

Getting it Right

MARK ROZELLE • ROCKY MTN BIGHORN SHEEP • WYOMING

Growing up near the coast in southern California was ideal for my decades of underwater hunting as a breath-hold diver. When a vertigo problem robbed me of this, I looked on land to satisfy my hunting passion, but big game hunting had been really frustrating. I went on more than 10 local deer hunts and saw only one distant buck. A friend said, "To get the big bucks, you have to pay the big bucks." So I went on two outfitted hunts and one guided elk hunt, which was a waste of money. I saw only one bull and missed the shot. Basically I didn't know what I was doing.

My life changed on a mountain bike ride one evening in the fall of 2012 when I bumped into a work acquaintance who was an avid hunter. After relating my frustration he said, "You need to subscribe to *Huntin' Fool* and follow their advice." I went right home and subscribed, and after reading a couple issues it quickly became apparent how ill-equipped and poorly planned my hunts had been.

Over the next 6 months most evenings were consumed with studying the magazine and the opportunities in each state. I ended up applying for virtually every big game species in nine western states. At 60 years of age and with zero bonus points I knew a wide net had to be cast. This cost me about \$1,000 after all the refunds came back.

I drew nothing in seven states. My home state shut me out, even though I applied for a high percentage hunt. Nevada, Idaho, Montana, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado all said no. In Wyoming I applied for an antelope zone that had a 100% chance the previous year, but I did not draw.

The wisdom of the *Huntin' Fool* system is that statistically a person is bound to get some draws, and I should have been playing the lottery. With zero points I was drawn for a Wyoming Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep tag. The remarkableness of this draw was not lost on me, but as I heard stories of people applying for 10, 20, and even 30 years before getting drawn, my appreciation grew.



Inspired by the backpack hunting articles, I wondered about doing the hunt solo. Fortunately I spoke with Garth Carter of *Huntin' Fool* who gently recommended that with my experience I should hire a guide. I had a lot to learn.

Huntin' Fool's list of recommended guides and members who had hunted in my zone was incredibly helpful. After interviewing them all one guide stood out, but he was already booked. He strongly recommended Josh Martoglio of Shoshone Lodge Outfitters out of Cody, Wyoming. Hiring him was a fabulous decision.

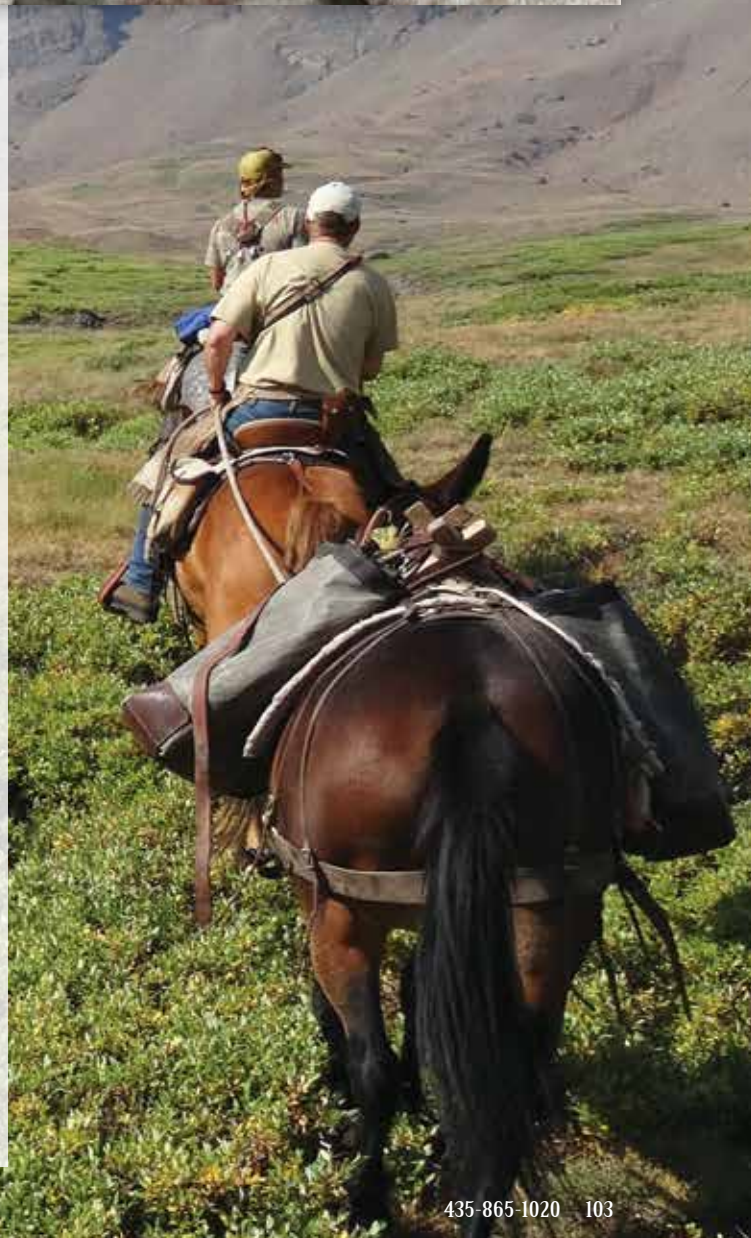
With 6 months to go I focused on getting my gear together and getting in "sheep shape." Besides regular mountain bike rides, I hiked three peaks over 10,000' in southern California, hiked the 50+ miles to break in new boots, and carried large water jugs in my pack up the hills behind my house. When my August 27th departure date came I was ready.

My guide was Josh's brother, Jordan, a veteran mountain man and skilled hunter. Even though I was the only hunter in the spike camp, he also recruited a Jackson, Wyoming *Huntin' Fool* recommended guide Bob Barlow to join us. We were supported by 11 horses and mules.

The 5-hour pack trip to our spike camp took us into awe inspiring territory. We camped at 10,300' and regularly climbed on horseback or foot over 12,000' ridges. The peaks above the treeline looked barren from a distance, but up close they were full of color and life. We looked down on the herds of bulls that gathered "high in the mountains" before the rut and on soaring eagles and hawks. We saw the first trickle of water melting from snowfields that started the creeks that became the streams. The jagged and difficult terrain added excitement to the moment we crested and peered into each new drainage.

On our scouting day we covered 10 rugged miles. We saw 15 or 20 ewes and lambs but only 4 small rams. On opening day, with my gun in the scabbard, there was a fresh excitement and many more mountains and drainages to explore. We covered at least 15 miles on incredibly challenging terrain, spotting a couple flocks of ewes and five or six smaller rams. I was amazed at how many sheep there were!

On the second morning of the hunt my eagle-eyed guides found six borderline-sized rams on a hillside and carefully evaluated them. I sat down with my binoculars and looked the opposite direction. Just over 1 mile away on the opposite side of the drainage I found "my" first two sheep. After checking them out through the scopes Jordan said one of them was a mature ram and probably a shooter. The hunt was on!





As with most of the sheep we saw these two presented a challenge to stalk because they were on a wide open, exposed hillside where nothing could ambush them. Our biggest challenge was determining how to approach them. Jordan concluded that we needed to go the opposite direction around the upper end of the drainage, along a ridge, and then drop down onto the mountain next to the sheep. Even after all that we were not sure if we would be within shooting range. Excited to begin the stalk, I walked over to my horse and started to mount, but Jordan informed me the ridge was too sharp and treacherous for the horses. It would be a 3-mile stalk on foot. I told Jordan that after all the physical conditioning I had done it would be disappointing to ride a horse up to a ridge, dismount, and shoot a ram. He told me, "Here is your chance for your hard work to pay off."

First we climbed about 1,500' into even thinner air at 12,000' and then sidehilled out of view for over 1 mile on loose shale. Soon the rain started to fall and a cold wind whipped along the ridges. We layered up, but the grassy areas got wet and slippery. The fourth hour of our stalk was spent slowly creeping into view of the rams and then belly crawling forward each time the rams looked away. Once we were in the best shooting position I anxiously watched Jordan pull out his rangefinder – 385 yards, a shot I should be able to make. However the wind was howling in the ravine between us and the rain was pelting down, so we waited. For about 20 minutes I held my crosshairs on the ram as he fed across the hillside. That distance across a deep ravine sure looked farther than one with flat land in between!

Finally the wind and rain stopped and the ram turned broadside. All the months of preparation now rested on the squeeze of the trigger. Laying on that tundra, I found the calm that had helped me hold my breath for deep dives. I squeezed, and my Weatherby 300 magnum echoed from ridge to ridge across the drainage. Jordan yelled, "You hit him!" I'm embarrassed to say my response was, "You're kidding, really?" The ram slowly staggered away from us, and when he paused another shot sent him tumbling 40 yards down the steep slope.

The return of the rain spoiled a lot of the pictures, but we still got several good ones. Bob brought a horse and mule up to the ram for the meat, but I insisted on carrying the head and cape on my pack back to camp. That walk will always be a special memory.

After watching dozens of hunting shows over the past months I had wondered how I would react when I made this kill. I nearly cried but didn't. A solemn respect for the ram kept me from jumping up and down. Instead, all the preparation of the previous months flooded through my mind and I thought to myself, "I finally got it right."

Thank you *Huntin' Fool* for teaching me. Thank you Jordan and Bob for showing me. You folks are all first class.

