

In Quest of the Nevada Slam
by Alan Means

“I’ve heard it said that being a successful sheep hunter requires a little luck and a lot of persistence. That ideology seems applicable to my story, so I’m sticking to it. Having applied for a little over 100 Nevada big game permits over a 26-year period speaks to persistence. Successfully drawing four tags out of all those applications does not seem inordinate, let’s say just a little lucky. But the fact that three of those four draws were for each of Nevada’s sub-species of sheep puts me in a class by myself, the first Nevadan to get a crack at all three of our state’s bighorn sheep trophies. Here’s the rest of the story...”

Desert Bighorn

Mid-December 1987 found me quietly anxious as I pulled through Corn Creek Station and turned south to meet the crew I’d assembled to share my first Nevada sheep hunt with. At this point in my sheep-hunting career, I already had a grand slam with over ten sheep hunts cycled through my well-worn boots. Through my previous experience I knew this was my chance to take a really great ram, but that meant finding one first. That would require a lot of looking and a lot of patience along with good knowledge of these magnificent animals and their habitat. Being able to accurately judge a real trophy ram (we’re talking real trophy here) on the hoof, at great distance, takes a lot of experience. I was determined to make the most of this opportunity, so I packed my camp with the best help I could find. Roy Lerg, Jim Lathrop, Clint Capurro, Jim Puryear and Bob Heady gave all the knowledge and experience I would need. The patience and persistence was up to me.

Over the next twelve days, hundreds of miles of rough roads and long hikes broken up by countless hours of glassing had blessed us with the sightings of over 150 rams. Six of these we felt would qualify for the Boone and Crockett Record Book, but I had set my sights higher. A New Year’s tip from the then dean of Nevada sheep hunters, Jerry Hughes, encouraged us to look over an obscure set of foothills some distance away from and considerably lower than the rugged Sheep Range where we had concentrated our hunt to this point. Finally, on January 2, 1988, our efforts were rewarded. Jaws dropped and eyes got big as we peered through our spotting scopes at a ram unlike any of the dozens we had seen up to that point. His horns were long and massive and he seemed to walk with his head slung low, as though struggling to hold up their weight. At first sight, I dubbed him Snowplow for the way his horns seemed to plow at the ground. The name still fits.

Now Jim Lathrop, for those who didn’t know him, was a somewhat excitable personality, possessing exceptional strength and stamina, and blessed with the gift of gab. After one look at Snowplow, he became a quivering twitching, babbling wreck. I thought he was going to wear the ground out as he circled his tripod mumbling to himself. Taking him along on a cautious, quiet, controlled stalk was out of the question, so I suggested he stay and keep an eye on the quarry while Roy, Clint and I snuck in for a

closer look. After leaving Jim, we were quickly out of sight of the ram group. However, the rams were also on the move. This is generally not an ideal combination. So we painstakingly checked out every canyon, cactus and crevasse as we eased north toward where we last saw them feeding. Finally, five canyons up and on the other side of the ridge from where we had first seen them, we found the seven rams bedded down just where the canyon flattened out onto the valley floor. Roy and Clint quickly identified Snowplow and I spent very little time in sending him 130 grains of Sierra flat base. Our long awaited trophy was finally down and we wasted precious little time getting down that hill to check him out. This magnificent ram was better than my conservative guide team had estimated. At an official 183 2/8 Boone and Crockett points he tied for the second largest ram ever taken in the state up to that point. Knowledge, persistence, hard work and patience had paid off big time. Oh yeah, and just a little luck.

Rocky Mountain Bighorn

Early in April of 1995, I was listening to country western music on the radio when an old friend came on for an interview. It was Joe Williams, NDOW game biologist stationed in Wells, announcing the granting of the first ever tag for a Rocky Mountain Bighorn on Pilot Peak located on the Nevada-Utah border north of Wendover. Joe said that whoever got the tag was really going to have his work cut out for him as the terrain was very rugged and the access was poor. It sounded like this hunt was ideally suited to me and I had this strong feeling I was going to get it.

That June, when tags were issued, my premonition came true. A couple weeks later, after considerable map reading and telephone research, my wife and I set off for Wells for a scouting trip. We spent the evening going over maps and memories with Joe. The next day we met Bill Gibson and his pack string at the north end of Pilot Peak and proceeded to pack a spike camp as far up the mountain as the horses could take us. Bill rode out the next morning and Sharen and I spent the next five days exploring the mountain searching for sheep. Joe's observations of the sheep and the ruggedness of the terrain were made with the benefit of a helicopter. Our mini-vacation on the ground was a totally different experience. One evening, while looking over the hundreds of square miles of Bonneville Salt Flats that seem to go on forever, Sharen and I surmised that some ancient civilization must have mined all those rocks off the flats and piled them up to make this mountain. I think I'm the only living person who has climbed to all three of Pilot's peaks and I can accurately report that there is nothing but boulders from the valley floor to the sign-in box situated on the highest peak. When our scouting trip came to a close we had seen about 30 sheep, approximately ten of which had been rams. This represented 80% of what was reported to be on the mountain and we had not seen a ram over four years old yet. We cached the camp for later use and wearily hiked back down to the truck. Later that afternoon as we relaxed over a well deserved beer in the Cowboy Bar in Montello, Sharen politely suggested that I might consider donating the tag to a good charity cause. I have to admit, that thought did seem worth of some consideration.

But dogged persistence prevailed over logic again, when the season opened August 1st, I was there to greet it along with Dave Barrett.

By this time, I figured I already had about, as much sheep hunting experience as anyone in the state, so I did not need a lot of help in that regard. Thinking that I really needed a companion, yet realizing that a week struggling up and down this boulder pile was already more than any sane person would consider, I called Dave. Dave, a biathlete, marathoner and Ironman Triathlon competitor certainly had the stamina for the job. And besides, I figured he might be the only individual I knew, crazy enough to keep me company on this rock hopping adventure. Well, Dave and I spent another nine glorious days roaming from one end of Pilot Peak to the other scrambling from bottom to top. During our tour we were blessed with the sighting of numerous elk, five deer, one antelope, seven blue grouse, a highly indignant rattlesnake, four ewes and three lambs. Not what you'd call hitting the Jackpot. It was time for a rest.

I was back in Reno tending to business and regrouping mentally and physically for another foray on the infamous mountain when I got a call from Bill Gibson at about two o'clock one afternoon. After completing an elk hunt, Bill had ridden up to pack out our spike camp when he saw five rams not 500 yards from the camp. He said that one was worth looking at and that I ought to get back up there. It took all of about 30 minutes to throw my stuff together. Bill and I were in the saddle at 6:00 am the next morning. About half way up the mountain we got off the horses to glass. Within a minute we picked up two young rams feeding up a grassy chute about a mile south of where Bill had seen the rams the day before. But these two were in the opposite direction of where the group he'd seen had gone. We looked the area over closely for about an hour, but could not locate any more rams. Bill was sure these couldn't be part of the group he'd seen and felt he could show me where they went. We mounted up and rode further up right above where Bill had seen the other rams. We dismounted and hiked another ½ mile over the ridge and up into the basin where my camp had been, which was where he felt they would be. Having spent a week here on two previous occasions, I was very familiar with this basin and its sheep movement patterns. After looking it over unsuccessfully for about an hour, I got another one of my premonitions. These cagey critters must have doubled back. They had to be back with the two we had seen this morning.

I expressed my conclusion to Bill and we hiked around the mountain, sneaking as quietly as we could as we approached the area where our two little buddies had been. Of course they were out of sight by now. While traversing the cliffs above the spot where they had been feeding, we heard some noise below. The area was heavily timbered, so we scrambled up to a pinnacle where we could get a better vantage point and just waited and watched. About ten minutes later I spotted a light movement at the edge of some trees about 300 yards below us. It was a ram. At first sight Bill was urging me to shoot, but I patiently cranked my spotting scope to 60 power for a closer look. From all my talks with Joe Williams, I knew the initial ram transplanted onto pilot Peak would now be 11 years old. I could count at least ten annual growth rings on this fella. He had to be our boy.

I eased out on a ledge, trying to get the best rest I could. It was a very steep downward angle and the ram was partially obscured by some of those damn boulders. Not to worry, I knew my rifle's ballistics well. I settled in confidently, gently squeezed off a shot and plugged him right in the left horn. Nice shootin studly! Quickly regrouping and knowing my bullet would strike high shooting from this angle, I actually had to sight into a rock in front of the ram and hope the bullet would pass just over the rock and strike home. I relaxed and sent him another one. This one put him down.

It took us quite a while to climb down to him, particularly since he had moved about 200 yards further down the chute. After putting him down once and for all, we were able to confirm that he was indeed the eleven-year-old ram we'd spent weeks trying to find. The King of Pilot Peak was mine.

California Bighorn

As I studied the regulations for the 1997 big game application I noticed that NDOW had opened a few new areas for California Bighorn. One of these was the Calico Mountains about 30 miles north of Gerlach. I called my old friend Tony Diebold who resides in Gerlach as well as Mike Dobel, game biologist for Washoe County, to see what they knew about the sheep in the area. Although both had seen what they felt were good heavy trophies in the area, neither reported having had a real good look at them. Why then, were they both going to apply for that area? My premonitions were back. When June rolled around, Les Naisbitt and I became the lucky recipients of the first two tags for the Calicos.

A week after the results were out, my wife Sharen and I packed the truck and went scouting again. Hiking into an area about half way between Donnelly Mountain and Little Donnelly Mountain, we hadn't even reached the base of the mountains, I spotted our first ever California Bighorn rams. By the time we reached the crest of the mountains some three hours later, we had seen an incredible 22 rams. Needing a break, we sat down for lunch with our scopes fixed on four rams atop a rocky pinnacle. Two of these bad boys were adorned with green ear tags and sported by far the best horns we had seen. Both were ten years of age. Dobel had told me that the original transplant some eight years previous had included two, two year old rams outfitted with green ear tags. Let's see, eight plus two is ten. These two were just who we were looking for. Now all I had to do was wait six weeks, stumble back to this little knoll and voila. No worries!

Incredible stuff this sheep hunting. Two days before the season opening my son Troy and I unshouldered our heavy backpacks at the spike camp Ton Diebold had set just a half mile from where Sharen and I had seen our two big rams. We expected Tony, who had spent two previous days scouting the area, to tell us right where our two buddies were. No such luck. It seems Tony had traversed Little Donnelly from one end to the other in the sweltering heat and had only one brief glimpse of three fleeting rams several miles to the south to show for it. The next morning we split up and pretty well covered the whole mountain. Going north, Tony saw zilch. Heading south Troy and I located Naisbitt, his guide Mike Hornbarger, and six rams that did not meet our expectations. As

the sun settled in the West, we packed our nifty little camp back off the top of the mountain. Our well-laid plans were out the window. Tomorrow was opening day and we did not have a clue what to do. Later that night, relaxing in a meadow down below, we decided to start our search near the area where Tony had gotten a glimpse of the three rams a few days before.

By the time the sun came up on that opening morning we were well on our way to Cooper Canyon, which separates Little Donnelly Mountain from the Calico Mountains. We followed the canyon from the west side of the range, over the top, down the east side and then settled in for a lengthy glassing session. With three scopes set up we had been scanning every nook and cranny on the mountain until we just about wore the terrain out when Tony said “There’s a couple of sheep right in front of us!” Sure enough, just on the other side of the canyon, right in front of us, the morning sun had just lit up two rams not $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile off. Searching the shade below these two carefully, we found seven more rams and two of them looked good. As we were in plain sight of them too, we picked up our gear and sort of slouched back around the mountain to get out of sight. (“Slouched” for a non-hunter is when you walk slowly, sort of bent over to resemble a rather portly four legged critter so as not to scare your quarry.) By the time we got around the mountain to a new vantage point, the rams were on the move as well and we had misplaced about half of them somewhere in the rock formations below us. We backed down, and crossed over to the other side of the canyon to get a better perspective. There we located four rams including the two best ones. They were lying down now and there were lots of hiding places for the other ones we couldn’t see. Once again, not a great situation. Swirling winds complicated things further. After a long debate, I suggested that Troy and Tony stay put and keep an eye on the rams which were a about 800 yards away, while I snuck in for a better look.

After the first ten yards or so I was out of view of the rams. I wound around through the rocks and across the side hill as quickly as possible, trying to be quiet and at the same time staying out of sight of the other hidden rams. By golly it worked. From back at our vantage point where Troy and Tony waited, I had picked out a rock outcrop from where I felt I would be within range of the rams. I eased up the rock and sure enough there they were lying about 250 yards below me. What do you know, the two bigger ones were all decked out with pretty green ear tags and sported a lot of growth rings. Looking them over carefully, I settled in on the one with a little more mass all the way through his horns. But when I lowered myself to get a rest for my rifle, another rock formation between my position and theirs blocked them out. So I eased back down and crawled to the outcropping about 25 yards ahead. I quietly chambered a round, peered over the ledge and there they were. Calm down. Relax. Take a deep breath. Release half of it. Squeeze – Bingo! I had just become the first guy in Nevada to possess all three of its sub-species of wild sheep.

The ram was a ten-year-old beauty. It took Tony about 20 minutes to traverse the mountain down to me. In the intense heat, he was a happy but badly dehydrated guy. Troy went back the other direction to get the truck and bring it around to the east side of the mountain range. It took Tony and me about an hour to preserve our quest on film,

cape and bone the ram and load our back packs for the long walk out. It was a very hot 90 degrees and we had about a pint of water left between us when we started off the mountain. It took about an hour and a half to cover the three miles to where Troy had brought the truck. By the time we got there we were dry and beat. It was now 4:30 pm and the decision to go soak up a few beers in the soothing waters of Wheeler Hot Springs was a no-brainer. After all our work was done. We were now on vacation.