


# A Bighorn in Broken Country

by  
NATALIE KREBS

A young hunter and his dad dedicate their season to a ram that turns out to be a new world record

illustration by  
CHRIS MALBON



Justin was gone. A moment ago he'd been right behind his dad, sidehilling the ridge to get in position above the bachelor herd. But sometime in the last five minutes the teenager had slipped away into the scrub. Ted Sheedy thought of their emergency radios, switched off for the stalk. Baffled, he backtracked to see where the hell his son had got to. ¶ He found trampled sagebrush where Justin had settled prone behind his rifle, but no Justin. Meanwhile, the rams were feeding out of sight into a side draw. The only thing to do was wait. ¶ It was still shooting light when the sheep came pouring back out of the draw. Ted hadn't heard a shot, but here they were, running right past, eight or nine dust-colored rams, all spooked by something. If he'd had the tag and the rifle, Ted could've shot any one of them.



# THE GATHERING DARK finally forced

Ted to start picking his way toward camp. On the hike back he bumped into Justin, who was doing the same thing. Justin, it turned out, had worried the milling rams would bolt and dropped down to intercept them. But the wind had shifted, blowing his scent to the herd and his chance for the evening.

Ted wrestled with his frustration, ticked the 19-year-old had doubted their plan and his experience. But this season was disappearing fast, and he understood Justin's urgency. So neither said much. Instead, the Sheedys turned one last time to see the rams, now silhouetted on the horizon, looking back at them.

A storm rolled in overnight and sunny T-shirt weather dropped into the 30s; steady winds brought rain and snow. Unable to hunt and unwilling to get snowed in, the pair packed up camp and left the rams for another weekend, hoping they wouldn't range far.

The 5-mile hike out through Montana's Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument didn't ease their bitter mood. The Breaks—canyon country normally so parched, hunters must carry in all their water—is notorious for its cracked clay that melts to gray gumbo in the rain. The Sheedys used trekking poles to scrape 4 inches of wet concrete from their boots every 20 paces, packs pulling on their backs and snow blowing sideways all the while.

Hunters with vacation to spare might've holed up, shuffling cards and talking in the tent for a day or two, but both guys had to get back to Bozeman. Ted couldn't afford to take more time off from his sales job. This was their fourth long weekend in the Breaks, and he was already tight on time. Justin was a freshman at Montana State University, juggling classwork with National Guard duties and a part-time TSA job at the Bozeman airport.

When the draw results posted last summer, Justin didn't check online—after only seven years of applying for the resident bighorn hunt, he didn't expect to pull the tag. It wasn't until the mail arrived and he opened the Fish, Wildlife and Parks envelope that he realized he'd actually drawn: UNIT 680: SUCCESSFUL.

Then he got to work. Justin saved paychecks to buy a new set of camo, and even scheduled classes to keep Mondays and Friday afternoons free. Ted tackled much of the research. The Sheedy men are experienced elk and mule deer nuts, but sheep were a wild card, well beyond Ted's expertise and, ordinarily, his price range. So he started calling people who know sheep.

## IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Asking about a hunter's elk spots is like asking how many guns he owns: impolite and certain to produce a vague answer. But

odds are bighorn hunters will get only one season, so sharing intel with the latest lucky guy to pull the Breaks tag doesn't exactly create competition.

Plenty of locals were happy to help the Sheedys. One guy sent over a wall-size BLM map, blown up for his own hunt in the same unit a few years back. A few offered their boats for river access. Another pointed them to a sheep guide by the name of John Lewton.

Lewton is a divisive character in the Montana hunting community. He has a track record of guiding clients to big sheep, including roughly a dozen governor's tag holders. (These tags are sold in auctions to the highest bidder and typically go for more than \$300,000.) In years when he doesn't guide paying hunters, he shares info and often tags along on hunts.

Lewton was also the subject of a controversial FWP sting in 2008, after the department received complaints that he was guiding illegally. That operation ended in an undercover officer shooting a record-book ram and misdemeanor charges of hunting without landowner permission and outfitting without a license for Lewton. He was found not guilty.

Controversial as he is, every-

one agrees that Lewton knows sheep. Of the 47 Montana bighorn tags allotted each season (45 drawn, one lottery, and one governor's tag), Lewton says usually about 25 hunters call him for advice.

When Ted reached him, he found Lewton willing to give him a few free pointers about sheep behavior and how to size up rams. They should look for horns jutting high off the head, deep curls dropping below the chin, and plenty of mass.

Father and son began poring over photos, trying to get the hang of field judging. When Justin had to report to National Guard training, Ted took a scouting trip to the Breaks—a five-plus-hour drive one way—to locate access points. All told, he called about 20 people in the area for info and access: everyone from game wardens to the BLM office to landowners. He didn't have any luck knocking on doors for permission to cross private tracts. Once, he narrowly avoided stepping on a rattler coiled on a front porch.

But a boon appeared in the form of an easement, acquired by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation in 2015, that provides access to sheep habitat. It would still take plenty of boot leather to reach bighorn country, but it was a start.

## WEEKEND WARRIORS

Locals—sometimes complete strangers to the tag holder—often clamor to join bighorn hunts, knowing the odds of drawing themselves are slim. But few are willing to hike 5 miles before the hunt even starts. The Sheedys, along with one of Justin's buddies, packed in for the Labor Day weekend opener, expecting to scout as much as hunt. Justin, slight but strong from military conditioning, brought his bow. Ted carried a shotgun for birds and, although used to tough hunts with his son, felt all of his 51 years. The trio split up each day, covering a 20-mile loop. The vastness of the

badlands overwhelmed Justin but encouraged him too. The boys found rams—maybe 15 to 20—though none mature enough for such a special tag.

They didn't see any other hunters, either, although they did encounter someone who wasn't happy to see them. The Sheedys were threading their way through the patchwork of public ground that runs between the easement and their sheep spot when a pickup came flying toward them. The landowner behind the wheel lurched to a stop and informed them, none too kindly, that they were on private property.

Ted explained politely that they were, as a matter of fact, standing smack in the middle of a contiguous public parcel. They had the map and a glowing GPS dot to prove it. The landowner doubted they would have reached this spot without driving across private tracts. She had clearly underestimated their determination.

Justin and Ted returned twice in the following weeks. With permission now secured for a splinter of private access (from a different landowner), they hunted the rifle opener—which coincided with a gumbo-conjuring rainstorm. It took six hours to drive 25 miles with a trailered ATV. When the trailer became so heavy with mud they couldn't go any farther, Justin unloaded the quad and drove behind his dad, wearing a garbage bag as a poncho. When they finally stopped to camp at 1 a.m. and he peeled away the plastic, mud caked both arms from shoulders to fingertips.

The storm subsided and the Sheedys turned that weekend and the next into productive hunts, finding rams, covering ground, and getting comfortable field judging. On the fourth weekend, the Sheedys hiked in again, arriving with just enough light to look for sheep. They spotted the rams not far from camp and set out early the next morning, but this time the sheep saw them



Justin Sheedy with the 6-year-old ram, currently the largest hunter-killed Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep ever taken in the U.S.

first. When Justin glanced up, the bachelor herd was 100 yards ahead, staring right back. They'd fed toward camp in the night. Now they bolted.

The Sheedys watched them bed down on a canyon wall. They spent the day waiting for an opening that never came. They were sure now: Two of the rams in this group were definitely shooters. The first had handsome dark headgear, but the second was truly striking in profile, with horns that swept back, then curled deeply below his jaw. When the ram faced away, Justin could barely see any hide peeking out between the wide, crowded curls.

Once, an outfitter drove his quad right above the bedded rams, never spotting them, but it wasn't until evening that the sheep rose and trotted off.

Justin and Ted checked canyon after canyon the next day until, at last, the herd turned up, again close to camp. They agreed on a plan, but Justin took off and so did the rams. Three weeks passed before they could hunt again.

## UNDER THE WIRE

Justin couldn't stop thinking about the two big rams he'd seen. He figured other hunters had probably killed them

while he was stuck in class or on a shift. Finally, he was able to head back out. This time Lewton and a buddy joined them, and they set out early on a Friday, hiking the long miles back to the last sighting. Justin and Ted skipped setting camp and split up to locate the sheep. General deer season opened the next day, and more hunters would move through the area.

Incredibly, the rams were bedded near where they'd last seen them, as Ted discovered while glassing a coulee. The bachelor group had now doubled to 16. After retreating to a ridge for a better view, he hurried off to find Justin.

By the time the whole crew assembled atop the ridge, it was midafternoon. Justin lay behind his rifle now, scope settled on the biggest ram, bedded safely behind a bush at 270 yards. Lewton looked through the spotter, confirming his suspicion: This was a giant. Not wanting to pile more pressure on Justin, he didn't say a word.

Justin spent two hours waiting and watching, running through different scenarios in his head. He looked through the spotter, then the scope on the .300 Weatherby Mag, then the spotter. His legs and hands

shivered, not from the chilly wind, but from adrenaline.

When the big ram finally stood, the first of the bunch, Justin's training kicked in. His muscles relaxed.

The rifle went off, but he didn't really notice. He didn't hear the shot. Instead, he watched the hit and saw the ram stumble out of sight as its companions rose and trotted off, one fewer in their number than before.

Skinning and quartering complete, they rough-scored the ram: 209 inches. A mistake, surely. But a second, more conservative tally put the horns at just over 208 inches. Most hunters are lucky if they kill a 180-inch ram. Boone and Crockett accepted Justin's ram as the new world-record hunter-killed bighorn (pending panel scoring next year), its 208 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches tying with an Alberta ram from 2000.

But that doesn't mean the Sheedys are done. Ted could draw the tag any year now. And word has already gotten around to this year's lucky hunters that the Sheedys know a thing or two about chasing sheep in the Breaks and just might be willing to help out if you give them a call. 🌲🌲🌲