

Barbary Sheep
March 21, 2020 New Mexico

Psalm 90:10 “Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.”



Amidst the initial panic, misinformation, confusion, turmoil and toilet paper hoarding surrounding what has become known as the COVID pandemic I figured “social distancing” and Barbary sheep hunting were pretty much synonymous, so made plans to get away from it all and head into the rugged desert southwest last spring. Although most people in New Mexico were hunkered down in their homes, it wasn’t in my nature to cower in fear. God knows the number of my days, but beyond taking precautions to wash my hands after filling with gas I’d wager it was safer for me to go sheep hunting than to stay in Albuquerque. None of us are going to live forever and although I’m not advocating undue risk, we may as well live today rather than cower in fear worrying about a tomorrow that may never come.

Although I had visions of long sweeping horns, our freezer was beginning to look a little bare after sending 200 pounds of meat back to Alaska with my mom and sister after their timely visit just before travel ground to a screeching halt. Our Alaskan family had a rough 2019 hunting season and plenty of mouths to feed up north, so with their larder empty, we arranged to share our bounty. In hindsight our timing was perfect. My mom and sister were able to watch Robin compete in her high school State swimming meet and made it back home just before store meat shelves were stripped bare as the frenzied panic began.

With my season winding down, it was time to get serious about filling my tag, and any meat would be welcome, even if small rams or ewes were the best I could find. My foray involved exploring a new piece of country that looked promising. Maps are one thing, but one never really knows until boots are on the ground, so off I went. The weather was odd for NM: overcast and foggy, which made it difficult to glass very far.



Atypical NM weather – and this was some of the better visibility!

I covered a lot of country, but although the terrain and vegetation looked about right, I failed to turn up any sheep, or even sign. Fresh air, exercise and sparse mule deer sightings were all I managed to find that first day.



Desolate but starkly beautiful



Typical country

Later that evening a silent hunter swooped over me to alight on a nearby rock outcrop and allow me to snap a few photos. Over the years I've seen great horned owls all around New Mexico, and often heard them hooting in the evenings. I've even had them leapfrog from tree to tree along with me as I hiked before dark, apparently hoping I'd kick up a rabbit for dinner.



Another hunter

The next day I moved a few miles and charted another loop through likely looking terrain. The weather remained cool, making for comfortable hiking conditions, and within an hour the clouds began to burn off, allowing me to put my binoculars to use. Late morning, I spied a large herd of elk on the other side of a canyon. I was a little surprised, as the desert habitat seemed a little marginal for elk, but I've seen elk in plenty of oddball places before, so it wasn't entirely unexpected.



Non-target animals always keep things entertaining

Mid-afternoon I finally crossed fresh Barbary sheep tracks and droppings; eureka! The tracks were relatively small, likely a ewe, but it was a start.



Fresh track!



Fresh droppings!

After crossing into the next canyon, I spied an animal skylined and based on its color immediately recognized it as a sheep! My binoculars revealed a ewe and yearling lamb, although well out of range. Within a few minutes they hopped over the horizon, but the sighting confirmed I was finally in sheep country!



Ewe and lamb

I worked my way over to where they had disappeared and carefully glassed the area. Initially I didn't turn anything up, but after several minutes of careful glassing I located a medium-sized ram and 3 ewes perched on a bench partway up the side of the opposite side of the valley. There appeared to be plenty of vegetation and terrain to allow me to close the distance, so I began studying an approach route through my binoculars, including identifying landmarks and cover. Satisfied, I was just about to move when a

small herd of cattle appeared below me, galloping along the valley floor. Having no idea what had caused them to spook, I quickly scanned behind them in hopes a mountain lion was on their tail (for which I held a tag) but failed to locate any danger. Despite traveling well below the sheep, the cattle must have put the fear of God in them, because the Barbs stared at the stampeding herd and then turned tail and sprinted over the far horizon. Drat!

I spent the next several hours trying to relocate them or find others. Eventually I found myself back in the vicinity where I had originally seen the sheep and spied a lone ewe bedded on the tip of a rocky cliff. I had already mentally charted a route that would allow me to stalk within rifle range of the area so immediately began to close the distance.

As far as stalks go, this one was relatively straight forward. By keeping low and using a meandering arroyo and occasional bushes to my advantage, I approached within 200 yards relatively quickly. Still hoping for a big ram, I scanned the surrounding area but failed to locate any other sheep. I was able to lie prone for a solid rest and after watching the ewe for nearly 10 minutes I decided with sunset looming this would be my last opportunity to put some meat in the freezer this season and gently squeezed the trigger. The sheep slumped where she lay. One shot, one kill. Just the way I like it.

I discovered the ewe had an old bullet hole through the base of her left horn, which I imagine must have really rung her gong, but it was long since healed. I made short work of photos and butchering, but it was still well after dark by the time I began hiking toward the truck. I have a pretty good sense of direction, but with the cooler temperature the fog became thick as the proverbial pea soup and obscured the stars. Even my high-powered headlamp only revealed a small bubble around me. Between my phone GPS not tracking very well and the limited visibility I felt like I was wandering all over the countryside. My return trek ended up being closer to 5 miles, rather than the 3 like I had been expecting, and I was pooped by the time I reached my truck.

In these crazy times a lot of exercise with the bonus of a bunch of burger meat for the freezer was just what the doctor ordered!





"Hole in the Horn" ewe