



I crouch behind my urial, an Asiatic wild sheep, that I dropped at 200 yards in northern Iran. Horns taped 37½ and 36 inches



Snowy Elburz range towers over road to camp

IT WAS SHORTLY after daybreak when game guide Shoja Hamidi spotted sheep on the far side of a lonely valley. But he saw them only briefly during a break in low cloud cover that made the landscape seem dark and unreal.

"I think some rams," Hamidi whispered.

"Then let's go have a closer look," David Laylin said.

Without further conversation Jack Antrim and I shouldered rifles and followed the two others into the gloom. For several hundred yards Hamidi set a fast pace up a slight grade that would bring us around and

Urial and Ibex

Hunting in Iran

By ERWIN A. BAUER

We travel halfway around the world for high adventure with heavy-horned game

above the animals. Although the morning was bitter cold and a hoarfrost covered the wiry bunch grass underfoot, we were warm when we reached a low ridge and crouched there to wait for another break in the overcast. We could just barely see the sun low in the east.

"If we're lucky," Dave said softly through cupped hands, "the sun will soon burn through the clouds and visibility will be unlimited."

Then came one of those tense periods of waiting that every big-game hunter knows. Time passes in slow mo-



Shoja Hamidi, left, and Dave Laylin flank Jack Antrim and his ibex



Guide Hamidi and I with my ibex, one of best from Elburz



Rugged stalk produced this view of urials on snowy knob

tion. The game is nearby but cannot be seen. Smoking or talking or moving about isn't wise. Cold begins to penetrate even warm clothes, and if the hunter has been sweating during his climb, the cold penetrates even faster. The best strategy in this situation is none at all.

Fifteen, maybe 20 minutes passed, and I tried to huddle deeper into a fleece-lined jacket. Then I pulled the flaps of my kolā, a native hat of soft goat wool, down over my ears. That felt good.

A moment later I heard a sound in the void somewhere below us—a rock or rocks being dislodged. At first I thought I was hearing things. But I noticed that both Hamidi and David had heard the sound too and were sitting alert and watching. A few minutes later, more rocks were dislodged, and this time the sound came closer and closer.

What followed has to rank among the most exciting moments during half a hundred big-game hunting trips I've made around the world.

Almost as if somebody had flipped a switch, the overcast dissolved and the scene before us was bathed in golden sunlight. And scattered throughout the scene were about 20 sheep, among them five or six rams. They were the first urials—or eastern Elburz wild sheep—I had ever seen, and the nearest was no more than 50 yards away. It was a spectacle I will never forget.

But it didn't last long. Before David even had time to raise his glasses for a better look at the rams, a vagrant wind blew and the sheep were again hidden by

the clouds. As we waited for another break, the adrenaline began to pump. And I started getting the first symptoms of buck fever.

Then something went wrong, all wrong.

Maybe it was just that sixth sense of impending danger that all wild sheep seem to have, or maybe the same breeze that had shifted the overcast had also carried our scent to the animals. But no matter; all at once we could hear hoofbeats in the distance, and next time the overcast cleared, there was not an animal to be seen on the landscape. The only moving thing was

Hunting in Iran

continued

Antrim and Laylin, American-born outfitter, climb toward spine, beyond which is an ibex



A telephoto lens helped me "shoot" this urial band—rams, ewes, youngsters. Laylin and Hamidi help Antrim show fine urial ram, result of a long stalk



a single lammergeier that circled above us on silent, motionless wings. Lammergeiers, also called bearded vultures, have wingspans of six to seven feet and subsist largely on bone marrow of recently killed animals.

"I guess," Jack said, "sheep are the same the world over."

Jack and I were in the Elburz Mountains of north-eastern Iran, halfway around the world from home. Both of us had hunted in North America and East Africa. This time we wanted to try a country that is not generally known to outdoorsmen but offers a variety of big-game shooting. Iran came to mind, and a note from Jack O'Connor, OUTDOOR LIFE's shooting editor (who had hunted in Iran before and written many stories about it), confirmed that there was a good deal of game in that country.

Next we made contact with David Laylin of Iran Safaris in Tehran and booked a two-week hunt for mid-February of 1969. Laylin, a serious outdoorsman and a native of Virginia, had traveled to Iran on a holiday four years previously and had fallen in love with the place. He did some hunting and discovered a need there for a professional guide and outfitter. So at age 33 he plunged into the business. He considers it the perfect niche.

Jack Antrim, a neighbor of mine, is also a long-time hunting partner and close friend. He lives and farms near Worthington in central Ohio and operates a gravel quarry near Columbus. At 50, Jack keeps in excellent physical condition by constant training. He is a great companion and an excellent field shot.

Perhaps the main thing that attracted both Jack and me to Iran in the first place is that nearly all the hunting there is in mountains and for mountain game—sheep and ibex. Although we enjoy any kind of big-game hunting, we are especially addicted to wild sheep and have collected all the North American varieties except the desert bighorn.

Iran has three kinds of sheep, and we would be hunting two of them, the urial and the red sheep. The third—the Laristan sheep—is very rare and lives in the hot southern part of the country.

Jack flew to Iran via New York, Paris, Beirut, and Tel Aviv, pausing in Lebanon and Israel to visit some of the shrines and antiquities. I flew into Tehran from Kenya, where I had spent three weeks filming the East

African game herds and fishing for bass in the Rift Valley lakes. Jack and David met me at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport.

Jack and I found Tehran a busy, dusty town apparently growing outward at an incredible rate. It is a mixture of very old and ultramodern. Getting my 7 mm. Remington Magnum through customs was a major operation that required all day and was an exasperating experience. The traffic problem in town is the worst I've encountered anywhere in the world; most of the local drivers seem bent on suicide. It was an immense relief to get out of Tehran and into the countryside where the air was pure.

Our first destination was the Mohammad Reza Shah Reserve in the Elburz Mountains about 500 miles north-east of Tehran. Specifically it is near Bojnurd and is astride the main road to Mashhad, a Moslem holy city, beyond which is Afghanistan.

We needed 13 hours to make the trip, mostly because heavy snows had fallen on the main pass over the Elburz and more was falling. We had to pause long enough to put tire chains on David's four-wheel-drive rig in the shadow of Damavand, Iran's highest peak at 18,960 feet, but we could not see the mountain through the snow. We arrived in the hunting camp long after dark.

Camp was really a lodge—a neat stone building situated on a wooded mountainside. It was well equipped, containing indoor plumbing, good beds, and a fairly modern kitchen. Water came by gravity from a clear cold spring just behind the lodge.

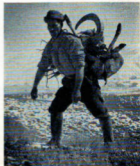
While Yeprem Nazari, the Armenian who was to be our cook during the hunt, prepared dinner, David, Jack, and I sat around an old iron stove and discussed the greatly confused status of Iran's sheep. No two authorities agree on the proper identification of the various species.

Consider, for example, the urial, which we would be hunting first.

In his book, *Hoofed Mammals of the World*, T. Donald Carter calls this sheep the shapo, *Ovis orientalis vignei*. In *The Great Arc of the Wild Sheep*, the late James L. Clark of the American Museum of Natural History calls it the Transcasian urial, *Ovis vignei arkal*. Altogether Clark lists seven (rather than three) different sheep for Iran with sometimes over- (continued on page 134)



All eyes, with the help of binoculars, search for trophy among sizable band of urials



Edghoi Mardani packs out an entire ram

HUNTING IN IRAN

(continued from page 61)

lapping ranges, and that can compound the confusion.

It may be best to accept the identification of Jerry Hassinger, Montana University-trained biologist who is now chief of research for Iran's Game and Fish Department. Hassinger, who first came to Iran while in the military service, simply calls the sheep urial, or eastern-Elburz sheep (*Ovis ammon vignei*), in a scientific volume he is preparing on all the wildlife of that country.

We started hunting at daybreak, first by driving a steep dirt road through an awesome canyon east of camp until the terrain softened into an open valley that separated parallel snow-capped ranges. With us were Shoja Hamidi, a handsome, smiling Turkoman game guide and a warden for the Game and Fish Department, and Edgholi Mardani, a Turkoman porter.

It was while crossing the valley that Hamidi had spotted the sheep and we had been foiled on the first stalk of the trip, as I mentioned at the beginning. David then suggested that we climb the rocky ridge behind us to a place where we could look over that cool high country. Less than an hour later, our breathing labored and our leg muscles complaining, we reached a rock parapet beside a snowbank from which we had a magnificent view.

David pointed to fresh sheep tracks in the snow and to several beds just vacated. At the same time, Hamidi suddenly dropped to all fours beside me and pointed into the distance.

"Ghoosh," he said. "Rams."

I couldn't separate the animals from their background with unaided eyes, but through binoculars I easily and clearly saw four fine rams. Two were lying down, and the others were standing, looking away from us. They were in a good position for me to notice the outward and downward spread of the horns, which differ greatly from the thick, tight curls of American bighorns. These Iranian sheep, I noticed, were reddish and wore long beards, also unlike their North American cousins. I judged the rams to be 400 to 500 yards away, too far for me to risk a shot.

"The second from the left," David whispered, "is worth going after."

Very seldom does a sheep hunter find himself in a position like ours. Here was a trophy ram unalarmed and in near-perfect position to be stalked to within very close range. All we had to do was retreat from our positions on the ridge, circle around, staying just below the ridge, and come over the top again to within not more than 150 yards of the targets.

It seemed so easy that I absolutely knew something had to go wrong.

It did. Just as I reached the crest above the sheep, somebody dislodged a rock and it went rolling down the slope. So my first view of the sheep was of running animals. Hurriedly I tried to pick out the largest in my scope, which is seldom easy to do. Then, unaccountably,

all the rams stopped to take one last look back.

There stood the big one, now on the extreme right and just 200 yards away. But as I held on his shoulder and squeezed off a shot, the ram began to drift away.

Mountain hunters usually know instantly whether their shot is a hit or a miss. A hit brings that thump-thump of bullet striking flesh. This time I didn't hear that sound, but still the sheep seemed to stumble and hesitate, and I was able to snap off a second shot after the three other rams had gone out of sight.

But the second shot ricocheted off a rock—the crack and whine of the bullet were clear—and my urial vanished from sight.

"I really blew that one," I said out loud.

"We'll find the sheep," Hamidi said, and he took off after it at a dead run.

"He must be nuts," I said to Jack. I figured I'd missed all around. I felt terrible.

But on some rare days it's hard to lose, and this will surely remain the shortest wild-sheep hunt of my life. He lay dead scarcely 10 yards beyond where he was when I'd made the second shot. The first shot had struck his body a little too far back to drop the animal instantly, and the second had plowed through the right horn a few inches above the base. The ringing sound of this hit had made me think I'd struck rock.

When I was finally able to unwind, we measured the horns at 37½ and 36 inches. There is no current official record book for Asian game, and my ram probably wouldn't make it if there were. But the horns are very good for the species, and I was a candidate for the happiest man in Iran that day. By 11 a.m. Edgholi Mardani, who is not a very big man, had lugged the sheep back to the car.

There was more to this unusual day. We were having lunch—a shashlik (shish kebab), bread, and sweet tea—in the bright sunshine when Hamidi picked up the glasses and idly scanned the mountains to the west. A moment later he was speaking in rapid and excited Iranian to David.

"He has spotted another band of rams," David translated, "and they look good."

"Let's go," Jack said, and that was the end of lunchtime.

I have never had a better ringside seat for a sheep stalk than I did for this one. We climbed a half-mile or so to another ridge just opposite the urial rams and at about the same elevation. From there we had a better look at them and found that at least two of the eight were of trophy size. But we also discovered that in a depression between us and the rams was a band of about 15 ewes and lambs. If these animals were spooked, they would spook the rams.

"It will be tricky working our way around them," David whispered, "but if we're lucky we might be able to pull it off."

While David, Jack, and Hamidi set

out, Edgell and I remained in place to watch. The stalkers, by staying on hands and knees much of the time, managed to get within 175 yards (later paced off) of the rams without disturbing the ewes. I watched through binoculars as Jack rested his 7 mm. Remington Magnum on a boulder cushioned by his hat and, from a prone position, squeezed off a shot. The ram dropped instantly.

By 3 p.m. both rams had been loaded onto the hunting car and we were headed back toward camp. Jack's urial horns taped 38½ inches and were almost carbon copies of my ram's. Both of us were feeling mighty high.

"I hate to bring up the subject right now," David said, "but from now on the hunting gets tougher, much tougher. For one thing the sheep right now are as low as they ever come, thanks to the heaviest snow in the mountains for many years. And we've been lucky enough to have two easy stalking situations. But ibex live in steeper and less-accessible country. Right now they're higher up, as you'll see."

The Persian ibex or pasang, *Capra hircus*, is believed to be the ancestor of the domestic goat. Several ibex subspecies range in the high mountains from the Caucasus through Asia Minor, Iraq, and Iran to Baluchistan and Sind. Ibex range widely through the Elburz Mountains and are seldom far away from precipitous country.

It's understatement to say that David's prediction was a good one. We covered a good deal of upside-down landscape during the next few days and made many footprints in steep places. But we didn't find any trophy billys. We did spot occasional nannies, kids, and small males. We also learned that the country is full of wild boars, and we actually saw far more of the big pigs than we did ibex.

That was surprising to me because I always thought of these animals (the same species, *Sus scrofa*, as the boars of eastern Europe and Russia) as forest mammals, and I said so to David.

"Later," he replied, "we'll find even more in the woods here."

Early one morning we were hunting up a deep canyon and watching above us on both sides for ibex. The wooded floor of the canyon had been practically plowed up by herds of boars rooting under the snow for acorns.

It was Hamidi who first spotted one of the rooters. It was easy to see that here was a truly huge male. It was working its way slowly around a bench in the canyon wall above us. Unless it changed direction it would eventually come within 100 yards or so.

"You want to try that one?" David asked Jack. "It has tremendous tusks."

"Why not?" Jack answered. Jack located a forked tree trunk on which to rest the rifle and held on the boar as it came nearer and nearer. He was just about to squeeze the trigger when David tapped him on the shoulder.

"Good grief," the young guide blurted, "don't shoot! There's a tremendous ibex on the cliff above that pig."

Save **NEW CATALOG** *Save*

SAVE ON THOUSANDS OF ITEMS FOR RELOADERS, FISHERMEN, SPORTSMEN AND GUNNERS

● Buy reloading tools and components direct from the manufacturer ● Large assortments of fishing equipment and archery supplies ● Great savings on guns, tents, sleeping bags, canteens, binoculars and thousands of other items for the sportsman. ● 100% direct from the manufacturer prices pass the savings on to you, our customers.

Send \$1.00 refundable for large catalog by Dept. 5-05

RUBR-AMERICAN Corp., Glenwood, Minn.

DEPENDABLE LIGHTWEIGHT FIBERGLASS SAWYER CANOES

THE QUALITY PREFERRED BY CANOEISTS SINCE 1957



FROM 22MB

See Your Local Dealer
Write For Free Literature
Dealer Inquiries Invited
SAWYER X CANOE COMPANY
448 6221, PO 1141, Duluth, Minn. 55810

The boar was forgotten, and all glasses were focused upward. At first the cliff seemed bare, but near the crest I spotted the animal—a billy lying down and staring out into space. Only the head, neck, and horns were visible, but what horns! They were so long that they crossed near the tips. For the second time on the trip, my adrenaline began to pump.

There seemed to be no possible way to approach within shooting range of the billy. An experienced alpinist might have easily scaled the cliff, but I am not one of those. Hamidi, however, thought he could pick out a route by which we could continue a little farther up the canyon and then, by switchbacks, angle up to a position within 200 yards of the ibex. All this depended on our being quiet enough en route to avoid alarming the goat.

"I'll try anything once," I said, "for a shot at that animal."

We'd climbed less than 100 yards when I wondered at my madness. I felt a loose rock dislodge from underfoot, and for an instant I hung with bare hands alone on the edge of nothing. But beyond that the going was a little easier—until the third switchback. Then progress was only inches at a time, and the steep slope seemed to set my lungs on fire. When we finally reached a place from which to try a shot, I had to wait until my breathing got back to normal again.

The billy had shifted his position slightly upward. But the range was still good, although not much of the animal was visible.

Then the ibex looked directly at us, probably figuring that his lofty place on a thin ledge was a sanctuary against any danger. Through my 3 to 9X Leupold Vari-X scope the horns looked as long as the body, but I also saw that if the shot was pulled even slightly off target, the bullet would strike rock and that would be that.

I held on the goat's shoulder and squeezed. At the shot the ibex tumbled from the ledge and didn't stop falling until it reached a spot that was well below us.

It was some time before I could work around the canyon wall toward the ibex, all the while fearing that one or both horns had been smashed by the fall. But my luck held out; the animal was even

more magnificent than it had seemed earlier.

My hands were unsteady when we taped the horns, and it wasn't only from the altitude and the precarious location. The horns measured 45½ inches on the outside curve. David said that he had never seen a larger ibex on the hoof and that he knew of only one bigger head taken in the eastern Elburz Mountains. Prince Abdorreza Pahlavi of Iran, a big-game hunter who is well known to OUTDOOR LIFE readers, has collected two ibex with longer horns but only one was taken in this area.

Next day Jack, after a much longer and tougher climb than mine, bagged a fine ibex with 42-inch horns. We had spotted the animal early in the day among other billies in a large mixed band. But it wasn't until afternoon that Jack worked into position to make his kill.

Nobody complained about sore leg muscles during the celebration in camp that night. Instead we talked about the hunting still to come.

The cost of this eight-day urial and ibex hunt (plus the bear hunt to be described at another time) is \$1,215 per person for two hunters. Round-trip air transportation New York to Iran runs about \$1,000, but by completing the trip in less than three weeks, hunters can take advantage of reduced excursion rates at certain times of the year. Both urial and ibex can be hunted all year in Iran.

Next on our list were boars and maybe a bear. Then we would drive completely across Iran, to Azerbaijan province, to hunt red sheep on an island. I'll tell about all that in a forthcoming issue of OUTDOOR LIFE.

THE END