

## Barbary Sheep 2021, New Mexico

**Proverbs 27:17 “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”**

Late winter 2021 refused to release its grip of cold weather, and ice storms continued well into Barbary sheep season. For the first time my buddy Brian and I both held sheep tags and we looked forward to chasing these wily nomads of the badlands together. We had narrowed down areas to hunt and boldly headed out in an attempt to find some despite the dismal forecast.



Chilly conditions caused moisture from clouds to freeze as it blew against vegetation!



The desert looked like a white Christmas...several months later than typical

Waterproof boots, gaiters and layers of warm clothes helped keep the weather at bay, while a tent and heater staved off the bitter cold at night. Not only did the heater have its own low oxygen alarm, but I brought our home battery powered carbon monoxide detector as a backup. Thankfully, we never had any issues but better safe than sorry. The condensation inside the tent was a bit of a challenge and the frost line on the tent sidewalls hovered right about the level of our cots, so it was no luxury stay, but we endured.

It took a couple of days to locate sheep, and one of the first we came across was a small ram. I urged Brian to hold out for a bigger one so early in the season. The ram ended up trotting by us at 15-yards and would have made a great archery trophy, but we had hopes of something bigger. Brian lamented he might regret heeding my advice, but in the end, it paid off...although I'm getting ahead of myself.



Young ram at close range



Young ram at close range





One day after the snow melted, we spotted a couple of bull elk

Neat fossils abound in sheep country; some small enough to carry home and others so big a photo has to suffice. Most of the fossils are seashells, located far from the ocean and over a mile above sea level. It makes one wonder how they ended up where they did. Perhaps old Noah could shed some light on the subject...



One of the larger, impressive fossils we happened across

Mile after mile fell beneath our boots, as we averaged over 10-miles daily. The rough terrain took its toll and each night we returned to camp tuckered out. Thankfully, during the winter months the nights are long, so we were able to catch up on sleep and recovery before rolling out to do it all over again.

Finding sheep proved difficult, but after a handful of days Brian finally spotted a herd far off. We charted their location and realized they might be on private land, but given they were the only sheep in sight and were generally moving in our direction, we felt it worthwhile to at least get closer and assess the situation. Once we cut the distance, it was apparent they were on private land, just barely out of reach. One ram was outstanding

and dwarfed the others in the group. We debated leaving them in search of others, but each time we prepared to retreat, some of the herd would move just a little bit closer and offer hope they might cross onto public land. We needed them to come about a quarter mile our way, but they traveled at a snail's pace: feeding, bedding, and milling about seemingly without rhyme or reason. After hours of potentially wasted time, it finally appeared they would step across the imaginary line delineating public boundary. We prepared for a shot and ranged the distance to a bench that would put them solidly on legal ground.

Brian announced he'd be happy to take any of the rams and suggested I shoot the biggest one and he'd select another. I would have nothing of it: he had spotted the herd in the first place and if anyone shot the big one it would be him. We had a brief discussion about who would be shooting at the large ram until I convinced him it wasn't going to be me. I also made up my mind to pass up the other rams. Packing one to the truck would be plenty of work for the two of us, so I insisted he shoot while I kept tabs through binoculars. I mused: many people would have been salivating over the ram and arguing their case to be the shooter. What a blessing to have an unselfish hunting partner! We each continually help each other succeed and success for one is a success for both.



A nice group of sheep

Soon some of the herd reached public land and we knew it would only be a matter of time before the big ram joined them. Brian readied his rifle, and we double-checked the distance. I regularly called out the ram's position to be sure he was lined up on the correct one. It took several minutes for the big ram to step clear of other animals and provide a broadside shot, but when he finally did, Brian capitalized. The remaining animals milled around, and Brian again asked whether I wanted to shoot any of the others. I opted to skip the opportunity and simply relish in Brian's success. I knew it would be a tough pack to the truck and his beast would be more than enough work for the day.

We let the remaining sheep wander off before approaching Brian's trophy. Despite having studied the ram for hours, we were surprised to discover one horn was broken off. However, it didn't diminish the trophy: the horn mass, chaps, and sheer body size embodied an amazing achievement. Later the full horn taped out to just a shade under 30", eclipsing my biggest 28" trophy by a good margin. What a success!

Despite shooting the ram well before sunset, after trophy photos and butchering were complete, the light was failing. With heavy packs, we attacked the long, grueling hike. At first, we chit-chatted and reveled in Brian's achievement, but after several hours we were reduced to silence, simply forcing ourselves to put one foot in front of the other. At one point Brian stumbled and tweaked something in his hip. We redistributed some weight

and I lashed his rifle to my pack to help as best I could. Ultimately, we arrived at the truck after midnight, utterly spent. One ram down, one to go!



What a brute...and I'm not talking about the guy behind the sheep



Pretty sunset, but still a long hike in the dark before us to reach the truck

Needless to say, we slept in that morning. With the overnight temperature below freezing, the meat was ice cold to the touch when we awoke. We cached it in coolers and set off to locate another ram. Despite our late start and tired legs, we still covered some 8-miles that day. We spotted a few deer and some Barbary ewes, but no rams.





Even non-game species are entertaining to see

Over the next few days Brian massaged and stretched his hip at every resting/glassing stop but began to limp noticeably and was in obvious pain. Failing to locate any more sheep I suggested we call it a wrap and head for home; one monster was a tremendous success, and I had no regrets passing up the others. Brian admonished me, "I'll rest up in camp, but you're hunting tomorrow. I'll monitor my satellite messenger. When you get one down, I'll come help you pack it out." What a great friend!

The next morning Brian wished me well and I headed into the desert with a vague plan for the day. It was a little lonely being solo, but I sent location messages to Brian periodically so he could keep tabs on my progress. I scanned seemingly amazing sheep country, but it was devoid of any game. Each new vista offered new hope, but I failed to anything turn up for hours. I found a few shed mule deer antlers, but no live animals.



Mule deer shed antler





Pair of mule deer shed antlers

Nearing the farthest point of my intended loop I scanned the final large canyon before private land. Only one small drainage remained out of sight and I balked at crossing to the other side only for the slim chance some sheep were hidden in the unseen draw. Still, I'm loathe to leave any stone unturned, so I reluctantly began the ridiculous descent.



Keep going or call it quits? Leave no stone unturned...press on...

I determined that while time consuming and difficult, by crossing the canyon and peeking into the next draw at least I wouldn't look back and wonder "what if?" It took me longer than anticipated to reach the other side and begin to scan the small drainage, but immediately it looked like just the place where sheep might hole up and remain undisturbed. Even so, when I glimpsed tan forms moving in the heat waves, I nearly had to pinch myself to be sure my eyes weren't playing tricks on me. I spotted at least 3 sheep and given the wind direction I immediately backed off and skirted the near side of the ridge to keep my scent away and approach from above for a better view and assessment.

Conditions for my approach were ideal: a steady breeze cooperated, and the terrain provided good cover. Plus, I could see the far side of the drainage was empty, so the sheep had to be below me somewhere. I slowly crept ahead, dropping elevation, and

employing my binoculars to relocate the animals. Soon I reached a rock outcrop with a large yucca on top, which provided a perfect vantage for me to view the valley floor while remaining concealed.

I located 3 ewes and 2 rams tucked in the drainage bottom. The ewes browsed while the rams wrestled and butted heads. I'd watched Barbary rams "fight" once before and these two employed the same tactics. They would stand side by side, head beside rump, and "hook" their horn over the other's hips; tugging, pushing, and testing each other's mettle. Every once in while they would separate briefly, occasionally thump their horns together, then resume their push/pull contest. I wished I had my camera to video their antics, but I had left it a dozen yards behind me with my backpack.

Neither ram was close to the size of Brian's, but both were of reasonable size. With plenty of time to spare I studied them carefully and identified the bigger of the two. I also scanned the area thoroughly in hopes of turning up an even bigger ram but couldn't find any others. In reality, the bigger ram wasn't noticeably larger than some of the rams I had passed up from Brian's herd, but it was 5 days and 40 foot-miles later and we hadn't spotted any rams of this caliber since. I was ready to fill my tag and the setup was perfect: a mere 150-yards distant and a solid rock outcrop upon which to rest my rifle in prone position. After watching the rams tussle for 10-minutes and confirming nothing larger lurked nearby I waited for them to separate and when the bigger one stopped broadside, my trusty .300 barked and he dropped like a stone. The ewes startled and began trotting away but the remaining ram initially acted like he was the boss and had defeated his fallen foe. He headbutted and kicked the lifeless ram several times before ultimately deciding a retreat after the ewes a more prudent action.



Perfect shot setup to my ram below





My ram where he fell

This ram falls somewhere in the middle of my trophies, horn length being about 24", but I was tickled. Thanks in part to Brian's encouragement I had persevered and would be adding the final meat of the season to our freezer. I sent Brian a location message and shared my success. He was thrilled and replied he was on his way.

I took photos, relished in the moment, and enjoyed the nice weather while I trimmed meat from bone and loaded my backpack. I charted a return route that would be slightly longer but avoid the numerous ascents and descents I had undertaken to get where I was. One major climb out of the valley and then a winding route which generally followed ridgelines. It would be a heavy load, but I didn't want to make the climb twice, so stuffed my backpack to the gills and began the ascent.



Sheep always look bigger and more impressive from behind



Good chaps on this ram

Once I reached the top of the hill, I took a seat on a dead yucca and was surprised to discover Brian had already arrived! What a great partner! I filled him in with the full story while we divvied up the load, and then we began hiking. The weather was stellar, and we weren't in any hurry, so we chatted and took advantage of frequent rest breaks. Brian's hip was still bothering him, so he stretched and massaged it regularly, but he was able to carry a good part of the load and save me from making a second trip.

We had to break out the headlamps for the final 30-minutes but reached camp at a far more reasonable hour than we had after packing out Brian's' ram.

What an incredible hunt! Another double whammy for me and Brian, and another successful adventure under our belts. I later chided him that my ram at 2x24" was bigger than his at 30"+17", but it was all in good fun; we both came away with trophies. We certainly bring out the best in each other, pushing each other, encouraging each other, and helping each other. Praise God!





My well-earned ram, and a dandy one to boot



Final sunset in our successful sheep season