

Dall Sheep - Alaska 2006

Greetings:

I just returned from 2-weeks in Alaska hunting and visiting family. We had a pretty good visit, all in all, and if it weren't for the Ugly as detailed at the end, the trip would have been fantastic.

You guys probably don't want to hear all about Robin playing with her cousins or the good meals my mom and sister cooked, and the enjoyment that comes from spending time with family, so I'll cut right to the hunting activities, but it was good for me to get back up to Alaska for more than just the hunting. I went up a week before Robin and Laurie to spend time hunting sheep with my dad.

First the Good:

After an entire summer of cold and rainy weather in AK, I arrived on the afternoon of what was arguably the best day of the summer: clear weather, temp close to 70 and beautiful! Given the fine weather, we went to my parents' house and quickly geared for my dad and me to fly out in his plane to give it a go for Dall sheep, my all-time favorite animal to pursue.



Dad's plane parked at the airport. It's a Piper PA-12, very similar to a Super Cub, and with the modifications from stock form (addition of a bigger engine, Super Cub landing gear/suspension, tires, wings and flaps) it is a bush pilot's dream machine. It's can get airborne at only 35 mph, so can get in and out of very short strips, approximately 150-250-yards in length. It's been a couple of years since I've been flying with my dad, and boy was it fun to get up again.

We loaded the plane and took off to begin our several hour flight to an area where he had flown to scout for sheep earlier in the summer. Due to the previously noted poor weather for most of the summer, he hadn't been able to fly to scout as much as he had hoped, but he had a couple of spots picked out for us to try. I was bringing my bow, while my dad was toting his trusty .270 as he

hadn't quite gotten his bow shooting form back after shoulder surgery and felt that trying with bow was asking a little too much.

The flight was beautiful, with Alaska's breathtaking scenery all around. We spotted sheep, moose, caribou and black bear on the flight as well as beautiful mountains and landscape.



Right after take off from Birchwood Airport



Typical scenery – photos just don't do it justice.



Glacier – one of a bazillion in Alaska.



Glacier



Typical mountains. Folks from the “lower 48” simply cannot comprehend the vastness of Alaska. Although we followed and crossed several roads during portions of the flight, it represented hundreds of miles of unforgiving terrain that would simply be impossible for a person to hike across in a lifetime.



Some mountains with a hint of a rainbow to the left and a storm brewing in the background.

After one refueling stop we arrived at the strip just before dark, with a spitting rain making the landing a bit difficult. We landed safely and quickly set up the tent to get out of the weather and for some much needed rest.



View of "strip". A relatively flat gravel patch approximately 200 yards long with a dogleg at the end. A little tricky to get in and out of, but relatively good as far as bush landings go.



Plane tied down and tent set up just before dark.

The next morning we woke to fair weather and decided to take a short flight to scout for sheep and other hunting camps. Alaska law does not allow anyone to hunt the same day they fly, but because it was still the day before sheep season and we couldn't hunt that day anyway it didn't hurt us to fly around a little in order to better plan for hunting the next day.



View of a breathtaking, frigid mountain that we flew past while scouting. Mountains such as this are snow covered year round, and no animals live up high in the snow, so we aren't looking for sheep above the snow line but rather in the rough terrain directly below the snow all the way down into the valleys.



View over my dad's shoulder approaching the strip for landing after scouting. As the passenger I'm in the back seat. Our tent is set up to left of the strip and an orange surveyor's flagging "windsock" can be seen hanging in a bush on the right side of the strip.

Our scouting flight didn't reveal anything substantially different from my dad's earlier flights in the summer, although we did see quite a few sheep, mainly ewes and lambs, and a handful of other hunting camps sprinkled around the

mountains. Some of the camps were up very high in the mountains, indicating that pilots who were willing to take risks had dropped off hunters and guides at elevations that would cut miles and elevation from the client's pack routes, but we didn't find any spots where my dad felt comfortable considering a landing. As the old saying goes "there are old pilots and bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots". We opted to return to our original strip, strap on our backpacks and go after sheep the typical way we have for years, one step at a time with enough gear on our backs to survive for 4-5 days.



This was at the beginning of our 6-mile (by GPS) hike to spike camp. The packs sure seemed light when we started out, something we both commented on. Somehow they became heavier and heavier as our 11-hour hike dragged on and the terrain tilted sharply upwards! We climbed 2,600 vertical feet from beginning to end, and that didn't count the intermediate ups and downs!



Our initial hike followed a glacial stream uphill, and required several crossings. We were able to hop from rock to rock to get across. In this crossing I had to place some extra rocks in the stream to get enough stepping stones to make it with packs on.

This glacial stream we followed was actually only a side channel from the main stream, and the main stream became our nemesis. From the air it looked relatively small, but once on the ground standing next to it, the main channel appeared too formidable to cross even with our packable hip boots (called glacier boots) so we had to abandon our planned route and follow the stream all the way to a glacier where we could cross the water by hiking over the ice and rocks. Unfortunately this meant we were unable to go to the original area where we had seen rams and instead climbed up a mountain that we hadn't scouted much and consequently weren't exactly sure where to find sheep. Ah well, any time in sheep country is good, and despite being white, Dall sheep have an uncanny ability to pop up (and disappear) nearly anywhere, so we figured that finding a legal ram might be possible.



Although it doesn't seem like much (I routinely run 6-10 miles with my wife Laurie while pushing Robin in the jogger) several miles of this type of hiking can really take its toll on one's body. Good boots, and light equipment are a must in order to be able to at least partially enjoy it.



Here's the glacier where we were finally able to cross over the stream. We climbed well away from the edge of the glacier to avoid potential pitfalls or slips into the icy water. This photo doesn't give real perspective to the crossing, which ended up taking about 45-minutes to get from one side of the stream to the other over the loose rock and steep terrain.



After crossing the stream we began our steep uphill hike to get into true sheep country. Note my dad is still smiling at this point, roughly 8-hours into our hike from the plane.



Farther up the mountain, my dad is still moving too fast for the camera to keep in focus, with the glacier crossing far below. Pretty darn good, especially for a guy in his upper 60s! Goes to show you that doing crazy stuff like this for years helps keep us young.



By this time we were pondering just how much farther this mountain could go up, but with no flat spots big enough for our small two-man tent we had no choice but to continue. We took several well-deserved rest stops throughout the climb, but the view from each stop only revealed that the mountain kept on going and going.



At long last we reached the top of the “mesa” and were able to settle in for dinner.



View from camp was amazing, but I was struck by how unforgiving this country is. It seemed like one could feel a chill from the nearby frigid snow and ice covered mountains. It is simply incredible that critters can thrive here and survive the winters.

The next morning we awoke to dense clouds/fog and visibility of under a hundred yards or so. This would have been great had we known where to find a sheep, but since we didn't have any idea of where to begin looking it made for tough spotting conditions. The clouds remained while we slowly hiked for about an hour in the morning. At one point we even sat down and played a few games of cribbage in order to kill some time for the clouds to lift enough to see anything.

Shortly after the clouds began to lift we did see 4 small rams nearby. In most areas of Alaska, including this one, rams horns must be full curl to be legal. Although this ram looks fairly impressive, with a wide spread from the front view, he has several more years before he'll be a legal sheep.



As can be clearly seen when he turned sideways and shows that his horns are only about a $\frac{3}{4}$ -curl. Too bad, as he and his smaller sidekick came within 40-yards of us out of curiosity after glimpsing me belly-crawling among the rocks trying to take these photos.



We continued on, as visibility increased, but no other sheep were spotted nearby.

We did see many bands of ewes and lambs as well as scattered groups of rams, but at 2-4 miles away, there was no way to tell whether or not they were legal even with my spotting scope, and no way to get to them given the time of day and level of effort to hike to them.



Some small bands of sheep could be seen in the foothills in front of the snowy mountains in the distance near the small snow patches, but at least for today we did not have the time to cover the distance. The next day we did hike there, but were unable to locate any sheep, and had drizzling rain on and off all day.



On our next day of hiking we managed to stalk within 50-yards of this fine caribou bull; however, with no caribou season in the unit all we could do was snap a few photos.



We also came across several bands of white-tailed ptarmigan, a particular species I had never seen before. The willow ptarmigan is much more common throughout Alaska and I have even hunted them before, but seeing a new critter is always a treat.



In even the most rugged of terrain plants somehow survive, as in the case of this arctic poppy.

Despite our best efforts we were unable to locate any legal sheep in the majority of our hiking and glassing. One afternoon we did spot a potential candidate about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile away, so quickly closed the distance to only a few hundred yards. After dropping our packs we crawled closer I was finally able to get a glimpse of the ram about 100-yards away and heading toward us before he dropped out of sight. I nocked an arrow in anticipation, but after waiting for 10-minutes without seeing anything we suspected that he had turned away. We crawled closer for a better view and the ram was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly a group of three rams came into view about 600-yards away moving away from us uphill. After putting the spotting scope on them and watching them climb for about 5-minutes we were pretty sure that at least one was legal. Somehow they must have moved in an unexpected direction after I had lost track of the one I had glimpsed and smelled us. All we could do was watch them as they topped out over the ridge and then hitch up our packs and traipse after them. Unfortunately we didn't see them again, and couldn't find them the next day either.

With the potential for bad weather closing in, food running low, and apparently only the one legal ram to be found in the area, we opted to pack out the next day, fly home and perhaps make another attempt later.



As you can see, the hike down was no picnic, and perhaps not having the additional weight of a sheep on our backs was a blessing in disguise.



With each step downhill, our legs ached and we questioned our sanity.



Another white tailed ptarmigan.



While not as plentiful as on some of our past sheep hunts, we did happen upon occasional patches of wild blueberries.



Although not as sweet as the commercial variety, a handful provides a pretty tasty treat and a welcome break!



We heard many of these unique critters, and I was finally able to get a good photo of this pika. They are a rodent about the size of a guinea pig and they live in the crevices and burrows found in rock piles. They are the only animal that cuts grass, dries it on the rocks, and then stockpiles the hay in their underground tunnels for the winter and have a shrill squeak that they use to alert each other of potential danger.

After a 6-hour hike back to the plane (it was a lot faster downhill than it was uphill, plus our packs were lighter because we had eaten almost all of our food) we made ready to return to civilization to recoup.



My dad taxied to the end of the runway while I trimmed a few bushes that were a little close to the wings prior to takeoff



Ready for departure

Although the weather was plenty good enough to fly home, unfortunately, the next day torrential rain and winds set in and we were unable to fly out again to try for sheep, so my 2006 sheep hunt came to an end. My dad may try to get out with my sister or brother-in-law later in the season.

Now on to the bad:

As in bad weather, and lots of it. The remaining week of my stay in Alaska was marked by spitting rain, wind and low clouds, punctuated by severe rain, howling wind and lower clouds! There were periods of time where it wasn't actually raining, but heavy clouds were always present, and it rained off and on every day and night. Although unable to fly out after sheep, Alaska's game laws are kind of neat in that anyone can hunt a "cheaper" animal with their tag; consequently I could pursue moose under my sheep tag during an early archery season. Being closer to home, and accessible by car, my sister, dad and I made several half-

day forays after moose by either hiking through the swamps in our hip boots or floating small streams in an inflatable canoe.



Typical moose swamp with sheep terrain in the background.



Although the swamps were not this bad everywhere, this photo shows is my dad wading through the swamp. He's almost to the top of his hip boots in water, and the grass is a couple of feet tall. Only his head is visible. We wore hip boots all the time. Visibility was never easy, and several times my sister and I tried climbing trees in order to glass for moose.

We did see a handful of moose, mainly cows. To be legal, moose in most areas of Alaska need to have either big or small antlers: either a spike or a fork on one side; or total width over 50" (which can be hard to judge) or at least 3 brow tines on one side.



Photo of a cow moose, which was visible only from up in a tree. My sister from ground level could not see it at all due to brush and tall grass, despite these animals being about 6-feet high at the hump and even taller at their head.

While we had a grand time looking for moose and my dad actually saw a legal fork-horned bull one evening, none of us were able to close to within archery distance of any moose in the noisy swamp. It made for fun, though strenuous activity for part-day excursions, with time to dry out all of our gear back home, and since it provided an opportunity to use my unfilled sheep tag while spending time with family it was a hoot. To actually be successful for archery moose, I think that hunting later in September during the rut, when they are susceptible to calling would be the better way to go. It also wouldn't hurt to hunt in areas of the state with less hunting pressure and higher moose populations.

Although this hunt could not be counted as a success in terms of trophies for the wall or meat in the freezer, whenever I get to spend quality time with family in God's great outdoors, I consider it successful beyond words.

Until next time, God Bless.
Carl