

Barbary Sheep
March 13 (Friday), 2009
2 Corinthians 5:7 “...for we walk by faith and not by sight...”
(Who says Friday 13th is unlucky?!)

After two successful years searching for the ever elusive Barbary sheep (Aoudad), I and my hunting partner, Jason, made plans for our third serious attempt opening weekend 2009. I vowed to hold out for one larger than I had taken previously, while Jason had yet to shoot his first sheep.

In previous years we made many late-night drives on Red Bull, put a lot of miles on the trucks, hiked 6-11 miles a day and glassed until our eyes dried out just to locate a meager number of animals in the wide-open country they call home.

None the less, gluttons for punishment, we schemed and poured over maps and headed down early in order to have one full day of scouting prior to opening day.

While exploring areas near where we'd seen sheep in the past, we glassed a few medium-sized sheep as well as three decent rams that, after consulting our maps, were on private land...darn.

In another area we came across a group of small-to-medium sized sheep and then in the same canyon we spotted another band that included one big ram. After watching them until dark (“putting them to bed”) we backed off to camp and make plans for an early morning assault.

Little did we know how appropriate the word “assault” would prove to be...

We were awakened at 4AM by a truck driving past our Spartan camp; then 2 more trucks passed at 4:30 and yet another at 5AM. Our plan had been to move out at 5, well before daylight, and hike to where we'd put the sheep to bed. We hesitantly proceeded with the plan; however, at dawn we could see trucks on hilltops in literally all directions. Too many roads...

The sheep were in the same general area, but the rising sun lit them up for every other "hunter" to see. One guy on a mule/atv was the biggest jerk I've encountered; he kept driving up a 2-track following us toward the sheep, who fed over the ridge top (unfortunately lots of little roads in the area) and we literally had to run to keep ahead of him. We topped the ridge and saw the sheep at ~250 yards, but before we could prepare to shoot another guy a couple hundred yards to the south shot twice and the band blew out of the canyon. The “hunter” must have been ~400-yards+ and was just slinging lead; he didn't even have a bipod or shooting sticks.

As the sheep took off up the far side of the canyon, a handful of different trucks that could now see them headed onto roads that would take them toward the sheep.

Jason and I didn't even bother to pursue; instead heading back to the truck in disgust. On the mile long hike, we saw even more trucks driving into the area (sorry guys, WAY too late...)

We hiked some other areas in the vicinity, but didn't see any other sheep that weekend; just dozens of camps and trucks along every road, which wasn't very enjoyable.

A few weeks later I made a short overnight attempt in another area with my 4-year old daughter, but despite glassing some great looking country, we didn't spot any sheep or even deer for that matter.



We encountered a couple of other trucks glassing, but this area wasn't very conducive to road hunters, so it was not a problem. Robin & I hiked about 2-miles and I was able to glass a mile or more in many directions. I was surprised we didn't see anything, as the terrain looked great.



Later in the trip Robin did spot some elk before daddy! It was the first time she's spotted game on her own, so I was darned proud. They were near the road as we drove out of the area as she chimed "daddy, elk" pointing excitedly to some bulls.



As you can see, Robin is very uncomfortable in the outdoors – LOL

On yet another weekend I teamed up with my friend Brandon from Hobbs and we tried other areas in the southeast corner of the state. The country was extremely rugged and remote, yet despite spotting a few deer, sheep were nowhere to be found.



Typical rugged terrain



No, that's not sasquatch...it's Brandon...



Some nice deer within archery range, but of course, not deer season...

Brandon and I continued to move from one area to another and finally crossed paths with some sheep just when we were ready to give up on the spot and move elsewhere.

I initially spotted a lone sheep that was acting nervous, so we glassed it for a while in hopes there were more. After a short time it disappeared into a ravine, so we worked our way over to investigate.

Turns out there were three medium-sized sheep; unfortunately they saw us about the same time as we saw them, so after quickly assessing their size and opting to pass, I only had time for a hurried snapshot as they said "adios".



We continued in the direction they had gone in hopes of finding others and eventually spotted what appeared to be a different group bedded on a hillside. After studying them carefully from a range of 300-yards, Brandon announced that despite their moderate size, after passing up small to average sheep for the past 3-years, he was getting an itchy trigger finger as he desperately wanted to put hamburger in the freezer.

Although I was sorely tempted, thanks in part to Brandon's continued urging "so, you going to shoot one?", I opted to pass on the group and let him take the shot. This was a rare instance where I made a concerted effort to pass up a legal animal in hopes of something bigger and I hoped that I wouldn't regret it, knowing that I would likely only have one more weekend attempt for sheep prior to the end of season.



Brandon's respectable 18" ram

We quickly photographed and butchered Brandon's ram, then stashed the boned out meat in the shade in order to use the remaining daylight to explore more country. The plan was to look for a sheep for me until dark and then pick up the meat on our way back to the truck.

Alas, after spending the remaining daylight hours hiking away from the truck, I was unable to locate a shooter and we were left with a long hike out by GPS and headlights.

As the last weekend of season loomed, my friend Jason called excitedly announcing that his work load had finally eased up and he would be able to break free for another sheep trip the last Friday of season. I cautiously broke the news to my understanding wife and was given the green light to go along.

In typical fashion, by the time we got loaded up and on the road Thursday night, we knew we wouldn't be getting much sleep before packing out in the pre-dawn.

The weather was uncharacteristically damp, with low clouds/fog and occasional drizzle during our drive down. We awakened to a dim sunrise as we prepared for the day.

In hopes of getting farther away from people, we had decided to "bivy" or carry our lightweight camping gear on our backs, spending the night for a couple of days if necessary to avoid long hikes to and from the truck each morning and evening. Our packs were notably heavier than typical day packs. Given the weather, rain gear was mandatory for this trip; unwelcome additional weight often not needed in New Mexico.

Since Jason had never been to this area, I planned to head to the general location where Brandon had taken his sheep and branch out from there. However, as we hiked, it became apparent that the low clouds would not be conducive to glassing. Often our visibility was reduced to a matter of a few dozen yards, which did not bode well for locating animals that, based on our experience, were sparsely scattered over tens of miles. Stumbling blindly into some was unlikely. *Walk by faith, not by sight...*

Letting one's eyes do the walking through binoculars and spotting scopes can eliminate wasting stores of energy hiking to faraway ridges, but glassing seemed all but impossible on this day.

At the first high point (identified only by GPS & map) where we *should* have been able to glass a fair amount of country, our visibility was limited to the top of the small knob within bow range of our perch.

Lamenting that we may have wasted a vacation day being out in these conditions, I suggested we sit tight under some junipers in hopes that the clouds would lift. We found a flat, dry spot to get comfortable and I started a tiny fire to help warm our damp spirits and outerwear. I couldn't help quote another buddy from Colorado "White man make huge fire, stand way back and stay cold...Indian make tiny fire, sit close and stay warm..."

It was actually quite peaceful and relaxing to sit around a cheery fire and warm up, with the clouds muting all sounds around us. Jason even fired up his stove and made a cup of coffee while I snacked on a Wilderness Athlete bar. *Walk by faith, not by sight...*

Eventually the clouds lifted and we hurriedly glassed the adjacent canyons and hillsides before they rolled back in. Having not seen any game and knowing we were still several miles from our intended destination, we snuffed the fire and hiked to the next high point, where we repeated the drill: curl up under some junipers, dry our damp socks next to a small fire and wait for the clouds to lift.

During this respite I was able to implement, with great success, a technique that my dad had relayed to me. He spoke with a guy who heated rocks beside a fire, then stuffed them into his damp boots. With careful temperature monitoring, this was a stellar method, allowing us to warm our boots and dry our socks at the same time. It is my understanding that placing wet rocks near a fire can be dangerous, as the moisture in the cracks of the rock can quickly expand to vapor, causing them to literally explode, so be careful if you try this! In our case, we warmed small, smooth rocks that were sitting below the trees and dry to the touch. Once heated, they stayed warm for a surprisingly long time and I'll be implementing this technique on wet hunts in the future, to be sure.

When the clouds eventually lifted, we again did not see any animals, so marched on.

As we neared the canyon where Brandon shot his sheep a few weeks prior, Jason excitedly pointed out *fresh* sheep droppings. We still could not see more than 100-yards in any direction, but we knew sheep must be nearby! We quickly found a secluded nook to sit tight and stay dry while we waited for the clouds to lift. Knowing that we were at the mercy of the wind direction and that if sheep were downwind they had likely already left the area, we made another small fire, ate lunch and hung gloves and other miscellaneous gear to dry. *Walk by faith, not by sight...*

It is amazing how time slows when game is suspected to be nearby but low clouds obscure views in all directions. I commented to Jason that with fresh sheep sign, we may as well hold tight for the rest of the day, if it took that long, until the clouds lifted enough to glass. I also commented that since it was the last opportunity of season I would be happy with pretty much any sheep, to which he agreed.

After about an hour the clouds sluggishly lifted and we could begin to see into canyons below. We quickly pulled our on boots and ducked out from beneath the juniper, eagerly throwing binoculars to our eyes and hoping for sheep.

Right off the bat I spotted some deer on an adjacent ridge as the clouds rose and visibility improved. After about 10-minutes of glassing we had yet to lay eyes on our quarry, so I told Jason I would move downhill a dozen or more yards because a small cliff blocked our view into a secluded basin.

Apparently the sheep had decided to lay low with the fog also, because I immediately spotted a group directly below among junipers and feeding on cholla fruit. A quick glance through binos revealed good rams and I hurriedly backed completely out of their view and motioned for Jason to get back to our gear, and more specifically, our rifles.

As he arrived at our packs I quickly explained that a band of good rams were directly below us. Evidently we had spent the last hour or more within range without being able to see them! *Walk by faith, not by sight...*

We laced up boots, grabbed rangefinders and rifles and slithered to the edge of the cliff, which put us in perhaps the best shot position I've ever had within 200-yards of the band of rams.

As we lay side by side evaluating them, it was difficult to determine which ram might be the biggest. I thought maybe one of the farther ones, but when Jason hissed that he thought the two closest were bigger I laughed at myself for trying to be picky when these were clearly the biggest sheep we'd seen in 3-years and we had just gotten through agreeing that any modest sheep would suffice! The chill away from our cheery fire, coupled with the damp weather and adrenaline made my teeth chatter, so the welcomed the stability afforded by our prone shooting position.

Jason asked which one I wanted and my quick response was, "I'd be happy with either one; but I'm on the left, so I'll take the one on the left". Jason then whispered that I should make the call since I had spotted them first. I responded that we'd wait until they both afforded sure shot placement, then I'd count "one...two...three..." and we'd shoot together on the count of 4. What a blessing to have both rams standing side by side and viewable at the same time as we studied them through our scopes!

Due to "his" ram feeding at a very sharp angle facing away and partly blocking "my" ram, it took several minutes until we were provided with clear shot angles.

It was almost surreal as I whispered "ready" and heard Jason respond "yep".

I took a deep, relaxing breath; "one...two...three...BA-BOOM!" Our shots sounded nearly simultaneously. My rifle's recoil shifted my view off the sheep, so I quickly scanned below with my eyes. One sheep stumbled to the right, Jason's rifle quickly barked, and it went down immediately.

Initially I was unsure of the situation as the remaining sheep filed away, but quickly confirmed through binos that my ram dropped at the first shot.

We turned to each other with huge grins on our face: amazingly on a horrible weather day we had pulled off the nearly impossible – a double and on nice rams, to boot! *Walk by faith, not by sight...*

In past years I had taken a couple of above-average ewes, and based on our experience, we were led to believe that Barbary sheep were relatively small animals. However, as we retrieved our gear and dropped down to inspect our trophies, they seemed to *grow*. These two were solidly in the 250-pound range. Just dragging them for photos and butchering was a chore, although we certainly weren't complaining!

After caping both animals for half-body taxidermy mounts and de-boning the meat into game bags, it was pitch dark.

We were facing a couple of hours to the truck, minimum. Jason's insight to bivvy camp there and pack things out in the morning was extraordinary.



We pitched a quick camp, ate some stew and went to sleep. The spitting snow and freezing rain bouncing off our tents during the night confirmed that being snug in sleeping bags had been a stellar idea.



In the morning we hauled the first load toward the truck to a point at which the remainder of the hike would be easier, and then brought the second load to that same point.

Jason thought it might be possible to bring everything to the truck in one load from that point, so we lashed, stuffed, strapped and otherwise attached all our gear and sheep onto our respective packs and even managed to shoulder them. Man, what a load. With each step my hips and legs were screaming. Without a hiking staff it would have been impossible, yet I still had to stop and rest on the staff every 20-yards or so.



Temporary He-Men with crazy loads; we just couldn't take it

We managed to make it about ¼-mile before Jason (and I called him a sissy for it – LOL) said “no more” and I thankfully dropped my burden to the ground. We re-organized things and split into two trips to the truck, arriving with our second load late in the day. It had been a long one, but definitely worth it.

Once we found cell service I phoned my wife as we drove home. “Good, great and bad news”. Good news; both of us got sheep. Great news; both are big ones! Bad news; we need to find some wall space, because this one's going on the wall – LOL. As it turned out, Jason's taped over 26” and mine was right at 28”.

What an incredible hunt; definitely in the top few of all time for me. It was especially gratifying to have pulled off the double with my good friend Jason, on a bad weather day

no less, after all the years, truck miles and boot leather that we've invested pursuing Barbary sheep together.



26"+ ram



28" ram



Daily double on Friday 13th...
Walk by faith, not by sight...