



EMBERS OF WILDNESS:
A FATHER AND SON'S HUNTING JOURNEY TO THE NORTH WEST
TERRITORY

by

Gary Young

"Backpack Hunting at its Finest! North Mackenzie Mountains, N.W.T." the Arctic Red Brochure stated. Six hunters, hundreds of pounds of camo-patterned gear, we set out.

After five legs of flight, we arrive in Norman Wells, an oil town founded in 1921. Our accommodations were the town's finest – a double-wide turned motel. We dropped our luggage off and piled in a van to go shoot. We drove to a roughly graded area at the base of a small mountain. We tacked some white paper plates to a log, parked the van a hundred yards out and began.

Jeff went first. He made a few disappointing shots then remarked, "I swear, this scopes too old – I've got to get a new one – should've done it before the hunt."

Next, it was Bill. He did the same thing but said, "There's a crosswind just gusting – snatching my bullet all over the place."

Then it was George's turn. George had told me, on the drive over, that he snipered a crow at 900 yards while in the Marines. I watched him intently. Gun up, he drew in a deep breath and froze – BOOM! He missed the plate. "Blasted airlines; they just knock and bang the shit out of your gun-case," he said.

Next was John, who made some poor shots, then noted in his southern twang, "The wind's 'movin the van – it's 'throwin me off. I just can't git comfturbull."

Even my dad shot under-par, "Hugh – I don't understand that at all." He was modest.

My shot was a fine shot. I only needed two, the second for good measure. "Good shootin Gary," some of the hunters said. Some of them boasted having shot a 3 inch pattern at 300 yards just days before; now they were having trouble with a paper plate at a 100.

Before the night had fallen, Jeff was overheard asking how he might come up with a few more shells for the hunt. As for John, he'd been back to the shooting range two more times and had to quit for the dark. So far, the sheep were winning.

A hundred and sixty miles west, we touched down on a dirt runway. Welcome to Arctic Red's base camp. We were met by an earth-seasoned crew of

guides, packers, and departing hunters holding horns. Exchanges were brief. Jeff, John, and I, at the hint of our guides, began to sort our gear for the umpteenth time. We filled a large box for storage with our extravagance. One ounce carried 16,000 steps equals a 1000 lbs.

We ate a hot meal in the cook cabin, talked about sheep hunting and how to escape a grizzly attack, then prepared for our final flights in. Strewn throughout the Mackenzie Mountain range, we separated. Each man went alone, accompanied only by a guide toting a mean gun for bears. Dad and I would share a guide and go it together.

I loaded into the boxy plane. They called it a super-cub. It was like a kite with a motor on it. I settled in; the pilot flew with the ease of a man paddling canoe on a calm lake. I enjoyed the view. Thirty minutes in, we spotted a couple young Dall in the riverbed. They bucked off as we flew by; it whetted my heart for the hunt. We flew 44 miles in; it was as if we flew through a time-warp – submersed in wilderness.*

No longer do you lean over a ceramic sink in the bathroom but a bed of river rocks, crystal water below adorned with arctic char – live and swimming – and an ever present flow that carries your toothpaste spittle away faster than you can say cat-scratch-fever. The walls have spread themselves, transforming into giant swells of mountainous terrain, voluptuous and craggy...green, wild,

untamed space as far as the eye can search. Creature-comforts damned, nature bares her glorious breast.

After the motorized kite dropped us off, Dad and I gathered a few fagots of wood, prepped our tent and used the last hours of light to glass for Dall. We spotted a good one.

I wriggled around on the rocky, uneven earth and took aim. Any moment now...any second, the ram we'd been stalking all day might appear.

"Are you comfortable? Are you comfortable?" Dad kept whispering. My body lay on the edge of a lip in the earth, partially jack-knifed. Only one foot touched the ground. I needed both feet touching to get anchored and make a good shot. I waited...uneasy, I waited...anticipating, I waited...until, nearly twenty minutes passed.

I started to feel tired from the unused adrenaline. "There he is! – There he is!" I took aim, the sheep drifted in my crosshairs. I was all awake now. Anytime now, I could pull the trigger, drop the hammer – and the sheep kept walking up the mountain – slowly, but moving in and out of rock cover. Shoot now – no, there you go, no – now, no. With each step the sheep took upward, I felt my big chance slipping through my fingers. Then, he was no more, and I just never had a safe, sure-fire kill shot.

Our guide Tavis's head poked out from the cliff above. He waved us up. Dad and I crept over bushy grass, through rock, and around the lip until we were above the cliffs.

We joined up and Tavis informed us the sheep was sixty yards below, bedded down behind a rock. I slinked out to the edge. I steadied my aim at the rock, got as comfortable as I could on the cliff, and waited – all was ready. The sheep would have to piss, or stretch, or move on at some point. And as he stood, without warning, gun resting on my knee, I fired, and blood poured, a stream like a spigot from his neck. The ram stumbled – Kaboom! – I shot again – “You zippered him,” Tavis let out.

The ram was down.

We made our way around the precipice and below. The sheep lay, his blood spread about on the earth and rocks.

I kneeled over the animal, a hand on his coarse, white hair. I bowed my head.

“Now that's a big ram,” Tavis remarked, satisfaction on his face. We spent the final daylight caping and quartering the sheep there on the mountainside. The sheep tasted good that night by the campfire.

It was Dad's turn now.

We climbed up and up. The unsettled rock slid back with each step. Dad, for a change, was ahead of me. We arrived at the top, mid-afternoon. I peered down into two giant, colorful valleys. On the ridge, Dad and Tavis took off their frame packs and left them behind. The primary stalk began.

We turned west heading up the ridge line, well above the lone ram by now. As we crested a roll in the ridge, a lamb met our eyes. She froze; her eyes pierced us. She spooked and galloped away, threatening to spoil it all.

We walked on gently. The view opened up into a sub-canyon. The middle was a rockslide, the left a marbled face, the right side jagged with high cliffs. The ram was bedded at the base of the cliffs, sheltered by a rock cubby. We studied, perched on the ridge. It was a long shot.

Finally, the sheep stood up from its bed. Dad took aim, I covered my ears-- KABOOM! The gun fired-- "You shot high," our guide whispered. Dad took aim and let another one go. I watched through my binoculars as the ram dropped, like a sack of potatoes, out of sight.

Dad and Tavis began down the rockslide. I stayed above for the gear left behind. They climbed a few hundred yards down. It seemed the ram was shot, but we weren't certain. I watched them. They were still in hunting mode. Then, through my binoculars, I saw Dad taking aim. He fired once, twice, maybe three times. No sign of the sheep from my vantage point. I rushed off for the gear so I

could return and descend upon the action. Walking away, on the ridge, I heard another shot, and then another. I felt frustrated. I was missing it. I moved faster. Counting the shots, there must have been six in all from the beginning. That ram must be dead.

Returning, I spotted dad below, climbing through rocks towards it all. The ram lay dead, just beyond him. I snapped a picture and rushed down. When I came near him, he was smiling. He told me the ram ran up into the cliffs. His blast brought the ram off in a fifty foot plunge, somersaulting. Another shot was required after the fall. We took photos and went to work on him.

The sheep nourished us that night back by the campfire.

Dad and I killed our rams on the south slopes of the mountains, the side more plentiful in game. There was a river between our spike camp and the south slopes. Hunting them meant crossing the river. It was our first day hunting caribou. Crossing, our packer Jay chose a shorter route with swifter water. He stranded in the middle, water up to his groin. We watched. He looked back, then forward, wavered and made a last wild-maneuver to stay. He fell in, and we relished it. We hiked a couple miles up valley and spotted three bulls feeding.

We watched them from the valley floor through morning fog and light. An hour, we watched them grazing. Our guide, judging from afar, said they were

good caribou. The day was an open page, unscripted. Tavis had a 10 mile route planned out for us that lead in a direction opposite of the bulls. We debated. Tavis suggested we hike up to them for a closer look. "If we make the climb up that mountain I'm gonna shoot one of 'em," Dad said. He laughed. Tavis smiled, I laughed.

Thus far, our hunt had unfolded like clock-work. Day 1: Spot Dall ram, stalk, and kill. Day 2: Dall's meat, hide, and horn care / repose. Day 3: Spot Dall ram, stalk, and kill. Day 4: Dall's meat, hide, and horn care / repose. Day 5: Underway....

We climbed through midday and into the afternoon. It was steep, but the grass and lichen soft underfoot. We dropped our packs and began the primary stalk. All at once we were on them. Since Dad had given me first shot on Dall, it was time to return the favor.

Crouching, we closed in. Thirty yards away, bedded down, we saw two of the caribou. The third had to be close by. There was a rock, the size of an easy chair, between us and the 'bou. With whispers, we devised. Dad would step out to the right and bust the bigger one. As they rose, I would step left and bust the other 'bou, or the third 'bou if it appeared and was bigger. It would be a split second judgment. If I hesitated, they would bolt, and I didn't want that.

"Are you ready?" Dad looked for my affirmation. "Are you ready?" Dad whispered a second time. Hearts were pounding like they do when you're about to take life.

These were magnificent.

A subtle 'click and our safeties were off. Stepping right, gun up, dad marked and fired. The Caribou stood, robust and strong. I held my gun up. The Caribou began to trot around the hill away from us then suddenly turned heading straight towards us. KABOOM! Dad shot a second time. The 'bou sucked in the lead. I held my gun up, then a voice came sharp and certain, "Shoot-him, shoot-him," KABOOM! My gun exploded and a second 'bou stumbled to the ground – KABOOM!

Just like that. It was just like that. Two caribou lay dead on the ground, fifty yards from each other. A third stood in the distance. Dad was so excited.

I breathed deeply for a while.

Tavis left to get our packs. Dad told me he loved me. We stood over my caribou, an arm around each other.

The sun was set by the time we finished skinning and all. The hike back was steep, the packs heavy with meat, hide, and antlers.

We ate caribou that night by the fire.

The hunting log completed as follows. Day 5: Spot Caribou, stalk, and kill. Day 6: Caribou meat, hide, and horn care / repose. Day 7: Return to Arctic Red River base camp.

After arriving back, we were pleased to find the other hunters had each taken ram. Each has his own story. They are different from mine and Dad's, but with fraternal threads conjoining each. Through hunting we "nurture the ember of wildness within ourselves...we exercise our passion to belong to the earth...to participate in the ecological drama" (Posewitz 90). And so we did. ~

Source:

Posewitz, Jim. *Beyond Fair Chase: The Ethic and Tradition of Hunting.*
Guilford: The Globe Pequot Press, 1994.

**The law in the N.W.T. requires that a hunter wait twelve hours after landing before beginning to hunt – a very important law for ethical hunting.*

Boone and Crockett Scores of our trophies:

*Young Gary's Dall Sheep: (38") 169 1/8 B&C
Dad's Dall Sheep: (35") 158 B&C
Young Gary's Mountain Caribou: 369 B&C
Dad's Mountain Caribou: 403 B&C*