

# Scratch

By Ron Spomer, Field Editor

After the fifth try you'd think Dall sheep hunting would get easier. It doesn't. But it does get more fulfilling, and in September 2003 Scott Grange and I got more than our share of fulfillment in Alaska's brutal Chugach Range.

"To heck with Lance's philosophy. I'm not going up there again," Scott announced, as the snow-dusted mountain we'd just descended loomed over his prostrate body in the twilight's last gleaming. "He may be young and tough enough to pursue relentlessly, but I can't keep this up without a break."

"I hear you," I commiserated. "Lance's hunting motto is fine in theory, but all this relentless pursuing is going to burn me out before we find a ram worth stalking. I'll be too weak and sore to climb when we do see one. We need a day off. You want lasagna or chicken and rice?" I leaned forward to lift the boiling water from the tiny gas stove, groaning with the effort, and poured it into two plastic bags holding our freeze-dried meals. What I really wanted to do was pour it over my head, along with a lathering of soap and about 10 more gallons of delicious, steaming, hot water. Five days of backpacking will do that to you.

"Hey Todd, is that hot tub about ready?" Scott teased our big packer as he trudged up from the creek with an armful of water bottles dripping what had been glacier hours earlier.

"We found a hot spring on our bear hunt in B.C. last May," I piped up. "Must have been

# the Clouds

**Welcome to Alaska's  
Chugach Range. One day  
here would make most  
hunters cry "uncle,"  
and only one thing could  
ease the pain of eight days  
in the wilderness:  
a white ram!**

a hundred-twenty degrees. Paradise." We would have no such luck in these tundra peaks.

Among Dall sheep hunters, the Chugach are known as the toughest mountains in Alaska. Though not nose-bleed high, they are extensive, steep, sliced and carved by hundreds of glaciers, and protected by moats of alder and willow jungle guarding their flanks. It's this vegetation that scares off most hunters. Lance Kronberger, our lean, optimistic young outfitter, was wise enough to make light of this impediment at the start of our hunt—before we encountered it. "We only have a few hundred yards of alders to get through," he'd said brightly as we dried our feet after our second river crossing. "And I have a trail cut through them." He neglected to define the term "trail" and its angle of incline.

"Well, I can't open it up too much or you'll be able to see it from the air," he explained an hour later when we stood beneath the interlacing canopy of dripping leaves and limbs as black and slimy as

eels. A mist fine as gauze had increased to a steady drizzle as we labored up the tangled alder slope. Each time we grabbed another branch to pull ourselves up or stop ourselves from sliding back down, showers cascaded from the overstory.

"How's everybody doing?"

"Just fine," I lied.

"I think I'm going to puke," my 49-year-old partner announced, bending over his walking stick.

## Home, For Now

Scott didn't vomit, and after five hours of hiking we finally reached our camp beside a pretty brook bordered by pink fireweed and deep blue gentian blossoms in a huge, naked, tundra mountain valley surrounded by dark, barren peaks that scratched the dripping clouds. Lance had thoughtfully left a big dome tent set up from his previous hunt, but we found a rat had all but destroyed its weather-resistant qualities, and he instead graciously gave us the

smaller two-man tent he and Todd had planned to use. "Well, how do you like sheep hunting so far?" I asked. A veteran Rocky Mountain mule deer, antelope and elk hunter from Utah, Scott was a mere dreamer when it came to Dall sheep hunting. Or at least he had been.

"I hate rain," he confessed as we watched silver drops coalesce and roll off the tent overhead. "That's why I live in the desert."

It rained the next three nights and mornings everywhere except on the ridges where the sheep were; there it snowed.

"Grab your rifles and let's go," Lance said late the next afternoon. We'd been policing camp, drying clothes, patching holes and tightening guy lines when Todd spotted two rams on the far side of the valley. A quick peek through his big 20X-60X-80mm spotting scope told Lance everything he needed to know. "One's legal, the other's close." Never mind that dusk was just two hours away. It was relentless pursuit time. But by the time we peeked over the boulders across from the rams' last known location they were gone. "Ten minutes," Todd Catterson explained when we reached camp at dark. "They walked over the top about 10 minutes before you got there."

We found their tracks the next morning after we trudged back up the mountain. They meandered over the top, went down the nearly sheer backside, past a glacier, through a saddle, across a scree slide, behind another mountain and into the next wide valley. A gunsight notch in the far rim of that valley 6 or 7 miles away, five rams rested on a black hump of rock. "There they are," Lance announced. "Maybe they'll come out to feed during the magic hour. We'll wait for them." This was our aggressive guide's concession to the physical limitations of his two "old" hunters. Wisely, he was letting us conserve strength while in position for spotting sheep and launching a stalk. Better to lounge all day on a peak than in a valley.

Six p.m., the magical activity hour, came and went, but no rams did. The Distant Five rams rose and began feeding. At 60X in our spotter, one appeared to be a full curl, another might have squeaked by, but all were safe behind that moat of distance.

That set the pattern and tone for the remainder of the hunt: Climb 1,500 to 2,000 feet, hike 4 to 8 miles and glass, glass, glass, every day, rain or shine. Relentlessly.

### Mutiny on the Mountain

"We need a ram. Preferably two," I said on our fourth, fifth and sixth day.

"Patience. They'll show," Lance kept promising. I didn't believe him. For one thing, he'd already guided clients to four rams in these very mountains in the preceding two weeks. How many legal sheep could the place hold? And into which obscure hidey-holes had they been driven? No other hunters were out stirring up things and the rut was still three months away, so why would the rams move?

"We're moving tomorrow," Lance announced. "One valley closer to those rams." We did, wind and rain lashing us as we side-hilled around the ridge, staying above the thickets until we were forced to plow through acres of willows that finally opened into cozy pockets near the head of the valley. Here we camped amid rolling drumlins and

winging harlequin ducks that foraged in the splashing creek. The Distant Five were now just 4 miles away beyond a high saddle and two glaciers. We went after them the next day, cautiously, circuitously, closing to within 700 yards before running out of cover in mid-afternoon. Lance and Todd watched and plotted. Scott and I napped. Finishing the stalk unseen required climbing thousands of feet and several miles. It would take another day. Lance opted to cross the open valley far below. "Sometimes they feel secure up there and just watch you walk by." And sometimes they spook and run.

I don't know who—Scott or Lance—was more dejected as we watched seven rams file over the highest peak. Six days of work blown in an instant. We'd hiked and glassed dozens of square miles of habitat and seen but two legal rams. Two more days of hunting and it would be over. It appeared hopeless.

"I don't think I have enough reserves left to chase after them anymore," said Scott. But this must have been his disappointment talking because he was setting a brisk pace back up the glacier to camp. In truth, after the third day we both had begun gaining endurance. Nevertheless, 50-year-old joints and muscles require recovery time. After that 10-mile hike and failed stalk, we vowed mutiny. If Lance wanted to climb yet another mountain, fine, but he would do it without us. Relentless pursuit is a great theory, but it's nearly impossible to sustain. No, it was time for a couple of geezers to loll about camp, drink cocoa and try to regain strength. Better to conserve energy for a final push on the last day than to waste it searching for the Holy Grail on the second-to-last.

True to his word, Lance arose in the dark and hiked up the mountain yet again. We were just stirring when Todd injected us with an unwelcomed dose of adrenaline. "He's signaling he's seen rams," the former basketball star said as he studied his energetic former teammate through the spotting scope. "He wants us up there. Now!" We groaned but saddled up and climbed, arriving in time to get our just desserts.

"You just missed them," Lance said. "Three rams were bedded on that ridge below until a ewe and lamb walked by. They chased her around the mountain. Maybe they'll come back." They didn't, but we located three more rams across the valley on a spur of the mountain where our seven had fled over the previous day. One's horns looked especially long and heavy. Another might have been legal. One of the three that ran after the ewe had definitely been legal. The question was, did we have enough drive left in us?

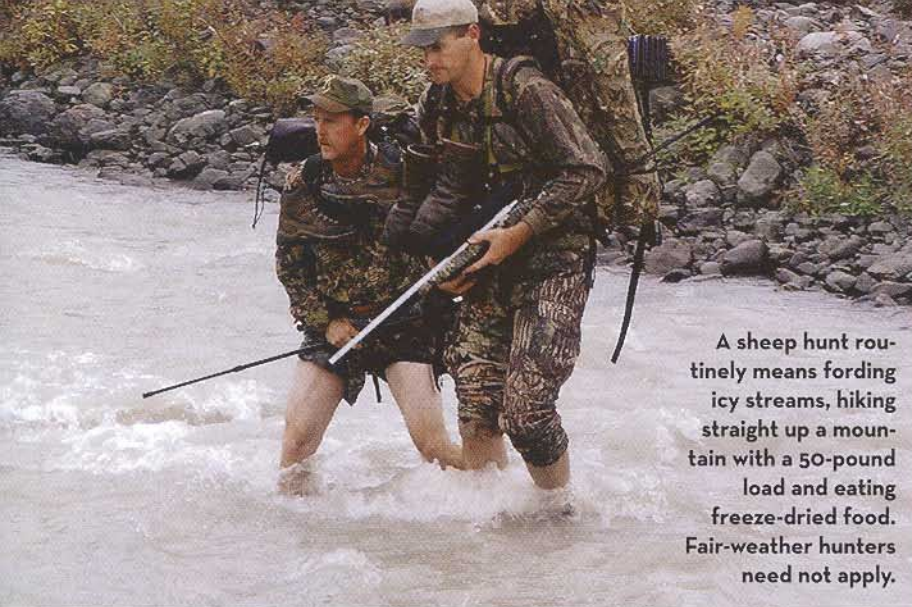
# I trailed Todd's slipstream, pushing until my lungs ached and calves screamed.



Photos By Author

**LEGAL TENDER:** Rams must show at least one full curl or be at least 8 years old as determined by annual horn rings and segments. That's a tall order when they regularly "broom off" horns so they can see. Savvy guides count ring segments with top-notch optics to make an accurate assessment.





A sheep hunt routinely means fording icy streams, hiking straight up a mountain with a 50-pound load and eating freeze-dried food. Fair-weather hunters need not apply.

"We could climb down, cross that valley and try for that far ram. We'd have to stay overnight whether we get him or not."

"What about slipping around the mountain where the three ran? They could be just around the corner."

"Yeah, but we'd have to drop clear down to the glacier and climb back up. This ridge breaks off in cliffs. I checked it while you guys were napping. I still think they might come back." By sunset they hadn't, so Scott, Todd and I started back to camp, riding scree and snow slides down the steep slope that had nearly killed us going up. We'd just reached the valley floor when Lance waved again. Todd focused him in the scope. "He says the three rams are back. Can you make it back up there?" Scott and I looked at one another. Neither saw encouragement. "I thought I was having a heart attack going up this morning," I confessed. "It'll be too dark to shoot by the time I get there now. If I get there at all." We waved bye-bye to Lance and continued into camp.

### Digging for More

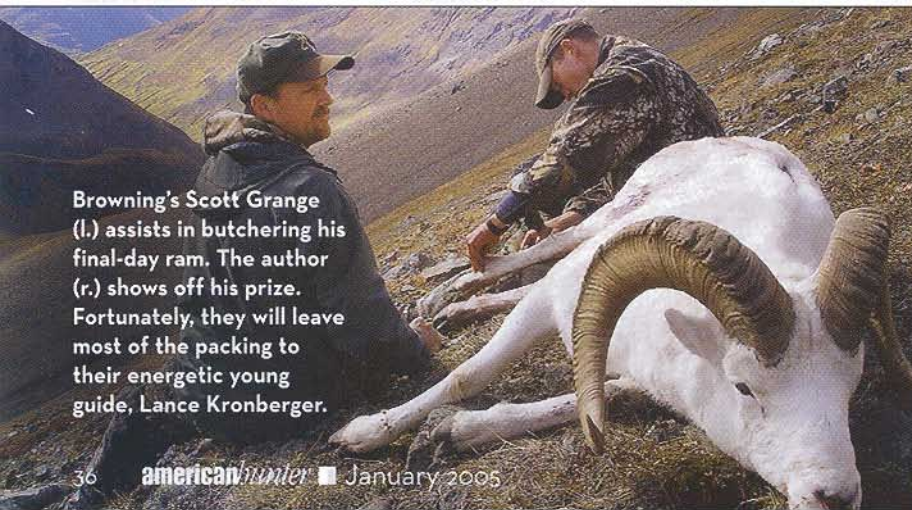
Day eight. Last chance. Lance wanted to start early and get up high while the sheep were still feeding. We rose and ate in the dark. "You go ahead. We'll come along as best we can." Where that boy got his strength I'll never know. Ridges we climbed in two hours he ascended in one. The sun hadn't yet risen when he appeared on the horizon, doing the ram wave yet again. We looked where he was pointing and spotted three sheep foraging over the ridge. The largest wasn't quite full curl, yet Lance continued gesticulating wildly. He wanted us up there.

We suddenly found that energy reserve we thought we didn't have. I trailed Todd's slipstream, pushing until my lungs ached and calves screamed. Twenty yards behind me Scott, still recovering from life-saving surgery the year before that had left him skeletal and pale, sucked air and pushed just as hard. The mountain loomed, oblivious to our pain. Gravity pulled relentlessly. Todd crouched and waited near the top. We caught up, then caught a

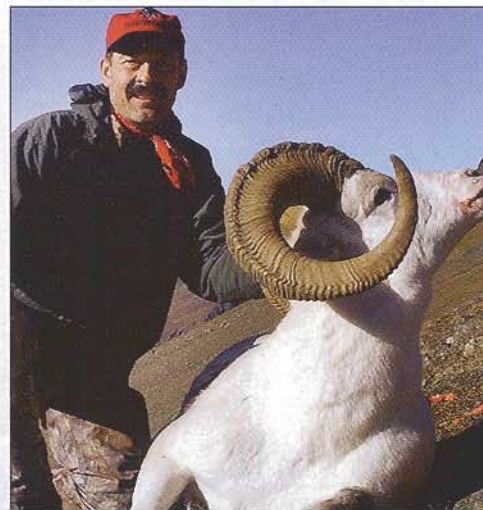
snatch of breath before easing over for a look and saw rocks, patches of tundra, the distant saddle, but no sheep. Were we again too late? We slipped right to get a clear view into a dip in the upper valley. From his periscope perspective (6½ feet above the ground) Todd saw the rams. There! He crouched and pointed. We scrambled higher. Two sheep were foraging, heads down, toward the saddle. Too far to shoot, but the broken flank of the slope offered stalking cover. We dropped our packs and crabbed toward the first low wall of tundra, reached it and aimed for another, losing altitude but gaining on our quarry. One more outcrop ahead. Wait until both sheep are feeding away, then duck-walk across the open, drop into the hole and race up to the rocks. There wait, catch our breath, chamber a round and crank the scopes to 10X. Ready? We bellied to the rocks only to find both rams running right to left, cutting the distance to us. "Take the leader," I said. "Wait till they stop. I'll shoot after you do." I was counting on the sheep's notorious habit of standing in bewilderment after a shot.

"How far?"

"Damn far, but the uphill angle is working in our favor. I'm thinking a hold right on the backline." We were both prone, elbows anchored in tundra. I whistled. My crosshair settled over the ram's shoulder when it stopped. Scott's .270 WSM exploded and my .243 WSSM cracked a split second later. Both rams bolted. We each fired again. My ram flinched and turned uphill, running straight away. I held between his horns and launched my third 100-grain slug. He flinched again, turned broadside and stopped. I dug for more cartridges and saw the other ram still running. Scott, too, was reaching for a fourth shell. "I think mine's hit," I said. "Just standing there.



Browning's Scott Grange (l.) assists in butchering his final-day ram. The author (r.) shows off his prize. Fortunately, they will leave most of the packing to their energetic young guide, Lance Kronberger.



I'll call your shot for you." While Scott chambered a round, his ram stopped. At the shot rocks shattered over its back. "High."


"Okay. Now I know ..." Hair erupted at Scott's fifth shot. The ram trotted a few yards and fell over. Scott didn't pause to celebrate. "Okay, now I'll spot for you," he said. My ram was still standing. I held over its shoulder and fired. "High." I lowered my aim and sent my fifth bullet flying. The ram collapsed.

### Basking in the Glow

I'm not given to blatant expressions of celebration after taking game; my joy is tempered by respect for the animal that has just given its life to sustain mine. Not this time. We'd worked too hard, endured too much; respect and reflection would come later. Now we whooped, high-fived, and slapped backs. Yes, yes, yes. We'd done it! On the last day. Two beyond-prime-time players had persevered to take what is a young man's quarry. We'd defeated gravity, outlasted our own pessimism and taken two of the finest trophies in all the world: white rams, symbols of all that is wild and free in us.

Thereafter followed one of those rare days in a hunter's life when he has time to bask. The sun reached our sheep just as we did and stayed with us all day, warming us as we photographed, skinned, butchered and packed. Well, Lance and Todd did the bulk of it. Scott and I assisted here and there, but mostly leaned back and absorbed our good fortune. Turned out we'd each hit our rams three times, our first shots right in the boiler room—the bullets hadn't opened much at the extreme range.

As we worked, three ravens swooped and fell to squabbling over offal. Golden eagles soared patiently overhead. Gray-crowned rosy finches fluttered in and hunted among the rocks, jumping up to strip seeds from a tuft of grass. Life was good.

Despite the additional workload, Lance was obviously pleased. He's been guiding sheep hunters for a decade from Alaska to Mexico, and Scott and I were his 40<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> clients and we'd just bagged his 39<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> rams. That is phenomenal success, a testament to the man's energy, drive and extensive knowledge of sheep and sheep hunting. That night we celebrated his success and ours with slab after slab of tender ram chops, a fitting reward hard-earned. 



### GO LIGHT OR STAY HOME

**A** backpack hunt in wilderness mountains is no place to skimp on gear. Your success and your life depend on the tools you carry, and the less you carry the farther and longer you can hunt. I packed a Browning A-Bolt Composite Stalker ([www.browning.com](http://www.browning.com)) with matte-blued metal and synthetic stock chambered for the new .243 Winchester Super Short Magnum. The rifle weighed just 6 pounds, 4 ounces. With Talley rings and bases ([www.talleyrings.com](http://www.talleyrings.com)) and a Bushnell Elite 3200 3X-9X scope, ([www.bushnell.com](http://www.bushnell.com)) add another 17 ounces. A bonus with this scope is its Rainguard lens coating that resists external fogging. It worked as advertised. Of course, I didn't have to worry about the rifle's synthetic stock swelling to change point of impact. The blued metal did rust quickly in the rain, but cleaned up nearly perfectly with a bit of oil back home. Still, I'd go with stainless metalwork next time. Scott's A-Bolt was stainless and worry-free.

The .243 WSSM cartridge is similar to the .243 Win. in performance but is shorter in length. Having taken five sheep in the past with the .30-06, .284 Win. and .280 Ackley Improved, I believed a tight-grouping .243 would be more than adequate, and it was. My sheep, struck through both shoulders with my first shot, reacted no differently than did Scott's hit just behind both shoulders with his .270 WSM and a 140-grain bullet. In fact, it appeared my 100-grain Winchester Power Point bullet expanded slightly more than did Scott's Fail Safe ([www.winchester.com](http://www.winchester.com)). Another advantage to the .243 WSSM is less rifle weight. The bolt from my rifle weighed 2 ounces less than that of a standard-length A-Bolt. Subtract

another 2 ounces from the action, 2 from the shorter magazine, follower and stock, and you're shaving nearly a half-pound from the rifle. When you're climbing day after day, a half-pound means something.

Since I knew my guide would be using a top-quality spotting scope, I packed a compact, 15-ounce Bushnell Legend binocular, more than adequate for spotting white sheep and differentiating ewes from rams.

I carried everything in a proven Kifaru LongHunter backpack ([www.kifaru.net](http://www.kifaru.net)) with a unique rifle carrier on the belt and shoulder straps. This held the rifle at ready, yet allowed me to use both hands for climbing. A Stoney Point PoleCat telescoping hiking staff ([www.stoney-point.com](http://www.stoney-point.com)) contributed stability when climbing and wading, supported my binocular while glassing and held my camera for steady pictures. I even used it to prop up a tent fly. It's like having a third leg. I won't hunt mountains without it.

Even clothing weight becomes an issue on a backpack hunt. Moisture is a promise in Alaska. The smart hunter wears hydrophobic clothing, mostly polyester. Wool is too heavy and slow to dry. What I wore:

Browning Pac Pant and Pac Jac (superlight microfleece with Gore-Tex lining); fleece vest; fleece gloves; a Genesis fleece balaclava; and baseball cap. ([www.browning.com](http://www.browning.com))

Cabela's berber fleece jacket; PowerStretch Fleece pants—the warmest, most comfortable long-underwear I've ever worn; and Perfekt Hunter boots by Meindl, with 400 grams of Thinsulate and Gore-Tex bootie. ([www.cabelas.com](http://www.cabelas.com))

Thorlo Mountain Climbing socks of wool/acrylic over light Thorlo CoolMax liners. ([www.thorlo.com](http://www.thorlo.com))—R.S.

**Contact** If you're dedicated, tough enough and want to hunt sheep with a young master, contact Lance Kronberger at 208-631-4611 or [freelanceoa@hotmail.com](mailto:freelanceoa@hotmail.com). Check out his website at [www.freelanceoutdooradventures.com](http://www.freelanceoutdooradventures.com).