

# THE KING OF THE BASIN

## A story of the perfect Alaskan Dall Sheep Hunt

By: Gary English

My aspirations of Dall sheep hunting came to me five years ago while hunting the giant Alaska-Yukon moose of the famed Koyukuk River with Hunt Alaska. While on that hunt not only did I take a beautiful wolf and an absolutely incredible 64" moose, I was very fortunate to meet one of the most knowledgeable people in the guiding industry, Virgil Umphenour. During that hunt on the Koyukuk I was very impressed with his uncanny ability to consistently produce exceptional trophy animals for his clients. It appeared that every hunter was successful and had a huge moose in the 64"- 70" range.

While visiting with Virgil during that trip he and I discussed hunting the magnificent Dall sheep. He explained that his son Eric has an exceptional guide area in the Alaska Range that was producing some fantastic rams. That was all it took, from that day on I began reading about and studying photographs of Dall sheep. It seemed as though my distant dreams of collecting one of the most prestigious trophies not only in Alaska, but in the world, could soon become a reality. Four years later and numerous phone calls to Virgil and Eric the details and arrangements were worked out and the plans for my August, 2004 Dall sheep hunt were finalized.

I talked several times with both Virgil and Eric on the phone concerning rifle caliber, bullet weight and structure, as well as ballistics. I had heard too many horror stories of sheep hunters finding a huge ram lying down in the middle of a basin surrounded by shale slides perfectly safe from the hunter, simply because he was out of range. On my sheep hunt I wanted to minimize the chances of finding myself in that same situation.

Nine months prior to my hunt I decided to search for the perfect sheep rifle, one that when combined with the best accessories would make the impossible shot possible. After extensive research consulting with hunters, guides, and firearm manufacturers, my search lead me no further than three miles from my home in Rapid City, South Dakota to H-S Precision Inc. H-S precision manufactures extremely high quality firearms that define the term "accuracy", in fact every .30 caliber or smaller rifle that leaves the factory is guaranteed to shoot ½ minute of angle or less. I decided to shoot their Professional Hunter 2000 chambered in the very accurate and flat shooting .270 Winchester topped with a Leupold 4-12 power VariX III scope, coupled with a Harris bipod. After shooting many different bullet types and weights, I gained my best accuracy with a 130 grain Sierra Spitzer Boat Tail. Armed with one of the most accurate production rifles available, coupled with superior accessories and the knowledge from studying ballistics charts for bullet drop and bullet drift from wind at long ranges, I felt that I was now ready to hunt the Alaskan Dall sheep.

I had waited many years to hear the words, "Now boarding Alaska Airlines flight 107 with service from Denver to Fairbanks." I was on my way to Alaska. After spending the night in Fairbanks my bush flight for sheep country left the next morning promptly at 8:00 AM by way of a Helio Curior aircraft. When I arrived at the cabin on Dry Creek there were three other extremely happy sheep hunters who were waiting for flights out of

the bush. I took a look at their trophies and all three looked very nice to me. However, the words from these hunters were, "Wait until you see the big, smart, curl and a quarter ram in the basin that we couldn't get a shot at. After hearing this I got a big grin on my face and thought to myself, let's go get him.

Later that evening I was discussing my options with Eric and the other guides/packers Jay Dee Kirby and Clinton Weter who were to accompany me on my hunt. Our plan for the next morning was to travel 11 miles to Eric's cabin, using two Yamaha Rhino ATVs and stay the night. Once at Eric's cabin, I reconfirmed the zero on my rifle, by shooting at the 100 and 300 yard targets. After making a couple of minor adjustments I was satisfied with the impact point and the tight groups in each target. We were now ready to make our way several more miles, to the top of the steep shale slides that Dall sheep call home. There we would make a spike camp for several days and try and locate the big old trophy ram. The country just kept getting more beautiful the farther we went. With each foot of elevation a new and increasingly awesome landscape appeared. I have hunted all over Alaska and as far as beauty is concerned, this part of the Alaska Range would rank a dead tie with Kodiak Island. I wondered if the sheep live here for their safety from predators, or if they simply just enjoy the spectacular view. There was one drawback though, due to the hot, dry temperatures in Alaska this summer, it was the worst fire season in their recorded history. There were 52 fires burning at once, which had already consumed 5.9 million acres. These fires were producing substantial amounts of smoke in the air which was reducing the visibility and it seemed to get worse with each passing hour. We traveled as far as the Rhino 4x4's would take us and then put on our backpacks for the final grueling ascent to the giant basin where the big ram had been last spotted.

When we made it to the top Eric peeked over the ledge and immediately turned around and gave the thumbs up sign. As I peeked over the sharp jagged edge I captured my first glimpse of the monster ram. He was bedded a considerable distance away with another ram, facing away from us, in wide open view. Even at that range, with the naked eye you could clearly see that this was the ram of a lifetime. I immediately put my Swarovski spotting scope to my eye for a better look...yep, he still looks huge. After all four of us looked at him through the spotting scope they were absolutely positive that he was the same curl and a quarter ram they had seen several days earlier. However, there were two problems; he was a long way away, and he was strategically bed in the wide open. I was having an adrenalin rush after sighting the ram and wanted to immediately execute a stalk of this fantastic trophy ram. Quickly, Eric cautioned me and explained that if we tried to approach him we would certainly create rock slides that would alert the sheep and we would undoubtedly lose him for sure. We sat on the ridge discussing our options while waiting almost two hours for the ram to get up and move. As time passed, the smoke from the fires kept getting thicker and more intense, but the sheep refused to move seemingly content, knowing that he was laying there in the open basin free from all danger.

We discussed the probability of shooting the ram from our position. I put my laser range finder on him and was able to accurately determine his range. Since I had done my homework on my rifle before the trip, I told myself that I would only take an extremely long shot if every condition was absolutely perfect. I was holding a highly accurate rifle in my hands, but that alone does not make the perfect shot. The four of us weighed the

pros and cons. On the positive side, this was the first day of my ten day hunt, leaving time to pursue another sheep if I missed. In the event I hit him I would have an exceptional trophy to take home. I also knew I had the perfect equipment to pull off such a feat. On the flip side, the big ram gets away and the uncertainty of the impending deteriorating smoke conditions could get so bad we might not be able to spot sheep in the days to come. We decided I should go for the shot. I would never have tried the shot had even one variable been wrong. I had the perfect rest, no wind, a known range, accurate bullet drop information and the ultimate firearm. The rest was up to my skills as a marksman. As I laid on the ridge in the prone position with the sheep in my scopes field of view, I can remember my rest being as solid as the concrete bench and sand bags I had shot from preparing for this moment. I chambered a cartridge, lowered the bolt and clicked off the safety, then let out half a breath and thought to myself, don't force the shot Gary, just let the gun do all the work. As I held the cross hairs at the predetermined spot above the ram I squeezed the trigger...slowly. As the gun fired, I lost the sight picture in the recoil; the next thing I heard was Jay Dee saying, "You hit him!" Upon further inspection through the spotting scope he was right, the sheep was hit. He was barely able to stumble over the steep rocky ledge near him and then he slipped out of sight from us. We waited 15 minutes and the sheep never came out, then Eric said, "Let's go get your trophy ram."

After descending some very rocky and treacherous terrain, I was at the ridge where we last saw the sheep. Eric cautiously peeked over the ridge and said "your sheep is laying down 150 yards away, catch your breath and come over here and kill him." As I eased over the ridge, there was my trophy. I squeezed off the trigger and the sheep collapsed. He rolled 50 yards down the steep rocky slope coming to a rest upside down jammed into the jagged rocks. To my complete amazement he did not break a horn or scar up his beautiful white hide. After a 30 minute photo session, we measured the flawless set of horns to be 38 4/8" x 39 1/8". He was truly an amazing animal with perfect unbroomed horns, certainly the trophy of a lifetime.

We skinned him out for a life size mount, collected all the wonderful sheep meat and then loaded our backpacks for the long treacherous up hill hike back to spike camp. Walking on the vertical terrain that Dall sheep inhabit is challenging enough, now add a 50 pound backpack and a rifle and it becomes damned near impossible. After negotiating the steep rocky slopes for several hours it started to get dark and all four of us put on our head lamps. I looked at my watch and it read 11:00 pm. We are nowhere near the top, with several hours yet to go and I was near exhaustion. At this point my legs could have passed for over stretched rubber bands and my lungs felt like shriveled up raisins. My shirt was soaked with sweat and my eyes burned from constantly rubbing them trying to remove the dirt and perspiration. I kept telling myself that sheep hunting is not easy, and is reserved for only die hard trophy hunters. We kept hiking up hill, navigating the sharp loose rocks by the single beams of light coming from our headlamps in total darkness. Looking from the corners of my eyes I could see the horns of my ram on my backpack, this was a constant reminder that I was now a member of a very elite group; I was a successful Dall sheep hunter. As we made it back to spike camp I looked at my watch and it read 1:55am. We took off our backpacks and were so exhausted we just rolled out our sleeping bags and slept out under the big Alaskan sky. Two days later we made it back to the cabin on Dry Creek, and called for the airplane to come get us. The smoke had gotten

so thick that the pilot from Fairbanks had to exercise better judgment and turn back due to poor visibility. A second Super Cub came from a different direction and was able to get in and land on the grass strip. We would soon be on our way back to civilization. Many other hunts were called off or cut short due to the Alaskan fires; I feel that I was extremely lucky to have taken my trophy ram during my hunt. If I hadn't decided to take the long shot, I too may have been in the same predicament. I owe a huge amount of thanks to Eric and Virgil Umphenour of Hunt Alaska. Jay Dee Kirby and Clinton Weter were also outstanding. Without these guys I might be still deep in the bottom of the Alaska Range trying to get my ram out.

There is an old saying that goes something like this: "Once you go to Alaska, you never really come all the way home." Alaska truly is "The Last Great Frontier" and it will always have a special place in my heart. Can you believe it, 15 trips to Alaska and I have yet to go to Hawaii.....hmmm.

#### My personal thoughts on long range shooting...

Many people, with very good reason, question the ethics of long range shooting in actual hunting situations. I will be the first to agree that the object of hunting any animal is to get as close as possible before taking any shot, the ultimate result a quick clean kill. However every situation is different and sometimes getting close enough for the "ideal" shot is just not possible. Long range shooting can be accomplished if all the variables are met and the shooter has the skills and essential equipment to make it possible. There are a few companies manufacturing firearms for the 1000 yard competitive bench rest shooter and today that same technology is starting to show up in extremely accurate long range hunting rifles. Is that good for our sport of hunting? Or is this encouraging many hunters to shoot beyond their capabilities, simply because they have a super accurate hi-tech rifle? I will leave that for you to decide. One word of caution though; no matter how accurate the firearm, the ultimate outcome after one pulls the trigger, **absolutely** depends upon the marksman's ability.

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