



# LUCKY EWE

Sometimes you  
make the most  
of what you get

BY JOHN BARSNESS

As modern hunters, we try to deny luck, regarding our good fortune as something we deserve. Our success arises from studying the animals we hunt like a stockbroker studies the market, buying and practicing with the right equipment, and hunting hard in the right places. When the hunt is over we say, with false humility, “Luck is when preparation and opportunity meet.”

But hunting luck takes many forms, some not apparent to the falsely humble. I’ve been lucky in some hunting, mostly because of my profession as an outdoors writer. Work has meant spending lots of time hunting in my native Montana and locales ranging from Alaska to New Zealand for everything from Cape buffalo to mourning doves. My luck on many trips has been outstanding, ranging from the time I stalked an old male wolverine while in the Arctic to several big elk I’ve had the chance to shoot during the last moments of the season.

Yet in anything requiring pure gambler’s luck, my own stinks. For over three decades, a check with my signature has been annually delivered to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, along with the lottery ticket that is the bighorn sheep license application. And each year the department sends my money back, minus a few bucks for the privilege of applying, with a note indicating I was “Unsuccessful.”

My lottery luck continued to run bad even after FWP began allotting “bonus points.” Some hunters call these preference points. No. True permit preference points, like what they have in Colorado, move you up in line, ahead of anybody with fewer points. Bonus points are just more chances, like buying 100 individual \$1 raffle tickets at a Ducks Unlimited banquet. You may well hold more tickets than, say, the nonhunting spouse of your hunting buddy. Yet when she buys a single ticket (with money your so-called friend gave her), she wins the shotgun.

Of all the lottery tags in Montana, a bighorn ram is at the top of my list, and that’s true for hunters everywhere. This is partly because Montana rams grow very large horns, and also because bighorn sheep hunts in places like British Columbia and Alberta are very expensive.

Why a bighorn ram is considered the apex of North American hunting is somewhat of a mystery. Bighorn sheep, like any sheep, are not very bright as compared to, say, an old white-tail buck. Want proof? There are roughly 100,000 bighorns in North America, and something like 25 million whitetails. (Of course habitat has something to do with this, but still.)

There’s also empirical evidence that sheep lack intelligence. I’ve accumulated some personally over the decades of hanging out in the bighorn-inhabited portions of Montana. In the Missouri Breaks, for instance, rams often just stand there looking at me cross-eyed while I search for elusive mule deer bucks. Then there was the ram on the Rocky Mountain Front that woke me one morning by chomping on grass 50 feet from the tent. When I unzipped the door, the sheep just stared at me, grass sticking out of his mouth like a dry tongue.

One of the dumbest bighorn sheep I’ve encountered was also one of the biggest. A friend had drawn a ewe tag for the Rock Creek hunting district, so we headed up one Thanksgiving Day. Snow covered the steep slopes that we glassed from the road below. We eventually found one ewe being chased by nine mature rams. It took two hours to climb the 2,000 slippery feet to within rifle range. After my friend shot and began field-dressing the ewe, the biggest of the rams walked over and stood on a rock 30 feet above us, looking down. I looked up at him, while holding one of the legs of his deceased significant other, and wondered just how any bighorn sheep survive in modern Montana.

And yet that very innocence is part of the bighorn’s mystique. Like caribou, wild sheep are creatures of wilderness. Though we sometimes see both species from highways, caribou and bighorns mostly live in those few patches of 21st-century



Earth where humans remain relatively scarce. Caribou inhabit the tundra at the top of North America, while bighorns live in high mountains, far above the settled valleys.

There is indeed something about bighorn sheep and the high country that sets them apart from any other Montana big game. My wife once drew a ewe tag, the same year my friend drew his Rock Creek permit. The three of us spent several clear September days in the high country along the Front. The aspens were yellowing in the draws, and the sky curved above the limestone face of the mountains.

Eventually we found one little herd in the spotting scope, 3 miles away at timberline. It took most of the day to hike up there. Eileen made a 200-yard shot on terrain so

steep the ewe rolled halfway down to us. Though we worked up a sweat packing out the meat, our group bypassed an inviting shady aspen grove. We'd found fresh grizzly tracks on the climb up, and bears like to nap under aspens.

And so I kept applying for a ram each year, certain that before I grew too old to climb the limestone basins of the Front or the crumbling sandstone of the Breaks, a bighorn tag would arrive with my name on it.

When one finally did, two years ago via cyberspace, it felt very strange. I stared at the computer screen for a long time, not believing I'd actually drawn the long-coveted ram tag. I even logged off the FWP website and then on again to see "Successful" under my name.

After about 15 minutes of elated staring, though, I noticed that the season number next to my name didn't seem right. I looked it up in the hunting regulations. It was for a bighorn sheep *ewe* tag. How could that be? I'd never applied for a ewe.

Obviously I'd misread the numbers, or perhaps hit a wrong key.

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My elation turned to confusion, anger, and then finally, when reality set in, extreme disappointment. Yes, I knew that if I'd actually applied for a ram permit the odds would have been extremely slim, but I thought I'd finally broken my curse and drawn the legendary Montana ram tag. It was the first year I'd applied on-line. Even though I'd used computers for work since the 1980s, I'd

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never quite trusted them for critical things like paying bills—and applying for big game permits. Now my mistrust proved justified, even though the fault had been my own.

After a day, the hard feelings drained away, leaving an emotional emptiness. Soon the actual tag arrived in the mail. While tearing the envelope open, I still hoped that the computer had been mistaken. But no, there it was, printed in black and white on actual paper: "Adult Ewe."

The tag was accompanied by a note stating that I could return the tag and it would be awarded to the next applicant, and my bonus points would be restored.

The tag and note lay for several days on the table where we pile our mail. Once in a while I'd pick it up. Using the permit would eat up all my bonus points, so the tag remained there, resting quietly, while its would-be owner complained to his patient wife and any friends who would still listen.

Eventually I started thinking rather than whining. I liked hunting any sort of edible animal, and had no problem hunting female antelope, deer, or elk. Heck, I'd be thrilled at the chance to hunt a Montana cow moose, if I could ever draw the darned tag. There were already plenty of trophy heads on our walls.

And I'd really liked eating the meat from Eileen's ewe, one of the most delicious big game animals I've ever tasted.

What's more, I would turn 55 that fall. I remembered the story told to me by an older friend, a veteran Montana hunter who'd hunted wild sheep for decades in many places in North America. He took his last Dall sheep in Alaska when he was 60, and it

was a tremendous ram. But the sheep had been killed on a steep cliff, too late in the day to retrieve it and then hike back down to the main camp. So my friend and his 30-something guide spent the night on the cliff during a snowstorm. My friend said the adventure wasn't nearly as much fun as it would have been 20 years earlier. So I wondered if maybe now was the time to hunt my Montana bighorn, even if it was a ewe.

Then there was the bonus that the hunt would be practically out my back door in the Elkhorn Mountains where, in the 1990s, FWP transplanted some bighorn sheep. When you travel across the globe to hunt, as I have, you end up relying on the locals who know where the game animals hide, what they eat, and how they taste. It can be a great pleasure to find out how Inuit hunt caribou and whales, and to kneel on the tundra and eat cloudberries. Or to bite leaves of the plant called spekboom—a nutritious bush found along the Cape of South Africa that supports thousands of kudu and bushbuck and improves the taste of their meat. Still, even an adventurous hunter can tire of airports and airplanes and yearn for pursuing game near home, where he is the knowledgeable local who knows where deer and elk hide, what

they eat, and what makes their meat taste sweet. As I get older, even a pickup ride to the Missouri Breaks or the Rocky Mountain Front becomes less desirable than a local hunt.

In the end I sent in the \$50 required to actually buy the license I'd won and started scouting. The hunting gods had obviously given me a chance to hunt bighorn sheep near home, and I knew I should accept their gift.

Local friends pitched in to help me scout that summer. Eventually we found quite a few bighorns on a slope just below the crest of the Elkhorn ridge. The ridge was almost visible from town, but by the time the season opened on September 15, parts of the Elkhorns had been ablaze for more than a week. Smoke from the fires clouded the view and made the air nearly unbreathable.

Finally a few rainstorms knocked the fires back and cleansed the skies. Eileen and I headed into the mountains in late September and glassed the ridge where we'd found the sheep earlier. Parts of it had burned, but the dark gray ash was already dotted with tufts of green week-old grass. It was ideal bighorn country. The combination of new grass on slopes just below limestone cliffs provided both food and steep terrain for the sheep to escape predators.

We first spotted a herd of elk, with one 5x5 bull, near the bottom of the burned grass. Farther up a black bear grazed. Then above the bear six mature rams fed uphill toward the cliffs. From a distance, bighorn sheep somewhat resemble mule deer, with the same blocky brown bodies and pale rump, but the sheep's coat is more chocolate-colored while the mule's is grayer.

Though we could see no ewes, we didn't want to spook the rams by approaching any closer because other sheep might come down to feed with them on the new growth. We decided to come back later. That's one advantage of hunting locally, though it felt a little strange to go home and eat lunch in the kitchen, and then take a nap on the couch instead of in a mountain meadow or inside a tent.

The elk and bear were gone by midafter-

noon, and so were the rams. After some glassing we spotted pale animals among the blackened tree trunks up toward the cliffs. We set up the spotting scope and found eight bighorn sheep, none with large horns, their hair the typically paler hue of ewes and lambs.

We hiked to the base of the burn. Eileen stayed there to keep watch on the little herd while I moved up through the lightly scorched forest. The last rain had fallen two days before, but the weather had turned warm and dry again. My boots put up small ash-clouds amid the new grass, which seemed to glow in the dim light.

Climbing nearer the cliffs eventually put me in their afternoon shadow. Everything grew dim because the blackened earth and trees reflected little light. Something pale moved among the dark trees. In the binoculars it turned out to be a bighorn ewe—or perhaps an immature ram. The horns are about the same size.

That's the problem with hunting ewes, solved only by looking carefully at the end of the sheep opposite from the horns. Fine optics really help, perhaps even more than in ram hunting, because you must look between the rear legs for proof positive—the lack of dropped testicles—that a short-horned sheep is indeed female. (Another way is to watch the animal urinate: Males lean slightly forward, while females squat slightly.)

Soon more sheep grazed their way into an opening in the timber. Some were slightly larger than the first I'd seen, but they had lambs at their side and I didn't want to leave an orphan. By now I was prone, the 7x57



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUNE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS, FROM A PHOTO BY JUDY WANTULOK

with a round in the chamber, its forend resting on the daypack in front of me. I watched the sheep feed for perhaps longer than necessary, wishing Eileen was there to help in the glassing. When she'd shot her ewe, I'd lain next to her looking through a spotting scope, while we whispered back and forth to confirm which sheep was the right one. The last thing I wanted to do now was mistakenly—and illegally—shoot a young ram. Finally one medium-sized ewe, without a lamb, fed broadside for too long. I aimed carefully behind the shoulder, pushed the safety off, and squeezed the trigger.

By the time I'd tagged the young ewe and dragged it downhill to a more level place for field-dressing, Eileen was halfway up the burn, inside the shadow of the cliffs. Up a canyon to the left a bull elk whistled. Across the valley rose another mountain range, wearing the first horizontal touch of snow on its highest peak. Down in the valley I could see our little town about 10 miles away, including the water tower a block from our house.

I guess that sometimes even the unluckiest of hunters can make his own good luck. 🐾