



FATHER and SON DOUBLE COMBO

by Paul Taylor

With just another hour or so left in my business meeting before I needed to leave for the airport for the return trip home, I felt a buzz in my pocket from my cell phone. Noting that I had a missed call my son Cole who was driving from his home in Charlotte to meet me in Fort Worth for our trip to the Yukon, I stepped out to return the call. He simply wanted to check in with me and advise me that he was well on his way and even a bit ahead of schedule. I returned his enthusiasm, but being a Dad, went through a checklist of things to make sure he had packed everything he needed... "Boots? Check. Sleeping bag & pad? Check. Rain gear? Check. Rifle & shells... Check!! Passport? Oh S!"

Trying to not overreact, I took a deep breath muttered, "Your passport is the only thing you absolutely HAVE to have. Everything else we can work around." He was devastated and knew none of his options were pleasant. We quickly went through several. Turning around meant at least 12 additional hours of driving... returning to Charlotte then flying to Vancouver or Whitehorse meant trying to find a last minute dog sitter for at least two weeks... and then a Hail Mary solution... he was able to reach the apartment manager who not only was able to get into his unit and locate the document but was kind enough to get it on an express courier to our Texas home. The passport arrived the following day just as hoped and afforded us a family day catching up with his then girlfriend and now wife, Maegan while performing one last pack and gear check.

Our connection through Vancouver to Whitehorse went very smoothly with us arriving in the Yukon's largest city in time for a great dinner with other hunters as excited as we were. An air charter flight to Bonnet Plume Outfitter's (BPO's) base camp provided amazing views of spectacular mountains and valleys. This late August combination moose and dall sheep hunt would have me going after a white ram and Cole would be focused on moose. Upon our arrival, we learned that the weather was very warm and expected to remain that way for quite a while. This had caused the moose to stay well back in timber and very difficult to find. BPO's Chris McKinnon suggested that both of us should focus on sheep and we would be able to hunt together. Our guides were not only experienced and capable but were also good friends both in the mountains as well as back in town. We were ecstatic!

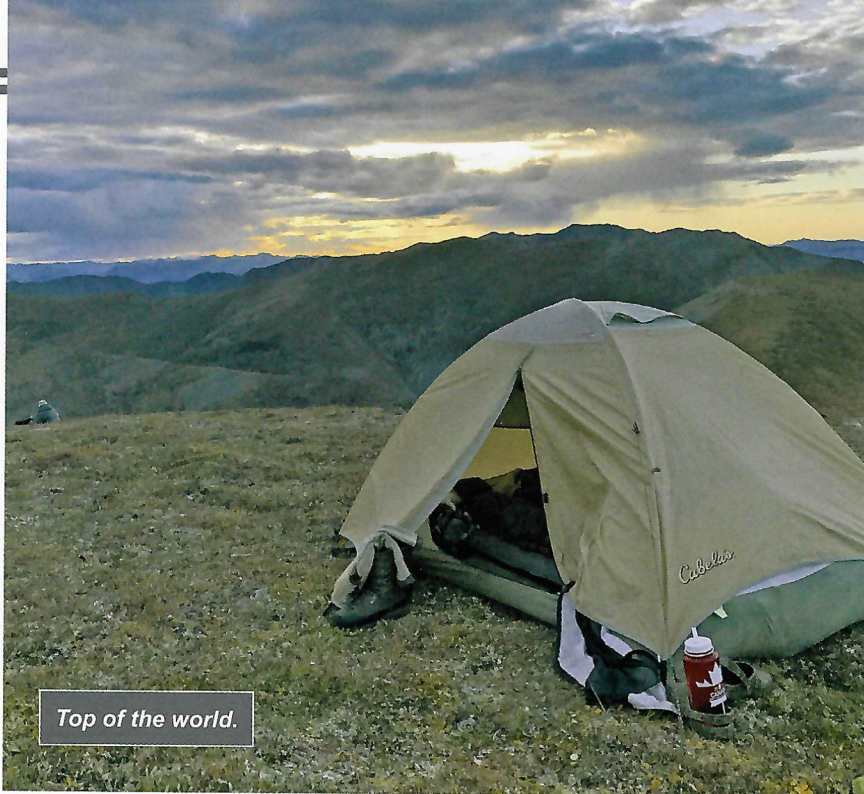
Our bush plane flights to our remote camp were breathtaking and bolstered our spirits even more. While breaking our gear out and getting settled in to a cozy "trapper's cabin" adjacent to a pristine lake, we glassed surrounding



mountains and quickly found several caribou on distant ridges. While we each held caribou tags, our main focus were sheep so we just enjoyed glassing the bulls from afar. Adam Stillar and Karl Sundin explained that we would spend pretty much a full day relocating to another cabin and then would spike out from there. This would put us in an area where we would be in very good sheep country. Our new "base" was at the juncture of several drainages, adjacent to a running river and while very austere, had a wood stove and room for the four of us to sleep and stand. Better yet, its location provided us with several nearby mountains to explore.

Carrying enough food for six days, the first three hours of our hike was through fairly flat and passable terrain. Occasional willow patches gave way to low brush where we would often see moose and caribou tracks and droppings. Our pre-hunt training seemed to be spot on and as we slowly made our way up gentle slopes we felt strong. Stopping and glassing provided just enough rest for us to get ready for the next pull. Making our way up and around an alder choked drainage yielded a view of a stunning line of mountain tops. Our admiring the pinnacle above us was interrupted by Adam asking if we were ready. By ready he meant that fun and giggles were over and we were about to start

the climb up to those very tops. Our plan was to camp on top and then work the ridgelines from above. We quickly learned that no amount of training back home would have prepared us for what we were now experiencing. Our gear, tent, food, rifles, and water on our backs felt fine on the flat and moderate hills but now going up and up and up, we felt each and every ounce. The steepness of the grade required us to take a serpentine route and we laughed at our awkwardness when resuming our trek after sitting for a bit. Adam and Karl seemed to have accurately gauged our fitness level and knew how hard to push us, and when we needed to pause. Reaching each peak would expose another peak in the distance that would be our new goal. Our guides encouragement was often clouded by their obvious misstatement of distances. "Another 200 yards" really meant at least 500... "just a bit farther" translated to a half mile... finally we reached a point where there was nothing higher above us and we settled in to a nice saddle wide enough for us to set up our tents. Sharing a two person tent with an adult son after a 12 hour day was no issue at all. We spent the final few minutes of daylight glassing a seemingly endless series of ridges and drainages that we couldn't see from the valley floor. Several distant white dots turned into sheep



Top of the world.

through our spotters and made our sleep even more satisfying.

Our hard earned vantage point enabled us to branch out and peer in to many incredible sightlines without having to yield any elevation. We spent the next two days looking over several groups of lambs and ewes and a few immature rams. With each group sighted we would move a bit closer and get a better perspective, and even though disappointed that there wasn't a shooter in any group so far, we were very optimistic. The third evening after returning to our tents and devouring a freeze dried lasagna, we noticed Adam and Karl excitedly pointing to a far ridgeline. Just below that summit there were several large bodied sheep and our guides were confident that even though over three miles away, there were one and maybe two mature rams. They quickly decided that we would strike out at first light, going up and around a number of ridges to stay out of sight and lessen the number of descents and ascents required to get near this group.

Negotiating along craggy and at times knife like ridges took much longer than I thought it would. Incredibly even on top we saw caribou sporadically, and encountered a black bear who seemed as surprised to see us as we were him. After six

hours the last rise gave a way to series of switchbacks that we were able to peer into and locate the sheep we had seen the night before. There were two different groups of rams, each with legal ones high up on grassy knolls. With shadows lengthening, we found a small bench out of view of the rams but from where we could approach the next morning. Leaving us to set up camp, Karl deftly crept up to a better position and put the rams to bed. When he returned he gave us the great news. Several of the rams were real good and were in a great spot for a stalk. During the night we were treated to an immense and spectacular display of the northern lights. Brilliant purple, green and blue arches leapt and danced above us in a mystical way as we drifted off to dream about the next day.

At first soft and then louder and more frequent "plops" of raindrops on our tent along with some faint light on the tent fabric brought us out of our slumber. As we were slipping out of our bags we heard whispers of the guide's plan. A light rain fell as we left our tents with just rain gear, guns, a few protein bars and water. We climbed a very steep hillside that would enable us to stay out of sight of where the rams were just a few hours prior and get to a spot where

we hopefully could identify the best ones. The ascent was challenging but our determination to get on the rams provided the fuel we needed. After an hour we were able to locate one group with one old ram and several young ones. At just over 900 yards we could see that the old patriarch was well past full curl on his right side and had a stub horn on the other. While he could be a great one to harvest, Adam was convinced that there was another group that had even better rams nearby. Being careful to not expose ourselves, we moved a bit further up where we could see the opposite hillside. Very faintly we could make out the shape of three sheep through the now steady drizzle about a mile up a sparsely vegetated drainage. While we couldn't exactly tell the ages both Adam and Karl felt that these were the ones we were after. However, the ram's location would require us to backtrack down the steep and now very slick slope then cross over a creek and work our way up to where we could get within range. We stopped by the tents, picked up a couple of extra bars, grabbed puffy's, and a heavier coat in case the sheep moved over the top and we had to stay overnight on the mountain.

Deciding that our best approach would be to stay in the creek as we went up the drainage to not only stay out of sight but to also cover any sound we might make walking over the unsteady and noisy shale, we began our stalk. After only a couple of hundred yards, the drizzle gave way to much heavier rain. Within minutes the rain gave way to sleet. After an hour and a half of tip toeing from one rock to another while crouching low we were able to take one last look from behind large boulders along the creek. We confirmed that there were three mature rams and two appeared to be really old. They were now 740 yards away and we needed to somehow get closer for a reasonable shot. But we only had an exposed slope from which to try and approach. There was a small outcropping roughly 400 yards from us but it would be dicey

to get there undetected. And then, the sleet turned to snow with a cloud enveloping the entire valley. We used the changing weather to our advantage and climbed up 175 yards and then cut across to a bench while we had cover provided by the elements. Through the snow we could just barely make out the three rams 327 yards away. Two rams were very distinguishable with sway backs, hollow haunches and heavy dark horns. All were now bedded and appeared impervious to the now nasty conditions. Each of us shivered as we propped up packs and set up our rifles for a shot. Adam and Karl calmly whispered the yardages as Cole settled in on the near ram now at 330. We determined the next

best one was the far ram at 341. The snow which had kept us from being too visible was starting to lighten a bit. Our scopes were fogging and it seemed everything we had to wipe them with was wet. The cold and wet was penetrating but well worth the discomfort.

Just as one ram started to stand, we heard the distinctive bleat of a sheep down the hill and to our left. We turned slightly to come face to face with a banana horn ram at 60 yards. We instantly locked up and tried our best to not twitch a muscle. Evidently, he had come up the drainage without seeing us due to the falling snow. And now we blocked his return to his buddies. Fearing that he was about

to give us up and just as we were mentally cursing our luck on this turn of events, we could see the big rams emerge in full view from the parting cloud. Realizing that if we can see them, they can also see us, Karl told Cole that it's now or never and told me that the far ram will stand as soon as Cole shoots and I needed to be ready. Using the .338 we had brought for our original plan of moose, I put my crosshairs a couple of inches above the middle of his shoulder. Just as I heard Cole say that he was good, his .300 WSM barked and is if on cue, my ram stood. At my shot, I could see my ram buckle and with a wobbly start moving toward us a bit. Cole then added an insurance shot

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to his ram and after missing with my second, my third had mine tumbling down the hill.

Initially we were overcome with disbelief as we all tried to process what had just transpired. It had all played out so quickly, yet time had seemed to stop. Realizing that we actually had two beautiful rams down within 50 yards of each other, we ecstatically hugged each other, and our guides who had scripted and executed an awesome plan.

Laying our hands on and admiring the old warriors, we were stunned to count so many rings on both. Cole's was 11 ½ and mine was 14 ½! We brought the rams together and steadied them on the steep grade with rocks positioning them so we could safely clean, cape, and debone without the rams or us, falling down the mountain. Dividing up the capes, horns and meat between the four of us made the trip back down the mountain manageable. Cole and I gingerly eased our way down and were amazed that Adam and Karl carrying at least double the weight that we were seemed to be

able to sprint down. Upon our return to our spike camp, we enjoyed freeze dried chicken something and relived each moment of the day. The tent we shared now had the additional company of two stunning rams tucked safely at the ends of our bedrolls. Sleeping on an incline with lumps under was now more comfortable than a suite in a 5-star resort.

The full day pack out back to our cabin might have seemed arduous under different circumstances but with the treasures we now had, wasn't bad at all. The downpour we had for the next two days while delaying us from trying to find caribou or moose, provided us with much needed recovery time and the chance to flesh out and salt the capes and skulls. The plywood cabin while a bit airy, was dry and the sheep meat and conversation was tremendous.

By the third day in the cabin we were all starting to fidget a bit. Camp chores were fun but we were ready for something else. The muffled hum of the Super Cub was barely audible but with the clouds clearing soon

came into view. With its landing on a near gravel bar we were able to get our rams out and real food in. After a hearty lunch, we made our way up to another ridgeline to glass. With another 4 days remaining in our hunt and with caribou, wolf, moose and grizzly tags were hopeful that we would be able to add something else.

Amazingly as we cleared the heavy brush and got slightly above the tree line our glassing caught some specs high up on a mountain side that soon morphed into several caribou bulls. Even at over two miles away we could see that two of the bulls looked very promising. There were several routes we could use to get closer and two afforded a fairly open and direct path. At this elevation the ridge line we took was pretty clear of entanglements found on the valley floor and with care we could stay out of view of the bulls while approaching. The slope for the most part was gradual and with light packs we made good time. We estimated that we should be in range within an hour or so and with plenty of daylight remaining were able to



often stop and reconfirm the bull's location. During one of these stops while admiring the view back out over a sweeping and vast view of the Wind River basin, Karl picked up several additional caribou across the valley 90 degrees from our current position. With the naked eye we could tell one was massive and binoculars confirmed that he was indeed a great bull. Cole had been experiencing some blister issues and with our climb to the first bulls starting to get a bit steeper, we decided to split up. Karl and Cole would drop back down toward the large bull in the valley while Adam and I would continue up toward three bulls above us. With luck we would both be able to get on bulls at about the same time.

Adam and I picked our way up the ridge and moved to within 175 yards of the now bedded bulls. One was much better than the others and we decided to take him. However, we didn't want to shoot too soon and risk spooking Cole's bull down below. We could see Karl and Cole making progress but their stalk was slowed by

brush and willows. Turns out they had quite the show as they methodically moved in. The large bull was thrashing willows to remove velvet from his tall and wide antlers pausing every few minutes to look back at the cows and small bulls he was trying to impress. We were glancing at our bull while also watching the show below. Through our glass we could see that the small two human shapes were stopped and looked to be setting up for a shot. Adam had me set on the largest of our bulls and told me that he would try to get them up. Once again the plan came together perfectly. Adam's wolf howl got our bulls up, and as they were trying to shake off their afternoon snooze and determine the source of the disturbance, we heard Cole's shot echo through the valley. While my crosshairs were steady, my hands were not and I missed the kneeling shot not once, but twice. The bulls were now in a slight jog up the hill and somehow, I was able to regroup and when he paused, dropped him at 260 yards. Looking back down roughly a mile into the

valley we could see Cole and Karl approaching his downed bull.

My bull had tall tines and was in great condition. Cole's was indeed a great bull that dreams are made of. Tremendous spread with large palms and tines, his turned out being one of the largest taken in the Yukon that season. Caribou are much more of a challenge to clean, break down and pack out than sheep. While each pair of us wasted little time and smoothly worked together on our respective bulls, it was well after dark when we met on the trail back to our cabin. The burning in our legs, back and shoulders never felt so good as we unloaded then dined on tenders, potatoes and onions.

We hustled the following morning readying the cabin for the winter, prior to being picked up and returned to BPO's base camp. Reconvening with the other hunters, guides, along with Chris, and Sharron McKinnon stories were told and retold while beverages flowed. And as we departed for the airport in Whitehorse... we double checked... we both had our passports! ●

FALL 2023

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