

The Gift



Glassing for sheep in the steep country.



by Rick Ellison

When I first saw the old ram, he was wrapped in green cliffs surrounded by colorful, shiny rock, much like a present. He was holed-up in the back of an isolated canyon in Canada's Northwest Territories. His brilliantly white coat stood out in the afternoon sun, and his massive, curling horns left no doubts about our next move. My sharp-eyed guide, Kaleb Molnar, had located this reclusive old-timer on the afternoon of the first day of our ten-day hunt with Arctic Red River Outfitters. He had us pinned down on a wide-open slope, but that gave us time to inspect every inch of his impressive headgear. He was magnificent from every angle, and the incredible experience that followed was indeed an amazing gift.

This adventure was put in motion by a sequence of seemingly predestined events. At the December, 2008 Utah FNAWS banquet my son, Spencer, and I had randomly sat at a table next to a couple of strangers, Bruce Engelby and his brother. We were thrilled for Bruce when his raffle ticket was drawn as the winner of a Dall sheep hunt during that fundraiser. At the

2009 banquet, I again bumped into Bruce entering the event, carrying the ram horns from his successful hunt. I congratulated him on his beautiful trophy and he wished me luck on winning my own hunt. Then later that evening I happened by Bruce's table and I joked that perhaps he could touch my tickets to rub off some of his good fortune.

When the time came to draw the Arctic Red River hunt winner for this year, the emcee of the drawing and founder of Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife (SFW), Don Peay, asked Bruce to come up and draw the winning ticket. Bruce told Don that he had a ticket in that very bin, but if he drew his own name he committed to draw someone else. Beyond all odds, Bruce drew his own name! But without hesitation, he gave up a hunt for himself by reaching back in the bin and pulling out another ticket, this time with my name on it. After the hooting and hollering was over, Bruce told me that when he realized who he had drawn, it made him shudder. Indeed, from the very beginning this hunt was a gift that was seemingly meant to be.

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...says Glen Jones, a big game hunter from Prince George in British Columbia. For his hunt in Canada, he trusted a Berger Bullet's Hunting VLD to bring this moose down instantly. He is equally impressed that Berger's are "flat shooting and extremely accurate."

Glen used a Kimber rifle chambered in 300 WSM with a Nikon scope and Berger March Grade Hunting VLDs.

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Rick Ellison's battle scarred ram was over 13-years-old and super heavy. What a nice trophy.

Perhaps the best gift came when Don, knowing how much I love to hunt with my son, was able to make some arrangements with Arctic Red River to have Spence hunt with me. I knew this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and despite having to sell some property to finance it, we were able to book an August, 2010 hunt for us both. In addition to world-class sheep, the Arctic Red also holds some monster mountain caribou, so we added caribou tags in case our sheep hunts ended early.

For months we physically prepared for this grueling backpack experience. I lost over 40 pounds off my 61 year-old body hoping to somehow keep up with my 23 year-old son. I had mixed emotions when ARRO outfitter Tavis Molnar offered two guides to Spence and me, instead of the scheduled two on one. We would hunt the same area, but we would split up to cover more ground and improve our chances. Spence had been my only hunting companion for years, but now he would be hunting with a "go-getter" guide named Mike Schroeder, and I would go with the outfitter's brother, Kaleb.

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It seemed to be no coincidence that the week before coming on the hunt, I had watched Kaleb guide the PRIMOS team to two nice rams, on TV's Outdoor Channel. When I saw him in camp, I secretly hoped that perhaps he would be my guide--another little gift.

On day one of our hunt, Spence and Mike headed south to check out a high mountain pass, while Kaleb and I hiked west up a narrow drainage. During the day we spotted a few ewes and small rams, but that afternoon, in the back of the drainage, we found the "gift ram".

By the time the ram lost interest in us on the slope it was late in the day, but we decided to make a play for him straight up a steep rock-slide and into a bowl next to the cliffs. Unfortunately the ram never showed himself, and by midnight the light was fading. With cold setting in, we made a forced march back down the drainage, arriving back at camp at 3 a.m.

The next morning we dragged ourselves out for another try. Mike and Spence had also seen sheep on day one but no shooters, so they took their camp and headed north. Our plan was to move our camp closer to my ram and wait for him to make a mistake. It was only day two but I was already feeling the physical drain. Partway up the canyon, Kaleb spotted sheep down low in the back of the drainage. Even though they were miles away, Kaleb thought our ram might be with this group, which lightened my step.

As we got closer to where the rams were last seen, we dropped our camp and kept moving. We were now going slow and glassing often. While hiking through some waist-high boulders, Kaleb suddenly grabbed his pack dog "Knarls" and motioned for me to get down.

There on a ledge at the top of a gradual rockslide lay the old ram with three smaller companions. Overnight he must have wandered down out of his safe perch in the cliffs to feed with this little bachelor band. The rams had not seen our approach and the situation was perfect.

Kaleb encouraged me to get a good rest and wait for the big ram to stand before taking a shot. I was surprisingly calm at first, but as the minutes ticked by and rain sprinkles cooled my sweating body, I started to shiver. I was also feeling every rock beneath me and my leg started to cramp from the unnatural position I was in.

Finally, one by one the younger rams got up to feed. Then a little ram walked over and nuzzled the resting monarch, seeming to show respect for the king of the mountain. The sight of him sunning himself on that cliff was stunning. Then, without warning, the big ram stood up.

I had ranged him at 360 yards, but Kaleb was telling me 320. Going with Kaleb's yardage, I settled in and squeezed off a shot, grazing his belly. The ram backed up behind a rock, but when he stepped out I shot again, this time hearing the "whack" of a sure hit. Another shot with a higher hold put the ram down for good.

The emotions that followed surprised me. They were more of reverence and respect than elation. The hike up was steep, but he was everything I had dreamed of and more, with thirteen age rings and massive horns. His left horn was heavy and broomed, still breaking the bridge of his nose, and his right side swept back 40 inches. I had dreamed of this day since my youth while reading the adventures of Jack O'Connor. Now I was at peace in this beautiful spot with a magnificent, long-awaited trophy.



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Spencer Ellison's ram was age at 12-years-old. What a beauty!



Wading glacier rivers with loaded backpacks and living in a tent. A sheep hunters dream!

With eight hunting days remaining, I was anxious to get back with Spence and Mike, but we still had to get camp and my ram back to the airstrip ten miles away. Two days later, Tavis picked up my ram in his Super Cub, but by then Spence and Mike had already moved several drainages north. They had radioed Tavis that they had passed on two nice rams and were continuing to move north. I knew I would never catch up with the youngsters, so we would hunt caribou.

Having taken a bull in Quebec years ago, I was not planning on punching my caribou tag. I had promised my wife that I would not bring another bull home unless it was exceptional. But the next morning we hiked up the mountain to see what we could see. Only partway up the mountain, Kaleb looked across the valley and spotted a big caribou cooling himself on a hidden snowfield. Through the spotting scope we could see that this was indeed a special bull. I asked Kaleb if this was a “book” bull and he quickly responded, “He will make the book!” Then I joked, “Well if he has double shovels, we will go after him.” Sure enough, the Swarovski illuminated two perfect shovels...so off we went.

To get to the bull we needed to hike down the mountain, cross the half-mile wide Orthogonal River, and climb the opposite ridge. Despite the warm temperatures, I was sure the bull would not stay long on that ice patch. But to my surprise (and my wife’s dismay) when we peeked over the ridge we could see the tops of the bull’s antlers. I was hoping to sneak closer, but shifting winds alerted the bull and he headed out. Fortunately Kaleb handed me his shooting sticks and when the bull paused on the hillside I dropped him with one shot at 240 yards.

The closer we got, the bigger he looked. His beams were long and massive. He was impressive indeed, with huge, palmated top points, perfect double shovels and back points. The sight of his 450+ inch velvet rack was so overwhelming I had to sit down to take it in. What an incredible and unexpected additional gift.

Unbeknownst to us, at the exact same time Spencer and Mike were moving in on a band of seven rams six miles to the north. They had spotted the sheep the night before, from a high vantage point across the canyon, but the sheep were not in a good spot for a stalk. With their camp being miles away, they backed out and moved their gear closer to the band for a better opportunity the next day. There were two almost identical “shooters” in this band, both heavy and over ten years old.

Here is the rest of the story in Spence’s words:

“We woke up early in anticipation of seeing if the rams were still located in the same area we left them the night before. It didn’t take long to spot the sheep, which were only about three hundred yards away from their previous location. We watched them for a couple of hours from camp until they wandered back to bed in the cliffs. The stalk was on as we quickly grabbed our gear and headed up a draw that would lead us around to the back of the ridge.

This route was risky. We would be hiking out in the open until we got about 500 yards from the sheep. My heart was racing in anticipation as we quickly snuck undetected across the open slope. After what seemed like hours, we finally got to some cliffs just below the band. Slowly we crept through a boulder field and crevasses to where we could see some of the rams, but we had to circle higher to get a good look at the rams we were after.



Rick Ellison and his huge mountain caribou.

As we peeked over the rise the old companions were bedded only 112 yards away. They had no idea we were there, but a few minutes later a swirling breeze seemed to send our scent their way. We could see the nostrils flare on the dark-horned ram I had chosen, just before he got up. Resting on Mike's tripod, I settled the crosshairs just behind his shoulder.

Holding my breath, I squeezed the trigger and the ram immediately went down behind some boulders. I knew he was going to pummel the cliffs on the way down so I jumped up and ran to where I could see him tumble. The whole band scattered as I watched my ram fall from a 30-foot cliff. My stomach was in my throat as he rolled in a cloud of dust into the boulder field below. I was praying for my trophy to stay intact but he was still struggling and sliding towards another, bigger cliff. Mike yelled, "Shoot again, but don't hit the horns." The shot was true and the ram finally came to rest short of the cliff.

Joy engulfed me as I burst with excitement and I thanked Mike over and over for the hunt of a lifetime. The weight on my shoulders was finally lifted and the months of preparation had paid off!

BROWNING

Rick received a rifle from Browning for his story. See page 40 for more information.

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Gear List

GUN: Browning A-Bolt 300 WSM & Remington 7mm

BULLETS: Barnes 168 & Barnes 140-grain

OPTICS: Swarovski 15X56 & Steiner 12X50

CAMO: Sitka gear

BOOTS: Meindle & Lowa

PACK: Mystery Ranch 6000





Spencer Ellison's 380" bull.

Retrieving the ram was very dangerous, as a slip would send us tumbling down the mountain, so we spent an hour going the three hundred yards to the sheep. When we finally got to the old ram I was ecstatic, as he was beautiful and nothing was broken. We aged him to be twelve years old and it showed in his huge body. The view was unbelievable, with a glacier field above and a huge river drainage below. The experience was even more special as we figured that this ram could have been one of the rams in a band that a good friend, Mike Fisher, had taken his ram from two years earlier in the same canyon."

Rain was pouring down when Spence and Mike returned to the airstrip with his ram the next day. I doubt a father has ever been prouder and happier than I was for my son.

When the weather finally broke, we still had time to find Spence a caribou. Mike and Spence had spotted a great bull with huge back points several days earlier while sheep hunting, so we packed up camp and all headed out to find him. Late in the afternoon we reached the head of the canyon and there, lying in the same little draw, was the "back-point bull".

He was in a perfect spot for a stalk so with us watching from the opposite side of the canyon, Spence and Mike waded the stream and snuck right into this impressive bull's bedroom. At about 80 yards the shot was too easy and the long-pointed bull ran up the hill and tipped over. There were lots of smiles and hugs that evening, as we admired another amazing trophy. Spence's 380" bull was also very impressive, with busy, long-pointed tops and 13" back-scratchers.



It is hard to describe the feelings of gratitude and humility that came to both of us as the Super Cubs took us back to base camp. We had literally lived a dream in the Arctic Red country, and it would not have come to us were it not for the generosity of many, especially Bruce. It was only fitting that our return flight home was re-routed and took us directly over the Wyoming ridge where I shot my Rocky ram in 2004 and then over the Davis Convention Center, where I was given this hunt. It was a concluding reminder to us both of how lucky we were to receive such an amazing gift. 