

Barbary Sheep
March 24, 2017 New Mexico

Proverbs 22:6 “*Start off children in the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.*”



Robin's hunts this past season were more like camping trips than hunts. We bivied in for her deer hunt only to discover that our pre-erected tent had been flattened, likely by a bear, despite *never* having had any food in it. Thankfully we had no threat of rain and the poles weren't broken. We were able to make the best of it; however, we didn't spot any deer during her hunt. Or the bear, for which Robin held a tag and was eager for revenge.

Following that was her first bull elk hunt. By investing a lot of boot leather we finally heard a bugling bull but we were hampered by gale force wind and never did pinpoint his location or even lay eyes on him. Another hunt without a notched tag or sighting of her quarry.

Next we carved out some time for Barbary sheep early in the season. The only caveat was that Laurie would be racing that weekend so we were committed to bringing our pups. As the saying goes, it's easier to kill a sheep with two dogs in tow than by staying at home...but not by much!



Even the pups enjoyed the warmth of a campfire!

We had a great time camping and Robin enjoyed the company of our frisky pups. Although our dogs are very good at staying close to us when we take them hiking, we brought their leashes to keep them in check.

The first morning we located a couple of rams right off the bat. It seemed too easy, actually. Initially I thought we might be able to pull off a quick stalk but as we closed the

distance it became apparent that stalking with our dogs on their leashes would be a challenge. They are used to running with us and always being in the lead. Trying to stay out of sight and keep the dogs under control resembled a western rodeo.

Before we could reach reasonable shooting range the two rams arose and began feeding away, and then disappeared over the top of a nearby knob. The wind was favorable so we stalked up the ridge. The dogs went wild as we crossed fresh tracks and droppings.

With so many things that could go wrong I doubted the crazy stalk would work. I was wrestling the dogs, carrying Robin's rifle and trying to glass as we crept forward. Suddenly I caught movement a mere 50-yards ahead! I struggled to set Robin's shooting sticks while she held the dogs in check, but couldn't get her clear visibility through the nearby yuccas and at the same time keep the pups from blowing things. I was amazed that the sheep hadn't heard our ruckus, but before long one of the rams stared quizzically and began to walk toward us stiffly on high alert. I pulled the dogs back and told Robin to stay ready, hoping that the curious ram would walk into her lap and give her a point-blank shot. After several minutes with no ram, I moved up to Robin and confirmed that the sheep had left. I glimpsed them one more time over the far lip of the small mesa, but they vanished by the time Robin peeked over with her rifle.



"What, you blaming me for not tagging a sheep?!"

It was exciting to have had a close call, but a little disappointing to know that if we hadn't been hindered by the pups Robin would have likely filled her tag. Never the less we sat and ate a snack, and then got right back to glassing.

Later in the day we located a ram bedded on a shelf opposite our ridge. His location lent itself to stalking much better than the prior ones and we approached out of sight and got into shooting position relatively quickly. We were partly exposed during the final stalk and it was tricky trying to crawl behind meager cover while dragging the dogs along.



We reached the end of our cover and found ourselves a little farther from the ram than we had hoped, but well within rifle range. As we prepared to get Robin set up on the shooting sticks a rain squall blew in suddenly and the ram stood up and stared in our direction. We found ourselves scrambling and battling the elements at the same time. Robin lined up on the ram and said she was ready. I had my hands full with our dogs on my lap while holding my Vortex binoculars tight to my eyes.

Robin's rifle cracked and the dogs lurched, so I wasn't able to watch for a hit. I was back on him quickly, but saw no indication that he'd been injured as he trotted directly away from us without a limp or any hesitation. Robin lamented that she had been nervous as she thought he was about to run away, plus the rain had made her uncomfortable. The rain died as we gathered our gear and made our way to his location to search for blood. The dogs certainly smelled him as they excitedly sniffed his bed and tracks, but we didn't find any hair or drops of blood despite following his tracks for over a quarter mile. We continued glassing and ultimately resigned ourselves to the fact that Robin had missed. I consoled her that it's tough to stay focused and shoot accurately when factors play havoc with our nerves, and all she could do was use this as a learning experience.



That opportunity turned out to be the last on that trip, as we didn't see any other sheep over the following 2 days of hard hunting. We retreated home and dreamed of next time.



Heading back to the truck

On our next foray we were joined by a friend who also held a tag but had never hunted sheep. We agreed to give Robin the priority since it takes her a little longer to get set up to shoot, but our goal was to pull off a double whammy.

We met up late at night and readied ourselves to find sheep in the early chill the following morning. I chided Robin "Is it OK with you if you both get a sheep today so we can make it back for evening church service tomorrow?"

On our drive down Robin and I discussed her weekend goals. We had plenty of meat in the freezer so this would be a fine time to hold out for a big one. On the other hand, as a young hunter often the priority is simply to get something – heck even as a seasoned hunter I frequently feel that way! After chewing it over Robin decided it was important to her to get a sheep and she wouldn't pass up a shot opportunity at any mature animal, whether ewe or ram. I could certainly understand her position after having not seeing a deer or elk on her previous two hunts.

The wind had a bite to it, making it uncomfortable to glass. We separated a little to gain different vantages and did our best to keep from shivering as we tried to locate some game. Robin tucked in behind some rocks to keep warm at the expense of losing some view of country to glass, while I suffered in the wind. Before long I spotted a handful of sheep feeding, including a couple of decent rams. I quickly set Robin to keeping tabs on them and went to round up Don. He couldn't believe how quickly I had found some, but what can I say, sometimes things fall into place.

We returned to Robin and I quickly made a plan. It was easy, really, as we had decent terrain and vegetation for cover so we pretty much just charged toward them to close the distance. Most of the time we were able to keep tabs on the feeding flock. Just before we got into range the sheep fed away from us toward some rocky benches. For each yard we gained, they moved a few feet until they slipped beyond some limestone ledges. Drat: it becomes more difficult to relocate game once it's out of sight.



Barbary herd just before disappearing around an outcrop

We had dropped out of the chilly wind and warmed up so quickly shed a layer of clothing and stashed it in our backpacks, then stealthily crept forward, hoping to spy the sheep slightly below our elevation. I took the lead and used my binoculars often. We covered nearly one hundred yards before a tan shape caught my eye immediately over a small rise tens of yards in front of us. It looked like a stone, many of which were the same color as a sheep. I focused my binoculars and immediately thought “yep, a rock” when suddenly it moved! Yikes! This sheep was only 30-yards away with its head down feeding and only the top of its back visible.

I quickly motioned for Robin and Don to get down and retreated a few steps to them, where I frantically whispered that the sheep were close. I began readying Robin’s rifle to get her prepared. Don was a little more exited and I heard the rapid metallic chatter of a shell being chambered. Unfortunately the sheep heard it too and popped into view staring at us oddly-shaped blobs cowering in the stubby desert grass. Don whispered “Can I shoot?”

I glanced at him with his rifle readied and evaluated Robin’s chances. I still had to get the rifle into her hands and support it so she could be steady enough to shoot. Had we been alone we might have been able to pull it off by moving slowly, but I worried that the situation would become a total loss if the sheep sprinted off and took his fellows with him. I reluctantly told Robin to plug her ears and gave Don the go ahead to take the sheep.

The ram disappeared at the retort of Don’s rifle, and I grabbed Robin by the hand and scooted ahead in hopes that the herd might pause long enough to give her an opportunity. I knew at such close range Don’s sheep was dead and didn’t even worry about looking for it. I was still in “hunt mode” and tried to keep a low profile as we moved; however, Don was anxious to find his sheep and rushed ahead. I glimpsed the sheep on the far slope but they spotted his movement and began to sprint. I planted Robin’s shooting sticks and she dropped her rifle into its cradle but they never slowed before dropping over the horizon. So much for a double whammy.

Don's ram was dead as a stone and we congratulated him on his fine trophy, knowing that it would be fine table fare too. We snapped a few trophy photos and Don graciously turned us loose to look for sheep while he butchered and packed his to the truck.



Solid ram for a first time Barbary hunter – congrats Don!

Robin and I took off in the direction of the herd, but in my heart I knew it was unlikely that they would stop running anytime soon. Instead I concentrated on finding others that might not have been spooked by the noise of a single gunshot.

We crossed ridge after ridge but despite finding very fresh droppings no sheep were to be found. Regardless there are always neat things to see in the outdoors and I snapped plenty of photos along the way.



Yucca preparing to bloom



Interesting fossil



Camouflaged cactus tucked into the rocks



Stone arrow that Robin thought indicated "Barbary sheep...that way"



A perfectly square rock



"L" is for Laurie...we miss you honey!

By midday we hadn't found any sheep so crawled into the shade of a large bush to glass, eat some lunch and take a breather.

During our sit I spied some sheep bedded far away at the base of a rock outcrop. They appeared to be ewes, but Robin wasn't picky and wanted to try for them. We would have to detour around some large canyons to get to them. After refueling and resting we were ready to go, so we prepared our backpacks and I took one last look around before leaving.

Yikes! A half dozen sheep lay bedded on the far side of the valley right in front of us! Somehow I had overlooked them during my glassing and I was chagrined to have nearly missed them in the yellowish tan rocks. We immediately changed our plan and decided to try and close the distance so Robin could shoot directly across the canyon.

We retreated to get some cover and then crawled onto a finger across from the sheep, which all appeared to be ewes. Unfortunately we were still over 300-yards away. Doable, but we prefer to be 200-yards or less. We were able to crawl into the shadow of a large boulder and had a relatively flat place to sit so we studied them and pondered our options. Although most of the sheep were bedded a couple were up and grazing. As we watched them I got the feeling that they might move toward us.

After waiting for 30-minutes with almost no activity the sheep alarm clock must have gone off because they all arose and began leapfrogging toward us rather quickly. We went from dozing to scrambling to get Robin's rifle ready and her shooting tripod steady. The sheep worked their way along the opposite ridge and gradually closed the distance. When they got directly across from us they would be less than 150-yards so we watched and waited. I told Robin to keep following them in her scope and let them come as close as possible. Depending where they meandered they might even get within 90-yards.

Occasionally I'd whisper the range: 290...275...260.

When the lead ewe got to 240 yards she suddenly turned straight uphill. Drat, that was a little farther than we were hoping for. I quickly explained to Robin that it looked like the herd was going to change direction and not get any closer so she would have to shoot if any turned broadside and she felt comfortable. Her longest shot to date had been 209 yards. I heard her take a few deep breaths as she tried to prepare herself.

I glued my Vortex binoculars to my eye sockets and carefully watched the sheep. One turned broadside facing to our right. I described it to Robin and she confirmed it was in her crosshairs. I told her she could shoot if she felt good. She whispered that she was going to and I watched the sheep closely. Crack! Her .243 echoed across the canyon and I saw dust fly. Hoping it was from the bullet passing through the sheep I kept my binoculars trained on the ewe as she wheeled and trotted away with the rest of the herd in tow. I didn't discern any flinch from impact, blood, or limping as we watched them scamper several hundred yards until disappearing.

Robin didn't think she shot well because she had become nervous when she had to quickly get ready to shoot. I consoled her that controlling one's nerves was one of the most difficult components of hunting and we all struggle with it. For whatever reason she had missed again. It happens. I've done it. We've all done it.

I glassed the original group we had spotted, still bedded far away. "The good news, kiddo, is that we have more sheep to go after and our route will take us directly along the path of the one you shot at so we can double-check for blood on the way". With that we sipped some water, ate a quick snack for energy, and began our long hike around the valley along which we had been perched. We found no evidence that Robin had hit the ewe.

It took us over an hour to get onto the same ridge where the band of sheep had been and unfortunately they had been out of view for most of that time. We could only press forward on faith that they remained in the same position as we kept our eyes and binoculars active in case they or others popped up somewhere else.

We approached the last known location of the sheep and dropped our backpacks to creep forward. Due to the terrain we wouldn't be able to see where they had been bedded until we were within 50-yards. That's great for archery, but for rifle hunting I prefer to be 100-150 yards away because sound and movement aren't as hypercritical. In our case where getting Robin set up to shoot can take a little while, being too close can be tricky.

We peeked over and around whatever vegetation and rocks we could use for cover, but it was apparent that the sheep had moved. The trouble was we had no idea if they were within a few yards or a mile away and had to proceed as if they could be tucked anywhere. We kept silent and moved slowly as we diligently searched for the missing sheep.

After scouring the area we were convinced that they were no longer in the vicinity. It was time to branch out and expand our search. I took the lead as we crept over a small saddle, which revealed a large drainage and a vast amount of country to view.

Within seconds of cresting the rocks the afternoon sun lit up a group of Barbary sheep like a beacon and they were close! I hissed to Robin and quickly scooted the both of us into a shaded depression: a veritable stone foxhole that rendered us invisible. I quickly ranged the sheep at 160-yards and feeding toward us. This was shaping up to be a slam dunk!

The rocks in front of us gave us plenty of cover to set Robin's shooting sticks, don our earplugs and situate her rifle at the ready position. During our preparation the sheep had closed another 20-yards and continued toward us. At 90 yards they disappeared into a depression, but there was no way they could slip away from us. I told Robin to watch for them to reappear while I scanned more broadly in case they abruptly changed course and materialized where we least expected.

Robin hissed that they were back in view and I easily picked them up a scant 70-yards away. This was exactly what Robin needed as a confidence booster after her misses earlier in the hunt. All of the sheep appeared to be ewes, with a couple having small lambs in tow. Robin wisely whispered that she didn't want to shoot a ewe with a lamb. It was pretty easy to tell the pairs because both of the ewes with lambs trailed the other three by a dozen or more yards. I replied that the first sheep was by itself and to keep it in her sights until it turned broadside. The first paused to nibble at a bush and the second sheep passed it and turned to present a perfect shot angle. I told Robin to shoot it if she was ready and I heard her take a deep breath and begin to exhale. Boom! Her ewe stumbled and fell off the rock. We heard it tumbling through the vegetation below and immediately knew it was a clean kill.

The remaining sheep darted about at high alert, but then began staring down where Robin's ewe had fallen. They ended up milling around in front of us for over 15-minutes. Unfortunately I left my good camera behind with our backpacks so the memory of the sheep and the cute antics of the lambs will have to suffice, but we kept silent and enjoyed watching. The photos I was able to get with my cell phone were pretty grainy, but good enough to identify a sheep.

Robin whispered "If only those sheep Don shot or the ones I missed earlier would have stood around like this I could have gotten one." Darn true. And we'd have a few less miles to pack the meat to the truck. Oh well it was a success and later Robin recapped how exciting it had been to watch the sheep and their cute lambs for so long at close range, which we wouldn't have experienced if she had gotten a sheep earlier.



Ewe looking down “What happened to her?”



Sheep at 70-yards

Eventually the sheep got tired of wondering why Robin's ewe had taken a dive over the cliff and meandered away. They headed up in the direction of our backpacks and Robin wondered if there would be tracks beside our gear when we returned to it.

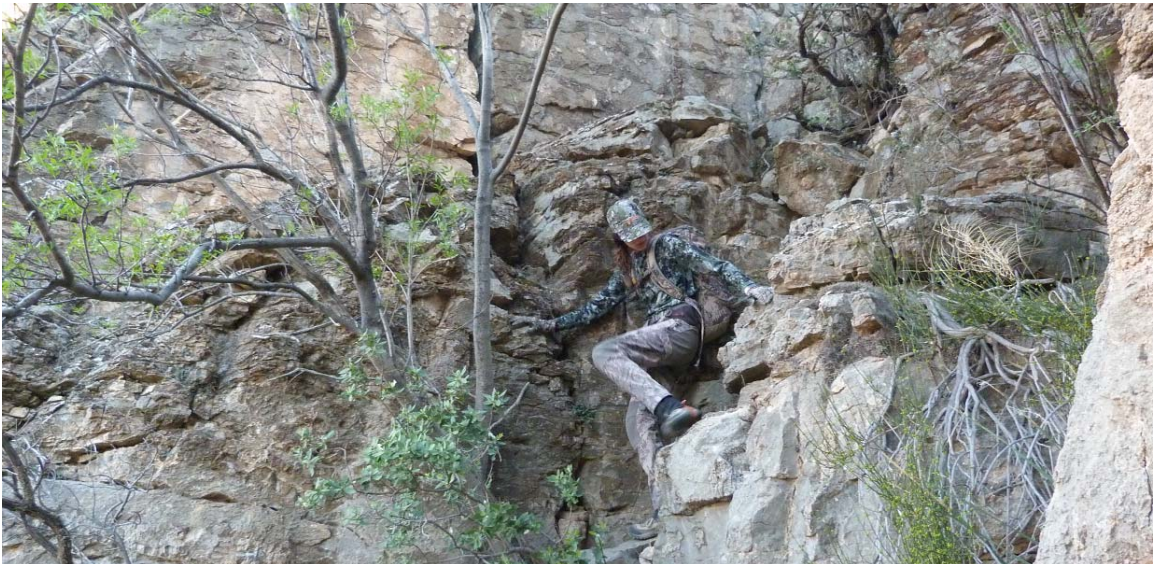
We knew that retrieving her sheep would be demanding given the steep terrain. I volunteered to retrieve our backpacks while Robin evaluated a route for us to descend.

Upon my return I reported no sheep tracks near our gear, and Robin reported that she didn't think it was possible to climb down to where her sheep was. I already had an idea of where we could descend and asked if she had looked down a particular chute. She said it looked impossible. I asked her to take a look with me. Indeed it looked bad. I asked if she had studied the next chute over and she reported that was also impossible. We checked it out and it really was impossible! Which meant the first chute had to be the one. I told Robin that looking impossible and actually being impossible are two different things. At least it supported some vegetation to hold onto and to catch us if we slipped.

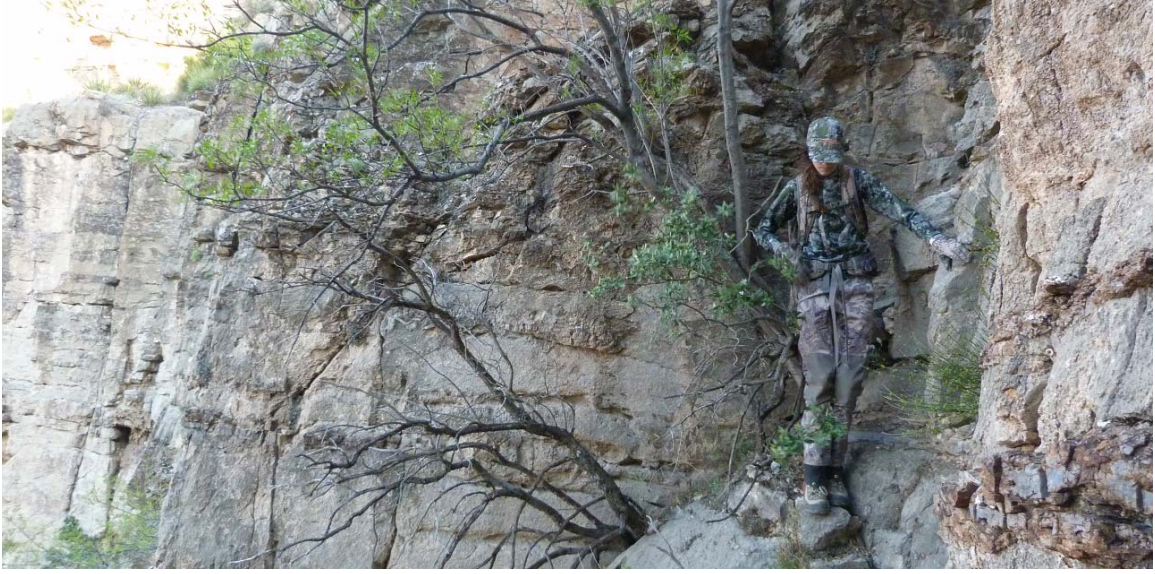
I told Robin I'd take the lead and for her to follow me. I warned her to not kick any loose rocks onto me and to holler if she needed me to catch her.



Photos can't do it justice, but that first step is a doozie



The next hundred or more steps were doozies too





Once we started Robin realized that the climb wasn't really all that dangerous. We had plenty of handholds and enough vegetation to grab. It was rigorous though. We discovered that her sheep had tumbled farther than expected and ended up descending nearly one hundred vertical feet before reaching her trophy. Robin notched her tag while I dragged the ewe to an area slightly less steep for photos and butchering.



Another hard earned trophy for Robin and Clarice



Sweet success and delicious meat for our family

By the time we finished loading the meat into our backpacks it was nearly dark. At least the temperature had cooled and would be pleasant for hiking. We had texted Robin's success to Don, along with our coordinates, and he agreed to head our way to help carry

our load to the truck. He texted that he was “only” half a mile from us, but Robin rightly quipped that the half mile was straight up! We gulped some water and hoisted our heavy backpacks. I must say the first 15-20 minutes of our journey was about the toughest packing I’ve ever endured. It was akin to climbing a rickety ladder with laden backpacks. I had Robin take the lead so I could boost her when needed and be ready to catch her if she lost her footing (which she never did). She kicked one rock on me but gave me enough warning that I avoided the brunt of it. The final chute was the toughest. We spread our arms and legs to each side of the rock chimney for the final ascent. It wasn’t life threatening, but pretty hairy. Robin pressed on like a trooper and we made it over the lip and laid on flat ground for a well deserved breather. Plenty of work remained but it would be easier than that first painful effort.

We donned our headlamps and resumed our march. About 15-minutes later we spotted the light from Don’s headlamp as he headed toward, but was another half hour before we met up with him. He congratulated Robin and offered to redistribute our load. He took the bulk of mine and I took some weight from Robin’s pack to make the next couple of hours of hiking more reasonable. As usual our hiking sticks helped tremendously.

During our final rest stop we sat and turned off our headlamps. The stars sparkled brightly and the sound of crickets...and silence...was soothing and peaceful. Don commented that he hadn’t started hunting until he was an adult and although none of his other family members had hunted, he was getting his daughters started. He was amazed at Robin’s experience and the terrain she was capable of tackling at such a young age.

Robin checked her watch and proclaimed “You know I’ve only stayed up until midnight one time in my life that wasn’t related to hunting!” That’s my kiddo.

We dropped our burdens at the truck at 12:30am, cooked a hot meal and fell into our bedrolls. What a day. Like a 17-hour day. But we had pulled off a double. And we made it home in time for church that night. File another notch in your gun barrel kiddo. I can’t wait to do it again.

Love,
Daddy