


Tom Miranda

ADVENTURE

BOWHUNTER



Sheep and goats live on the roof of the planet. Get in shape to enter this world or plan on going home empty.

BETWEEN THE EARS: THE MINDSET OF A MOUNTAIN HUNTER

Bow hunting is full of highs and lows. The highs come in small doses of promise and the lows like tsunamis washing away any hope of success. On my hunts, the promise is often a ray of hope, like a glimpse through glass of a boar grizzly walking a stream, which is diminished by subsequent days of never seeing him or another bear on the hunt. Or going to full draw on a whopper whitetail only to have the tree stand squeak, freezing my prize and throwing my chances out the window. Most bow hunters work for weeks scouting and preparing stand locations and then sit for days waiting on the opportunity for the thirty seconds of sheer panic and adrenaline we call the “moment of truth.”

I say “most” because there is a unique group of bow hunters who take these highs and lows to another level. These individuals are the mountain hunters. Bow hunters who pursue sheep and goats in God-awful-rugged and remote terrain; hunters who spend 10 days, 14 days, 21 days living in a bivy bag, eating freeze-dried mush and burning 4000 calories a day looking for a ghost on the steepest part of the mountain.

ARE YOU IN?

Sheep and goat hunting is an acquired taste. Some hunters do one trip and know immediately that this game isn't for them. Others may luck into some sort of windfall and shoot out in a day or two - immediately claiming to be a sheep hunter and with the full curl horns to prove it. There are, however a few diehard bow hunters who live to hike and hunt; who enjoy climbing into the alpine with the enthusiasm of a monkey eating bananas. Mountain hunters are athletes, guys and gals who work out and stay in shape knowing that bow range in rugged country comes at a price.

The tourism and outfitter brochures can

be an ego booster. What's more gorgeous than an alpine lake or a vista of jagged peaks? The thoughts of gripping full curling horns and thrusting a bow skyward in celebration is a huge motivator. And it takes some motivation when the typical wild sheep hunt is \$20,000 or more. Mountain goats can be sought for less than half that amount, yet success rates on wild sheep and goats are well under 50 percent.



The beautiful, snow white Dall sheep is often the first sheep a bow hunter pursues. Tags are plentiful and the hunt is the least expensive of North America's wild sheep. Here Tom Miranda poses with his Dall ram, arrowed on the eighth day of tough hunt in the Mackenzie Mountains of Canada's Northwest Territories.

Add in the “no satisfaction guarantee” and a bow hunter's chances are very likely to be circling the drain before a hunt even starts. Yet bow hunters still dream of the mountains and the elusive horns in the alpine.

Are you in?

PUCKER FACTOR

Sheep and goats live life like a *Star Trek* movie, “boldly going where no man has gone before.” When hunting mountain goats, it's best to glass the roughest, steepest and most inhospitable country first because this is likely where the goats are. A

fear of heights is not an asset to a mountain hunter, as walking sheer ridges, traversing slides and climbing into downright “scary stuff” is common.

Sheep will often feed on the softer side of the mountain, but when alarmed always hightail into the toughest country. Good mountain bow hunters know that their best approach is often from above, a strategy that means a hunter can't take the most direct route to the animals. Instead, getting to the edge requires climbing higher than the sheep, circling the back side of the ridge and coming down on the animals. In essence if you MapQuest the route, it's the long, long, *long* way.

I am a licensed pilot and am not afraid of heights at all, but I have been in some very uncomfortable places on the mountain. Loose footing, ice, razor shale 500-foot sheer cliffs make even seasoned Everest sherpas nervous. I can clearly recall a sheep hunt in Canmore, Alberta, where a nice day on the mountain suddenly turned deadly. Clouds rolled in and the wind picked up, literally within 30 minutes. Guide Chad Lenz, cameraman Jeff Parker and I were face-down on the ridge being buffeted with winds in excess of 100 mph. Sugar snow turned to sandblasting, and rocks rolled across the landscape. We were pinned down and literally couldn't get up because of the risk of being blown entirely off the mountain.

Mountains make their own weather and if you don't believe it, spend 10 days at the top of one. Sunburn, windburn, rain, sleet, snow, bitter cold and searing heat all before breakfast are all possible, and a sure reminder that no matter how prepared you are, you can't truly be prepared.

REALITY CHECK

To be a successful bow hunter in mountain country is to understand mental

BETWEEN THE EARS, CONTINUED

toughness. When things are going well, it's easy for everyone to stay positive. Yet when the fun of hunting actually becomes serious work, the shine wears off quickly and what was a great idea last week is a nightmare on the mountaintop.

I have been on many mountain hunts and can break the mind game down to three main factors. First is the sheer amount of exertion or exercise required to climb mountains day in and day out. If a bow hunter isn't in good shape, two things are certain: the hunt isn't going to be enjoyable and the likelihood of success is very low. Climbing mountains is hard work and often base camp is high in a mountain valley. The elevation will often be 8,000 to 10,000 feet above where a hunter normally lives. This thin air starves the lungs of oxygen, which starves the blood cells. Thus, less oxygen gets to the muscles and hunters quickly tire, breathing like freight trains only steps from camp.

It's not uncommon to hike seven to 10 miles a day on a sheep hunt, especially if rams are spotted and stalking attempts are made. Much of this hiking is up and down and as most know, hiking down can often be as hard or harder on the legs and knees as climbing. Unless horses are involved, the only mode of transportation in the mountains is walking. Add a backpack and heavy mountain boots and the recipe adds up to sore muscles, fatigue and a serious bad attitude.

The second mind hurdle is the do-overs ... climbing and working all day to get into range and realizing that it's not your day to shoot out. For a bow hunter who must get inside 50 yards of a spooky ram or goat, every day on the mountain can feel like Groundhog Day. Most hunts in mountain country don't offer stalks every day and if there is a stalk, it usually takes the entire day. On August sheep hunts, there can be 18 to 20 hours of huntable light, making for long, grueling days. Getting rested and having muscles recover with only six hours' sleep isn't easy. In fact, sleep becomes a commodity on the mountain because tents are cramped, mummy bags claustrophobic, and even the best Thermo-Rest pad isn't like a pillow-top mattress at home. If a hunter heads to the mountains "out of shape," the hunt is certain to be miserable.

The last factor is the stress from realizing that after a few days there's a real possibility that the hunt could end without a ram. Exhaustion, coupled with the reality of spending upward of \$25,000, and the amount of travel and time off work devoted strictly to one hunt, often weighs heavy with each step. One learns quickly why so many bow hunters opt for the guide's rifle on the second or third day of an expensive sheep hunt, as bow stalks often end out of arrow range yet within easy rifle range.

Diehard bow hunters must go into a sheep or goat hunt knowing full well that the end result can be a goose egg. This is why preparation is so important. Fitness, mental toughness, long-range shooting ability and plain old elbow grease are required for success.

MOUNTAIN READY

I learned early on that layering on mountain hunts was crucial. Often mornings are cool, yet when you start climbing, things heat up quickly and the combination of the day warming and exercise of hiking can overheat a hunter quickly. Start out cool at

the bottom and remove layers as you climb. Once on top, add clothing to balance out comfort.

Proper gear will also help keep your mental attitude on track. Good hiking boots that are broken in, gaiters to protect legs, a small archery target to keep your confidence are all important. Think about pack weight as well. Even if you're running three miles a day at home, adding a 30-pound backpack will cause back and shoulder pain as well as be a boat anchor on steep climbs. Look to purchase the lightest gear and take up only what you must have.

Comfort foods are also important. I love to eat a PayDay candy bar on the hunt. PayDays don't melt, can be crushed and lie in the bottom of a pack for months and taste off-the-shelf delicious. I often pack a good supply into camp and take one in my pack every day. The sugar is quick energy and I use the treat to refocus on the task at hand. Of course the best time to eat one is for the celebration after arrowing a big ram!

MIND OVER MATTER

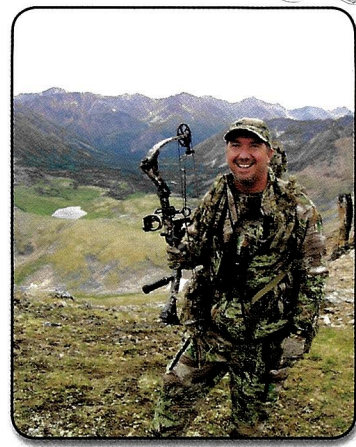
One of my favorite sayings is "Mind over matter; if you don't mind, it doesn't matter." This is so true in sheep hunting. The biggest single factor to bow success on the mountain is not giving up. The mind is a powerful thing. Having the resolve to stick with a plan through tough times is essential for every bow hunter. Whether it's on the deer stand, elk stalk or caribou migration, bow trophies don't come easy and it's the hunter who doesn't give up who is successful with archery tackle more times than not. On the mountain, mind-set can be everything. Quitting is not an option.

On steep climbs or descents I count steps to 20, then rest, and then 20 more. Pace is mandatory. Another must is finding your mental "happy place." When exercising, think about good things. Many marathon runners use music to achieve the mind state of "zen" where they no longer focus on the body punishment, but remove the task from their mind altogether. I don't advocate an iPod on the mountain, but if "Stairway to Heaven" can get you to the top – fire up some Zeppelin and get climbing.

THE PERFECT ATTITUDE

Treasure hunter Mel Fisher spent nearly 15 years of his life looking for the wreck of the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*. This Spanish galleon was wrecked during a hurricane in 1622 and carried \$450 million in gold and silver to the bottom. Every day of the search Mel would echo the words "Today's the day!" This is the essence of a successful mountain hunter. No matter the weather, no matter how tired or how many days, the mind of a bow hunter in sheep camp must always be "today's the day."

The best bow hunters learn to take negatives and turn them into positives. Train yourself both physically and mentally for your next hunt. There's no need to huff and puff after a 100-yard walk from the Polaris or climb down from the deer stand if it starts to drizzle. Go early and stay late. Attack every hunt like a mountain hunter and success is yours!



Happy to be at the top!

Tom Miranda