

Craig Boddington på jagt efter sneged. - Tatlow Mountain Outfitters -

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Tom Dillabough met us at the trailhead with more packhorses. We adjusted some loads and made new ones, then took a winding, ever-ascending horse trail up a long river valley, Tom and outfitter Mike Hawkridge, guide Emery Phillips, Aaron Cummins and me. Three hours into the ride I was feeling it in my back and legs and, well, tender posterior. However, when we saw the first goat, I didn't hurt anymore.

My mind was racing, addressing the problem. At this point we were in a broad alluvial valley, with steep ridges (very steep ridges) rising on both sides. This goat was far up on the left-hand ridge, bedded tight on a little outcropping jutting out from a monstrous slide of gray shale. He (for he was alone and seemed slightly yellow) was just a pale spot against the gray rock—and not much more through binoculars.

Yep, thar's goats in them thar hills, I thought to myself. I also fervently hoped we wouldn't need this one. He was very high in very steep stuff and, to my eye, in a nearly impregnable position. I didn't want to climb up there and try to find out. My saddle sores didn't hurt anymore, but now I was faced with reality as I studied angles and approaches. This was a goat hunt, perhaps North America's most serious mountain hunt. I was in my mid-50s, and the people who would go up the mountain with me—in front or behind—averaged twenty years younger. I had a bad feeling that I was in trouble.

Some of my fondest mountain memories are actually of goat hunting, not sheep hunting, so when asked to do this one, I didn't hesitate. I also didn't stop to consider what I was getting myself into. Fortunately, I was getting into a very good situation.

After some years of guiding in this and other territories, Hawkridge had recently acquired Tatlow Mountain Outfitters. A young and eager outfitter isn't a bad thing. It's even better when he's smart, competent and has sound horses, good equipment and fine country. It's a huge bonus when he's a nice guy on top of it. Hawkridge fits all these things, a good hunter and a good cowboy. The bad news is that this was a goat hunt, a serious mountain hunt in tough country.

I had sort of imagined that we might ride up to the tops, tie the horses, peer over and find goats. I not only should have known better, I knew better. At least I knew; Aaron, on his first mountain hunt, was rubbing his backside and looking up at the distant goat, just starting to get a clue. Fortunately, we only had an hour of daylight left, and it would take much longer than that to attempt a most unlikely approach on that goat. So we saddled up and rode on, reaching an old trapper's cabin surrounded by a small cluster of tents just at dusk.



Tatlow Mountains.

So Close...

The camp wasn't fancy, but it was nice and dry under some big pines, and Tom's wife, Alice, put on plenty of good food. We were going to need it. On our first hunting day we rode several miles farther up the broad valley, glassing as we went. From camp we had glassed a distant goat far up on the left-hand face in what appeared to be a terrible spot. A mile or so upriver we glassed a big group on the right-hand face, moving up into the rocks. These were reachable, maybe, but there were too many, almost certainly nannies and kids.

So we rode farther, and we glassed two goats far up on a ridge, both almost certainly billies, big-bodied with luxurious coats (at least through the spotting scope at several miles). They were bedded when we saw them, but in a little while they got up and ambled over a ridge, probably looking for a cooler place to bed as the sun warmed the face they were on.

The goats were way up there, and we were way down here, but that was clearly the way it was going to be. We might as well jump into it. Going up through the timber would be a nightmare, but not far from where we had last seen the goats a long, open slide led into the sharp “V” of a creek drainage. Maybe we could get up that way. So we rode up the valley another mile, tied our horses at the base of the slide and started up.

It wasn't easy, and it wasn't pleasant, but you take it one step at a time. Three hours later, we were approaching the canyon we believed the two billies had gone into. What amazed me the most was that we found them. Well, okay, that isn't so amazing. Goats like to bed where they can see danger coming, and for them, most danger comes from above. We climbed the last rocky ridge before the main summit, really a terminal moraine from an old glacier. The goats were bedded across the wide-open glacial trough, below some outcroppings on the main ridge. They were 700 yards from our position, a sheer drop below us and below them and no way to get closer.

There was nothing to do but wait them out and hope they would come down when they got up. They rose from their beds on schedule, about 4:30, but they fed straight up an impossible slide toward the top of the main mountain. We had no choice but to turn around and start the brutal downhill trek to the horses.



Goats.

Almost!

In spite of heat waves and mirage, we'd been plenty close enough for a good look at those billies. Both were very good, and one looked like a monster. I hoped we'd have another chance at them the next day, but the mountains had swallowed them. Instead we had a single billy more or less across from camp and seemingly approachable. From the bottom it looked like an easier approach—on the mountain, things tend to look different than from below.

It was worse, a steeper slide. Maybe it just seemed worse because this was the second day and now we were stiff and sore. For sure the ascent took a whole lot longer. The last push, from the “V” of a watercourse up onto a high ridge, was only a few hundred yards, but it took more than an hour. Now I was looking at my watch. The billy had been bedded in a pretty good spot, but the afternoon was slipping away.

Once we had the altitude, we needed to sidehill a long ways—much easier but still slow going and a bit scary in several places. We finally reached our target, an outcropping that looked into a cut where the billy had been bedded. Mike went ahead and peered over. The billy was up but still there. Something happened while Aaron got into position, possibly wind, but probably too much noise. All that remained was fresh tracks in the scree where the billy had gone straight up over the mountain.

Wakeup Call

The next day we were all tired, but a horse trail gave us some altitude, taking us up from camp into a long, high valley, good country on both sides. We tied up where the trail brought us out of the trees and glassed for a while, counting more than twenty goats on the rocky ridge far above us. Leaving Tom with the horses, we climbed straight up. We'd have the option of hunting on down the ridge and returning to the horses or dropping straight down to camp, with Tom trailing the horses down.

Once up in the rocks we had goats on both sides, but up the valley it seemed to be mostly small groups, almost certainly nannies and kids. Behind us, along the ridge above camp, was a more likely target, two goats bedded under a massive outcropping. We had to circle far around along an ascending series of ridges, but Mike planned a perfect approach. We came out on a finger just below the main ridge, and when we crept into place the two goats were still bedded at less than 150 yards.

Aaron crawled into position with the rifle while, Mike selected the right-hand goat, and when the shot was clear Aaron anchored his goat with his little Kimber .308. Well, he anchored it for a second. Then there was a little movement, and the goat rolled once slowly, then again, faster. . . and when it went out of sight it was going end for end into a narrow cut.

The tracks led us straight into the narrow “V” of a creek—and then straight under an old snowpack, undercut by the creek. The goat was in there, stone dead with one horn broken. Not good, but part and parcel to goat hunting. At this point it was still early in the day, but we'd dropped so much

elevation that our only real option was to keep going straight down to camp. Well, that we did. In some ways downhill is worse than uphill, and it was a long, steep descent.

One Good Day

We lost some time to rain and fog, also part and parcel to goat hunting, and I needed the rest—but I was also feeling good. From the open meadow by camp, clouds permitting, we could glass several goats on any morning or evening. Some were in bad places, some seemed approachable, and I felt confident that if the weather gave us just one more good day we could get a good billy.

We got that day. Mike and Emery took us up the horse trail again, this time all the way up that long, high valley through a saddle, where we could look into new country beyond. The saddle was actually a divide, with the drainage sloping downhill and curving to the right below a massive saw-toothed ridge. Between two of the teeth, right on top, there was a tiny white spot that optics showed to be a billy, bedded. The only obvious approach was to go straight up, cross the ridge, then come to him along the far side of the spine. It was only noon, but while we watched he got up and moved down the slope and started to feed.

We waited him out, and after a time he moved a couple hundred yards down the ridge and bedded in a little outcropping. We had a gentle climb to the base of the ridge. Then we were out of sight, and the real climb began. It was terrible, steep and treacherous with unstable scree and crumbling rock. Worse, this was one of those ridges that just kept going up, with multiple false crests. It was past three o'clock by the time we reached the real top—and then came the worst surprise. The far side was sheer cliff, and we were cliffed out to the right as well. We were done.

We couldn't go forward, and we probably couldn't make a direct approach. Rather than call it a day and give up all that good altitude, we decided to drop down a bit, then sidehill along the ridge. At least that way we could see what our goat was up to. It took another hour before we could peer around an outcropping and see where we had left our goat.

Predictably, he was up again, staying level and moving away, and by now we knew he was a very nice billy. It was past four, three hours of daylight remaining, and we were a long way from camp. Sensibly, this goat was walking—out of our lives forever. Beyond him was a deep cut that ran from the valley floor to the top, studded with outcroppings. While we watched, he moved slowly to the lip and disappeared.

I was finished. Mike and Emery, well, they live there—but they were tired, too. We clearly had a chance. The goat would feed in that cut, maybe bed again and slowly work his way back up, but we were already far above him. One last push, a fast sidehill march, and we could hit the lip of the cut above him. It was obvious but not necessarily sensible. I asked, and everybody looked at me like I had three heads. Then we started out. I figured it would take us an hour to look into that cut. We were there in thirty leg-burning minutes.

Except the goat was not there. We reached the very outcropping he had disappeared over, and there was open ground below. Nothing. There were more outcroppings above and more below, but our theory was that he would feed back up. So, now pushing personal envelopes, we climbed up along the lip. No goat. Also absent were fresh tracks. We had to drop into the drainage to get back to the

horses anyway. We crossed the top of the cut and started back down. Maybe we missed him, maybe he went down instead of up—maybe both.

Ten minutes later Mike sank into the loose shale and pointed. Opposite us there was a bedded goat on a little bench, visible only in a small window between two rocky spires. He was just below where we first looked into the cut, not 100 yards from where we had last seen him but completely hidden from that side. He was angling away, so we took time to verify. Yes, a billy. Yes, a good billy. Almost certainly the one we'd been stalking for more than five hours.

Breathing hard and trying not to, I organized my pack on the steep slope and achieved some measure of stability. The goat was about 250 yards, considerably downhill. With the Kimber .270 WSM I'd need to ride the shot a bit low. Mike shouted and the goat stood, then turned and gave me a quartering-away angle. I fired, low on the body in line with the off foreleg. He took it hard, went down behind the left-hand spire—and then there was just a flash of a goat rolling down a snowfield. This time the creek wasn't very far, and he was dirty but intact.

We made it back to camp late on a dark, moonless night, and nobody much cared. We woke up the next morning to fresh snow, and there would be no mountains climbed that day. We didn't care about that either. We'd had a great hunt, and it was time to come down out of the mountains.



Craig Boddington & Mike Hawkrige.