to focus on a fall trip north to the Great Land.

The hunting unit was relatively close to my hometown, which made it convenient for my dad to pilot his Piper PA-12 (basically tricked out to be a Super Cub with a wider back seat) and scout the area, access and sheep numbers. Unfortunately Alaska’s summer had been wet and accompanied by low clouds, often enveloping the higher elevations where sheep would be found.

A couple of marginal scouting flights early in the summer by my Dad had revealed few sheep. A later trip turned up many ewes and lambs, but very few rams. Rumors of high winter kill of mature rams circulated, and it they appeared to be factual. Finally just shortly before season, the weather broke and my dad, sister and niece enjoyed a successful scouting flight and located several groups of rams. From the air it had been difficult to judge their size, as the terrain made it difficult to navigate closely without undue risk. Still, their report was welcome news, and I anticipated getting back above treeline and glassing for majestic white sheep in August.

Before I knew it, season was upon me and it was time to shake loose from work and head to Alaska. During the summer I had spent a lot of time gearing up with a new (used) bow in preparation for an archery attempt at a ram, although my tag as valid for any weapon. Having been born and raised in Alaska, I have been blessed to take several sheep with rifle over the years, but ever since taking up archery tackle I had yet to tag one with a bow on my two previous attempts.

I arrived home to clear skies and good weather: quite a rarity in Alaska, and downright miraculous given this summer’s track record. The next morning the weather continued to hold and it looked feasible for my dad to be able to drop us into the remote strip 2-days prior to season. We quickly loaded gear into backpacks and waterproof bags, calculated the number of sandwiches, snacks and freeze-dried meals we’d need and rushed to the airport after lunch.



Dad's plane



Pre-hunt enthusiasm!

We quickly prepped the plane, stowed our gear, and I hopped in with my dad for the first load to our sheep strip. Because the landing strip was relatively short and at high elevation, it would be necessary to ferry us in two lighter loads. My sister would await Dad's return to the airport and join me in the second load.



View over my dad's shoulder as we left civilization behind

Dad dropped me off on the high mountain strip mid afternoon and, as usual, I was awed by the silence once he left for Jill. The only sound was a dull roar emanating from numerous glacial streams.



Dad preparing for take-off

The views were breathtaking! Being able to take it in without Alaska's typical "liquid sunshine" was awesome. The luxury of being able to walk around on dry tundra (in socks or barefoot!) and simply toss gear onto the ground wherever I pleased was beyond words. Conditions don't get any better in the wilds of Alaska.

During my time solo I broke out the optics and began systematically scanning the mountains. After just a short while I located a band of rams a couple of miles up valley.





Stunning views



Dad on final

When Jill arrived, she was equally enthralled. We unloaded her gear, hugged Dad, and just that quickly we were isolated from the cares of normal everyday life.

By Alaskan rules, were unable to hunt until the following day; never the less, we resumed glassing for game and enjoying the scenery. Because the weather was pleasant, there was no hurry to set up camp.

Jill mentioned that she had been so worried about getting cold and putting a damper on my hunt that she had asked all the ladies from church to pray for warmth and nice weather. It had certainly worked – thank you, Lord!



Certainly can't beat the views

We were able to locate some moose and a small black bear. Unfortunately the bulls we saw fell within the parameters of not being legal. Bulls needed to either be small (spike/fork) or large (50" wide or at least 3 brow tines) to be legal, and every bull we saw was had palmed antlers in the 24-36" range. The bear ambled past our vicinity and it was apparent he would be long gone by the following day.



"Tweener" moose: not legal to hunt





Small black bear

We did some hiking to gain altitude and rise above the heat waves, which made glassing nearly impossible. Wildflowers were abundant everywhere we walked. Many were miniscule, yet stunning upon closer inspection. Others blanketed swaths of landscape.



This little flower was no bigger than the tip of a pinkie finger



Alaska's state flower; the Forget-Me-Not





Even the tiniest flowers on the moss were gorgeous



Views from camp were phenomenal

Over the course of the hunt we came across several coveys of ptarmigan, Alaska's State Bird. Season had not yet opened, so we snapped photos. It was amazing how well camouflaged they were. God painted them drab in the summer; they used that color to their advantage and would simply freeze in place. Often we'd nearly stumble over them before we noticed their presence. I can only imagine how many we missed.



Ptarmigan molt their feathers to be drab in the summer and white in the winter.

After a hearty meal of Mountain House stew, and a restful night, we spent the next day sticking close to camp and glassing for game. The rams up the valley seemed content to hang out suggested a pattern of moving down from the steeper slope into the bottom to feed in the morning. We hoped they would follow that same blueprint on opening day.

The afternoon before season opener, we heard a plane flying nearby and feared we would be joined by another hunter. Thankfully, it made one low pass over our camp and then left. Later on another plane dropped in, obviously on final, and landed. We were initially dejected that another hunter would be in the same area, but it turned out to be an Alaskan State Trooper on patrol. He checked our licenses; the first time in all my years of hunting in Alaska, made a note of our tentative hunting schedule and then left. He was very friendly and wished us well.

After dinner we sorted gear and loaded our packs in preparation for the morning's crack at sheep and hit the sack early.

We arose before light, ate a hasty breakfast and began trekking up the valley in the early dawn, being careful to follow a glacial stream bottom out of sight. We didn't have to worry about noise, as it was thunderous in the rocky chute we followed. In several places we crossed the ravine on ice bridges clinging from the previous winter.

We positioned ourselves about 300-yards below the napping rams without much difficulty. We tucked in beside a rocky outcrop near where they had crossed a snow patch the morning prior, in hopes that they would follow the same route to feed again. It was neat to observe them napping; some of the rams crashed out with their heads flat on the ground. Others would nod, and then snap their heads back up to attention, bringing back memories of trying to stay awake in class after early morning swim team workouts back in my college days!





Rams relaxing

After we had watched the rams above for about 15-minutes, they began to stretch and stand up. We hoped that signified they would soon amble past on their way down to feed. Unfortunately in short order we realized something was up, as several became alert and stared our direction. As if synchronized, the rams arose and angled uphill diagonally away from us. Despite the breeze feeling favorable, I suspect it was had swirled somehow, as is all too common in the mountains, and that they had caught some of our scent. They weren't overly spooked, but clearly wanted to move away and uphill: so much for our easy lowland ambush. The upper portion of the mountain was shrouded in clouds, and the rams were on course to disappear.

I told Jill that our only chance would be to circle above them. We considered two options, and finally decided the breeze would be more favorable if we dropped back and ascended a rocky spine. Easier said than done, but we took off and made our way painstakingly uphill and into the clouds.



Up, up and away...

We finally reached an elevation that was well above the last position we had seen the rams; however, we enveloped in clouds and unable to see more than about 20-yards in any direction! With our eyes effectively hamstrung, I suggested we sit and eat a snack,

layer up to combat the chill that would surely seep in after our uphill exertion, and pass the time to see if the weather would improve.



Surrounded by white

Gradually we began to perceive openings as the clouds blew past and teased us with dozens of yards of visibility. Soon we were offered glimpses over a hundred yards, and then more.

Suddenly my sister whispered excitedly that she had glimpsed a sheep not far below us. Sure enough, another small ram popped into view just a few hundred yards away! Jill enthusiastically relayed that she had been frustrated by not being able to see anything in the mist, as we had felt nearly blind for hours. She said that she now more fully appreciated the clear views we had enjoyed throughout the past couple of days. Our predicament helped her understand more fully the many depictions in the Bible summarized as “God is light”. She continued that in her aggravation not more than 30-seconds prior, she prayed that we would at least get a glimpse of the sheep; regardless whether they were cresting the ridge on their way out of my hunting unit or within striking range. Talk about an immediate answer!

Within minutes the cloud level lifted several hundred feet and bright sun revealed nearly a dozen rams scattered below feeding. We were fairly exposed on the shale slope and had no immediate options for closing the distance, but that mattered little: we simply enjoyed the amazing Light and spectacular view, with the bonus of majestic rams scattered below us.

We held tight until the closer rams moved out of sight below a rim, and when clouds began to obscure the others, we quickly slipped downhill in an attempt to close within bow range. The clouds thickened as we slithered, shrouding our movements, but also making it difficult to tell exactly where we were. I felt we were getting close to where the first rams had passed, when suddenly a small ram stepped into view. We froze and I carefully nocked an arrow in hopes a shot would present itself. He was a little out of range, but as soon as he disappeared we slid farther downhill just before a larger ram popped out on the same route. I quickly ranged the distance...but to my dismay discovered that the the wispy vapor rendered my laser useless and incapable of



obtaining a distance reading. In desperation I tried ranging closer objects and finally got a 20-yard reading to a particular rock. I estimated the sheep to be just over twice that far away, so drew and aimed for 50-yards. Upon release, everything felt pretty good, but my arrow passed just below the ram's torso and ricocheted off the rocky ground and into oblivion. Drat; so close. The ram took a few startled jumps and looked around, then resumed his feeding. We both studied the ram carefully through binoculars and independently verified no indication that I had even nicked him. The ram's reaction certainly suggested it had been a clean miss. He was now farther away and given my inability to determine the exact distance, I chose to pass a second shot. The good thing was that none of the sheep had been spooked, we had remained unseen and a steady uphill breeze carried our scent away from them.



First small ram revealed by the Light

We crept downhill until we could see over the small rim below us and were treated to a view of four undisturbed rams feeding about 100-yards away. A couple of them were respectable enough in size to get my heart pumping, but with no way to approach, again, we simply watched, snapped photos and enjoyed the event.

Soon one ram bedded just below a rock pile in a very stalkable position. Then a second one lay down beside him. It looked nearly too good to be true...and it was, as the third ram climbed above the rocks and pawed out his bed to face in our direction. I had seen rams employ this strategy many times over the years. Members of a group tended to bed facing in different directions while they chewed their cud and kept watch.



Biggest of four rams that bedded below us on day one

As we sat idly wondering what to do next, the clouds began to thicken and descend again. Soon the sheep were entirely obscured. The rocks we were on were loose and noisy, making it difficult to move without making substantial noise, but after a while my sister chattered that she was getting cold. I decided we had nothing to lose, so might as well scoot closer, which would help us warm up. We slipped and slid one step at a time in the direction of a large boulder that I had noted before the clouds had returned. We could no longer see it, but when reached, it would serve as a landmark to indicate we would be within bow range, if the rams hadn't spooked.

Clouds play tricks on one's depth perception and it felt like we had descended hundreds of feet on our way to the boulder that had been only 50-60 yards away. Eventually it loomed out of the gloom and we crept beside it. I nocked an arrow and we waited silently in hopes that the clouds would thin before we got too chilled.

We began to hear shale sliding and clinking in several directions. We realized it was the sound of sheep hooves rhythmically shifting as they fed all around us. This was one of the most exciting situations I had been part of on any hunt! We could identify at least three rams moving, all certainly within bow range, but couldn't see any of them. I would no sooner shift my bow toward one noise, before we'd hear movement in another direction, necessitating a twist in a different direction.

Finally a nice ram materialized out of the mist headed toward me at about 40-yards! Immediately the vapor engulfed him and I turned to my sister for hand signals. With eyes wide she pointed downhill toward two other rams at about the same distance feeding upward! Since I would be unable to obtain a rangefinder confirmation and the rams seemed to be moving closer, I hoped they would approach to within no-brainer range and provide a 20-yard shot. Again, the clouds obscured them from view and we waited at high alert, our ears straining for the melodic clinking of hooves on shale. I relished every second of this intense encounter. By the expression in my sister's eyes, the rest of her face hidden behind her face mask, she enjoyed it every bit as much.

Each of the rams appeared briefly a few more times, but never at the right angle for a shot. Eventually the sound of their hooves receded until they moved out of earshot. We were afforded another short-lived glimpse of them about 100-yards and filing away, and just like that our close encounter evaporated like the mist that had afforded the opportunity in the first place.



We checked the time and evaluated the ascent needed to retrieve our packs, and the subsequent route back to camp. Coupled with the difficulty of relocating the rams in the clouds, we decided to back out and try again the next day.

By the time we reached our packs stashed far above (thank you GPS!), we were considerably warmer!

On our descent we noted numerous fresh sheep tracks and droppings as we retraced our route. Unable to see more than a few dozen yards at best, we simply tried to keep quiet and vigilant, anticipating sheep at any moment.

As the gloom darkened with the obscured sun dropping low on the invisible horizon, we recognized our position to be on a rocky outcrop that would have provided a great vantage had the weather been clear. I suggested we sit for just a few minutes in hopes that a break in the clouds would sweep past and offer a view. We positioned ourselves so that we could see in different directions and waited.

After about 10-minutes my sister waved excitedly, having glimpsed 2 rams just below her! We eased our way down toward their location and I just caught the tail end of one disappear around a pile of boulders. We were halted by a cliff, so retraced our steps hoping they would reappear, but alas we never saw them again.

We continued back to camp and arrived about 11PM. Mountain House stew certainly tastes good after a long hard day in the outdoors. After a hasty refuel with some mystery juice I had stashed at camp, we hit the sack. Unbeknown to me at the time, my sister closed her eyes wishing that I had gotten a sheep that first day, as she wasn't sure she could repeat a tough day like our first. Thankfully, my refueling concoctions did the trick and when we awoke the next morning she was enthusiastic and raring to go.

Unfortunately the weather wasn't as ready. We had unzipped the tent to find ourselves engulfed in clouds. Since the sheep were nearly 2-miles from camp, it would be impossible to locate them without visibility. We enjoyed an unhurried hot breakfast, sorted our gear for the day, replenished our packs with food and water, and rested up for a while as we pondered our options.

Shortly after we had gotten our gear ready, the clouds straight above us began to thin and to reveal glimpses of blue sky. With confidence that the weather would break, we shouldered our packs and trekked up valley toward the sheep haunts.

Within a little while the clouds burned off completely to reveal beautiful blue sky! Feeling exposed to view by any critters above us, I suggested we plunk down and glass in every direction. We initially looked toward the head of the valley where we had seen rams every day prior, but turned up nothing. On a whim I continued to scan directly above us; nearly a mile closer to camp than we had seen any sheep to date. A respectable ram stepped into view and we quickly identified three more!

The small band was feeding in the middle of a large ravine and in a very approachable position, although the draw held little cover for stalking within bow range. In short order the largest ram bedded and we were fairly confident they would all settle to chew their cuds. I suggested we move immediately while the other three were still occupied by feeding and paying less attention to things like two legged creatures scurrying around

below. To reduce the chances of being spotted by the bedded ram, we moved slowly as we crept into a glacial ravine just below. In short order we were completely hidden from sight and able to march up the ravine until we reached the draw parallel to the one the rams were in.

While the route had initially appeared easy, it proved farther than it looked, and steep. Our ascent became trickier as the draw narrowed, bounded by steep rocks on either side and filled with last year's snowpack. I took the lead and chopped toeholds into the soft upper layer as we zigzagged our way higher.

Although our feet were in cold snow, the sun's rays beat down on us from behind and reflected off the snow to our front. Coupled with our efforts, we had to strip extra layers to try and cool down. We jokingly thought about sending text messages back home via the SPOT "stop praying...Jill too hot!" and chuckled at the absurdity of being too warm, given the cool, wet conditions Alaska had been saddled with that entire summer.

Eventually we recognized some rocks that we had taken note of from below as being ideal cover to peek toward the sheep. We slipped up behind the rock and spotted one of the smaller rams bedded above our position. We needed more elevation to see the other rams without exposing ourselves. Thankfully the thermal breeze continued steadily uphill, carrying our scent directly up our draw, with no chance of the rams smelling us from the next draw over.



Bedded ram unaware of our presence...it's a beautiful thing

We backed out and climbed until we believed our position to be at the elevation where the rams were bedded and contoured around the ridge separating us from the sheep. Fortunately, we spied a rock outcrop that offered a perfect vantage for us to peer into the sheep ravine. Sure enough, the four sheep were bedded at about 140-yards.

We quickly assessed the situation and realized that the wide open shale slope made the rams' position impossible to approach within archery range. For long minutes we enjoyed the moment and soaked up the warm sunshine as we studied their headgear. Two of the rams were obviously smallish, but the others showed promise.





The two smaller rams eyeing their domain



The view was worth every step, even without the bonus band of rams

As we studied the two larger rams, it didn't take too long to identify the biggest. He meandered and fed, and then lapped icy runoff from the foot of a remaining snow patch. Every once in a while he would offer us a side view of his horns. This ram was certainly the largest we had seen and a solid trophy.



Biggest ram sipping snow melt

The longer I studied the boss of the group, the more I came to realize that I wasn't a die-hard archery-only hunter. My Alaskan family would relish the meat and we had already bucked the odds with the streak of good weather. The setup was too good to pass up.

In all my years hunting in Alaska, the only success my sister and I had managed together was when she guided me to my first mountain goat two years prior. I realized that the opportunity to take a sheep with her as my backup was not to be taken lightly and I wanted to put the stamp of success on what had been one of my most memorable trips to date.

Rather than gamble on the chance that the sheep might meander within bow range later, I elected to take the easy rifle shot.

When the big ram finally turned I squeezed off a shot with the .270 and he bolted out of sight into the ravine. The other rams jumped up, startled, but quickly calmed down and even began to feed; often looking downhill toward where I suspected their leader had fallen. I had seen this reaction many times before: when the biggest ram of a group is shot, the others often mill around, unsure whether to leave or stay. So long as the hunters don't make any further noise or expose themselves to the rams, it is not uncommon for sheep to remain undisturbed for quite some time.

In this case, the rams slowly worked their way up and over the skyline, treating us to a front row view for nearly half an hour and enabling us to capture photos and video. Perhaps more powerfully, the majesty of these mountain monarchs was etched into our minds.





Rams just prior to topping the ridge – note the heat waves

After the last ram disappeared over the ridge top, we crept forward and confirmed my sheep had indeed expired just below thanks to a perfect shot. We relished the moment and snapped trophy photos that would bring back fond memories for a lifetime. My ram was a solid trophy at 8.5 years old with 36 ½" horns.



Sheep have to be considered among the most regal of God's creatures





It doesn't get much better than this

All too soon we took to the task of butchering, removing the weight of all bones, as we methodically stowed delicious cuts of meat into game bags. As we began to stuff meat and gear into our packs, the sky darkened slightly and we felt the pitter patter of rain drops. We wondered if the weather would deteriorate enough to justify donning our raingear, and received an authoritative answer as a wall of rain began to march uphill in our direction. As we threw on raingear, the squall hit and we were pounded with rain!

We heaved up our packs and began stumbling and sliding downhill, often nearly skiing as the soil below our feet turned into soupy mud. Immediately as I shouldered my pack, I realized that I was overloaded. But we were headed downhill with two trekking poles for stability, and with the driving rain I was loath to stop to reorganize. So with shaky legs and frequent grunts, I shuffled downward. I managed to keep my footing for the most part, but did slip a few times, flopping onto my back, and finding it nearly impossible to regain a vertical position.

Despite our circumstances, we tried to keep the mood jovial. Earlier we had joked about Jill being too hot and that her friends should stop praying for good weather. Now we sheepishly apologized for being so flippant; we'd gladly take the hot sunny weather over the sopping conditions we found ourselves in!

At one point we reached a long snow chute and were able to quickly lose several hundred feet of elevation by sitting and sliding downhill. The sheep horns dragged and made it tough for me to steer, but it was easier than hiking, and a lot more fun!

To avoid open water near the bottom of the snow slide, we were forced to haul ourselves out and over a rocky sidewall. The footing was particularly precarious, so I dumped the head and cape and shuttled my load in two trips, then returned for Jill's pack. As we sat on the tundra to refuel and mentally prepare to reshoulder our packs, the shower dissipated and we were able to peel off our raingear; what a blessing!

I told my sister that I was pooped and planned to jettison half of my load and make a return trip. My sister surprised me with her reply "We're not making two trips – I'll carry more weight!" I questioned her judgment, but at her insistence that her pack was fairly light, we reshuffled meat and gear. We shot a SPOT message to my dad that we'd arrive at camp with daylight to spare. With the weather lifted, he would be able to retrieve the meat. After a mental pep talk and some deep breaths, we again shouldered our packs: mine lighter, Jill's heavier, and pushed toward camp.

We had one final tricky stream crossing involving an ice bridge, along with a sharp, slippery downhill and a correspondingly steep rocky scramble up to the final stretch of tundra. Again I shuttled the packs across the rough stuff and just as we popped up onto the tundra, Jill cupped her ears and declared "There's Dad!" Sure enough, we recognized his plane on final for the ridge top strip. With renewed vigor, we pumped toward camp. After he landed and turned off the plane, I gave a sharp whistle and Dad came and met us a couple hundred yards prior to the finish of our undertaking.

"Here, let me take your pack" Dad said to Jill. She responded with a grunt that she'd conclude this one on her own and shrugged him off. I chortled "Be careful Dad; you may be surprised by the weight on her back!" Dad grinned and left Jill alone. I handed Dad my bow, happy to rid myself of a little weight, and we strode to the plane side by side.

After a quick conference and confirmation that the weather was predicted to hold, Jill and I opted to stay so she could try to fill her moose or black bear tags. Dad loaded the meat and buzzed for home, leaving us to enjoy the sunset, a hot meal and another recharge of mystery juice.



Sunset in God's country after a long, tough day...and still smiling!

Although we glassed our eyes out the following day, we were unable to locate a legal moose. We managed to spot a one black bear, but he was too far away and his feeding took him even farther, making an attempt to catch up impossible.

The following afternoon we texted Dad that we were ready for pickup and requested that he bring some shoes for Jill, so that she could pilot us home from the larger gravel bar

below, after my dad ferried us off the high mountain strip. You see, my sister obtained her pilot's license years ago and had been practicing regularly with my dad over the past several summers. She was confident that she could fly us all home from the comfort of the longer strip below.

We broke down camp and packed our gear in preparation for Dad's arrival. Upon his return we discussed the logistics of flying us and our gear off the short strip. The original plan was for Dad to ferry Jill and as much gear as the plane could carry out on the first trip and temporarily unload on a lower river gravel bar. Then Dad would return for me and our remaining tackle and again land on the lower strip. From the longer strip below, the plane would be able to bring both of us and all of our gear back home in one trip.

After stowing everything, Jill announced she was ready for Dad to fly them out. His reply took us both by surprise: "I'm not flying the first load out...you are!" Jill's eyes widened, and my Dad reassured her "You're good enough to fly off this strip without any troubles...just keep giving it power and this plane WILL fly out of here!"

With that my sister began to mentally prepare for her first real bush take-off. My dad settled into the back seat as co-pilot and I stood to the side ready to immortalize the historic event with a short movie...and pray for safety. Without much ado, Jill revved the engine, gave it full power and they rocketed past me...and up and away!

I reclined onto the warm, dry tundra (what an oxymoron!) to wait for my Dad's return. After 20-minutes I heard the faint drone of his plane and my departure flight sailed down right on schedule. We repeated the process to the lower strip, reloaded all the gear, and my sister piloted all of us back home in one load.

I can't wait to do it again. Next time we need to focus on helping my sister notch a tag.

God Bless,  
Carl