

Barbary Sheep
February 11, 2017 New Mexico

Switchfoot song “Love alone is worth the fight”



“It’s a killin’ moon” I texted my daughter Robin, a moniker my hunting partner Jason and I had assigned years ago to full moons like the one rising before me, after detecting a pattern of hunting success when the eerie orange orb made an appearance.

The final tune that popped up in a “random” mix as I pulled into my campsite was “Love alone is worth the fight” by Switchfoot, a song dear to my heart as it never fails to bring back happy family memories from when Robin was a little girl. As I waited for the song to finish before shutting off my truck, I couldn’t help but feel that the moon and the timing of the song were a good omen for my weekend adventure.

Although Jason had planned to join me, he had been so ill he actually had to stay home from work for three days earlier that week. Imagine, having to burn several days of sick leave during Barbary season to lie miserably in bed – he was *really* sick! It had been several years since Jason and I hunted Barbary sheep together and I was a little downhearted to be heading out solo.

Never the less, the siren song to chase free-ranging Barbary sheep was calling and free weekends seem to be in short supply, so I stuck to our plan. I quickly settled into my sleeping bag and drifted off with visions of heavy horns and flowing golden chaps dancing in my head. Except for the sporadic howls from song dogs in the distance, the desert was eerily silent. Never before had I hunted sheep without at least a stiff breeze. Most times the tent whipped in gale force winds, and I’d even broken tent poles on more than one occasion!

It remained wonderfully calm when my alarm chimed the next morning and I hastily dressed, threw boiling water into a dehydrated scrambled eggs and bacon meal and hoisted my backpack to set out for the day. I planned to hike until my legs could go no more and glass until my eyes dried out, and perhaps find a Barbary ram somewhere along the way in the rugged country they call home.



Morning in sheep country

As I scrambled over the rough limestone hills, I stumbled across a fossilized shell: a testament to a time long ago when water flooded the land and buried uncountable hapless victims in the mud to turn to be turned to stone.



Photo is about actual size – too much stone to carry around all day

The open terrain was vast. Too much country to hike in a month, let alone the weekend I was able to devote this time. As I topped each ridge I carefully eased ahead, picking apart the new vista with my Vortex binoculars, hoping to spot the tan, stocky body of a Barbary sheep. The morning remained dead calm, making it easy to glass. Whenever the views allowed, I sat down with my binoculars on a tripod to scan from horizon to horizon, and top to bottom with methodical precision.



Empty country...or is it?

Occasionally I turned up evidence that sheep had been around at some point, but I had been at it for several hours before I caught movement on a distant ridge. I kicked myself for not hauling my spotting scope. As I stared through the heat waves the shape and color screamed "Barbary!" I slipped my doubler onto the right eyepiece of my binoculars and confirmed a small herd filtering through the brush and cactus feeding.



There be sheep in these hills!

I decided to close the distance to study the herd and evaluate size. I was far enough away that I wasn't worried about being seen, so made a beeline for the end of my ridge and set up beside a bush to study them. Although there may have been as many as a dozen in the group, the most I could see was three at any given time. As each animal came into view I studied it eagerly, but all appeared to be ewes. I eventually identified the largest one, trying to convince myself that it was a shooter, but after watching them for over half an hour I realized that if none of them raised my blood pressure I might as well move on.



Can you spot 3 ewes?

The wind began to increase just before I packed up, and the sheep filed to a large juniper and huddled around it. I was astonished at how difficult it was to see them all bunched

together. A few fed in the open, but the rest gathered in the shade and would have been difficult to notice had I not watched them move there.



I shouldered my backpack and dropped off of my ridge to scale the next. The wind continued to increase and I found myself in “normal” sheep conditions, with gusts approaching 30mph. The wind was hot and dry, and I guzzled water from my hydration pack continuously.

I eased over the top of the next ridge, scanning the area nearby, while staying close to bushes to avoid skylining myself in the bright sun. Settling down in the shade of a juniper, I munched some homemade jerky, set up my tripod and once again began to systematically pick apart the landscape. The open areas were easy to sweep, but I carefully scanned around each bush, having watched the ewes grouped underneath one.

Nothing stood out on either side of the large valley I overlooked, so I panned to the horizon visible over the top of the nearby ridge. Bingo - I saw curved horns and immediately knew I had found rams! At first all I could see were horns and tops of their heads, but as I studied my quarry, one rose and began to graze. They weren't huge, but they were solid and there was no way I'd pass them up if I got the opportunity.



Good rams! Can you see three of them?

The wind blew toward me with enough force to negate any noise short of a marching band. After confirming they were worthy, I quickly dropped into the valley and hustled up the other side to formulate an approach. I carefully crept to the top of the next ridge and

studied the rams on the far side of the new valley before me. They were much too far for a shot, but I'd stick out like a sore thumb if I moved down the face of the slope in the bright sun, so I held tight and watched them feed. Soon the leader angled away and began to drop out of sight on the other side of the ridge. The remaining 2 rams followed and I hurried downslope as soon as they disappeared, crossed the valley floor, and ascended their ridge.

A couple of bushes served as landmarks near the top, so there was no need to slow or try to be quiet until I reached the first juniper. The rams had been out of sight for 15-minutes, but I was confident they hadn't moved far given their leisurely grazing pace.

At the first bush I carefully glassed before me, but the curve of the hill limited my field of view. To see a little farther I shinnied half a dozen feet up the scraggly trunk and confirmed the rams were not nearby. From my vantage I could see the next landmark, so quickly moved to it and repeated the process. Even my second elevated perch revealed nothing. I was near the top of a rounded knob and couldn't see beyond 50 yards due to its curvature. I knew I was close, so crept only one step at a time. After a few dozen yards I picked out the curve of a horn on the horizon. A thick yucca bush ahead of me provided cover, so I dropped to my knees and crawled behind it.

I used my binoculars to scan "through" the leaves and identified the three bedded rams. Two were facing directly away and I could only see their ears and horns. The third was bedded facing me and I could see his eyes. They were so close I didn't need to range them, but there was no cover before me and I dared not move.

The wind was strong and steady, so I had no fear of being scented or heard. All I could do was wait and see what came to pass. After about 10 minutes one of the rams facing away from me shook his head and stood. He filed away slowly and soon the other two followed; none offering a shot opportunity. I waited until they were again out of sight and slithered to a bare-trunked juniper just a few steps from where they had been bedded. The thick trunks provided cover for me to stand up and I immediately saw the rams feeding within 40-yards. I had my rifle, but was certainly within archery range; although the stiff wind would have made a bow shot difficult even at such close range.

The problem was I could only see their heads and the hump on their backs – their vitals remained hidden from view by the curve of the hill and once again there was no cover in front of me. I suppose I could have waited for them to move another 50-100 yards downhill and crept forward again, but that would have meant letting them out my sight for quite some time, during which they could either get a hankering to cover country and disappear, or decide to bed down just out of view so that when I popped out to look I'd scare them into the next county. I typically lean towards keeping an eye on my prey and aggressively taking matters into my own hands whenever I can, rather than leave things to fickle fate.

I needed just a few feet of elevation, and I needed it fast. While keeping an eye on the sheep to make sure I didn't skyline myself amongst the trunk and branches of the weathered juniper, I quickly scrambled 4-feet above the ground. It was almost too easy. I laid my rifle across a stout branch for a rest and studied the rams. One was definitely smaller than the other two and I immediately ruled him out. The other two appeared to be comparable in size and it was difficult to determine which was bigger. I studied them for several minutes: one was grazing at a sharp angle away from me, while the other was dead (no pun intended) broadside - it actually became an easy decision.



Death from above, thanks to this tree – photo taken from the rams' position

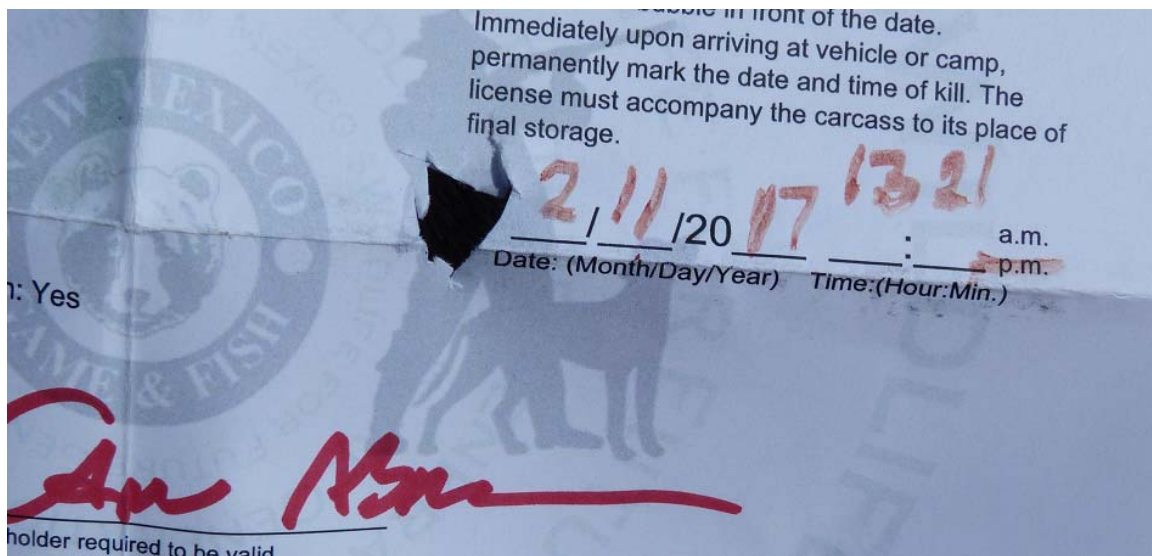
The instant I made up my mind, I flicked off the safety and squeezed the trigger. The rams bolted out of my sight at the report of my rifle. For grins I ranged the distance: 42-yards.

Slithering back down the tree, I crept ahead on full alert. Within a dozen steps, horns floated into view moving toward me and I immediately squatted. A ram's head popped above the grass as he nervously came my way, perhaps unable to determine which direction my shot had come from. Then a second ram appeared, followed by a third. My mind raced. From far and near I had seen only 3 rams. But I dared not shoot again until I confirmed the results of my shot from the tree - besides, how could I have missed at such close range?

The rams were on full alert and I was directly in their path. Camouflage can only do so much and at 20-yards, this oddly-shaped lump in the dry grass must not have appeared quite right to them. They veered away and broke into a lope before disappearing. I knew that if for some reason there wasn't a dead sheep ahead of me, these rams would be difficult, if not impossible, to relocate.

Rising to my feet, I continued downhill and within seconds was relieved to see my ram lying just ahead. I surmised that seeing my ram keel over had probably spooked the others back in my direction. It was still amazed that I had never seen the 4th ram and it hammered home the need to thoroughly follow up on the results of any shot before making hasty decisions on other animals.

I quickly notched my tag and recorded the required information with a cactus quill and readily available "red ink".



Sweet success, written in blood

After admiring the stocky ram, I snapped some photos and peeled the hide. It was hot and there was no shade nearby, but any cooling was better than body temperature. The ram was too heavy to drag by myself, so all I could do was work as quickly as possible to get the meat trimmed off the bone and into game bags. A scraggly catclaw bush provided a little respite from the sun, so I laid each bag in its meager shade and kept removing meat like a surgeon gone berserk: my trusty Havalon knife making quick work of each choice cut. I was too far from the truck to justify saving the entire hide, but kept the front half for my taxidermist friend, who can often put hides to use when hunters end up without a salvageable cape for one reason or another. Had I known what my backpack would feel like I might have left the hide behind but, after having gone to all the effort to save it, I was loathe to discard it at that point.

After completing the task, I peeled off my rubber gloves (presto, clean hands!) and stacked the bags of meat into my backpack. I rolled the hide and head into a bundle and stuffed it above the meat before stepping back to assess the situation. I've carried heavier loads, but I was still recovering from health issues over the past year that had me run down and out of shape. Add to the mix hilly terrain and ankle-twisting, rough limestone and cactus and it was going to be rough. Thank God for my trekking poles. I dragged my backpack to a nearby shelf, which allowed to me partially stand while buckling it on and grunted to my feet. It hurt immediately and my visions of humping it to the truck to make it home that night vanished.



Backbreaker just waiting to be hoisted

Each step was a struggle and I stopped for seated breathers at every convenient boulder, limestone shelf, and even dead yucca bundles! I made it down the sheep ridge and up the opposite side, but realized that my hike-to-rest ratio was spiraling towards 1:1. At that rate it would take forever to reach the truck, so I swallowed my pride and resolved to jettison half my load and make two trips. I set a goal for the next rock shelf before unloading, and took a long swig of tepid water - which came to an abrupt halt. I had been drinking a lot of water but still was surprised to have finished 70-ounces. No matter, I had carried a filter and could replenish at a nearby cattle trough marked on my GPS.

With relief, I dropped my pack on the shelf and removed one bag of meat plus the hide and horns. As evening loomed the temperature was much cooler. A nearby bush would provide shade until sunset. I was chagrined that even my half load was more than I wanted but pushed on for the oasis promised to be “only” half a mile away by my GPS.

Upon my arrival I found no sign of a cattle drinker. I didn't know whether the grazing lessee had changed the watering layout in the years since I'd been to the area, or if I simply had recorded an errant point, but my mouth was parched and the letdown was brutal. Had I known that there would be no water I would have rationed my supply but it was too late. Although twilight had arrived, I could still see well enough to confirm that there was no water source anywhere in the vicinity. At first I considered dumping my pack and hightailing it for the truck but dismissed the thought as the cool of the evening would allow me to at least shuttle the batch I had left behind to this location before hauling one load to the truck. In fear of losing meat to nocturnal marauders, I hung the two meat bags from the branches of a massive dead juniper that had been blown over by the wind from a time when the area had been wet enough to actually support such growth.

Racing back toward my cache with an empty backpack felt like flying but despite my speed I had to break out my headlamp as darkness enveloped me. I had hoped the second load would feel lighter, but couldn't discern any difference in the weight of my backpack as I hauled it to the top of the ridge where I had cached the first. By then the temperature had dropped substantially and the stiff breeze was cold – perfect for chilling the hanging

meat. With no reason to rearrange any of my edible bounty I hastily lashed my rifle, binoculars and other miscellaneous gear I couldn't leave behind onto my backpack and took off for the truck. After a quarter mile I stumbled across a black plastic pipe and I knew that it would lead to a developed water source. Parched, and fearing I might have just passed it, I dropped my pack and followed the pipe away from my intended route for a few hundred yards, but saw no sign of a water tank. I retraced my path, grabbed my pack, and followed it in the opposite direction for another quarter mile before the radiance of the full moon revealed a dilapidated metal tank in the distance. Thankfully, I found it full of water and in no time I had filtered and sucked down 40-ounces of water, plus refilled my hydration bladder to ensure I'd have plenty for the remainder of the hike. While resting and recovering I turned off my headlamp and gobbled an energy bar, the full moon making the landscape a patchwork of brilliant open areas and harsh shadows. The breeze had died and it was very peaceful; however, miles remained before I could truly rest.

The remaining hike was uneventful and, with my dehydration staved, I marched at a steady pace with few breaks. Still it was nearly midnight when I reached the truck. I quickly put the meat on ice and spread the cape on the top of my truck to stay cool before crawling into my sleeping bag and promptly falling asleep.

I awoke early with a goal to get home in time for Robin's swimming meet to see her swim the 1,650 yard freestyle event (basically a mile) for the first time and hustled off to retrieve the second load. The meat was untouched by vermin and felt as cold as ice. Scarcely giving myself any rest breaks, I completed the haul and launched for home with no time to spare. I was thankful that I didn't have to hunt in the gale force winds that hammered me and my truck the whole drive. I made it to the pool with 30-minutes to spare. Robin had a great swim and I was grateful to have made it back to support her.

The ram ended up being the second largest I'd ever killed, and added another 75 pounds of delicious, organic, healthy meat to our freezer – thank you Lord for the killin' moon!



I daresay not many people have killed a Barbary from a tree!



Horns taping 24" make this bruiser my second largest ram!

God Bless,
Carl