

Arizona Big Game Super Raffle

Desert Bighorn Sheep

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This hunt all began with a telephone call from my brother Lane who lives in Phoenix Arizona. Sometime early summer of 2006 Lane asked me if I had heard about the Arizona Big Game Super raffle that was just started in Arizona. (Lane knew that I had been applying for Arizona deer and elk hunts but had been unsuccessful). I replied that I had not heard of the new super raffle and Lane sent me an application since you could not apply online, a situation that has been corrected for the 2007 application. I read through the application and saw that you could apply for one each of eight big game species as well as a Swarovski optic package for \$110.00, what a deal I thought but a waste of time for me since I never win anything. Lane explained to me that although I would not likely win anything it would go for a good cause to improve the Arizona wildlife habitat and I may someday get rewarded if I ever drew an Arizona tag. Great logic I thought and mailed in my application and forgot about the whole deal, chalk it off as another donation to a worthy cause.

The evening of July 8, 2006 I was sitting in my recliner, taking a short nap after dinner and a glass of merlot. The telephone rang and my wife said, "Oh he will want to take this call". She said it is someone from the Arizona Big Game raffle. (I found out it was Mark Bool who later hunted with me) He informed me that I had won the Super Raffle Desert Bighorn Sheep tag. My sleepy response was "you are kidding me" (Actually my comment was "No S___?") He said no he was not kidding and congratulated me. I was speechless, since I know how coveted a Desert Bighorn Sheep tag was, although I had never considered hunting them. I expressed how happy I was, and then as I had ran out of meaningful conversation I decided to add a little humor to the deal and asked if the elk tag had been drawn. Mark informed me that it was up next so I said I had better get off the phone in case they needed to call me back. Apparently I had provided more humor than intended since I could hear the crowd's laughter in the background. I received a call the following day from a newspaper reporter about my drawing the sheep tag. After the phone call I was amazed that I had actually won something and particularly something as coveted as a Desert Bighorn Sheep. I didn't know much about hunting sheep but I knew the Desert Bighorn Sheep was a very hard tag to get.

The day following the drawing Pete Cimellaro, Co-Chairman of the Arizona Big Game Super Raffle called me; he is also a Past President of the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society. He congratulated me and explained the details of the year long multiple hunt zone tag that I had won. He said that if I had any questions or needed anything to call him. My wife Alice commented at the time what a nice man he was how helpful he had been on the phone.

Although the tag ran from August 2006 to August 2007 I did not consider thinking about hunting until it cooled off a little and so I proceeded about my life as usual. I got on the internet and read what I could about sheep hunting and felt like I should get a long range flat shooting rifle, hence the quest for another rifle, I only have about 6 and none of them would be perfect for a sheep hunt (at least that is what I convince Alice of). I finally decided upon a 270 Winchester short mag made by Hill Country Rifle in New Braunfels Texas. During the quest for a rifle someone pointed out that I should find a guide soon since this was a once in a lifetime opportunity and guides would book up soon. Well with my super rifle ordered now the internet search for a super guide was initiated. I found quite a number of interesting guides that appeared suited for the task, however it became apparent to me that I was definitely not physically fit enough to pursue Desert Bighorn Sheep and an exercise regimen was initiated. I was very paranoid about hiring the "super guide" and not being able to keep up with him when we got to my sheep. I have heard horror stories about hunters being 'walked to death' by an outfitter, usually in Colorado mountains. I personally had never hired an outfitter, although I have had a lot of exposure hunting in the mountains since I was raised in Utah, hunted there and I went to veterinary school in Colorado. During my quest for an outfitter I came across the name of Pete Cimellaro and Yellowhorn Outfitters, wasn't that the same fellow that called me about congratulating me on getting the Desert Bighorn Sheep tag and explaining the details of the hunt? My wife looked it up and said that was the nice guy that had called the day after the drawing. I called Pete that evening and we talked about Desert Bighorn Sheep hunting. He said some very key points to me. He said, "I can't shoot the sheep so I will have to go 'at your speed'". That was an important aspect for an overweight out of shape flatlander (for 25 years) that has to climb Desert Mountains after a sheep, since my desire to shoot a Desert Bighorn did not exceed my desire to live. Another thing I asked about was the rifle of choice. He replied, "Whatever you have that you can shoot well". He said, "We will get you as close as you need to make the shot".

Yeah right I thought, after having read about all the long distance shooting necessary and the importance of a long-range flat shooting rifle. I signed up with Pete Cimellaro and Yellowhorn outfitters and we started making plans for the hunt. I wanted it to cool off a little and I had a heavy professional commitment schedule for the fall. I had a huge professional commitment the first week of December so we decided to try for the middle of December. Pete had some hunts scheduled the first two weeks of December (which he ended up helping take two book rams) and we would get together after we both had our commitments taken care of. I knew I had plenty of time and flexibility due to the nature of the tag.

I drove to Phoenix mid December and picked up my brother Lane and together we drove to meet Pete at Lake Havasu City, Arizona. Pete led us through the desert to our campsite near the Bill Williams River in the unit 16A. What a great camp Pete had set up! Lane and I had our own bedroom tent and there was a very nice cooking and dining tent as well as a great fire ring and comfortable chairs. Pete's wife Cathy ran the camp and cooked some excellent meals for us. Lane and I had the best camping experience of our life, and neither of us are rookies at camping. An outhouse and shower tent were unexpected conveniences that were welcome additions.

Pete had reports of a huge ram that had been seen in this area and we were going to hunt for him. I could essentially hunt the northern half of Arizona for a year. The ram seen in this area was reportedly exceptional and there was only one other tag in 16A that had already killed a ram, but not the big ram. We hunted daylight till dark for 7 days and although we saw sheep daily and did see a number of rams we could never locate the big one. Pete's partner Jim McCasland, Chris Denham and Mark Bool all helped us look and we could not locate the old ram. A nice treat was watching a couple of rams spar and listening to the echo of horns knocking across the hills. After a week of glassing, climbing and looking I had blisters on both feet we had exhausted our hunt area so we decided to quit for Christmas and regroup at a later date.

I went to Utah and spent Christmas with my father before returning to Texas. As it turns out this was a very good decision since my father passed away before I could see him again in the spring. Because of the funeral arrangements for my father Pete and I had to alter our hunting plans a little and we resumed our hunt in March, hunting unit 13B out of St. George Utah in the Arizona strip near the Virgin River Gorge. Chris Denham and Mark Bool came the same evening that I got there. Pete had already been there several days scouting for sheep, but he had not seen any good rams. Unit 13B carries one the largest numbers of Desert Bighorn Sheep but we found they were scattered quite a bit since the ewes were actively lambing. On the 4th day of hunting 13B Mark said, "We are going to hell today". Pete explained we were hunting Purgatory Canyon area. The plan was for Pete, Cody (my nephew who joined me this trip) and I to walk the canyon and for Mark and Chris to glass from the east looking west. A sheep hunting friend of Pete's, Hub Grounds had been looking for us and had told Pete about seeing barrel cactus that had been broken by rams in the Purgatory Canyon area. After we had walked about 1½ miles down the canyon Chris radioed that they had spotted 7 rams. One was a larger ram approximately 6 years old that he estimated would score in the high 150 low 160's. Pete asked me if I wanted to consider the ram. He said, "It is your hunt and your decision". I said, "We might as well go look since this was the first possible shooter we had seen". Pete said, "If you hike all the way up there I guarantee you will want to shoot him". "I said let's go look, we have the wind and sun in our favor and should be able to get a closer look". So the climb out of the canyon and around the sheep began. It probably took 1½ hours and we covered about 1 to 1½ miles in the process but finally Pete got a good look and took out his range finder. He came back and said "they are right over the crest and below us on the opposite face. How far do you feel comfortable shooting?" "I said 300-350 maybe up to 400 yards". Pete said, "Good they are 150 yards away". I thought wow, all that practicing with my rifle at 300 yards would make this easy. We began our crawl and sneak on the rams. Cody was videoing the whole stalk. We crawled up towards a rock I was to use as a rest and all of a sudden Pete looks back and grabs my rifle barrel and pushes it to the ground. Apparently one the rams had seen it reflecting the sunlight (the rifle had a stainless barrel and I was keeping it pointed up out of the dirt and away from Pete in front of me). Pete got a little more excited and said "you had better hurry they saw us and are going to move". Pete described which ram I was to take and I looked through the scope. I thought, holy s___ he is huge! All I could see was those horns. The rock for a rest was too tall for a prone shot and too short to kneel so I took a ½ kneel and ½ prone position. Pete said "hurry he is going to move". There he was, standing broadside, I placed the crosshairs on his shoulder and as my heart beat the crosshairs would jump above his back. I fired and as the ram bolted downhill, I asked, "Is he hit?" Pete said, "I don't think so". The ram was out of sight below us and I missed an easy shot. I can't come close to describing the disappointment and the feeling I had let everyone else down by missing such an easy shot, all that effort and I had missed!

We ran over to the edge of the ravine and all of the rams were on the other side above a ledge trying to figure out what had happened. I sat down against another rock, again with the wrong height again and tried to get the crosshairs on the big ram. Pete exclaimed "he is the one at the top, just going over the ridge". I put the crosshairs on his shoulder and fired. He went down hard. Pete and Cody both congratulated me, he was down. Pete said "keep an eye on him in case he gets up" and Cody said "he isn't going to get up, you whacked him hard". Cody had the shot on video but went on to video the other rams. Just then my ram gets up. I thought, what is this, I can't see blood? Pete said that I should shoot him again which I did just as the ram went out of sight over the ledge. Was that shot good? I really didn't know. How did he just get up? I unloaded my gun and we went across to where I had knocked him down – no blood! How can that be? Pete said, "Maybe you hit a horn". We moved over to where we last saw him, still no blood! I thought damn I let that nice ram get away. Then Pete exclaimed "Blood and a lot of it". I felt overwhelming relief at that time. Pete continued making his way off the ledge and then exclaimed, "Here he is and he is dead". What relief that he did not get away after I wounded him. We climbed down to him and all exclaimed that there was no ground shrink and then contacted Chris and Mark to inform them he was down; and, if they could, get over to us for pictures. We took pictures for a long time then caped him, boned him and started out. It was a major task for me to get off the face of the canyon to the floor. Then there was about a 1½ mile uphill trek. I was pretty exhausted by the time we reached the trucks. All I could think was what a hunt! I have never experienced anything like this before. It was late when we were able to get back to St. George but after a shower and a steak we all felt better. Chris and Mark were gone when I woke the following morning. Cody went back home to Levan Utah and Pete and I proceeded to Kingman to check my ram in. The Fish and Game folks were nice and accommodating even if it was an unusual time for hunting. They aged the ram at 8 years and scored him a net 165¾, which is a real trophy for me. Pete took me to Henry's Taxidermy in Kingman Arizona where I left my ram, said my goodbyes and started the long drive back home to Texas happily thinking about what a hunt I had just experienced.

As I reflected on the hunt I marveled at the camaraderie shown by the sheep hunters in helping Pete help me find a nice ram. What a great group of hunters, sportsmen and conservationists.

Later I reviewed the tape of the first shot, just over the ram's withers. The 250 yard sight in and downhill angle didn't help but neither did the "ram fever". The second shot hit his horn base, which should have broken his neck and the third shot hit his heart. As I watched the shot on the video I remembered Pete saying, "Bring what you shoot well".

I can't say enough about what a great deal the Super raffle tag is with all the flexibility and opportunity it provided me. This was truly was a once in a lifetime hunt that provided a lifetime of memories.