

Barbary Sheep
February 22, 2008

1 Corinthians 1:27-29 “*But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise...so that no man may boast before God.*”
(Where’s my bow when I need it?!)

After last-year’s excursion after the elusive Barbary sheep (Aoudad), my hunting partner, Jason, and I spent time digging up more information from NM Game & Fish and other sources to make a more serious attempt this year. Jason even made a comprehensive exploratory drive to map the area’s roads (many were gated as private).

We schemed and poured over maps and scheduled a trip for opening weekend. I opted to carry both my bow and rifle in hopes that I could stalk within archery range, but recognized that it might be necessary to reach out a bit farther given the open terrain and phenomenal eyesight of these critters: hence the rifle.



Typical open terrain at sunrise

On that first trip we managed to spot a few sheep. We stalked a group of ewes and I blew a 50-yard shot at one with my bow. Both of us opted to pass on them with rifles, despite being within 50-150-yards of the small herd for nearly 30-minutes.



Small herd of ewes

Another day, while struggling to glass in the incessant wind, we spotted what appeared to be a decent ram. We managed to get within 200-yards but somehow Jason's rifle shot flew astray, whether due to the wind or excitement and we ultimately didn't capitalize on that opportunity.

We crossed paths with a G&F field officer who indicated that there were more hunters pursuing sheep than were out during deer season! It was crazy. We heard multiple shots in every direction most mornings, plus occasional gunfire throughout the day.

Another time we watched a ewe bed down in some thick brush. We had visions of wall-hanger rams, so neither of us opted to try for it with a rifle. I have much lower standards with a bow, so while Jason watched from across the valley and provided hand signals I managed to creep within 15-yards of the bush. I still couldn't see the sheep even while straining to pick it out with my binoculars. I took a couple more steps and she suddenly blew out like her tail was on fire. In hindsight I should have tossed a rock downhill to get her to stand up, but as they say it's 20/20.

With our typical busy schedule of work and life in general, we had to wait a couple of weeks to find time to break loose for another attempt. We tried a slightly different location in hopes of finding a more remote area with less hunting pressure than we had seen previously.

Our first day began with great weather conditions: sunny, mild and very little wind.

AS the wind began to pick up, we glassed from vantage points with nothing sighted until we popped over a shallow saddle and Jason's initial glance revealed what appeared to be two nice rams bedded on the lee side of a bush. We were unable to effectively see much of their surroundings to pick out landmarks without fully exposing ourselves, so we

noted a couple of yuccas and fence posts that we hoped would get us to the correct spot and dropped back to circle around them.

On the way we came across this neat fossil (we saw several similar ones throughout our walks). I asked Jason if I could load it in his pack as it would have looked great in my patio, but he declined. The shell was over 6" across and the rock was much larger, so a photo would have to suffice...



Fossil

As so often happens, once we got to where we thought we should be everything looked different. Given the wind direction, we talked ourselves into dropping down a bit sooner than we should have in order to guarantee our scent stayed out of the entire area in case we had misjudged things and we couldn't seem to locate the correct bush that the sheep had been bedded beside.

As we slowly moved forward, glassing continuously, they suddenly erupted from about 100-yards away. Despite our being ready, things happened too fast and the sheep never even paused for a shot opportunity. Darn. They had looked like nice rams, too.

We circled to try to relocate them, but to no avail. We spotted 3 other hunters so ended up veering in a different direction in hopes of finding other sheep. That afternoon the wind really picked up and we spotted only a lone coyote just prior to sunset.

We hiked about 12-miles by GPS on our loop that day. Given the terrain and uneven rocky footing we were tuckered by the time we settled in back at camp. Being a bit discouraged from the windy conditions, I decided to leave my bow behind the next day as we didn't have much time left and the extra weight on my pack was taxing, plus it was a hassle having to unstrap it to reach my spotting scope.

The next morning found us generally repeating the same hike as our previous day, with a slightly different route in order to take advantage of some side canyons we had missed in which we hoped sheep might be found. Despite scouring great-looking country all day we didn't spot a single sheep. We didn't see any other hunters, so couldn't figure out why. No pressure, ideal terrain, no sheep...it didn't add up and dejection began to creep in by midday when the winds started to pick up.

Finally in the early afternoon I thought I detected an “odd” colored something as I struggled to hold my binos steady in the wind. Given that it was about 1-mile away, it was little more than intuition that made me think it was alive. Jason thought it looked like a discolored cactus, but then I detected movement. We quickly dug out our spotting scopes and confirmed it was a sheep! Even at that distance we could see horns, so by all appearances it was a nice ram.

I lamented that since it was across two canyons with no discerning landmarks it would be all but impossible to relocate, but quickly responded to Jason’s surprised look that I was game to try and that we had no better options.

We quickly packed up and took one final look to identify a route and landmarks. During the short time we watched, the sheep moved several hundred yards, feeding with its tail to the wind. I could see a fence in front of it so suggested we sit tight and see what the sheep would do. Sure enough, it began to parallel the fence in our general direction. We quickly headed toward the fence in hopes of positioning ourselves to intercept its path of travel.

We reached the fence and began to work our way in the direction of the sheep. Surprisingly, we discovered the sheep had continued toward us at a rapid clip and was now only a few hundred yards away! As we watched, it continued to move toward us and I felt confident it would continue to parallel the fence to our position. Jason was worried that it might divert its path as it crossed a small drainage between us, so we scooted up a few yards to the some yuccas and chollas in order to get a better position for a shot opportunity if it hung up.



Approaching sheep

We settled in behind the largest yucca and I peered through the foliage to check the sheep’s progress. As I adjusted my binos the sheep popped into focus just a hundred yards away and closing fast! I motioned for Jason to keep down and get ready while I evaluated its body language to get a feel for which side of our yucca it would pass: it was nearly too close to call!

Soon it made a slight move to our left and I felt fairly confident that we should set up in that direction. We made ready in a seated position. I would be the designated “shooter” with Jason as backup, based on our long-standing agreement that whoever spotted the animal gets the first shot.

Because I was tucked closer to the yucca, the sheep stepped into Jason’s view first and when he tapped my side I knew he could see it and it was close.

Suddenly the sheep began to come into my view through the yucca leaves. I had to wait a couple of seconds for it to come into the clear. Luckily I had dialed my scope down to its lowest power...because it was less than seven steps away! Oh where was my bow when I needed it?!

At that range it's tough to miss and the rest is history. Upon examination, the "ram" turned out to be a huge ewe, which didn't matter since tags are for either-sex. The horns were an impressive 20-inches and it is my understanding that even 15" is big for a ewe. Who knows, maybe I shot a world-record ewe? My only regret is that I left my bow in camp as this would have been an archery trophy of a lifetime.

Here I had been skeptical about being able to even relocate it and instead it made a beeline to within 7-yards of us. What are the odds? 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 states *"But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty...so that no man may boast before God"*.

I perceived this experience as a demonstration that God is in control of everything. Logically, to experienced hunters, doing little more than waiting for this animal to come nearly a mile directly to us didn't make a whole lot of sense considering all the directions it could have gone. However, when the sheep began to head in our direction I had a feeling it would be delivered into our hands...little did I realize it would be into our laps!



While notching my tag I realized that the shot had been at approximately 2:22pm on 2/22 – a tidbit that only confirmed my doubts that anything happens by coincidence.

After photos and butchering (I even got to use a cool new Havalon knife that my friend Brandon had given me - thanks man) we continued our loop toward camp and came across another sheep, likely another ewe, but Jason couldn't get set up on it in time when the wind blew our scent directly to it across a small canyon. Sore and tired, we reached camp around 9pm, with more than a few rest stops.

We tried again the next day and despite gale-force winds we actually sighted another ewe as it spooked out of a ravine after we had thoroughly glassed the area, but Jason didn't have a shot opportunity. I guess we'll have to wait for next year to try for a couple of wall-hanger rams. And I'll carry my bow.

We found another neat fossil, but it was once again too big to take home.



It sure is a blessing to be able to put some meat in the freezer after a low-success year on my part, especially now that Robin loves hamburger! Granted, my friend Ward graciously provided our family with some delicious Texas game meat, but it's almost shameful for a hunter to have to resort to handouts like that.

Other neat things seen during the hunt include:

- One javelina glimpsed through my spotting scope. Jason had a tag, but it was extremely distant and I lost sight of it shortly after spotting it, so we didn't try for it.
- Two foxes that popped out of a small drainage directly in front of us one evening. They hopped and jumped as they worked their way over the nearby horizon, likely looking for small rodents.
- One evening just after sunset we passed a lone porcupine huddled in some sparse bushes. It was too dark for photos, but I've only seen one other porcupine in NM and was surprised to see this one in basically a desert area.
- Seeing a partial lunar eclipse as we drove down one night.
- Awesome sunsets/moonrises almost every day.