

## SIX

### RAMS

This is one of the “straight pieces.” The language is terse and under control, though a few westernisms creep in: cayuses, for example, and the pragmatic saying, ascribed to “The Indians here, who are mighty hunters,” “Any gun good, shootem good.” The topic, theme and tone are close to his stories written in character as Tex, but the language is correct and fluid—almost bland by comparison. Tex’s gifts of characterization and description come through here, even if there is no scope for his usual irony and gentle mockery. Details concerning the work of an outfitter/guide, such as the stacking of camp materials to hand in case of snow, to facilitate set-up, add a sense of reality and nearness to the material. The details of the hunt itself might interest hunters, given the enormous changes in animal stock, techniques and legal regulations since that time. Here Tex also mentions the ram he shot for the collection of the Smithsonian, meant to represent a normal animal, not a trophy head; this is one of a very few mentions of his long-term relationship with the Smithsonian.

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## RAMS

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*There is no hunting like the hunting of the Ovis canadensis*

By N. Vernon-Wood

THE SCIENTIFIC NAME IS *Ovis canadensis*, but to the hunters and guides of the Canadian Northwest, they are just “rams.”

North of the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway, on the eastern slopes of the Rockies, this king of the high places reaches perfection. A national park, embracing some four thousand square miles of natural breeding grounds and pastures in which all animal life is rigidly protected, extends from the foothills to the Great Divide, and all native big game, especially big-horn, have increased to an almost incredible extent during twenty years of strict conservation. The natural overflow maintains a constant supply of trophies for the hunter in the territory adjacent to the park.

The village of Banff, in Alberta, is the only settlement of any size within the park, and from here the pack trains strike off each season into the ram country. An outfit leaving the village is one of the most picturesque sights of the modern West. Following the guide in single file comes a string of cayuses—blacks, bays, buckskins, and pintos—shaggy, homely as sin, but sure-footed, hardy, and wise; each loaded with around one hundred and fifty pounds of grub, dunnage, and camp paraphernalia. The pilgrim with the cook and wrangler follow. All visitors are divided into three parts like ancient Gaul: “tourists,” “tin canners,” and “pilgrims.” Any old visitor is a tourist provided he or she comes by train. The tin canners explain themselves, but as soon as one mounts a cayuse and takes to the hills with

an outfit, to hunt, fish, climb, or just loaf, then he or she becomes a pilgrim, and as such is accepted into the inner circle.

Three or four days' travel through a land of peaks, glaciers, gemlike lakes, and tumbling streams brings the outfit to the ram country. Alpine meadows well above timber line—which is here at an altitude of 7,500 feet—broken by almost inaccessible ledges are the favored haunt of the big fellows. Here on wind-swept slides and grassy benches, sheep, stag, elk, and moose hold forth until the snows of late fall drive the antlered beasts down to the shelter of the forest, but the rams remain, high on the ridges, where snow does not accumulate to any great extent.

Most guides have their favorite places in which to establish the hunting camp. Pasturage for the pack string, wood and water and proximity to timber line are the prime requisites. Often the same spot is used year after year. When you arrive at such a camp the tent and tepee poles will be found carefully stacked against a large tree, so that they will be in plain sight in the event of arriving during or after a snowstorm, and there will be wood, piled under the overhanging branches of a spruce, that a fire may be started quickly.

CAMP MAKING, where every man has his job and does it, takes a surprisingly short time. The cook tent, in which the collapsible stove is erected, is the first consideration. While other tents or tepees are being pitched, the wrangler strips the ponies of saddles and blankets and piles all equipment in an orderly heap which is covered by the canvas pack mantles, as a protection against both weather and the nocturnal porcupine. What a porky can do to an unprotected saddle in the course of a night is a crime. Meanwhile, the cook has been doing his stuff, and before you realize it a meal is prepared. "Come an' get it or I'll chuck it to the mooses," is an invitation to drop everything and gather round.

One's first glimpse of *O. canadensis*, grace and poise in every line of him, head held regally, standing nonchalantly on the edge of a sheer chasm, is a sight for the gods. I have hunted him over a period of twenty years, and still nothing can thrill me as the sight of sheep. Rams, while stationary, are not easy to distinguish, so beautifully do they blend with the limestone cliffs and the autumnal color of the vegetation. Only when on snow fields, or silhouetted on the sky line, do they show plainly, and the novice will require quite a bit of practice to spot them easily.

A mature animal weighs from 325 to 350 pounds, and stands around

forty inches at the shoulder. Looking over some notes, I find that the ram which I killed for the Smithsonian Institute, to be placed in a group as representative of an average sheep, had an overall length of sixty inches. The curl of the horn measured thirty-six inches. It was not a large head, but just what he was to represent, an average ram.

The largest head on record, as far as I know, was killed in the Banff district, and he had a curl of forty-nine and three quarter inches on the right horn, and forty-eight on the left. The runner-up also came from north of Banff, and goes forty-seven and five eights and forty-five and a half respectively. Truly noble trophies.

The freshly-skinned head, with cape attached, will weigh fifty pounds, quite enough to back-pack down a mountain, after a strenuous day's stalking.

When the points of the horns do not reach the level of the eyes, don't shoot, but look for another and worthier trophy. When, however, the "curl" has reached the eye, the head begins to be worth while, and this is the basis used by most guides in sizing up a prospective shot.

Almost without exception, the tips of the horns on mature rams are rubbed and broken, frequently four or more inches being missing. The popular explanation for this is that the points are broken during the annual fighting of the rutting season. Personally, I do not agree with this. When fighting, the impact is taken on the curl just above the base, and in that position it is impossible for the tips to come together. Moreover, I do not think that even two grown rams, fighting as enthusiastically as they do, could come together with enough force to break the horns. The more reasonable explanation is that sheep themselves rub the points, because of interference with the vision. I have watched them working on the rocks rubbing and prying in an endeavor to shorten the points to a place below the eyes. Occasionally one finds a head with a sweeping curl, bringing the horns well forward of the line of vision. Here there has been no incentive to rub, and a perfect head is the result.

The flesh of mountain sheep is delicious; most mountain men agree that it is the finest of any game meat. The skin is practically useless; the hair, like that of the deer species, is hard and brittle. Don't ever make the mistake of having a skin tanned with the hair on, thinking it will make a rug for the den. In about two weeks you will find sheep hair in the morning coffee, and eventually you will have to sneak out some dark night and throw the thing over the bridge, if you value peace in the home.

For keenness of vision, scent, and hearing the ram stands unsurpassed;

the sight especially seems to be absolutely telescopic. The slightest movement, even at great distances, is instantly detected, so that, with the difficulties of the terrain added to the elusiveness of the game, a successful stalk is no mean achievement.

Rams have a weakness, however, which the experienced hunter will work to his advantage, where possible. With the exception of the eagle, which takes his toll of young lambs, all enemies of the mountain sheep come from below. *Ergo*, if humanly possible approach him from above, even if this means a circuit of several miles. In his pride as monarch of the crags, he seems to think that as long as he keeps the lower slopes under observation he is invulnerable. When alarmed he will almost invariably climb, another trait that the hunter can often work to his advantage. I remember, while hunting with Colonel Weems, topping out on a long ridge. Below us, but out of range for anything but a very lucky shot, were six or seven rams, feeding quietly. It was impossible to descend the other slope, because of the general steepness and lack of cover. I told the colonel that I would fire a shot or two in the general direction of the bunch, and that in all probability they would climb. It didn't make much of a hit with him, but as it was his only chance of getting a shot at that bunch he agreed to try anything once. I moved a few hundred yards along the crest of the ridge, and opened fire. At the first report, the rams bunched up, apparently at a loss as to what to do about it. The second report started them, and by the good luck that sometimes does attend a guide, they climbed straight for the colonel. He killed his ram, at about fifty yards.

STALKING RAMS, however, is not a simple matter of getting above a bunch, selecting your trophy, and returning to camp in triumph. An ever-present source of grief is the wind. While in the valley it may be blowing steadily from the west, as soon as one reaches the higher slopes and ridges it comes from every point. It swirls and eddies like the rapids of streams. A sudden change in temperature causes a down draft, and a cliff turns it from west to east. Your ram, a mile away and out of sight, catches a whiff of man and goes from here to there with celerity, often putting two ranges between himself and the ledge where you last saw him, and after stalking carefully you find nothing.

Again, a position may be attained well above, but too far away for a reasonable shot. Cover is scarce, and after what seems hours of lying in wait, hoping he will feed upwards, a marmot spies you, and immediately,

with that piercing whistle of his, alarms every living beast within sound. Or, just as you think everything is going to work perfectly, a young ram with a twenty-inch head, who has been feeding hidden by a fold on the hillside, walks into view. He dashes away with a clatter of loose shale, and your quarry immediately does likewise, not standing on the order of his going.

All this adds to the delight of the hunt, and when success crowns one's efforts the knowledge that no easy trophy has been secured adds much to one's satisfaction.

WHEN LEAVING CAMP to stalk rams, take no unessentials along. Rifle, ammunition, and the clothing worn will be enough to carry over slide, shale, cliff, and rock face.

It is not my intention to suggest the type of rifle. Every man to his taste. The Indians here, who are mighty hunters, have this saying, "Any gun good, shootem good." Do not, though, do as so many hunters do—leave the sighting in of a new gun until you are in the game country, or, worse still, take it for granted that the sighting was done at the maker's.

In the matter of clothing, use woolen underwear, so that the body sweat will be absorbed without leaving a clammy and cold rag next your skin. Wear good climbing boots, well nailed, and two pairs of woolen socks to cushion the feet against rocks. Take an extra sweater in the ruck sack, for lunch time and while your guide is skinning. The winds of autumn at this altitude are, to say the least, fresh, and after the climb you will undoubtedly be heated. A hat with wide brim is a protection from sun, and will also keep rain from trickling down the back of your neck. Khaki or dead grass colors, of course.

The end of the day will probably find you some miles from camp, dog tired and hungry. After what seems hours of slogging through fallen timber, muskeg, or what not, at last the flicker of a camp fire through the trees. Then the odor of coffee.

The evening meal over, after a pipe by the crackling camp fire and some talk of this and that, camp becomes silent. As you lie in your sleeping bag, listening to the faint tinkle of the horse bell, the distant hoot of an owl, and the ever-present music of running streams, whether or not the day has been crowned by success, you will decide, as so many good sportsmen have done, that there is no hunting like the hunting of rams.

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