

Alberta: Bighorn

My Holy Grail



Text and Photos: Ben Salleras

The alarmed ewe bounded across the open snow-covered slope and out of sight. Seconds later the ram in all his glory emerged from the timber, also running. Many times I had tried to imagine what this moment would be like, within that hunting dreamscape we all enter so often while at our desks at work; while staring at the highway ahead while devouring miles, or while trying to fall asleep at night in the comfort of our homes. Would it be a long shot? A steep one? Would I be hanging on for dearest life on some slippery craggy slope? None of the above. I held on him as he passed us side-on at about thirty metres. With the precision and coolness of a sheep guide with ten times his experience, Jordan let out a faint bleat at the absolute perfect moment. The ram came to an immediate halt, allowing me just enough of a window above the snowdrift to put an arrow into his vitals. My ultimate moment of truth had arrived...

A pair of rams waiting out
a blizzard. Strong winds
mixed with heavy snowfall
brought visibility to almost
zero on several days.





Top: The author glasses the surrounding ridges for any sign of sheep.

Right: Jordan and the author packed up and ready to make the long descent back to civilization.





There's something special about wild sheep that I find very difficult to explain. It may be their majestic appearance, or the spectacular and challenging environments they inhabit. It may have to do with the prestige often associated with hunting the *Ovis* species. Or it may be something deeper inside of us, something instinctive and innate that goes back in our bloodlines for hundreds of generations. Maybe it's a combination of several factors. Whatever it is, it 'got me' a long time ago.

As a young bowhunter growing up in the rainforest country of Far North Queensland, Australia, I was worlds away from anywhere where one might find a wild sheep of any description. Wild boar

were everything to me. I had hunted them with my father at every opportunity with our longbows from about the age of five. It was around age ten, reading US bowhunting magazines and exploring the internet, when I remember the sheep bug first bit me. Seeing photos of successful hunters with bighorn rams, taken with their bows, etched a dream deep into the depths of my imagination. This dream was bigger, more powerful, more consuming and seemingly more out of reach than any other bowhunting dream. My parents gave me a beautiful artist's sketch of a bighorn ram for my twelfth birthday, and that sketch has followed me to every house I've lived in. Throughout my life it's been a daily reminder of my ultimate dream, my Holy Grail. When I think back, I realise that this

dream was one of the main inspirations that pushed me through school and university. It drove me to do well and to establish a career that would someday nourish my hunting dreams. While bighorn sheep remained my number one throughout the years, this goal seemed unreachable compared to other more achievable dream hunts such as elk, moose, and African plains game.

Fast forward to early 2013, where I found myself recently separated, with a great career, and suddenly with a total change in life plans. The rug had been pulled out from under me, I was a little lost. However, at the same time, many of the dreams that had been suppressed in previous years, were suddenly released. I needed something to focus on, something to look forward to, and to give me some light. There was one thing that I knew would tick these boxes off perfectly. I did the research, spoke to many outfitters and hunters, and soon came to the realisation that if I were going to live my dream, and give myself the best possible chance, I'd best be heading to the famous Canmore Bow Zone of Alberta.

After weighing up the available options, I decided that Rick Guinn of Guinn Outfitters sounded like my kind of outfitter, and the hunt was booked. It was happening! I cannot describe the feeling when I wired my deposit, locking in my dream hunt. Something that I never thought achievable was becoming a reality. I was one step closer to my Holy Grail. The hunt was booked for November 2015, giving me just under three years to plan and prepare. Plenty of hard work and saving ensued. I worked on my fitness more than ever before, and ensured my bow set-up was as perfect as possible. I researched all the gear that would be necessary. Coming from the humid tropics of Australia, I had only seen snow a few times in my life, so this was going to be a very alien environment.

The lead up to the hunt was excruciatingly slow, I had never looked forward to a single event so much in my life. The daydreams of snow-covered peaks and heavy-horned rams became more and more





Top: A glorious day in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Sheep could appear from anywhere at any moment, so constant glassing was a must.

Left: The author returning from a hike away from camp to glass some new areas. Quality rain gear and layering were critical in these conditions.

frequent. My hunt was never far from my thoughts. There was a certain level of intensity that I hadn't experienced before. The financial investment was substantial, and there was absolutely no guarantee of seeing a legal ram, let alone getting a shot at one. No matter how much research or reading I did, it was impossible to truly comprehend how challenging the hunt would be, having never hunted any North American sheep previously. During those many months I processed possible emotions constantly – there were many potential outcomes, and only time would tell what my destiny would be.

The big day finally arrived, and I left Australian soil for Calgary, where I met up with Rick Guinn. Rick was exactly how I had imagined him, a man of few words, much beard, and a sense of humour so dry I often wasn't sure whether to laugh or not. It was a great pleasure to meet a man so accomplished as both a guide and a hunter, a true living legend. That night I met my guide for the hunt, Jordan Wagner. On shaking Jordan's hand for the first time, I knew immediately I was in luck. We prepared for our twelve-kilometre hike into camp the next day, buying a few last-minute items, including my bowhunting



Top: A group of sheep wander by the author.

Middle: Sheep grazing in the last patches of grass. After heavy snowfall, they were forced to dig through the snow to find such food sources.

permit, and spotted many sheep right off the famous Trans-Canada Highway just outside Canmore. The following day, the two of us hit the trailhead and headed into the mountains. It was a surreal feeling finally entering the domain of my beloved Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, under a heavy load, with bow in hand. It was finally about to unfold....

Hiking up that valley, my mind constantly wandered back to where this all started. That burning desire that had affected me most of my life, was suddenly being fed. As we gained elevation, I compulsively scanned the slopes, impatiently waiting for that first glimpse of a sheep.

Over the following days, I became very familiar with every rock, tree, shadow and shape within the range of my Zeiss Conquest 15x56 binoculars. I also became

familiar with the absolute loss of feeling in my lower legs, feet, and hands. But there was no other place I'd rather be, this was part of the experience, and an important factor adding to the difficulty of this ultimate bowhunting test.

Two days in, we were joined by Kyle Hudgins, who was after his Grand Slam archery ram, and his guide Elijah. We were camped close to the boundary of our unit, and had a very good view of much of the surrounding mountains and ridges. The location was a known migratory path, probably used for thousands of years by the sheep that call this section of the Rocky Mountains home. We glassed almost constantly, which meant sitting in the snow for extended periods of time, meticulously studying every square metre of the environment. A ram could come into view at any time, so there was a constant air of excitement, no matter how terrible the conditions got. When visibility became too poor to glass, we used our time effectively by harvesting and melting snow for water, and chopping large volumes of wood to keep the camp running.

We glassed for sheep most days, and were often entertained by young rams, ewes and lambs close to camp. This served as a constant encouragement for what might be heading our way, just around the corner. We climbed to different vantage points some days, trekking up quite high and taking plenty of incredible photos, while using the opportunity to glass basins and distant



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Top: Two rams keenly watch a lone ewe as she approaches.

Left: The author takes a peek over the edge. Bighorns inhabit some of the most spectacular terrain in the world.



ridges not visible from our main glassing point.

Over the first few days we witnessed several rams just a little under legal size pass through the area, but not until about day six did we first lay eyes on a couple of legal ones. This event raised the anticipation in camp to a new level. It seemed perfect – two hunters, two legal rams, and plenty of days left to make the magic happen. We hoped and prayed that these rams would travel down into our unit, but for days they lingered a couple of kilometres away, within sight but outside our hunting zone. After days of watching their every move, they finally showed signs of heading in our direction – and began moving down the valley towards our position. As I watched their graceful movements and impressive headgear through

my binoculars, the adrenaline was already starting to surge, even though they were still miles away. Unbelievably though, after watching them travel in a straight line in our direction for several hours, just as they approached the boundary of the unit, they did a sudden 180-degree turn, and walked straight back over the mountain, never to be seen again. It was as if they knew what was ahead. This was incredibly frustrating. Nonetheless, we patiently waited and hoped that sooner or later luck would fall in our favour.

The mountains above Canmore were an extreme environment to be living in. The temperature barely rose above zero Celsius, and there were rarely any natural sounds. It was the most silent environment I've ever experienced. Hour after hour was spent in almost complete silence, as the four of us intensely glassed everything within sight. Some days, blizzards blew through the area, making glassing impossible for entire days. As far as bowhunting goes, I have never experienced an environment where so much is working against you. As each day passed, I stayed positive, and tried to envision that one shot I needed. The sinking feelings of doubt snapped at my heels occasionally, but I remained optimistic.

Day nine rolled around, and a new group of sheep appeared on the horizon, including two rams that looked to be legal. The snow was really starting to fall now, with nightly accumulations of up to sixty centimetres, as the temperature continued to plummet, meaning more sheep were moving. We watched the new group like hawks, but frustratingly, they were staying in the same position, and they showed no sign of heading our way. A couple of days were spent studying their every move. It was a true game of amazing patience. Our luck would surely turn soon.

On day eleven I woke up with a feeling that something really good was going to happen. At the beginning of the trip, Kyle and I had flipped a penny I had found in the dirt in camp, to determine whose 'day' it would be first. The general plan was that if it was your day, you had first chance at the best stalk or ambush set-up, the second hunter taking the less favourable backup

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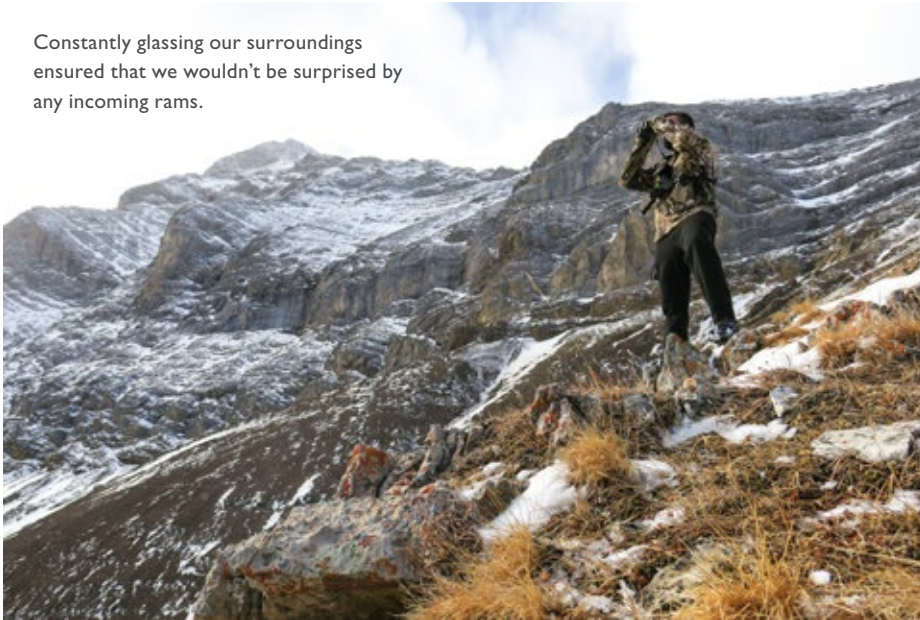
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My heart skipped a beat. What occurred next happened so fast it sends a shiver up my spine when I relive the memory.



Constantly glassing our surroundings ensured that we wouldn't be surprised by any incoming rams.



position. We would swap roles the next day, and the pattern continued. Day eleven was my day. When I arrived at our glassing point for the morning's session, the rams we had been watching for the last few days still hadn't moved. By about 2:00 pm there still had been no sign of movement. I watched each sheep's every move, mentally willing one of them to start heading our way, praying that they would eventually travel down towards our position. Suddenly I noticed two of the ewes drifting away to the left of the small group, their attention shifting from digging in the snow for tufts of grass to travelling. I could see the determination in their movements. They had made up their minds, and were heading along the ridge towards us. One of the big rams caught sight of them just as they were departing, and followed, leaving the remainder of the group behind. My heart skipped a beat. What occurred next happened so fast it sends a shiver up my spine when I relive the memory.

Once we were certain enough that they were going to enter our unit, it was time to get serious. Jordan asked, "Who's up today?", and without wasting a millisecond I replied, "I am." Jordan and I left Elijah and Kyle in the glassing spot. They wished us luck. I grabbed my bow and rangefinder, and not much else, and off we trekked up the mountain to a clearing above camp, where a prominent sheep trail exited the thick spruce forest. The snow was waist-deep for much of the way, I'd never seen anything like this in my life. Earlier, the travel speed of the three sheep had varied when we had been watching them move in our direction, so we wanted to get into the best possible position as quickly as possible. It was a gamble, but we agreed the ideal ambush location would be the prominent sheep trail where another young ram had wandered through earlier. As we approached the opening where the trail left the timber and entered an open field of snow, I caught movement ahead. At around eighty metres I saw the first of the two ewes exit the timber. Were we too late?

As the ewe disappeared from sight, unaware of our presence, we had to make the decision to either get closer, or stay



A good blood trail in the snow led the author to his prized quarry.

An immature ram stopped long enough for a quick photo. Many rams of this age class were seen in the area, traversing the mountains on the search for ewes.



The author with his Holy Grail animal, a beautiful Rocky Mountain bighorn ram.

A beautiful scene as the sun sets on another day.



put. I wanted to push closer – we had a reasonable amount of cover in amongst some young spruce trees, and that ram was going to be coming out any second. We pushed through the snow as quickly and quietly as possible, hoping to get within shooting range of the opening. Just as we approached a good position, I again spotted movement through the dark green and white shapes, as the second ewe emerged from the timber, bounding at full speed through the snow. She had already spotted us! Everything then went into slow motion. Without a second thought, I pulled an arrow from my bow quiver and drew my bow, instinctively expecting the ram to be following in hot pursuit...

Mortally hit, he bounded up the snow-covered hill, before lying down just fifty metres further on. With my brain not yet comprehending what had just happened, I went into auto-pilot and instinctively sneaked straight back into cover up the hill further through the spruce trees,

coming out level with the ram, and landing another shot into his chest. He got up and took off down the hill, but did not make it far. My brain caught up with my body finally, and I fell backwards into the deep snow with bow in hand, and stared up at the perfectly clear blue sky. That feeling of pure ecstasy I had dreamed about for so many years took over. I could not hold back the tears. Jordan joined me and I could tell he was just as elated as I was. We had done it! So much had gone into this moment. There were the years of preparation and planning; the psychological processing of the potential of coming home with some great photos but no trophy, and the incredible expense that I would likely never be able to afford again in my lifetime. There had been no guarantees of even seeing a legal ram, let alone getting a shot at one. The emotion I experienced in that moment was in a category completely of its own, and I doubt if I will ever reach that level of pure happiness again.

We contacted Elijah and Kyle on the radio, who brought up the gear we needed to photograph, cape and butcher my ram. The four of us were on a combined high. We had really become a team over the last eleven days, and this was a result we all shared. After the coldest caping and butchering job I've ever witnessed, we got back to camp around 10:00 pm, and of course the celebrations ran late.

The focus now shifted purely to Kyle and his Grand Slam ram. "One down, one to go", I kept saying. Jordan and I worked in the kitchen tent on the life-size cape, listening to music and reliving the moments over and over again. Kyle and Elijah worked extremely hard over the following days, enduring the most extreme conditions. There were close chances, but things just weren't quite working out. More than anything else, I wanted so badly for Kyle to kill his ram while we were all still in camp, so the full team could celebrate together. Sadly though, on day sixteen the



The author loaded up with his precious cargo, on the way back down the mountain.



The author admires the mass of his trophy horns.

time came when I had to hike off the mountain with Jordan back to civilization. My pack was ridiculously heavy, the snow very deep, and it was the single most testing physical activity I've ever endured. Halfway back, we heard a crackle over the radio, it was Elijah. Those sweet words came over the airwaves, "Ram down". I couldn't believe it! Why couldn't this have happened the day before? I was over the moon for Kyle. The amazing news gave me new energy, and just before dark that afternoon, I heard the first telltale sounds of humanity again, as one totally exhausted, smelly, dirty, but ridiculously happy bowhunter and his guide emerged from the bush back into civilization.

I'll never be able to properly convey with words what this experience meant to me, it is of immense difficulty to truly describe the emotion behind this journey. Sharing the experience

with the three guys, the way the story unfolded, and the fact the Hunting Gods decided to shine on me on this particular hunt – I can't imagine any experience in life ever comparing to this. I still wake up every morning to the words in my mind, "That's right, I got my sheep!"

Now being on the other side of this pinnacle, it's hard to describe the sense of fulfilment, mixed with some sadness, as that chapter has now passed. For me, there is nothing in hunting that I hope to achieve that's any bigger or more significant than this. No matter what happens now, I will die a happy man. I still have the fire and the passion, but I am now just a little more relaxed about things. While there are still quite a few species I dream of one day hunting, I'll be content no matter what, because I've hunted the one I wanted the most. My Holy Grail. ■

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Bill Hanlon/Nov.11



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