

Lion 2021 October, New Mexico

Proverbs 27:2 “Let someone else praise you, not your own mouth – a stranger, not your own lips.”



I began my final hunt of the year with mixed emotions. On the one hand pursuing ibex is perhaps my favorite due to the mental and physical challenge, the species, and the unique experience. On the other hand, it's physically and mentally draining, and even though I've done it before, killing an ibex with a bow is so difficult the odds of notching my tag were extremely low. Unexpectedly, I had begun to feel pressure to succeed when several friends innocently quipped comments like "So, will this be #4?" Although I certainly dreamt of tagging a 4th ibex, it's impossible to describe how difficult it is to get one with a bow to someone who doesn't bowhunt or has never climbed the Florida Mountains. Imagine trying to get yourself within spitting distance of a sharp-eyed, paranoid, sure-footed, nomadic prey animal, while negotiating vertical cliffs, loose noisy rocks, and very little cover. Literally, even having been successful, I could hardly imagine killing another one! Although I would try my best and give it my all, the reality was I'd likely return home empty-handed. It's hard to fully explain, but all these emotions swirled to create a sense of I needing to succeed simply to live up to the expectations of others, which is completely opposite of why I hunt in the first place!

As I rolled south the weather was unseasonably cool and the forecast for opening day included clouds and rain. Stark contrast to a hunt several years ago when daily temperatures topped 95-degrees!

My scouting during the summer led me to focus on a portion of the range new to me, and as predicted, opening day was cool with occasional showers. I could glass close by, but throughout most of the day clouds obscured the higher elevations and areas farther off. At least the overcast conditions made for wonderful photos and comfortable hiking.



A photo can barely capture the amazing nuances of muted colors in the clouds



Cool, overcast weather

The first day I hiked to various vantages and sat for relatively long periods of time to get a feel for hunting pressure and the quality and quantity of animals. I didn't see many ibex, but managed to turn up a few good billies.



One billy bedded across the canyon

The only billy I located within my zip code was bedded in a precarious location that offered no approach. I kept tabs on him for over an hour, but he never let his guard down. He was protected from behind by vertical rock and held a commanding view of any frontal approach. He frequently snapped his head to and fro, studying his surroundings carefully and remaining

vigilant. It would have been feasible to pick him off with a rifle, but retrieval would have been harrowing. For the moment I had to simply be content to admire him and snap photos.



The billy carefully scanned below for a long time before moving off

After a few days, it was apparent the ibex population was way down compared to my previous hunts. I'd heard historic NMDGF population surveys numbered the herd well over 800 animals, but the recent count was closer to 200. For reasons I can't fathom NMDGF decided to reduce the numbers by issuing a lot of nanny rifle tags over the past several years.

Still, by covering ground on foot and figuratively through my binoculars I managed to find enough ibex to feel like I had a chance. During one walkabout I spotted a small herd with a good billy on a rock knob. Although only half a mile distant, it took me well over an hour to reach the back side of their peak and by then I had lost them. Eventually I spied them less than 50-yards from where I had originally seen them, but nearly 100 vertical yards below. I could have almost dropped an arrow on them, but they were at rifle-range distance with no way for a mere mortal to descend without climbing gear and suction cups. Again, all I could do was watch and enjoy the experience. As the days passed, I began to relax and savor the moment, rather than think about pressure and "failure". The Lord soothes.



No way to close the distance on this billy

I continued that precarious trek and spied what would be the biggest herd seen during my hunt. More than a dozen animals fed at the base of a steep rock face, including some good billies. It seemed logical to position myself in front of them for an ambush and wait.

I found a likely spot just around the corner of the rock monolith about 200-yards from the grazing herd. Any closer would leave me exposed with no cover and they would pass my location if they continued their course.

The area was overgrown with some type of weed that blanked everything, choking out the native plants. It made for an easy setup; I only had to rearrange some of the vegetation and create a hide to nestle into, but the plague of tangle weed was sort of eerie, almost like a living fog slowly engulfing everything in its path. It must not have been edible because its thick blanket was unbroken except for where I had torn through it.



Tangle weed

After sitting for perhaps 10-minutes I faintly heard some rocks rolling and hoped the location I had picked would pay off. The wind direction was great, and I was tucked into the shade of some brush among the tangle weed, all but invisible.

Suddenly I heard a cacophony of rocks rolling and tumbling well below me. I raised my binoculars only to witness the herd charge across the bottom of the drainage and up a rockslide. They ran full tilt across loose ankle breakers and made a tremendous ruckus. Within minutes they had gone from being just around the corner to unreachable. Drat.



One of the best billies in the herd – respectable, but relatively young

I watched them scramble up the loose rock and then ascend a nearly vertical rock cliff. I was certain I hadn't spooked them but had no idea what might have caused them to panic. Perhaps an unseen hunter?



The herd traversed a rock face and then cautiously peered around the other side

I waited until they disappeared before beginning an arduous route to where I had last seen them. As I made my way up the drainage to a point where I could cross to their side, one ibex popped back into view and then bedded. It was turned away from me about 200-yards distant. I had plenty of cover amidst the brush and tangle weed, so continued carefully until I reached a gap in the cover. Recognizing it was a gamble, I decided to slowly crawl 10-yards, after which I'd be concealed behind a large evergreen. I was fully camouflaged, in the shade, moving slowly and the lone ibex was bedded with his rump toward me. I barely made it 5-yards before a warning snort echoed off the rocks. Dang it! Are you kidding me?! I would have bet the farm on making that move with any other game species! I trained my binos on the little billy and confirmed him staring at me. The gig was up. I scooted the few yards to wait and hide behind the tree. Sure enough, several more ibex came around the face and looked my way. There was absolutely no way they could see me at that point, but they kept staring and snorting for 10-minutes before deciding to trust the little billy's warning, and then tear right back down the rockslide to nearly the same place I had originally seen them. I swear ibex are paranoid and psychotic!

I watched them mill about for a few minutes before they again charged down the slope and disappeared far below and out of my life for good. Hunting ibex is humbling.



Some ibex remained alert while others briefly browsed



The two biggest billies just before they sprinted downhill and disappeared

A little dejected, I continued my hike. Although I didn't spot any more ibex that day, I came across countless amazing displays of God's elaborate and amazing creation.



This yucca was filled with some type of large beetle, which would quickly scramble down into the crevices or behind the blades as I approached



All the recent moisture produced a variety of flowers



More wildflowers



I have found empty faded shells before, but the shaded areas were cool and damp enough that I encountered a few live snails during this hunt

Days and experiences blended into a patchwork of memories, but I hadn't even come close to launching an arrow. Forgotten was the pressure to "succeed" and I was simply living in the moment; survival and the pursuit were all that mattered. I found myself talking to the Lord, asking for safety for my family while I was away, and thanking Him for the opportunity to let the worries of the world fade away.



Probably the two biggest billies I saw during my hunt; note the biggest one peeking behind the rock in upper left of photo



Uniquely shaped and beautiful wildflower



Mini predator



Stunning display of subtle colors



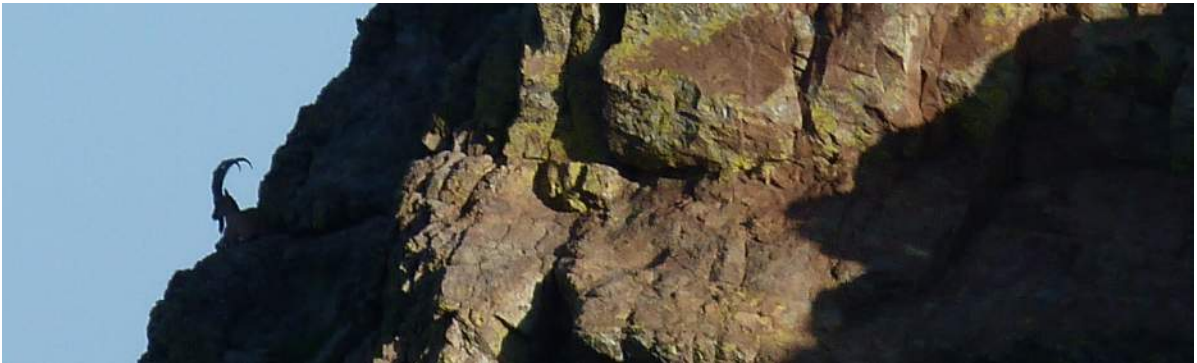
Beauty in the clouds



Gigantic, camouflaged skink



Untouchable billy



A closer shot of the untouchable one



A furry little friend



The artwork in creation surpasses that of even the most talented artists

One day I sat at a likely place that offered both the possibility of an ambush on traveling ibex and the ability to glass a huge vista for ibex to potentially stalk. I waited several hours without seeing anything until I heard rocks clattering across the valley below me. A small herd of ibex meandered across the loose slope, browsing on seemingly anything and everything in their path. Unfortunately, they passed well out of range before disappearing into the next drainage. Given their rate of speed catching them would be impossible, so I continued to wait.



This herd fed by me well out of range

Perhaps an hour later I caught a flash of something nearby out of the corner of my eye and turned my head as the clatter of rocks met my ears. Suddenly a nanny appeared on a rock just 5-yards from me! Just as quickly, she leapt down and I reached for my bow. A half dozen animals, including a medium-sized billy, sprinted down an insane vertical route I hadn't imagined to be traversable. The encounter lasted less than 20-seconds, without time to think,

focus or draw before they were gone. None except the nanny even paused as they essentially free-fell down the rock face beside me. They slowed a few hundred yards below me but never stopped while they were in view. Dang it, I'd been within 20-yards but hadn't even been able to draw my bow, let alone shoot!

Given the activity I opted to remain there for the rest of the day. Late in the afternoon I heard more rocks rolling on the spine below me and spotted a handful of ibex climbing in my direction. This time I at least had advance warning and held my bow at ready. I lost sight of them behind some rock outcrops as they made their way uphill. At first, I thought they would pass to my left, so I pointed that way ready to draw, but even though the clatter of rocks verified they were extremely close, I couldn't determine whether they would appear to my right or left. It was maddening trying to second-guess their actions, knowing they were within range! Soon I heard some rocks above and to my right, so scrambled across an outcrop in that direction. I saw a nanny ascending the cliff and ranged her at 56-yards sharply uphill. A billy stepped to her location and I drew, aimed, and released. I clearly saw my arrow smack the rocks directly beneath him and with that they disappeared behind folds of stone. I nocked another arrow in case any stragglers appeared, but it was in vain. I rehashed the encounter and suspect I had aimed with my 50-yard pin instead of splitting between my 50 and 60. Plus ibex are a small target and I had been in an awkward shooting position. Regardless of reasons or excuses, I had missed cleanly. Knowing how rare shooting opportunities can be, I secretly wondered if I had just blown my only chance. Minor consolation was the billy had been relatively small. Still, I would have been thrilled to have gotten him.

A couple days later I spotted a hunter. And I'm not referring to the buffoon who stood skylined on the ridge above me while chattering on his cell phone in speaker mode for half an hour, halfheartedly scanning with his binoculars held in one hand. Not only was he blowing his own chances but I'm sure his foolishness contributed to why I didn't see any ibex that particular day, even after he had left the area.

No, this hunter was the real deal and deadly serious. One that made me seem like a weekend warrior way out of my element.



A real hunter

Indeed, just after sunset, I spied a mountain lion scanning for a meal from a rock shelf a couple hundred yards away. Although I held a lion tag, it really wasn't even on my radar, so I lost time scrambling to retrieve my predator call from my backpack. By the time I started wailing like a tasty dying morsel the cat had disappeared, although it still had to be within auditory range. I squalled and whined as I scanned the area before me, which was generally open and provided a safe view of any approaching predator.

I heard rocks clink somewhere in the distance but couldn't see the cat. Daylight was waning. Soon it became too dim to see beyond reasonable shooting distance and the lion still hadn't materialized. Then it became too dark to shoot and I realized I needed to cease my intentions to attract the beast and instead don my headlamp to scan for reflecting eyeballs. I kept a wary eye as I organized my backpack and backed out of the area. I paid little attention to my footing, so must have sounded a herd of stampeding cattle as I stumbled over the loose rock during my departure. I didn't see any glowing orbs, so I'll never know how the lion reacted to my calling. When I texted my dad to tell him about the encounter, he replied "Tell me you at least brought a pistol for backup?". My response, "My only backup is another arrow...it's too much weight to haul up here." Additionally, during ibex archery season mountain lions can only be hunted with a bow. I suspect the rule is to keep "lion hunters" from slinging lead at ibex that are out of archery range. When I studied the photos later, I guessed the cat to be a female, or Queen, based on the relatively small head and lithe build, but it was still quite large.

Her presence validated the constant paranoia exhibited by ibex. Perhaps it even contributed to why I hadn't spotted many animals. On the other hand, the fact that she remained in the area suggested it to be a worthy hunting ground. I had observed half a dozen human hunters along the periphery or passing through the large drainage, which is about half a dozen more than I'd prefer to see, but none appeared to be very serious. One vaped regularly as he made his way from horizon to horizon, another was beet red in the face from sunburn and lethargically stopped to rest in the shade for nearly an hour during which time he removed his boots to air out his feet, munched some food and appeared to tuck his trash under a rock (lazy jackwagon), others tromped around as if they expected tame ibex to curiously stand gawking while they flung arrows. As best I could tell none of the hunters had spotted any game; certainly not while I observed them.

I idly wondered about the serious hunter. She was hunting the same drainage as me, no doubt aware of all of us two-legged wanna-be hunters in her territory, yet unafraid of our temporary intrusion into her world. Surviving in this rugged land had to be a challenge. I carried nearly a gallon of water each day as the arid country offered no regular water sources that I'd ever discovered except for a few cattle tanks far below in the flats. Additionally, much of the vegetation was covered in thorns, which no doubt made it tricky to extract mice or rabbits from their safe haven, and there were no fat, grass fed elk or deer to be had. Surely chasing down an ibex had to be difficult even for an apex predator designed with incredible agility and power. Yet apparently the cat had forged a successful life despite the challenges.

The following day I had to leave the mountain as I had promised to help a friend on his elk hunt over the weekend. Late the next afternoon I spotted a couple of nice billies far below and headed for them. They were on the opposite side of a chasm, but I hoped it feasible to shoot across. As I dropped elevation they descended into the gap and disappeared from my view. I began to believe killing one of them was a real possibility; however, even though I moved as fast as I could, one climbed back out and up over the other side of the gorge. I trusted the other remained below and carefully peeked over the lip. I spent a lot of time skulking along the edge, but finally realized I had simply missed the exit of the second billy. With no other prospects, I dropped down the ridiculous rock face, crossed the bottom and ascended the opposite side, which was equally challenging. To travel the horizontal length of a football field I easily traversed triple the distance, every hand and foothold paid for with blood, sweat and perhaps even a few tears.



Two nice billies

When I finally crested the ravine, I had to slow way down and slink along the crags in an attempt to relocate the billies. I was looking straight into the sun, which made it difficult to see. At one point I heard the clatter of rocks, so peeked from beside a boulder. I was surrounded by brush and all I did was carefully ease my face so one eye could peer across the chasm. Immediately I heard a dreaded alarm snort and spied both billies staring my way. I wore a camo facemask, and had moved extremely slowly, yet somehow, they had picked me off from 140-yards away. Dang those buggers! It was impossible to close the distance, as they were on the opposite side of another formidable gully. The gig was up, and I had lost.



Sharp-eyed billy



Adios for now

With a heavy heart I dropped to my truck and motored north to help my buddy find a bull elk. I hoped to return for ibex within a couple days but between travel and packing elk meat (yep, that's another story!) I didn't re-ascend the Floridas until midday 3-days later. The wind absolutely howled, and the base of the mountains were obscured by a cloud of dust. I correctly anticipated that afternoon and evening to be a bust, but at least I was back at it.



Where are the Floridas?! Obscured by a dust cloud...



The dusty sky created a pretty sunset, albeit 45-minutes earlier than normal

The next day I decided to make my way to some cliffs where I'd seen ibex travel a few times the previous week. I searched for an ambush and eventually discovered a very unlikely spot. Since I'm part monkey anyway, a large tree with plenty of branches afforded a seat high above the ground, yet within archery range of the cliffs. I hung my bow on a broken snag and settled into the forked trunk where I could relax in relative comfort and rest my feet on large limbs. Although I wasn't strapped in, the tree had enough branches that I felt reasonably safe, and honestly the risk of falling was no more likely than anywhere else in the near-vertical mountain range. From my perch I could glass part of the drainage where I had seen the lion the previous week, albeit from the opposite slope. I could also see down the canyon and over the ridge to another bluff, so I could put my binoculars to work on a lot of country while I sat in wait.

After telling my sister about my missed shot earlier in the hunt she had promised to pray for a closer opportunity. I could only trust the Lord had heard her petition.

As the sun's angle changed during midday, I was astonished to see Christ's face peering down on me from above! It was an awesome revelation and seemingly confirmed my roost selection. Perhaps I'd get another opportunity after all.



Can you see His face?



How about now?!

After the gale the day before the weather was surprisingly calm. Only a slight breeze swayed me high in the tree. Anticipating the need to rotate and change position, I used my feet and gloves to rub off portions of rough bark that might betray me as I shifted. The time passed pleasantly as I discovered the branches above me provided welcome shade. It was so calm I expected to hear rocks rolling or clanking as ibex moved, but the area seemed to be dead. Hours passed and I texted Laurie "Days like today make me question why I enjoy hunting ibex. No action and nothing seen in the past 24-hours." With the day beginning to wind down I would only have 2 more days of season. I began to daydream of sleeping in a soft bed, daily showers and being forced to report to friends and family that the ibex had won this time.

I was brought out of my musing by a faint scraping sound, almost as if the wind had rubbed a dried yucca stalk against some rocks, even though the breeze didn't seem strong enough to create the noise. A little while later I heard it again. Odd. Each time I scanned my surroundings, surmising an animal might be moving nearby, but I couldn't pinpoint the location and was unable to spot anything. After hearing the peculiar sound a handful of times, I happened to glance straight down.

My initial crazy thought was "Why in the world is a furry pelt hanging in my tree?!"



This modified photo is about what I saw when I looked down...

In a split second I realized it was the rear half and long tail of a mountain lion less than 8' below me! Indeed, somehow the cat had climbed almost silently *into my tree*! It was standing on a large limb with its shoulders and head obscured by the curved trunk and other branches. The hunter had become the hunted. But not the way you might think. Instantly, I knew I was going to kill that cat - indeed *it* was the hunter that had suddenly become the hunted!

I felt incredibly calm and silently reached for my bow. I drew and began to tilt downward for the vertical shot, but the lion leaped out of the tree onto the ground. I feared I had spooked it, but as it slunk below, I sensed it had simply decided to jump down with no clue that death lurked above. Its body was lean and incredibly long and reminded me of a tiger. Branches obstructed a shot, but I followed the cat with my bottom pin until it stepped into the open. WHACK! My arrow blew through its chest and instantly stopped as the broadhead smacked the rocks beneath the lion. The cat let out a cough-grunt and erupted in pandemonium. It rolled and clawed at the loose shale and tumbled in a loud avalanche of rock and dust, disappearing around a rock outcrop just below the base of my tree.

I sat in stunned disbelief. I had just shot a lion with my bow! And based on its reaction and the volume of blood on the rocks, it had been fatal. I waited several minutes to let my nerves settle. I decided I better text Laurie and Robin, my sister, parents, and a couple of close friends to fill them in before I followed up on the predator, so they'd know where to come looking for me in the off chance something went awry. I shinnied down the branches and onto the outcrop. I glassed the brush below me and could just make out the pad of an upside-down paw, suggesting an awkward, lifeless position. Surely the beast was dead!



A very good sign



The cat as I found it, which turned out to be a Queen

I cautiously approached the big cat and extracted it from the brush in which it had become tangled during its death roll. Its paws were huge, and teeth chipped and worn, an old Queen indeed. Definitely the same one I had seen several days prior. Its body was leaner than the big Tom I killed several years ago, but nearly as long (measuring 7'-6" from nose to tip of tail), and its claws every bit as large and formidable. Her head was huge and heavily muscled.

I jubilantly shared my incredible feat with my family and close friends. Forgotten was my missed billy; honestly had I connected with that one I'd have been finished and at home and entirely missed out on the lion. When I reported to my sister, I couldn't help but chide "Next time you pray for a closer encounter, maybe turn it down just a notch!" Indeed, the Lord has a sense of humor – in fact, He invented it! One friend jokingly texted "Yes! The ibex munchkins are singing *Ding Dong the Witch is Dead!*", complete with his hilarious audio rendition of the wicked witch dying.

Apparently, my choice of ambush location had been a good one because it appealed to the reigning Queen herself. I idly wondered how many ibex she'd pounced on or launched into pursuit of from that evergreen. Another friend texted "Congrats, that lion has probably killed even more ibex than you!"



Huge paws!



I was in disbelief of having killed a lion with my bow



Another photo



Yet another – heck, one simply can't take enough photos of a bow-killed lion!

As I literally skinned the cat, I discovered her hide was decorated with scars and a veritable pincushion of cactus thorns. I bet her tail averaged 8-10 thorns per square inch! Later at home when I trimmed and packaged the meat, I found numerous large thorns well over an inch deep in her muscles. What a tough old girl.

I packed the meat and hide down to my truck that night by headlamp. Still hoping for an ibex, I drove to town for ice, packed everything in coolers, and then hiked back up the mountain the following morning to finish out the last two days of season. Killing an ibex in addition to the lion would have been an incredible experience, but it was not meant to be. Apparently, the Lord wanted me to remain at least a little humble. Truly, how could I complain? The adventure was amazing, and I was blessed far more than I could have imagined or hoped for. He can far exceed what we envision for our lives.

Although I have been blessed with many incredible hunts, it's hard to visualize one that can top killing a huge old cat that had actually been in the same tree as me. But who can say, only the Lord knows what the future may hold. The Queen is dead. But let me not boast or brag - to God be the glory!



Big skull, worn and chipped teeth



Note the broken upper canine



As an 8½ x 11 sheet the skull would be actual size