

SFW MEMBER FEATURED ARTICLE

EXPO HUNT WINNER TAKES DALL RAM WITH BONNET PLUME

—by Karl Albrecht—

Because the hunt was to start August 1st, Al-Kan and Chris McKinnon did some pretty impressive scrambling to get all of the hunters into sheep country where our guides had been waiting for us through bad weather for several days.

The flights into the Bonnet Plume wilderness were nothing short of incredible with amazingly beautiful country and no sign of civilization. Our anticipation grew with every minute. I finally was dropped off by Super Cub into my hunting area mid afternoon on August 31st. There I met my guides Avery Shepherd and Brian Spitzig, along with Avery's incredible pack dog, Junior. Junior was a lab/shepherd cross that weighed about 55 lbs. Avery informed me that Junior had packed as much as 48 lbs.! We immediately went through my gear and pulled out everything that I would not need. This included things like flashlights because it doesn't get dark in the north country this time of year, and several other items. We loaded most of our food into Junior's packs and headed up the mountain in hopes of locating some rams.

After some nearly vertical climbing we made it to the top. What an incredible view! From where we were we could see for miles in every direction. To our east was the Northwest Territory border and the Arctic Red River Outfitters concession. From this point we located 25 rams, most of which were legal rams. Several of the rams were in the Northwest Territories and out of bounds, but we saw over 20 rams in our area. The best ram was in a group of 6 that were a couple days hike away. We made the decision to camp on top for the night and head toward our rams the following morning.

Our hike to the rams involved climbing back down the mountain we were on and giving up all of that valuable elevation. We headed down a long river valley and by the end of the day we set up camp at the base of the mountain where we had last seen our rams. Avery informed us that we would be getting up at 4:00 AM to head up and find my ram. As planned, we got up early and downed our obligatory oatmeal, emptied our packs except for food and provisions for 2 days, and headed up the mountain.



I was in my fifties and had never hunted wild sheep. I have been applying in Utah for years and recently in every western state possible in hopes that I would someday get to hunt sheep. I have always enjoyed the sheep articles I have read in hunting and conservation magazines and dreamed of someday getting that opportunity myself.

I attended the 2010 Western Hunting Expo in Salt Lake City. While there, I bought a few tickets for the various sheep hunts that were being sold at the Expo. As is usually the case, I buy the tickets, drop them in the hopper, and never hear another word. However, this time was different! A couple weeks after the Expo I got a call from Don Peay informing me that I was the lucky winner of a Dall Sheep hunt in the Yukon Territory with Chris McKinnon's Bonnet Plume Outfitters! I couldn't believe that my luck had finally changed!

After the excitement wore off I had to face two realities, 1) my hunt would not be until August 2011 (18 month wait), and 2) I had to get into sheep shape. Getting in sheep shape is a real challenge for someone my age, but I started a program of running and cycling for cardiovascular and leg muscle development plus uphill hiking, mowing lawns, and everything else I could think of with a backpack filled with lead shot to get me in shape for carrying a heavy pack. Despite all the hard work, I still questioned whether I would be up to the task.

Finally, July 28, 2011 arrived and I flew off to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory to start my adventure. On the flight up I met Tracy and Sloan Valdez, who would also be hunting with Bonnet Plume. They were sheep hunters and gave me a lot of good advice on how to approach this whole experience. Once in Whitehorse we ended up having to kill some extra time due to weather problems that did not allow Al-Kan Air to fly us out of Whitehorse and on to our sheep camp. We finally got to fly on July 31st.



After a couple of hours we arrived into a high saddle where we could glass the mountainside where we had last seen our sheep. We immediately located a couple of the rams feeding and eventually located all 6 rams. The larger ram of the bunch was a fancy ram with long, flaring horns. He also showed signs of age and was obviously not in as good of shape as his buddies. He also had quite a bit of dark mud on his hide that made it easy to pick him out of the group. We impatiently waited for the rams to bed down after feeding for the morning. The group fed over a ridge that gave us the opportunity to close the distance between us by getting above the rams and moving across the mountainside. Once we reached the ridge they had fed over, we carefully looked over the top and found that the rams had bedded down on the next ridge, about 500 yards away. While watching the rams, one of the group stood up and fed down the other side, out of our sight. Avery said that if we were lucky, the other rams would follow and give us the chance to move in for the shot. Well, we were lucky and the other 5 rams eventually followed and fed down the other side and out of sight. We quickly moved to the spot where we had last seen the rams and edged over the top to take a look. There below us was the sight of my dreams! Six beautiful Dall rams, all within 200 yards and not aware of our presence. My dark ram happened to be quite a distance below the other 5 rams so we backed down and headed down the ridge a couple hundred yards to a point where I could take my shot. After embarrassingly shooting high on my first shot, I finally settled in and made a good shot. My ram was down! I am not sure who was more excited, me, or Junior the pack dog! We made the steep descent to my ram and celebrated our success. We got a bunch of good photos, ate some lunch, dressed the ram, and packed for the hike back to camp. Incidentally, Junior packed out both hind quarters.

This hunt was everything I dreamed it would be and more. I want to thank so many people who helped make this dream a reality. I won't be able to name them all, but I do want to mention my wife, Jeri, and family for their support. Thanks to Chris and Sharron McKinnon at Bonnet Plume for the excellent operation they run. I also want to thank people like Don Peay and SFW, as well as all of the fine folks who donate their time and money to help conserve wildlife and habitat so people like me can live their dreams. ■

