



# Getting to No. 1

The stories behind  
Montana's largest big  
game trophies  
BY PJ DELHOMME

**BIG, BUT NO RECORD** This fully curled bighorn ram is certainly trophy sized, but it lacks the massive horn thickness to compete with Montana's state record—and number six in the world—taken in 1993 by James R. Weatherly.

BIGHORN SHEEP BY TONY BYNUM

**A**ny hunter who spends enough time in the woods will see one. I distinctly remember the time I did. His body was massive, the biggest I'd ever seen. And the rack? I saw only a retreating glance, but that was enough. The sight of the bull and his massive antlers burned an image into my brain that made returning to camp less appealing. I stayed out there in the wet and cold just a little bit longer that season, thinking that if I just put in another day he might end up in my freezer and on my wall. He never did.

For a big game animal to produce trophy headgear like the one on that memorable bull, it needs the right combination of genes and nutrition. It also needs enough secure cover to avoid hunters and other predators to grow old—and grow a massive rack.

To find and then kill such a trophy, a hunter needs a combination of skill, luck, and, most of all, persistence. That's certainly the case with hunters who have taken Montana's highest-scoring trophies. None of them topped the record books by sitting on a bar stool complaining about the good ol' days. None had a professional guide. And not one paid six figures for a special tag. Most were regular hunters like you and me—with a job, a family, and responsibilities tugging at every corner. Even so, they found a way to be in the right place at the right time.

On the following pages are eight of their stories.

It's been more than a decade since a Montana hunter broke a state big game record. Read what the current number one holders did and how they did it. Maybe you'll learn something you didn't know. Maybe this will be your year. ►►

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## MULE DEER NONTYPICAL

Score: <b>275-7/8</b>	Location: <b>Highland Mountains</b>	Boone and Crockett world rank: <b>73</b>
Date killed: <b>1962</b>	Hunter: <b>Peter Zemljak Sr.</b>	

Story: Like many Butte families in the early 1960s, the Zemljaks would head to the surrounding mountains each fall to get wood and meat for the winter. Peter Zemljak Jr. and Peter Zemljak Sr. would leave at dawn carrying a chainsaw and a .270-caliber rifle in search of timber and big game animals. On one fall morning in 1960, Peter Junior was hunting for elk when he saw a massive nontypical mule deer. Not wanting to ruin his elk hunt, he passed up the shot. The next afternoon, however, he saw the same deer and this time didn't think twice about shooting it. For two years that huge mule deer was the Montana state record. Then Peter Senior went hunting in the Highlands just south of Butte and killed his own massive nontypical mule deer buck, one whose antler size topped his son's by only fractions of an inch. It is the only case in Montana history where two family members have held the number one spot in the Boone and Crockett trophy records. The fact that it was for the same species makes the Zemljaks' achievements all the more remarkable. ■



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## The Boone and Crockett Club

The Missoula-based Boone and Crockett Club was founded by Theodore Roosevelt and a small group of hunting friends in 1887. The club began keeping records in 1906 as a way to draw attention to dwindling big game populations. Scoring later became a way to measure big game management effectiveness. The club is widely regarded as the keeper of records for all big game trophies throughout the world. It maintains high ethical ("fair chase") hunting standards for inclusion in what hunters call the "book."



## ELK TYPICAL

Score: <b>419-4/8</b>	Location: <b>Madison County</b>	Boone and Crockett world rank: <b>9</b>
Date killed: <b>1958</b>	Hunter: <b>Fred C. Mercer</b>	

Story: In 1958, Fred Mercer was working on his uncle's dairy ranch just south of Twin Bridges. In late October the two took a week off to hunt the upper Ruby River country, just as they had every year since 1946. In an article for *Outdoor Life* in 1960, Mercer wrote that he'd had a hunch he would find the bull of his dreams in the Gravelly Range, which he described as the "rough and roadless country north of camp." One morning at first light he took his .270-caliber rifle and headed out solo, walking through a few inches of sugar-soft snow. Soon he came across the biggest set of bull tracks he had ever seen. After following the tracks awhile, Mercer figured the herd was an hour or so ahead of him. The bull, which may have sensed the hunter, circled his cows around Mercer. The herd caught his scent and took off running. Mercer wouldn't let up, however. After trailing the herd for another 12 miles or so, he changed tactics. He decided to cut the elk off when they reached a ridge at the head of an open canyon. Upon reaching the ridgetop, he slowly peeked over. Not 50 yards away was the biggest bull he'd ever seen in his life, contentedly grazing broadside. Mercer's 150-grain soft-point hit the bull in the neck right below the ears. He fired once more and the hunt was over. After dressing the bull out to cool, Mercer made his way back to camp, arriving several hours after dark. For years the Mercer Bull, as it is still called, was the number two typical elk in the world. Today it stands at number nine. It's still the best typical elk Montana has ever produced. ■



## WHITE-TAILED DEER TYPICAL

Score: <b>199-3/8</b>	Location: <b>Missoula County</b>	Boone and Crockett world rank: <b>18</b>
Date killed: <b>1974</b>	Hunter: <b>Thomas H. Dellwo</b>	

Story: Because loggers spend plenty of time outdoors, they often cross paths with wildlife—sometimes exceptional wildlife. That's what happened to Tom Dellwo in 1974 near his home in Seeley Lake. On the last day of the hunting season, he and his wife were driving up a road and encountered deep snow. After turning around, they spotted the fresh tracks of a large deer that must have crossed the road behind them. Dellwo hiked after the buck until he caught it in the open. He shot it in the neck, but the buck didn't fall. Dellwo followed the deer into the forest until he found it again and killed it with a second shot.

The hunter returned the next day and dragged the deer a mile back home. It was a miracle that the head and antlers were still intact, he said later. At the request of a relative, he had the antlers scored shortly after getting the head mounted. The massive whitetail beat out Kent Petry's 1966 Flat-head County buck by fractions of an inch. But the story doesn't end there.

In 1981, Dellwo sold his record-book buck to a trophy buck collector for just \$4,000. "He...bought me several shots of whiskey," Dellwo told the *Missoulian* in 2000. "He had me pretty well looped up. We heard it sold for \$12,000. I've been kicking myself ever since." The new owner of Dellwo's buck is Bass Pro Shops. It hangs in the company's flagship store in Missouri along with hundreds of other record-book bucks from around



## Typical and nontypical

The Boone and Crockett Club maintains records for two categories of deer and elk. "Typical" antlers are those with points on the typical locations and with antler shapes that conform to what is typically found in nature. Symmetry of the left and right antlers is also important.

"Nontypical" antlers are those that don't look normal. The two sides have unmatched points (say, six on one side and eight on the other) and points that stick out in abnormal positions.



Nontypical whitetail

## PRONGHORN

Score: <b>91-4/8</b>	Location: <b>Garfield County</b>
Date killed: <b>1977</b>	Hunter: <b>Donald W. Yates</b>
Story: <i>Not available to the public</i>	



Boone and Crockett  
world rank: **13**

## SHIRAS MOOSE

Score: <b>195-1/8</b>	Location: <b>Beaverhead County</b>
Date killed: <b>1952</b>	Hunter: <b>C.M. Schmauch</b>
Story: <i>Not available to the public</i>	



Boone and Crockett  
world rank: **8**

## MOUNTAIN GOAT

Score: <b>54</b>	Boone and Crockett world rank: <b>27</b>
Date killed: <b>1998</b>	
Location: <b>Flathead County</b>	
Hunter: <b>Jason D. Beatty</b>	

Story: After drawing a bighorn tag, 16-year-old Flathead-area hunter Jason Beatty killed a ram that scored 178-6/8 points—no state record but still big enough to qualify for entry in the Boone and Crockett awards book.

The following summer he again defied the odds and drew a mountain goat tag. The hunting district was in the Middle Fork of the Flathead River drainage, just south of Glacier National Park and about an hour and a half from his home.



With his dad acting as guide, Beatty hunted every weekend of the three-month season. On their last Saturday afield, they returned to where they had earlier seen several goats. They spotted two billies, one to the left and one to the right. Beatty picked the one to the right because it was closer. The hunter and his father hiked straight uphill until they could see the goat bedded about 250 yards away. They crept closer. The goat stood. Beatty's dad told him to shoot. The first shot knocked the goat down, and it started to tumble toward them. The billy came to rest with its head hanging over a cliff. Just a few more feet and it would have been nearly impossible to recover. Beatty said later that he was happy just to have killed a goat. But it turns out that it wasn't just any old billy; the taxidermist in Columbia Falls knew it was record-book sized. After it was officially scored, the teen again entered the record books—this time with Montana's number one mountain goat. ■

## BIGHORN SHEEP

Score: <b>204-7/8</b>	Location: <b>Granite County</b>	Boone and Crockett world rank: <b>6</b>
Date killed: <b>1993</b>	Hunter: <b>James R. Weatherly</b>	

Story: After putting in for 22 years, James Weatherly finally drew a bighorn sheep tag for the Rock Creek drainage in 1993. The mountainous area, 50 miles southeast of his home in Missoula, was famous for large rams.

Weatherly hunted one particular trophy bighorn several mornings in September, but it gave him the slip every time. Finally, in early October he left his home at 3:30 a.m. and found himself atop a ridge looking down on 3 inches of fresh snow and two rams. In the early morning light, neither ram seemed to have a large curl, but he stalked closer anyway. Three evenly spaced trees stood between him and the bighorns. He crawled to the first tree. From there he could tell one ram was small. The other had its head down, feeding. Weatherly crawled to the second tree. Now the feeding ram looked big, but the hunter still wasn't sure. After crawling to the third tree, Weatherly was 175 yards away and downwind of the big sheep. When it looked up, he could see it had massive horns. Weatherly wrote that he became rattled and started shaking uncontrollably, knowing that two decades of wishing were about to come down to one shot. He put on his jacket, then took it off. He removed his pack, then his fanny pack. He propped the rifle in a fork in the tree, then couldn't get comfortable. Finally, he squeezed off a shot. The ram whirled 180 degrees and fell over dead. It stands as the number six bighorn of all time. ■



## WHITE-TAILED DEER NONTYPICAL

Score: <b>252-1/8</b>	Location: <b>Hill County</b>	Boone and Crockett world rank: <b>70</b>
Date killed: <b>1968</b>	Hunter: <b>Frank A. Pleskac</b>	

Story: Frank Pleskac was born in 1921 in Hill County near Havre. After serving in the Army, he returned home and married 23-year-old Julia Desak. On his ranch north of Havre, Pleskac often spotted large whitetails. One in particular caught his eye. For several years the huge buck eluded him, but in November 1968, along the west fork of the Milk River, Pleskac finally killed the deer with his .243-caliber rifle, using a 100-grain Nosler hand-load. The mount was eventually sold to an antler collector, who then sold the mount to Bass Pro Shops for \$30,000 in 2010. ■



## ELK NONTYPICAL

Score: <b>429-1/8</b>	Location: <b>Granite County</b>	Boone and Crockett world rank: <b>20</b>
Date killed: <b>1971</b>	Hunter: <b>John Luthje</b>	



Story: The forests near Philipsburg hold some wild and remote country with plenty of places for an elk to grow old and big. One day in 1971, John Luthje was hunting those hills near the area he ranched. He spotted and killed a massive nontypical elk. The rack itself reportedly weighed 35 pounds. In addition to being Montana's number one, it ranks as the 20th largest nontypical elk in the Boone and Crockett records. ■

## MULE DEER TYPICAL

Score: <b>207-7/8</b>	Location: <b>Teton County</b>	Boone and Crockett world rank: <b>50</b>
Date killed: <b>2004</b>	Owner: <b>Montana Fish, Wildlife &amp; Parks</b>	

Story: This amazing buck made headlines in 2005 when FWP game wardens and officers from the Cascade County sheriff's office executed a search warrant for the residence of Kelly Frank in the town of Simms, about 20 miles west of Great Falls. Frank worked as a painter on a ranch west of Choteau. An informant told authorities that Frank had discussed with him plans about committing several serious crimes. The informant also mentioned that Frank had talked of killing a large mule deer on the ranch the previous year. Wardens found the rack at Frank's home. Though Frank never admitted to killing the deer, he pled guilty to possessing the antlers, later scored as the largest ever for a typical mule deer in Montana. ■



Note: Boone and Crockett Club officials adhere to the club's principles of fair chase when deciding whether to list hunters' names beside their trophies in the club's records. Defined by the club, fair chase is "the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of any free-ranging wild, native North American big game animal in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper advantage over such animals." Obviously, poaching does not qualify. Still, the illegally obtained rack of 2004 is the largest on record. "We want to recognize the animal, first and foremost, for the trophy it is," explains Justin Spring, assistant director for big game records at the club. "For animals poached or otherwise not taken by fair chase, we do not list the name of the person who killed it and instead note it as 'picked up.'"

## Scoring antlers and horns

The Boone and Crockett score of a big game trophy is based on a combination of measurements of antlers or horns (bears and lions are scored by various dimensions of the skull).

For a deer or elk, three measurements are taken of the distance between the two antlers (the "spread"). Other measurements include the length of each main antler beam, the circumference at various points on the main beams, and the length of each point, or tine (the more tines, the more total inches). In the typical category, total score is reduced for the total length of all abnormal points in nontypical locations or those not paired.

Though anyone can determine a rough score by following instructions on the B&C website, all trophies officially entered in the record program must be scored by one of the club's official measurers, who are required to take a training class.

What's commonly known as a "green" score is an unofficial one determined before the antlers have dried for at least 60 days after the animal was killed.

For online scoring sheets and instructions, and applications to become an official scorer, visit boone-crockett.org.

