

Barbary Sheep
February 28, 2007

Psalm 118: 24 "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

(Why you sometimes just need to get out of the office...)

After a last-minute red-hot tip from a hunting friend regarding where the elusive Barbary sheep (also called Aoudad) might be found, I got things in order enough at the office to break loose for a one day bonsai trip on the last day of season.

Although rumors abound regarding where Barbary sheep have been sighted around New Mexico (from Farmington to Carlsbad and everywhere in between) in 10-years of hunting all kinds of game and traipsing all over the state I had never laid eyes on one. I had come to believe they were akin to Sasquatch or Jackalopes: everybody has heard of someone who thought they might have seen one once, but concrete evidence is scarce.

With my wife's approval I loaded the truck after dinner and set off on a 3-hour-plus road trip, arriving at the supposed location at about 1 in the morning. A short 5-hour snooze left me refreshed and ready to go (not really), and I arose before sunrise, gobbled an energy bar and set off with my day pack, rifle, binoculars, spotting scope, food, water and other miscellaneous gear.

After hiking over and glassing several hills, basins & valleys, I sat down to scan yet another hillside. Just as I set my binos back down I caught something out of the corner of my eye and turned to look at some animals cresting a far away ridge. Throwing my binos to my eyes I strained to identify them, but due to the distance, lighting and only a brief glimpse as they slipped out of view I was unsure whether they were simply mule deer. The color hadn't quite looked right, but without a chance to really get a good look I could not be certain. However, having no better direction in mind, I worked that way and eased around the hill where I had last seen the UFOs (Unidentified Fleeing Objects). Alas, I was unable to ever relocate them, so I'll never know what they were (probably Sasquatches taking Jackalopes for a walk...)



Typical terrain

As I continued to alternately hike and glass I eventually spotted a lone animal feeding on a rocky hillside. It certainly didn't look like a deer through my binos, as the color seemed yellowish-tan rather than typical mule deer gray. Trading my binos for my spotting scope I confirmed that I had finally sighted a Barbary sheep!

Picking apart the hillside through the spotting scope didn't reveal any other animals, but with only one tag in my pocket I didn't need more than one anyway. I quickly plotted a course that might allow me to get within shooting range of the sheep without being seen.

As I approached the area, I slowed my pace and constantly scanned through my binos, beginning to wonder if my original sighting was perhaps only a hallucination due to a combination of lack of sleep, wind burned eyes, and hot sun beating on my head. Suddenly the sheep came into view feeding on the rocky slope! A quick check with the rangefinder revealed it was within range and I unslung my rifle to prepare for the shot. However; due to the gusty wind and a less than ideal position, I didn't feel comfortable after lining up, and elected to scoot closer.

As I crawled ahead the sheep must have noticed something out of place and turned to look toward me. Perhaps the glint of my gun barrel in the bright sun tipped me off, or perhaps I had been a little too aggressive in my crawling. I froze as it stared in my direction and when it lost interest and turned its gaze away I rolled my backpack to the ground and lay in a prone shooting position. With the much steadier rest, I was able to thwart the wind to squeeze off the shot. One shot, one kill, that's my motto.

Climbing to the sheep was surreal (probably related to that lack of sleep thing). I had pulled off the seemingly impossible: I had gotten a Barbary sheep, and on a hare-brained one-day bonsai trip no less! The sheep turned out to be a ewe (no big deal, since tags are for either-sex) and while not a true wall-hanger, it had respectable 15-inch horns (a really nice ram has horns up to 30-inches long) and a beautiful hide. I mentally said a prayer of thanks for being able to put some meat in our freezer for the first time this year and to get a species I had never before laid eyes on.

After butchering the animal, the long hike back to the truck was almost enjoyable (well, not really – it was heavy!). If it weren't for the hundreds of cactus spines and other "biting" vegetation that left my legs looking like striped pin cushions; the winds that swelled to gale force by the afternoon, dried my eyes out and caked them with sand; and the rugged terrain that caused me to stumble and left my feet and legs tired and sore by the time I reached the truck, the day would have been wonderful. But, as they say, even a bad day hunting beats a good day working...

And actually, I wouldn't consider it a bad day of hunting at all!



One Happy bonsai hunter!