

HUNTING SHEEP IN WESTERN ALASKA

By JAMES H. KIDDER

TOWARD the last of July, Blake and I left the Kadiak Islands in a schooner which we chartered to take us to the Kenai Peninsula, where we were going for the white sheep which range on the mountains lying back from the coast some thirty miles. The hills may be reached by one of several rivers. It takes only two days of hard river work to ascend some of these streams, but we determined to select a country more difficult to enter, thinking it would be less often visited by the local native hunters. We therefore chose the mountains lying adjacent to one of the large inland lakes—a district which took from a week to ten days to penetrate.

When we reached the lake which was to be our base of supplies, we decided that each should take a light outfit and push on until we came upon rams, and there to make our shooting-camp, the natives taking the trophies out to the permanent camp on the lake and packing back needed provisions.

At noon of August 22d Blake and his outfit started for his shooting-grounds at the eastern end of the sheep range, and shortly after my outfit was under way. My head man and the natives each carried packs of some sixty pounds, while I carried about fifty pounds besides my rifle, field-glasses and cartridges; even my dog Stereke had some thirty pounds of canned goods in a pack-saddle.

After two days' hard tramping, mostly above timber, and with few good camping places, we were among the sheep, and as hunting in these hills is at best hard work I decided to keep the camp as high up as we could find wood and water. The next morning as we started on our first real hunt the day was dull and the wind was fortunately light, for it generally sweeps over these rugged, barren summits with great velocity.

We had been gone from camp but little over an hour when, on approaching a small knoll, I caught sight of the white coat of a sheep just beyond. At once dropping upon my hands and knees, I crawled up and carefully peered over to

the other side. We had unconsciously worked into the midst of a big band of ewes, lambs and small rams. I counted twenty-seven on my left and twenty-five on my right, but among them all there was not a head worth shooting.

This was the first great band of white sheep I had seen, and I watched them at this close range with much interest. Soon a telltale eddy in the breeze gave them our scent, and they slowly made away, not hurriedly nor in great alarm, but reminding me much of tame sheep or deer in a park. Man was rather an unfamiliar animal to them, and his scent brought but little dread.

From this time on until darkness hid them, sheep were in plain view the entire day. In a short while I counted over one hundred ewes and lambs.

We worked over one range and around another, with the great valley of the river lying at our feet, while beyond were chain upon chain of bleak and rugged mountains. Finally we came to a vast gulch supposed to be the home of the large rams. My men had hunted in this section two years before, and had never failed to find good heads here, but we now saw nothing worth stalking. By degrees we worked to the top of the gulch, and coming to the summit of the ridge paused, for at our feet was what at first appeared but a perpendicular precipice of jagged rock falling hundreds of feet.

We seated ourselves on the brink of this great gulch, and the glasses were at once in use. Soon Hunter—my head man—saw rams, but they were so far below that even with my powerful binoculars it was impossible to tell more than that they carried larger heads than some other sheep near them.

It was impossible to descend the cliff at the point where we then were, so we moved around, looking for a spot where we might work our way down, and finally found one where it was possible to descend some fifty yards to a sort of chute. Moving with the greatest caution, we finally reached the chute, and after a bit of bad climbing found the slide rock at the lower

end, as we had expected, but it took us a good two hours to get low enough to tell with the glasses how big were the horns the sheep carried.

There were eight rams in all. A bunch of three small ones about half a mile away, and just beyond them four with better heads, but still not good enough to shoot; and apart from these, a short distance up the mountain side, was a solitary ram which carried a really good head. The bunch of three was unfortunately between us and the big, sheep, and it required careful stalking to get within distance of the ones we sought. When we were still a long way off we showed ourselves to this bunch of sheep, and they took the hint and went slowly up the crags.

Although the four had become suspicious from seeing the three go slowly up the cliff on our approach, still they had not made us out, and the wind remained favorable. Lying close long enough for them to get over their suspicions, we cautiously stalked up to within some two hundred yards. Again we used the glasses most carefully, but could not see the big ram, which had come down toward the others from his solitary position. Suddenly the sheep became alarmed and started up the mountain. I expected each second to see the large ram come out from behind the boulders, and therefore withheld from shooting. But when he did not appear, I turned my attention to the four which had paused and were looking down upon us from a rocky ridge about four hundred yards above. As they stood in bold relief against the black crags, I saw that one carried horns much larger than the others, which proved to be the big sheep our carelessness had allowed to get so far away. My only chance was to take this long shot. We had been crossing a snow-bank at the time, and I settled myself, dug my heels well in, and with elbows resting on my knees took a steady aim. I was fortunate in judging the correct distance, for at the report of my rifle the big ram dropped, gave a few spasmodic kicks, and the next minute came rolling down the mountain side, tumbling over and over, and bringing with him a great shower of broken rocks. I much feared that his head and horns would be ruined, but fortunately found them not only uninjured, but a most beautiful trophy. The

horns taped a good thirty-four inches along the curve and thirteen and one-half inches around the butts.

That night the weather changed, and thenceforth the mountains were constantly enveloped in mist, while it rained almost daily. These were most difficult conditions under which to hunt, for sheep have wonderful vision, and Can see a hunter through the mist long before they can be seen.

A week after killing the big ram we visited again this great basin, but found nothing in sight, and cautiously moved a little higher to a sheltered position. From here we carefully scanned the bottom of this large gulch, and soon spied a bunch of ewes and lambs, and shortly afterwards three medium-sized rams. When we first saw them, one had become suspicious and was looking intently in our direction, so we crouched low against the rocks, keeping perfectly still until they once more began to feed. When they had gradually worked over a slight knoll, we made a quick approach, cautiously stalking up to the ridge over which the sheep had gone. I had expected to get a fair shot at two hundred yards or under, but when I peered over, nothing was in sight. I concluded they had not gone up the mountain side, for their white coats against the black rocks would have rendered them easily seen. I therefore started to walk boldly in the direction in which we had seen them go, thinking they had probably taken shelter from the gale behind some rocks, and that I should suddenly come upon them.

I had only gone some paces when we located them standing on a snow patch, which had made them indistinguishable. I sat down and tried to shoot from my knees, but the wind was so fierce that I could not hold my rifle steady, so I ran as hard as I could in their direction, looking hastily about for some rock which would protect me from the gale.

The sheep made up the mountain side for some three hundred yards, when they paused to look back. I had by this time found a sheltered position behind a large boulder, and soon had one of the rams wounded, but, although I fired several shots, I seemed unable to knock him off his feet. Fearing that I might lose him after all, I aimed for the second ram,

which was now on the move some distance farther up the mountain, and at my fourth shot he stopped. Climbing up to within one hundred and fifty yards, I found that both the sheep were badly wounded and were unable to go farther, so I finished them off. What was my surprise to find that the larger ram had seven bullets in him, while the smaller one had three.

The weather continued unfavorable for hill shooting until the 3d of September, but that day opened bright and clear, and fearing lest the good weather might not last, we made an early start, and traveled some distance before we saw sheep; but having once reached their feeding-ground, I had the satisfaction of watching more wild game than on any previous day. But though we saw a multitude—one band of no less than forty-eight—we failed to get a single shot. Late in the afternoon, on the return trip to camp, we paused for a brief rest and a smoke, and here Hunter sighted two lone rams in a gulch at the top of the mountain above us. By this time we were both pretty well used up, but the glasses showed that they carried good heads, and I determined to stalk them even if it meant passing the night on the hills. So we worked our way up to the top of a ridge which commanded a view of the gulch in which the sheep were grazing, but they had fled some distance away by the time we reached the place where I had expected to shoot, and were at too long a range to make my aim certain. However, I could count on several shots before they ran out of sight, and even at such a distance I hoped to get one, and possibly the pair. Both sheep carried good heads; but I aimed at the one which stood broadside to me. Hunter, who had the glasses, told me afterward that the ram with the more massive horns got away, but I succeeded in wounding the other so that he was unable to move. Knowing he would shortly die, and that I could find him the next morning, we at once started at our best pace for camp.

The following day we were literally wind-bound in camp. It was not until the day after that we could set out for the wounded sheep, which eventually we found not fifty yards from where we had last seen him. It was a long and hard climb to reach him, but he carried a very

pretty head with massive horns of over a full turn. I found that two shots of the seven which I had fired had taken effect.

Two days later the native arrived from the main camp with more provisions, and brought a rather interesting letter from Blake, from which it was clear that I had been hunting at a great disadvantage in my district, and that there were proportionately more big heads among the sheep at his end of the range. I at once determined to retrace my steps to the main camp and follow up his trail.

Therefore, the next morning (September 7th), we shouldered our packs and went over the mountains to our main camp.

Starting out from the main camp, we soon found the tracks of Blake's party, which led up a moraine, and carried us over much quicksand and through many glacial streams, icy cold. Finally we came to where Blake had started up the mountain side, and with all due regard to my friend, his trail was not an easy one. About noon it began to rain, but we pushed upward, although soon soaked to the skin, and came out above timber just at Clark. The next morning broke dismally, with the floodgates of the heavens open and the rain coming down on our camp in torrents. Later in the afternoon we succeeded in getting some wood to burn, and had a square meal. While we were crouched around the fire the natives saw sheep on the hills just above us, but it was raining so hard that it was impossible to tell if they were rams. In fact, when sheep's coats are saturated with water they do not show up plainly, and might easily be mistaken for wet rocks when seen at any distance.

The next day opened just as dismally, with the storm raging harder than ever, but by eleven o'clock it began to let up, and we soon had our things drying in the wind, for the clouds looked threatening, and we feared the rain would begin again at any time.

As we were short of provisions and depended almost entirely upon meat, my head man and I started at once for the hills. Climbing to the crest of the mountains on which we had seen the sheep the evening before, and following the summit, we soon saw a large and two small rams feeding on a sheltered ledge before us. We much feared that they would get our

scent, but by circling well around we succeeded in making a fair approach. I should have had an excellent shot at the big ram had not one of the smaller ones given the alarm. The gale was coming in such gusts that it was difficult to take a steady aim, and at my first shot the bullet was carried to one side. I fired again just as the sheep were passing from view, and succeeded in breaking the leg of the big ram. Hunter and I now raced after him, but the hillside was so broken that it was impossible to locate him, so my man went to the valley below, where he could get a good view and signal me.

It is always well in hill shooting to have an understood code of signals between your man and yourself. The one which I used and found most satisfactory provided that if my man walked to the right or left it meant that the wounded game was in either of these directions; if he walked away from the mountain, it was lower down; if he approached the mountain, it was higher up.

As Hunter, after reaching the valley and taking a look with the glasses, began to walk away, I knew that the sheep was below me, and I suddenly came close upon the three which had taken shelter from the gale behind a large rock. Very frequently sheep will remain behind with a wounded companion; especially is this so when it is a large ram. Now, unfortunately, one of the smaller rams got between me and the big one, and as I did not want to kill the little fellow the big ram was soon out of range. But he was too badly wounded to go far over such grounds, and I soon stalked up near, when I tied, breaking another leg, and then, racing up, finished him off. This ram carried a very pretty head, thirteen and one-quarter inches around the butts and thirty-six and three-quarters inches along the curve; but, unfortunately, the left horn was slightly broken at the tip. It was undoubtedly an old sheep, as his teeth worn to the gums and the ten rings around his horns indicated.

When a ram's constitution has been undermined by the rutting season, the horns cease to grow, nor do they begin again until the spring of the year, with its green vegetation brings nourishing food, and this is the cause of the rings, which, therefore, indicate the number of winters

old a sheep is. This was my head man's theory, and is, I believe, a correct one, for in the smaller heads which I have examined these rings coincided with the age of the sheep as told by the teeth. Up to five years the age of a sheep can always be determined by the teeth; a yearling has but two teeth, a two-year-old four teeth, a three-year-old six teeth, and a four-year-old or over, eight teeth, or a full set.

The next day, the 13th, and Friday opened dismally enough, but by the time we had finished breakfast the mountains were clear of clouds, and there was no wind to mar one's shooting. Such conditions were to be taken advantage of, and Hunter and I were soon working up the ridge well to leeward of the place where we had seen the sheep the night before. The white coats of these sheep against the dark background of black moss-covered rocks render them easily seen, but we now failed to sight any even on the distant hills. Therefore we pushed ahead, going stealthily up wind and keeping a careful watch on all sides. We had crossed over the ridge and worked our way just below the sky line on the other side of the mountain from our camp, never expecting that the sheep would work back, for they had seen our camp-fire on the night before. We had traveled nearly to the end of the ridge and were just about to cross and work down to a sheltered place where we expected to find our game, when Hunter chanced to look back, and instantly signaled me to drop out of sight.

While we had been working around one side of the summit the sheep had been working back on the other side, and we had passed them with the mountain ridge between. Fortunately, they were all feeding with their heads away, or they must have seen us as we came out on the sky line. My man had the glasses, and assured me that there were two excellent heads. We now felt quite certain that these were part of a band of sheep I had seen at a distance a week before and had been trying to locate ever since.

We cautiously dropped out of sight and worked back, keeping the mountain ridge between us. We were well above and had a favorable wind and the entire day before us. It was the first and only time upon these hills that the conditions had all been

favorable for a fair stalk and good shooting. Hunter did his part well, and brought me up to within one hundred and twenty-five yards of the rams, which were almost directly below us. They had stopped feeding and were lying down. Only one of the smaller sheep was visible, and my man advised me to take a shot at him, and then take the two large ones as they showed themselves. Aiming low, I fired; and then, as one of the big rams jumped up, I fired again, killing him instantly. The smaller one that I had first shot at went to the left, while the one remaining large ram and the second smaller one went to the right. The latter were instantly hidden from view, for the mountain side was very rough and broken, and covered with large slide rock. I raced in the same direction, knowing well that they would work up hill. But hurrying over such ground is rather dangerous work. Soon the two sheep came into view, offering a pretty quartering shot at a little under a hundred yards. The old ram fell to my first bullet, and I allowed the smaller one to go and grow up, and, I hope, offer good sport to some persevering sportsman five years hence.

While Hunter climbed down and skinned out the heads I turned in pursuit of the one which I had first fired at, for we both thought he had been hit, having seen hair fly. I soon located him in the distance, but he showed no signs of a bad wound, and as his head was small I was glad that my shot had only grazed him.

The larger ram measured thirteen and one-quarter inches around the base of the horns, and thirty-seven and five-eighths inches and thirty-seven and seven-eighths inches along the outer curves. These were the longest horns of the *Ovis dalli* that I killed. The other ram measured thirteen inches around the horns, and thirty-four and one-half inches along the outer curve.

While we were having tea that afternoon we chanced to look upon the hills, and there, near the crest of the ridge, was one of the small rams from the bunch we had stalked that morning. He offered a very easy chance had I wanted his head.

It is worthy of note that these sheep seem to have no fear of the smell of blood or dead comrades, and on several occasions I have observed them near the carcass of some ram which I had shot.

The next day opened perceptibly cooler, and the angry clouds overhead told us to beware of a coming storm. As I now had seven heads, five of which were very handsome trophies, I concluded to take Hunter's advice and leave the high hills.

Our hill shooting for the year was now practically over. Had the weather been fine it would have been an ideal trip; but with the exception of the 3d and 13th of September every day passed upon the mountains was not only disagreeable, but with conditions so unfavorable that it had been almost impossible to stalk our game properly; for when I had been once wet to the skin the cold wind from the glaciers soon chilled me to such a degree that I was unable to remain quietly in one place and allow the game to get in a favorable position for a stalk. I had been obliged to keep constantly going, and this frequently meant shooting at long range. With the exception of the rams shot on the 13th of September I had killed nothing under three hundred yards. Therefore, much of the sport in making a careful and proper stalk had been lost.

My success with the white sheep had come only with the hardest kind of work, but I now had five really fine heads, which I later increased to six—my limit, I was quite satisfied with the measurements of these horns along the curve, but had hoped to have shot at least one which would tape over fourteen inches around the butts, which would be extreme, for the horns of the white sheep do not grow so large as those of the common Rocky Mountain variety. They are also much lighter in color. I believe that large and perfect heads will be most difficult to find a few years hence in this section, and the sportsman who has ambitions in this direction would do well not to delay his trip too long; for this range of hills is not over large, and unless these sheep have some protection, it is only a question of time before they will be almost entirely killed off.