

Limit: One Per Lifetime

O'CONNOR WAS RIGHT ALL ALONG: THE .270 WIN IS STILL THE PREMIER SHEEP CALIBER TO BE HAD.

By CRAIG BODDINGTON





CZ 550 AMERICAN



We were on a little ridge, glassing west. The sun had just dropped below the tallest ridge, and the remaining light was good. The cruel wind that had plagued us had gone quiet, and sheep were up and feeding. Guide Allen Funkhouser and I were watching two different groups of desert bighorns, the nearest just 600 yards away, where a nice young ram shadowed a group of ewes. Enough light remained to get to them, so we were hoping a grownup ram might come in and run off the youngster.

Cameraman Conrad Evarts, with nothing to film at that moment, was also using his binoculars. It wasn't his job to find sheep, so his voice held a note of shyness. "What about that ram on the skyline?" Huh? What ram? He quickly oriented us: Far above, near the end of the farthest ridge, a lone ram stood on a little pinnacle, silhouetted against a fading sunset. His curls were deep and came all the way around with a slight flare at the tips—a full-curl ram. Both horns were similar, neither broken. It was a great spot, and also a lucky spot: The ram was in view for less than a minute, then he turned and stepped off the back of his lofty perch, gone.

DESERT BIGHORN

The desert bighorn is actually an amalgamation of five southwestern subspecies of *Ovis canadensis*, the bighorns, adapted over millennia to the drier, warmer climate. The

desert sheep have shorter coats and are generally lighter in color than the northern bighorns. They are also much smaller in the body, sometimes half the body weight. Yet on average, the horns of a mature ram aren't much more than 10 percent smaller—a lot of headgear on a small-bodied sheep.

Through my career the desert sheep has been the most difficult of our four North American wild sheep. There is no easy solution for hunting one. Odds against drawing an American tag are astronomical, and although prices for Mexican permits have fallen, they're still pretty high. And yet a desert bighorn sheep remains one of the most classic American game animals. This is partly because of the writings of Jack O'Connor, an Arizona native who, in the 1930s and '40s, was able to cross into Mexico and hunt desert sheep readily and affordably, and partly because the desert sheep, with his outside horns, is a fantastic

The combination of a classic .270, the grandeur of Arizona's rugged landscape and a spectacular desert bighorn sheep all salute Jack O'Connor's legacy. The CZ 550 reached out 250 yards, and Federal's 140-grain AccuBond did its job.

THE BEST OF THESE WAS A RAM THAT SEEMED TO HAVE VERY HEAVY BASES, WITH A DISTINCTIVE WIDE FLARE AND BROOMED HORNS.

creature living in harsh desert mountains that are exceedingly beautiful.

THE TAG

As with so many hunters, the desert sheep was the last of my four North American wild sheep—but not for lack of effort. I took my first ram, a Stone sheep, in 1973 at a time when the Stone sheep was the most available and accessible of our sheep. I started applying for desert sheep permits in 1978, long before I took my first Dall sheep—or my first bighorn.

Time passed, and I kept applying. At some point I turned over my application process to United States Outfitters in Taos, New Mexico (www.huntuso.com). This made me more consistent, and it paid off. I drew a Montana bighorn permit in 1994 and another in Wyoming in '98. By then I had a couple of Dall sheep, but the desert bighorn still eluded me. I lost faith that I would ever draw a permit.

Six years ago, when I returned from a tour of duty in the Persian Gulf, I put nearly a full year's worth of combat pay into a desert sheep hunt in Mexico. This was clearly a foolish thing to do, and I don't recommend it, but I have never regretted it.

Although I stayed in the drawings, it never actually crossed my mind that I might someday take a second desert ram. And then, one day in July 2008 an Arizona desert sheep tag arrived in the mail. It was for Unit 13B North, in the western Arizona Strip. We talk about a lot

of hunts being a "once in a lifetime" opportunity, but in Arizona the legal limit on desert bighorns is "one per lifetime."

When the drawings are made public, sheep outfitters go on a feeding frenzy, contacting permit holders. I spoke to several good guys, but I elected to stay with U.S. Outfitters. This was partly out of loyalty; after all, it was the third sheep tag they'd drawn for me. And it was partly because I liked Allen Funkhouser. He knew the Strip, and he had conducted a number of sheep hunts. He was also honest: "Craig, I'm not the best sheep hunter in Arizona, but I will give your permit 100 percent effort."

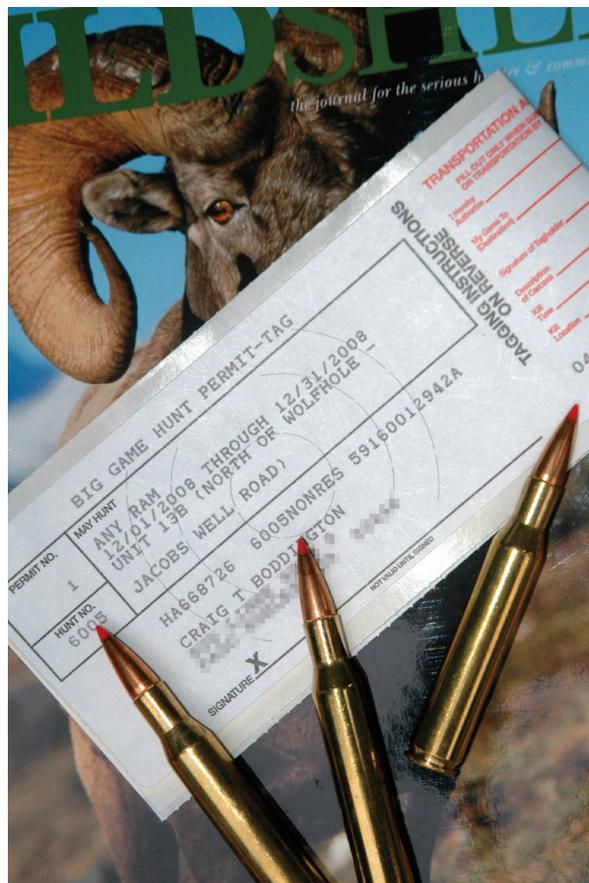
SCOUTING RESULTS

This he did. A retired federal law enforcement agent, he approached our hunt like an investigation. He obtained years' worth of survey and harvest data, cross-checking maps of sightings of Class 4 (fully mature) rams. He interviewed game wardens and biologists, and hunters who had drawn tags in previous years. And then he started scouting.

Unit 13B North is a big, rough wilderness area of near vertical canyons and high mesas and plateaus. Interstate 15 bisects the area as it follows the Virgin River Canyon between Mesquite, Nevada, and St. George, Utah. Research showed there were something like 200 sheep

in the area—truly a needle in a haystack, except that research also suggested the majority of the sheep were concentrated in three of four key areas. These, obviously, were where Allen concentrated his scouting. I wish I'd known about the tag six months earlier so I could have better cleared my schedule and done more of this legwork, but in truth I could not. The best I could do was some glassing while passing through. Independently, we both concentrated on pretty much the same areas, and in late September I actually glassed the knob where I eventually took my ram, but I didn't see any sheep there that day.

So all of the credit for success goes to Allen Funkhouser and U.S. Outfitters, and they "prepped the ground" (and me) as well as was possible. Research suggested that a long-term



One of the rarest government forms in existence: the tag for a desert bighorn. It took the author 30 years of applying.



Arizona's arid Unit 13 has high mesas broken with deep valleys—and mountains besides.

drought was reducing horn mass; it had been years since a Boone & Crockett ram had been taken in this area. This gave me realistic expectations. In total, we located six or eight Class 4 rams. The best of these was a ram that seemed to have very heavy bases, with a distinctive wide flare and broomed horns. He became our primary target.

OPENING MOVES

That is, until he went missing. He was seen three different times, weeks apart, on the same ridge, and then, just before the season, he vanished. We knew this before we started the hunt, which, by mutual agreement, was several days past the season opener. We were in hopes that the three resident tag holders would get in, get their rams and get out (two



High-quality, high-powered optics are a must for desert bighorns. Conducting an extended search through poor optics is asking for a headache.

MY HEART WAS SUDDENLY POUNDING, AND I WAS SHORT OF BREATH AS I PUT THE WELL BALANCED CZ 550 OVER THE PACK AND LAY INTO THE STOCK.

did, and the third took his ram the day after I took mine).

By December 10th that big ram was still missing, so we were essentially back to Square One, with the locations of some end-of-season rams known, but none of the kind of sheep we had hoped for. Plagued by cold and high winds, we started in high buttes accessed from the Utah side. Unfortunately, that strong wind was dead wrong; when we went in, I got a quick glimpse of a dark, blocky ram in the gray dawn, but he had winded

THOUGHTS ON DRAWING A TAG

In order to draw, you must apply.

Any North American sheep tag is a wonderful opportunity. Nowhere are the odds easy, but there are some important considerations. First, in order to draw, you must apply. Few things tick me off more than people who have never applied telling me I was “lucky.” There was more than luck involved in applying for 30 years, but it can happen the first time or any time. So, second, once you start applying you must keep at it and remain consistent.

This is also part of the third point. There is some science to the process. Consistency helps greatly, because most states have some type of “preference” or “bonus” point system, so the longer you apply, the better your chances. Some areas offer better odds than others, and this changes over time. You can do this research yourself, but the permit application services do it as a matter of course. Many years ago I told U.S. Outfitters I wanted a desert sheep tag, not necessarily a permit in the best and thus most difficult-to-draw unit. In 2008 they switched my application to Unit 13B North, with four tags available. The odds have been about 100 to one, but with all of my bonus points my odds were closer to 20 to one—still not great, but a whole lot better. My permit number was 1, the first tag drawn in that unit.

us and was already running. We glassed hard for him but never saw him again.

Up on the rims there were plenty of fresh beds and droppings. But the wind was out of the north, clearly pushing the sheep into cliffs on the south side. This made it, for me, a terrifying place. I’m scared of heights, and the only way we could hunt it was to prowl the rims, glassing straight down to the bottom of 300-foot cliffs. Even so, in many areas it was impossible to see the actual base of the cliffs, the most likely place for sheep to bed. Also, if we were to locate a ram in that dangerous jumble I couldn’t imagine how we might orchestrate a stalk—or safely recover a ram.

It was OK with me when we gave it up and moved on to Plan C, which was in the Virgin River Canyon itself. Luke Guaraldi, assisting Allen, took the south side of the canyon, where he could glass both sides. Allen, Conrad and I took the north side, hiking up onto a series of low ridges that offered good views of the faces above us.

Here we found sheep—multiple groups of ewes and a couple of young rams. And it was from here, just before sundown, that we spotted what seemed to be a good ram up on the skyline. There was no way we could reach him in the hour of light remaining, but it doesn’t take sheep as long as it takes us to cover ground. We stayed until dark, hoping he might come down to,



As with many other big-game species, wily desert bighorns like to bed where they can see approaching predators while not being easily seen.

literally, butt heads with the young ram we’d been watching.

ASSAULT ON RAM RIDGE

We were back on the same ridge before dawn, all four of us, with a two-part plan. First we’d glass the ridges on our side, hoping the ram might have dropped down during the night. If that didn’t work, we’d climb up to his ridge; this exposure seemed to offer a reasonable ascent. We were not yet committed to this ram. A quick skyline view at two miles is a poor way to judge anything, and we had to have a better look.

At dawn we found both groups of ewes and youngsters that we’d seen the night before, but no joy in glassing up the ram. So just after seven o’clock we started to climb. As is usually the case, it was far worse than it looked: steeper and rockier the higher we got. This is OK with me, as I can handle any slope short of vertical. It’s looking over a cliff

into nothingness that gets me. We climbed 4,000 vertical feet, glassing as we went. Along the way we ran into several sheep and had to lie low and wait them out to avoid spooking them over the top.

It was one o'clock when we topped out on "Ram Ridge." We were considerably above the ridge's last pinnacle, where the ram had appeared 20 hours earlier. This time, lag wasn't a problem. Unless spooked, older rams are often fairly sedentary. He might have dropped down to bother some ewes or to drink, but I figured he was bedded close to where we'd last seen him and Allen fully expected him to appear somewhere on this ridge in the late afternoon.

It had been a tough climb, but today the wind was down and the skies were clear. I ate a granola bar and stretched out in the sun for a quick nap. When I awoke, Allen already had sheep moving on a

distant ridge: eight or nine ewes and a young ram—a big band of desert sheep. Revived a bit, I studied the situation. It was just after two. The ram's pinnacle was fully 500 yards down the ridge, with a lot of ground hidden by little points as the hogback descended. Honest, I wasn't reading a crystal ball; I was a lot less confident than Allen that we might see this ram again. But from the shooter's standpoint, I didn't like the setup. We were too exposed up here on the crest, and we might not be able to make a stalk. I had no interest in banking this once-in-a-lifetime tag on a 500-yard shot.

So I said to Allen, "You know, we've pretty much bet the day on that ram showing up somewhere down there. While it's early, why don't we slip down to one of those lower points where we can shoot him if we like him and just huddle up quietly until dark?"

He agreed. So we saddled up and started down the ridge. We were moving slowly. Each little point took us briefly out of view of the final pinnacle, so we were being careful. At a bit over 300 yards we were in a good spot, but there was one more step below us. It hid an enticing cut where I thought it possible, if not likely, for the ram to be bedded. So I whispered, "Let's go on down to that last point."

How long does it take to cover 60 yards downhill on an open ridge? We were in dead ground for mere seconds, and when we could see over the lip of that final point there was a dark animal standing amid boulders on the pinnacle, probably not 20 yards from where we'd seen the ram 21 hours before. Binoculars came up, and mine dropped instantly: If this was the same ram, he looked a whole lot better at 250 yards. He had the same conformation, full curl



Desert bighorns prize their burly horns as much as the hunters who dream of them. Rams of *O. c. nelsoni* proudly display their headgear to awe other sheep.

I TOOK A BULL ELK AT 400 YARDS WITH THE “LITTLE” .270. JACK WOULD HAVE APPROVED; ELMER WOULD HAVE ROLLED HIS EYES.

with slight flare, but now it was clear that he had heavy bases and carried good mass throughout, with just a bit of brooming on the tips. I had seen enough; more looking was not my job, especially since this ram was looking up at us through his own binocular eyes and the clock was ticking.

I shed my pack and carried it forward to the lip of the point, finding a clear spot between two rocks. My heart was suddenly pounding, and I was short of breath as I put the well-balanced CZ 550 over the pack and lay into the stock. Allen, doing his job perfectly, whispered, “He’s a great ram, 256 yards.” Conrad had done both our jobs by spotting this ram the night before; he was now doing his own, rolling the TV camera. It was my turn.

Somehow I got my breath under control, if not my heart, and I got the rifle steady. The ram dropped to the shot, then tried to rise. Somehow I managed to hit him again—we wanted him on that point, not at the bottom of the canyon below us. And except for a lot of work, this once-in-a-lifetime hunt was over. It was 2:35 p.m. on a beautiful afternoon.

He was truly a gorgeous ram—perfectly shaped and about 10 years old, with a scarred face and deeply chipped horns. Not a “book” ram, he was still top-end for the area and well worth 30 years of rejected applications. We had glassed his pinnacle from various angles, so we assumed he’d been bedded and we just didn’t see him until he stood. No. There were beds nearby, but none was today-fresh. When we saw him he had apparently just stepped up to that point, perhaps changing his bed.

I have to wonder what might have happened, or would not have happened, if we hadn’t strolled down the ridge at that exact time. 📷

Peak Performer

Thirty-five years ago pages in gun lore were a battleground in a war of words between Elmer Keith and Jack O’Connor. Both men worked for Petersen Publishing Company, but since it was unacceptable for their work to appear in the same publication, Keith was the brightest star of *Guns & Ammo*.

O’Connor, who had recently retired from *Outdoor Life*, was the headliner for the fledgling *Petersen’s Hunting* magazine.

Elmer believed in larger calibers and, especially, heavy-for-caliber bullets. For North American big game, his thing was a fast .33 caliber with heavy bullets. O’Connor is best known as the champion of the .270 Winchester. He fell in love with the cartridge when it was brand new in 1925 and remained its champion until his death in 1977. Honestly, it’s not so clear to me that Elmer Keith really hated the .270, but rather that he despised “.270 Jack.” It isn’t as apparent that O’Connor felt the same enmity for Keith. Both men knew what they were talking about, but they approached the problem from different viewpoints.

O’Connor’s favorite game was wild sheep, and for the game he preferred

above all, he never found the .270 lacking. Like the prolific gunwriter he was, he hunted sheep through a long career with an eclectic array of cartridges ranging from the .257 Roberts to the .348 Winchester and including fast 7mms and .30 calibers. At the end of his career, in a position guys like me someday hope to be in, he was able to use whatever he chose, so his last sheep hunts were conducted with pet rifles in .270 Winchester. He had no qualms about using the cartridge for elk and African plains game and for grizzlies and moose (usually taken incidental to northern sheep hunts).

In fairness to O’Connor, however, it must be pointed out that on specific hunts for game like Alaskan brown bear, tiger and thick-skinned African game, he chose much larger cartridges, including the .375 H&H, .416 Rigby and the wildcat .450 Watts.

Elmer Keith had great experience with elk and bears and made several African safaris. He did some sheep and goat hunting as both guide and hunter, but this was not a passion. If you exclude sheep, Keith and O’Connor weren’t



THE .270 WINCHESTER

really all that far apart. In print, Keith described the .270 as a “damned adequate coyote rifle,” but in a private letter he acknowledged in writing that the .270, coupled with the best bullet of his day, the Nosler Partition, would be just fine for elk. Also in a private letter, O’Connor admitted that the .30-’06, with its greater frontal area and heavier bullets, was actually more versatile than his beloved .270.

In general, I have followed more closely the Keith doctrine of larger calibers and heavy-for-caliber bullets, but there is no Keith doctrine for sheep, only the O’Connor mantra of the .270. When I was a young writer it didn’t seem to make sense to use “his” cartridge, so I have also employed an array of rounds for my own mountain hunting. I’ve used 7mms from 7x57 upward, .30s from .30-’06 upward and even a few larger cartridges, including the 8mm Remington Magnum and the .375 H&H. I’ve also used the full run of .270s: .270 Winchester, .270 WSM and .270 Weatherby Magnum.

My first ram with the .270 was a great Montana bighorn, taken in 1994. Early in the hunt we got pinned down at dusk at 400 yards. I passed on the shot because I lacked confidence in the .270 at that range. It took several days to relocate the ram, so for the next few years I did most of my mountain hunting with fast .30s. Yep, they work, and I have confidence in them. I suppose I was in the waning years of my “magniac” phase, but, perhaps more significantly, I hadn’t used the .270 much in the previous 15 years. So it was really a combination of confidence and familiarity. I proved this to myself a few years later when I took a bull elk at 400 yards with the “little” .270. Jack would have approved; Elmer would have rolled his eyes.

In recent years I’ve done a lot more mountain hunting with .270s, both .270 Winchester and .270 WSM. I tend to like

the higher velocity, increased energy and shorter action of the WSM. I agree with O’Connor that there is no appreciable difference between the .270s (bullet diameter .277) and the 7mms (bullet diameter .284). A difference of seven thousandths? C’mon! This is especially true for mountain hunting, where the heavier 7mm bullets will not be employed. The fast .30s work, but they also produce a lot more recoil. From the perspective of an awful lot of mountain hunting on five continents, today I’m convinced Jack O’Connor had it right all along: For sheep and goat hunting, worldwide, it’s pretty hard to beat the .270.

In 2008, after 30 years of rejected applications, I drew a desert sheep tag in Arizona; it was clearly going to be a very special hunt. I settled on a .270 Winchester in a CZ 550, a good Mauser action that O’Connor would approve of, and his favorite cartridge.

O’Connor started sheep hunting with aperture sights and transitioned to 2.5X scopes, then fixed 4X, but at the time of his death variable scopes were still considered unreliable. Today we can trust well-made variables, and for longer shots I like the confidence instilled by a larger image. So O’Connor might or might not have approved of the Leupold 4.5-14X that I selected.

My best groups were obtained with Federal Premium 140-grain Nosler AccuBond bullets, a great bullet and load. Then, under the competent guidance of U.S. Outfitters’ Allen Funkhouser, we started hunting.

We glassed my ram late one evening, standing on a pinnacle somewhere up in the

stratosphere. The next morning it took us six tough hours to climb to his ridge. We hoped he might appear somewhere nearby at sundown. He nearly beat us to the punch, rising from his bed at 2:30 in the afternoon. The shot was simple—250 yards over my pack—but I’d be a liar if I didn’t admit to 30 years of accumulated pressure bearing down on that shot. No problem. Somehow I controlled the jitters, and the CZ 550 dropped him cleanly. For big stuff I suppose I will always lean toward the Keith school, but for mountain game Professor O’Connor had it right.

