

Ibex
February 21-22, 2013 New Mexico

Psalm 18:30 “As for God, His way is perfect. The Lord’s word is flawless; He shields all who take refuge in him”

When NM Game & Fish announced an opportunity to hunt female/immature (F/IM) ibex as population control, my initial thought was “sign me up!”

However, after pondering it for weeks, and hearing that over 1,000 tags had been sold, I began to question the wisdom of participating in the potential circus.

As the hunt date loomed, my close hunting buddy spurred me to consider the hunt as more of a personal challenge. Adding to the allure was the quirk that each hunter could kill 2 F/IM ibex and any hunter who had their 2-ibex limit checked by G&F would be entered into an incentive drawing for a trophy (billy) ibex tag. The hunt would open on a Thursday and be shut down when a quota of 125 females (nannies) were killed. My guess was that the hunt wouldn’t last beyond the first weekend.

With my wife’s blessing and no work commitments, I purchased my tag the day before season. I was taken aback when I asked to purchase a license at the local G&F office. The response was “for the war zone?” followed by “well, if you want us to take your money we will...but you know we’ve sold over 1,200 tags”. Ouch, that didn’t sound good, but I was already committed.

In what has become typical fashion I hit the road after loading my truck and buttoning everything up on the home front. 9:30PM sharp, with over 4-hours of driving ahead of me. Ouch. I downed a PURE Energy as I rolled south. On the drive I encountered sleet, hail and snow. Ouch.

I pulled into my predetermined parking spot about 2AM after passing a couple of camps. The ground was covered with a skiff of snow and wind was howling with overcast skies. I hastily arranged my backpack, food, water, clothes, etc. and curled up in the front seat for a catnap before starting my hike at 4:30am with the intent of reaching the top of the mountain range before 6:30am shooting light.

I layered up, slammed another PURE Energy and a breakfast shake and started marching by headlight. The climb was slippery and the blowing snow and clouds made navigation sketchy. Never the less I was able to stay fairly true to course and reached my goal saddle at 6:30am. Although the sun had risen somewhere to the east, visibility was limited to less than 100-yards and the western wind was brutal.



Note moisture from clouds frozen on west face of every obstacle – up to 2” thick!

Naively thinking that I was the only fool in the area I began to slowly search for ibex. BOOM! I jumped at the first volley of gunfire than 15-minutes after shooting hours! What could they possibly see in this soup? BOOM, BOOM the pounding continued. Apparently somebody, somewhere below could see critters. After hearing dozens of shots within the first hour I knew that this hunt would be much different than anything I had taken part in before. It was shaping up to be every bit the circus I had envisioned, and it was evident that hunting pressure was beyond extreme.



I certainly appreciated my layers of Sitka Gear – it allowed me to hunt instead of simply focus on survival!

All I could do is pray for safety, do my best, and to stay true to my ethics.

Each time the clouds thinned and the sky brightened, gunfire would resound in one direction or another. Still I could see nothing.

Finally after several hours I glimpsed the shadowy figures of ibex moving above me. Although I moved to try and intercept them, all I found were tracks in the snow. I followed for a while, but it was apparent they were making time and the odds of me catching up were slim to none.



Some forms of life were foraging despite the weather

Later that morning I curled up in a likely location and dozed for short catnaps in hopes that ibex would wander by within view or that the clouds would burn off and allow me to put my binoculars to use. After an hour it was time to move and warm up, but almost instantly glimpsed some ibex just on front of me. They climbed onto a rocky spire and I tried to line up for a shot. Despite being less than 100-yards away, I could not see well enough to pull the trigger before they were enveloped by clouds never to be seen again.

The clouds suddenly dissipated around noon to reveal snow capped ridges and breathtaking views. I broke out my binos and began to scan for ibex. Hunter Orange was visible in every direction. It was insane. Dozens of trucks were parked at every pull-off at the base of the mountain and hunters were visible everywhere.



Everything at my elevation was blanketed in snow and ice

With the view afforded by clear skies a fresh volley of gunfire broke out in every direction. I began to work my way toward some areas that had held ibex on past archery hunts in hopes that the nooks and crannies would be overlooked by the masses. Alas for the most part I found hunters overlooking nearly every area I looked.

I finally found a few undisturbed ibex, but they were on cliffs that would make retrieval nearly impossible even if I could have gotten close enough for a shot.



ibex are amazing: they will climb anywhere without fear!



The horns of these billys were much longer than the 15-inch maximum to be legal

In hopes of finding some ibex below me that were within range and retrievable, I skirted downward along the safe passways between steep cliffs. Again I found a few perched on rocky cliffs.



The frost in the brilliant sun was beautiful, although hard to appreciate through watering eyes squinting into 30-mile-per-hour winds

Unable to find a way to reach the ibex below, I slowly retraced my steps upwards. Just as I began to emerge from behind a rock outcrop I caught movement - ibex! Just 60-yards away a nice billy was moving into view! I was entirely hidden by the rocks, so simply leaned against the cold stone and chambered a round in hopes that a legal animal trailed him. I whipped out my camera and began snapping photos of these most regal of beasts. After half a dozen billys filed past me a single legal nanny appeared!



What beautiful creatures!

I dropped my camera and shouldered my rifle, steadied by the rock pressed against my side. At my shot the group scattered while my first ibex dropped like a stone! Hurray, my first ibex down at 3:30PM on day one!

I sent a prayer of thanksgiving skyward, snapped some photos and began butchering the dainty animal. My guess was that the nanny weighed about 50-60 pounds on the hoof and I later measured the horns to be slightly longer than 7". A convenient tree afforded a rare opportunity to hang the carcass for skinning and deboning the meat.



It was COLD! I had worn my facemask all day - why take it off for the photo?!

Throughout the butchering process the wind continued to howl and it was a challenge to keep warm. I occasionally scanned in all directions in case more ibex appeared. At one point I spied another hunter exposed on an outcrop above me. I waved as he looked my direction to let him know I was there and he saluted back. He eventually worked his way down past me and congratulated me on my success. I inquired where he was headed and he responded that he was heading back down the mountain toward camp. I wished him well and thought to myself "We still have over 2-hours of daylight left...hiking to camp is what headlights are for!" I hoped that the last few hours of the day would be less pressured as more hunters headed down.

The stunted tree provided some relief from the wind, but it was quite a relief to get everything zipped into my pack and slide my hands back into my heavy warm gloves.

As I prepared to shoulder my load I couldn't help but scan around one last time before stepping out from behind my sheltering bush. Something caught my eye, and my binos quickly revealed three legal ibex about 200-yards away!

I sat down to evaluate the situation. The three animals were mere yards above a tall cliff. Were I to shoot one, the likelihood of it falling over was almost guaranteed. I curled up and waited. They were facing my direction and if they came a little closer they would be safely away from the cliff. However, after several minutes for an unknown reason they turned and trotted away. So much for a double-whammy. I guzzled an E2 and an energy gel, knowing that I faced a long, slippery trek descent to the truck.

Never one to call it quits early, I hunted my way back. I stopped to glass as I traveled, but it was a challenge to hold steady enough to make anything out through my watering eyes in the gusting wind and blowing snow. As the moon came up and sun went down I slipped and stumbled downward without sighting any other ibex.



I finally reached the truck about 9PM, finishing the last couple of hours by headlamp. Thankfully the wind had died and lower on the mountain the ground was only damp and not slippery.

Too weary to cook a meal, I quickly contacted my close buddy Brandon, to learn that he had tagged both of his allotted ibex this first day! He had been worried about me as it was late, but I chuckled and replied "You know me...I hunt all day and all night, it's just how I roll. No need for worry before midnight!" Still I was thankful for his concern and his offer of help if I needed it. I assured him I was fine and bade him farewell to head elsewhere to try and fill his Barbary sheep tag.

I munched some nuts and a bar and rearranged gear in the back of my truck before snuggling into my sleeping bag. I had nearly six glorious hours of sleep before repeating the process, assuming that the hunt quota had not yet been filled. I'd call the G&F hotline in the morning.

My alarm beeped all too soon and I delayed slipping out of my warm cocoon. Knowing time was of the essence; I gathered my willpower and slipped into the cold air. I slept with most of my base layers on, but quickly slipped into my outer layers shivering as I dialed the hotline and confirmed the hunt remained open, but would close at the end of shooting hours this second day. I hastily restocked my pack with food and water.

I downed another PURE Energy and a breakfast shake, then grabbed my gear and began an ascent in a different direction than I had taken the prior morning. It was steeper, but I thought it might help me approach a more rugged area that would hopefully be less crowded.



No way to go but up

I had gotten a later start than on day one, but planned on making up time with a more direct, though much steeper route up toward the ridgeline. I planned on carefully glassing as I climbed, thus daylight was welcome before reaching the pinnacles above.

I eventually found a group of ibex; however, they were in a precarious position and I did not believe that I could retrieve one if I shot. Instead I captured them on film and video and carefully continued to pick my way upward in hopes of intercepting them in more favorable terrain.



What a sight!

I discovered that I had left my phone on when I received a text from a good friend Dave who was not hunting. I quickly filled him in on the details and asked for his prayers: for safety first and foremost, and that I be glorifying to God. After shutting off my phone I got to thinking that the priority should have been in reverse order. Oh well, I'd take all the prayers I could get, and regularly offered my own as I negotiated the steep rocky

chutes. I couldn't help but feel that everything would work out today. I had passed several marginal opportunities on day one, and although hard to explain, I was at peace knowing I would be rewarded accordingly.



The camera doesn't do the terrain justice, but this is the chute I ascended

As I poked along searching for ibex tucked out of the wind and away from hunting pressure I suddenly glimpsed movement in the bushes just above me at close range. A small group of ibex, including some legal animals, was meandering along perhaps 75-yards above me! I hastily chambered a round and found an opening for a clear shot. The first animals passed through without pausing, but as a legal animal entered my view I let out a grunt to stop it. I was shooting from a standing position, but the range was very close. As the ibex paused, I squeezed off the shot and the group scampered to my left. The animal I shot at disappeared immediately. Did I hit it? Or had I somehow missed? Several ibex tempted me by stopping to look around well within range, but with one ibex already tagged I didn't dare take another shot until I had verified a miss. I probed the brush with my binoculars but couldn't make anything out.

The herd continued their departure over a nearby ridge and I searched the location of my shot. I had a solid landmark, as the ibex was right next to a distinctive yucca when I had fired, and their tracks were readily apparent in the snow. I combed the area and followed their tracks, but it was apparent that I had somehow missed.

I was incredibly bummed to have squandered what I'd found to be a rare gift to have a clean shot at undisturbed ibex. I sat and glassed for half an hour while snacking to refuel and formulate my next move.

I spent the remainder of the morning peeking into ravines and over cliffs in hopes of locating a legal animal. Every time I found orange-clad hunters, gunfire, or both. It was impossible not to continue to kick myself for the blown opportunity earlier that morning. I eventually found a pair of nannies clinging to the face of an impossibly steep cliff, but approach was impossible and a fall of several hundred feet was below them.



Beautiful, but precarious

At about noon the wind increased until it was howling even more than the first day. With clear skies it wasn't as cold, but the 40-mile-per-hour blast made it difficult to stand on the ridgeline and even tougher to glass. I could feel my odds slipping away but doggedly pushed on.

At about 4PM I crossed paths with three other hunters. They told me they were heading down for their trucks: tired and wanting to get down before dark. One had an ibex in his pack and suggested I look in the direction that, unbeknownst to him, I had just come from. I thanked them for the input, congratulated them on their success and brainstormed where to try next.

In need of a boost, I refueled with some nuts, another PURE Energy and some homemade Coues deer jerky. Renewed, it struck me that the only chance I had to pull off the double would be to go off the beaten path and work my way down a particularly rugged route toward the truck in hopes that others would avoid the area and some undisturbed ibex might be tucked along the way.

As I pressed into the wind I came across a couple of dried yucca stalks that caught my eye – perhaps I was headed in the right direction after all?! Regardless, I was filled with the feeling of peace with the plan.



Random yucca stalks?

Soon I found myself approaching the area of my miss earlier that morning. Perhaps hoping for a miracle, I repeated my search of the area, but of course there was no dead ibex to be found: I had already thoroughly scoured it hours before.

As I mentally weighed my chances, the distance to the truck, the limited remaining daylight, my own weariness and the exertion it would take to descend the mountain the hard way, it was all I could do to force myself to head away from the easier course to my truck. "Do what others are unwilling to do" I told to myself with determination.

As I dropped elevation my eyes were drawn to a peculiar stump that I had seen before. It resembled an ibex, complete with horns. Even though I knew it to be only an illusion, I couldn't resist glancing through my binoculars anyway. Aye caramba! Several ibex were bedded right next to it! I was back in the game despite the late hour. They were bedded right where one would expect: out of the wind in an area without trails and along a seemingly dead-end route, at least for human passage. I was apparently the only one crazy enough to descend this way.

They were in a perfect position to be approached from behind a finger ridge and out of sight. Then I could crawl over the top and shoot across the narrow gorge to the pinnacle they were tucked beside.

I left nothing to chance, knowing this would be my last opportunity of the hunt. I crabwalked down out of their sight and then carefully picked my way toward my shooting vantage. Noise wasn't much of an issue as the wind continued to howl; however, I dare not slip and take a tumble even though I wasn't traversing anything life threatening.

I arrived at the base of my shooting knob and dropped my pack. I belly crawled to the top and carefully peeked through a small bush to verify that my quarry had not moved. Everything remained perfect. Through my binoculars I realized that there were more ibex than I had first believed. Several animals were bedded while a couple others fed contentedly. In total I could see 4 legal ibex and 2 billies that exceeded the size limit.

With my close-range miss still burning in my mind, I left nothing to chance with this shot. I carefully laid my rifle and studied my targets. I cradled my packs' removable top section underneath my rifle and checked the alignment. Unsatisfied, I carefully stacked a couple of rocks underneath and re-checked. Perfect: I was rock steady in prone

position and I guessed the distance to be less than 150-yards (my rangefinder battery had died earlier in the day).

The bedded animals offered marginal shot opportunities. However, one feeding nanny appeared likely to turn broadside and present the best shot position. I concentrated on her carefully through my scope and waited for her to turn. She turned shortly and I took a deep breath and squeezed the trigger. Instantly she disappeared as ibex scattered. Given my earlier miss at much closer range, my first thought was that I had somehow missed again. My brain reeled: I was well within range and had a rock-steady (literally) rest. A miss was almost unthinkable, yet my confidence had been shaken earlier.

Anxiously I scanned the area as two nannies jumped onto a rock and provided a perfect follow up shot opportunity...but I did not know for certain whether I had hit or missed. It had been ingrained into me by my dad since I was a little kid: I dare not shoot again until I searched the area and verified my shot. Reluctantly I let the ibex scamper away knowing that I would have no more opportunities. The sun was sinking and it would take a while to work my way over to search where they had been.

I trekked over to their bedding area and scanned the rocky ground where the ibex had been when I shot. Nothing. I picked my way downward and within a few feet I found a drop of blood; a good sign. In just a few more feet it was apparent that I had made a solid, fatal hit. Yes, there would be a dead ibex without question.



Dead ibex ahead

The blood trail was obvious and easy to follow. It led toward a drop-off and then veered around some rocks toward another drop-off. My stomach knotted: retrieval might prove more difficult than I had first believed.

I carefully crept along the edge. With no place to go I would either find the ibex very soon or discover that it had plummeted below. With thanksgiving I came across the animal wedged into a crevice inches shy of a vertical drop – praise the Lord! It was surreal and I was filled with thanksgiving as I punched my second tag.



Watch out, that next step is a doozie!

I had shot the ibex about 4:30 and it was now after 5pm. Yesterday I had killed my first ibex much earlier and still had to hike for several hours in the dark, and that had been on a much gentler path. There was no question I was pressed for time and needed to make the most of what little daylight remained.



Ibex number 2 – what a feeling!

I quickly snapped trophy photos. Once again I kept my facemask on: I was in the shade and though on the lee side of the rock face, it was breezy and still chilly. I quickly broke down the ibex and loaded the bag of deboned meat into my pack. In less than half an hour I was on the move. I slurped an energy gel and some water and strapped my on my headlamp to avoid losing precious daylight later stopping to dig it out. I gambled that any ravine that held vegetation would be passable and after a quick prayer for safety, I dove over the edge.



Pending route down

The route was steep, but passable. I caught myself numerous times with the aid of my trekking poles. Talk about a full-body workout: legs, back and arms! Not to mention the cardio, as I slipped and slid in a semi-controlled free-fall, pushing the pace to get as far down the slope as possible before darkness overtook me. Later, my wrists and forearms would be sore for days from the physical effort.



One last view of a lone ibex perched on a rocky crag high above during my descent



I nearly reached the base of the mountains before needing my headlight



Soon I would reach more level ground; no time for a break yet

In the deep canyon the gloom fell earlier than elsewhere and I had to turn on my headlamp for the last few minutes of my descent. Still I had negotiated the bulk of the difficult terrain and the end was in sight. I was amazed to reach the truck by 7:30. I killed this ibex nearly 2-hours later than the first, but reached the truck over 1½-hours earlier thanks to the more direct route down. I was whooped, but still on a high.

Despite the antics of other hunters and harsh weather conditions I had pulled off the double. It was every bit the extreme physical and mental challenge I had expected and more. I had given my all and left nothing on the table. It was a bonus to take not one but two ibex. Add another species to my list and two more notches to my trusty Ruger.

I had strived for perfection and not compromised myself in any way. I had entrusted my safety to God and He shielded me as promised.

I had my ibex verified at G&F and am now entered into the drawing for 10 trophy ibex tags. With no shortage of help from above and by refusing to give up I am in the running for a trophy tag during the spring of 2014!

To be continued....