

Barbary Sheep
May 10, 2014 New Mexico

Switchfoot song “24”: “*And I'm not who I thought I was twenty four hours ago*”

Although I'm known for bonsai scouting and hunting trips, this spring adventure entails perhaps the craziest 24-hours I've had in the outdoors.

I've been scheming with a couple of friends for years about pinpointing Barbary sheep outside of the standard draw units. Finding them even in the draw units is no easy task, but locating them in the lower-concentrated peripheral units is akin to searching for sasquatch. We have dozens of futile attempts behind us with nothing to show for our efforts but wind burn and cactus spines.

Realizing that we both had a free weekend on the horizon, one of my buddies and I penciled in a low-odds exploratory trip to yet another area rumored to hold sheep. In typical bonsai fashion one thing led to another and instead of leaving home at a reasonable hour after work Friday we rolled out at 10pm, which put us at our pre-determined campsite at 2 the next morning. Nothing like a half-night's sleep prior to a vigorous day of hiking and glassing in 90-degree heat (hear that foreshadowing sound of warning bells toll in the background?). Today would be a day chock-full of lessons learned and reminders to avoid the same mistakes in the future.

We awoke to clear skies and no wind: stellar conditions for hunting Barbary.

Despite little rest, it always seems easy to shoulder a pack and get after it the first day in the field, so with high spirits we marched out from camp.

As the sun rose we began glassing from a nearby knob, but only managed to spot a lone mule deer doe from our initial point. After thoroughly scouring everything within view numerous times, we traipsed to the next vantage and repeated the process.



The beauty of our dry desert landscape can be stark, but has grown on me

After a few hours of glassing it began to appear that this trip might end up just like so many others before, but it was still early in the day and that slim chance to taste success is often what keeps us going. Besides a golden eagle, some ravens and a few songbirds, we had seen nothing since that doe. With the temperature quickly rising we knew it was only a matter of time before most game would be wisely bedded somewhere in the shade for the bulk of the day, making it even tougher to locate our quarry.



Typical "barren" desert habitat that somehow conceals our big game species so easily

As we moved toward another vantage we began to lose our "edge" and my buddy inadvertently popped over a ridge too quickly, exposing himself on the skyline to anything below. "Whoa, there they are running!" he sang out as a group of sheep rocketed across the desert scrub and over the next ridge.

Point driven home: just that fast we went from seeing nothing, to seeing sheep and then missing out on the opportunity. Exercising more caution would have netted a chance at sheep well within range, but instead we were left slack-jawed after blowing out our quarry in mere seconds.

We circled and glassed in an attempt to relocate the sheep to no avail: they had simply melted into the desert. The broken terrain required a lot of boot leather in order to see into every ravine and valley and despite seeing some sign in the form of tracks and droppings, by midday we hadn't spotted any more sheep and the thermometer just kept climbing steadily.

Figuring nothing would be moving by this point in the day, I suggested we locate some shade for a nap. The problem was shade trees were few and far between. The few we could see wouldn't provide any view, being located in ravines or flat slopes instead of at overlooks. My partner opted to find a better vantage from where we could alternately nap and glass, on the off chance that the nomadic sheep would move despite the heat.

Grudgingly I agreed as we passed a beautiful-looking flat spot at the base of a robust shade bush and instead worked our way onto an isolated knob that provided good glassing in several directions. We surveyed the surrounding area through optics for a reasonable time before covering our faces with our hats and lying back on the hard ground under a merciless sun.

I dozed off and on as we simmered in the heat. After an hour I made up my mind it was time to move somewhere cooler and arose to find my buddy chugging water and massaging his thighs. "I woke up with leg cramps" he lamented, "so I'm trying to rehydrate". That didn't sound very good, but I had completely filled my hydration pack that morning so was fairly confident of our total water supply.

We shouldered our packs and reached another vantage point a little while later, so sat down to glass despite the lack of shade. This time we were rewarded with a sheep sighting! A small band of sheep were feeding quite a distance away and slightly below our location; the good news was they were moving toward us and appeared to include a good ram!



A reward for hours at post behind the binoculars!

It appeared that our best option was to sit tight, assess their route, and move as necessary to intercept the group, which afforded us plenty of time to study them through binos and spotting scope.

As they worked their way closer I couldn't help but notice that the smallest sheep, obviously a juvenile, kept pestering the biggest ram and head butting his rear end. Odd behavior and it surprised me that the bigger ram put up with it.

With sheep in sight and moving our way it was a no-brainer to just sit tight and keep an eye on them. Although an occasional breeze fanned us, it was still blazing hot.

Amazingly the sheep moved our way as if on a string and we soon realized that we were in perfect position with no need to move whatsoever in order for a perfect ambush.

However, I was beginning to become suspicious and finally voiced my opinion that I thought the "big ram" was actually a ewe and the juvenile was in fact barely weaned and nuzzling his mom to suckle. While it was a legal sheep, it was not the caliber we were looking for. Sure enough as we continued to watch their antics at close range we both agreed that this was not a "shooter" and although it was a trophy-class ewe it was far from a heavy-horned ram like we sought.



These buggers are tough to judge – had this been a ram it would have been a slam dunk

Eventually the sheep fed to within 100-yards of us and although the headgear on this ewe was impressive, we elected to only shoot photos and video.



Different angle of same ewe; note how much smaller her horns look from this view



She surely looks big next to this cute little bugger

Despite having hunted sheep for many years and observed scores of them, they still prove very difficult to judge. Although perfectly legal (tags are for either-sex), had we not been afforded plenty of time to study these sheep we could have easily ended up shooting only a modestly-sized ewe rather than a larger ram. Besides being a lesser trophy, I prefer to leave the ewes out there to make more sheep whenever possible.

Regardless, it was fun observing undisturbed sheep just doing what they normally do and a wonderful learning experience in judging them on the hoof. Additionally, we noted that they had traveled nearly a mile in just a short half-hour while simply feeding. They are truly nomadic and our observation demonstrates how they can be here one day and gone tomorrow – or vice versa.

Not long after the closest sheep approached archery range, an errant gust of wind gave us a way and they turned and loped back from the direction they had come.

It was now early afternoon and we were a long way from camp. My buddy suggested that we hunt our way toward camp, as he was running low on water. Given our recent encounter with sheep moving it seemed logical that hiking that direction offered as good of a chance as any to run into more, so we eased along, stopping occasionally to glass. Thankfully the sun began to drop, and the temperature along with it.

Late in the afternoon I turned to glass in the general direction we had just come from and spotted small band of sheep grazing! We hastily studied them and identified a bonafide shooter in their midst.

Because a stalk would entail dropping elevation and belly crawling, my buddy insisted I go get him, so I quickly worked my way to a nearby knob. I ranged the group at just under 300-yards, but between the animals moving and my awkward position laying downslope I couldn't get a solid bead on the ram before he disappeared over the skyline. I had to wait several minutes for the last sheep to follow out of sight before hustling to the ridge they had been on and stealthily creeping ahead.

This time the group was less than 200-yards away, but I couldn't locate the ram. I suspected he might be out of my view below me, but didn't dare scoot any farther forward as I would be exposed to the uppermost ewe and likely spook the group. I waited and frantically scanned for the ram. I finally located him, but he was facing directly away and fed over the next horizon without offering me a shot. Again I waited for the last ewe to disappear before moving to repeat the sequence.

This time when I peered through a frond of bear grass the sheep were so close I didn't even bother to range the distance (later confirmed to be 100-yards). I could see most of the group but wasn't positive where the ram was. I knew he wasn't huge, since I was having difficulty picking him out from the ewes, but our freezer was running low and I wasn't sure if we even had enough meat to last until the fall hunting season. And I was committed after successfully stalking them for a third time.

Finally I zeroed in on the target ram. I squeezed off the shot and he took one staggering step before a second round anchored him permanently. The remaining sheep galloped off and I took comfort in the fact that none of them were as big as the one I had taken.

It was now close to 7pm and I knew we had a long hike back to camp. I quickly snapped some trophy photos and dove into the task of breaking down the ram into deboned bags of meat. My buddy chided me for adding nearly ½ mile of packing to our plate by not shooting him at his first position, but it was better than taking a marginal shot.



Solid 23" ram for any area; especially outside of the draw units

As we butchered my buddy commented that he had finished the last of his water as he hiked down to me; not good. Had I known he was in such dire straights I would have passed on the sheep and instead focused on getting to camp. Lesson learned: speak up to your partner if you're in trouble, and be more discerning of your buddy's condition even if he doesn't say much.

I knew we'd both be hurting by the time we reached camp, but with my partner already out of water I loaded all of the meat in my pack and gave him only the cape and horns. I then gave him half of my remaining water, setting myself up for water rationing, and slurped the one energy gel I had in my pack before aiming toward camp. Within minutes it was time to don headlamps, but we took solace in the cooler temperature; it was downright pleasant. Still, camp was far away.

We plodded along: me overloaded, and my buddy in a state of dehydration. It would be a long night. We took many rest breaks, but with no convenient logs or boulders to sit on most of them ended up being standing pauses that did little good.

Finally my GPS indicated camp was "only" 1/2 mile away. Suddenly from behind me I heard a groan and turned to see my buddy laying on the ground, both legs locked with cramps. I had finished my water long ago and it was time to reassess our plan. I dumped half the meat from my pack and removed the cape and horns from his, and told him to sit tight while I headed to the truck for water and hydration drinks. With a lighter load and my buddy in dire straights and relying on me, I picked up the pace.

Back at camp I chugged some Hydration and Energy and mixed up a spare botte, but there was little time for the rest I desired. I hastily unloaded everything from my pack and retraced my route toward the stash of meat and my crippled partner. Halfway back I noticed his headlight and found he had managed to stumble closer to camp. I gave him a bottle of water and the Hydration/Energy concoction, then left him to recover while I continued to our meat stash.

By the time I retraced my path my buddy had nearly made it to camp and we arrived at the same time. 2am. 24-hours. And that's when the lyrics from a Switchfoot song hit me: "*And I'm not who I thought I was twenty four hours ago...*" In exactly 24-hours we had gone from arriving at camp to killing a sheep to stumbling back again exhausted.

Just like Switchfoot's song says, we could not have possibly imagined what the past 24-hours had in store for us. We can't know what tomorrow may bring: life is short and tomorrow is not even guaranteed. True this bonsai trip had ended successfully and we would be no worse for the wear after recovering for a few days. But we had teeted on the brink of serious problems: a lot of things can happen on our outdoor adventures and we must all strive to be prepared to ensure we make it home to our families and live to hunt another day.

God Bless and be safe out there!

Carl