

FROZEN TEXAS—A HUNT FOR ALOUDAD

He has a gigantic problem! A devilish cold snap engulfed West Texas as it had not done in living history. William Baize, manager of Barrel Springs Ranch, near Fort Davis, has 1000 head of cattle to ensure have water. With 50 square miles of ranch and 70 miles of water lines that presently are frozen and in numerous places had burst, his problems intensified. The sudden onslaught of freezing cold weather has William and his brother Jonathan on the run. There is another problem! Me. In the midst of their dilemma I have come to hunt Aoudad in the Davis Mountains that run directly through the ranch property. William is scheduled to be my guide.

Forgive me! I have gotten ahead of myself.

Blue sheep (*Pseudois nayaur szechuanensis*) in China had been my goal. Having scouted the hunting scene regarding the success of hunters in China and phoning a Canadian who had successfully hunted this species, I soon committed myself to a sizable deposit and awaited the invitation letter from the Chinese government to hunt there. The welcome letter arrived in July of 2006. I was to hunt with two other hunters and our names were included on the invitation letter. Before we could get our visa applications filled out, that dreadful announcement came. China had closed hunting. Speculation circled that the closure would be short lived.

For a few years, hope that it would indeed reopen kept my dreams alive. Early in 2010, indications surfaced that environmental groups, hunting interests and the Chinese government were to have meetings pertinent to the opening of hunting. That was a signal to me, that hunting in China was not about to happen any time soon. Having part of the deposit forwarded to China, the other portion kept in the U.S.A., my wife was not optimistic that I would ever see my deposit from China again. Fortunately, the agent in the U.S. was able to return my full deposit. His actions need to be applauded. My wife stood in disbelief when my deposit cheque was received.

Any hunter knows instinctively that monies set aside for hunting purposes cannot be channeled anywhere but hunting. Don't they?

Sheep hunters are a special breed. Beckoning mountain heights seem to mysteriously draw us to their lofty perches amidst innumerable clouds. We enjoy nature's punishment on our bodies. Dare us to climb just one more peak, perchance that trophy ram is lurking there. It's an inborn thing even we cannot fully describe, nor fully understand. We are bears for punishment. Yes, some even call us crazy!

Not having hunted in the United States, my desire to hunt Aoudad (*Ammotragus lervia*) began rising to the surface of my list of to do's. Why Aoudad? As a missionary to several countries in Africa and enjoying the privilege offered me to go on numerous safaris, it was the Africa that still lingers in my soul. Twenty years on the continent does something that keeps that love alive. Aoudad sheep are native to North Africa and the Tunisian name "udad" has been anglicized into its present form. Since retiring, going back to

Africa would be expensive, plus the fact that I don't believe Aoudad hunting in Africa, in their wild state, is any longer allowed. That is when my eyes and heart turned to Texas. Yes, my deposit money would be targeting a Texas Aoudad. Not a fenced sheep either, it must be free roaming before I would consider the hunt.

Many hunting guides and outfitters in Texas offer Aoudad. A great number of hunting ranches offer what I would consider canned hunts under high fences. I was to stay clear of those types of hunts. To me, the choosing of a reputable outfitter (guide) is crucial in experiencing an enjoyable hunt. Although we like to shoot our trophy game, the experience, even if we don't get our animal, is of utmost importance. As I scoured the internet, viewing dozens of websites and reading their promotional material, one web-page caught my attention immediately. Jim and Melony Roche of Magnum Guide Service had taken a mission's trip to Uganda. With my mission's background, my interest in their experience kindled the fire. After several emails and a long telephone conversation, the embryonic beginnings of my hunt began. Texas or bust!

Before arriving at the ranch, my wife, Bernice, and I journeyed to the majestic Big Bend National Park to take in the natural beauty of the Sierra del Carmen Mountains and the steep cliffs of the Rio Grande. As one observes these wonders of nature, one must conclude that there is a Master Planner, the Divine Designer, with a most intense and remarkable creative imagination. It's too astounding to just be an accident of evolution. What drove us away from this place of enchantment were temperatures hovering around -8 C with gale force winds that rocked our little RV throughout the night. Stupefied to see cacti covered in snow we drove toward the ranch as temperatures dropped to a staggering -18 C. West Texas was in a deep freeze!

Hunkered down behind the ranch's dune-buggy, slightly out of the whistling wind, I sighted in Jim's 7 mm that he had lent me. His action saved me many a hassle at the Canadian-American border. The sensitive trigger differed from my 270 Weatherby, but I felt semi-confident.

First morning of my hunt we find ourselves wakened to a blustery, miserable day. William informs me that ordinarily, we would use the dune-buggy to traverse the rocky surface of the ranch trails in search of a band of Aoudad. Today would be different. Using the buggy would ensure that we would turn into frozen Sasquatches before circumventing even the first set of hills. Armed with balaclava, fur hat, gloves, layers of sweaters and warm camo jacket we set forth in an ancient pickup to bounce our way over hundreds of jagged rocks that were determined to tear the transmission and undercarriage from the truck frame. Our ride can only be described as bone crushing.

Honey hued grasses sway to and fro in a constant wind. Skeletal clumps of dried bushes dot the landscape. Circling around another set of hills we stop and raise our binoculars to scan for any sign of life. Numerous stops and diligent searching brings no results. Waving grasses, millions of jagged rocks, but no Aoudad!

Constantly we edge forward, stopping periodically to glass each barren mountainside, both near and far. Finally, at a distance of about half a mile, William informs me that he has spotted a significant group of Aoudad resting in two bunches just below the upper ledge of the distant ridge. Most animals are resting, but the odd one rises, turns, paws its bed and returns to rest. A few sheep graze, while those lying stare at the vehicle, but do nothing to escape. We remain patient and continue to glass the wildlife. Within a 30 minute time frame, the largest group gets up slowly and proceeds over the top of the ridge leaving a half dozen still resting. Another 15 minutes pass before the remaining group saunter over the ridge and out of sight.

Now was our chance to close the distance. Driving a few hundred yards, we abandon the vehicle and begin our climb in search of our quarry. Without breaking a sweat, our climb through the rocks and cacti is not particularly taxing. Ever so carefully, William reaches the top and waits until I close in behind him before peering over the ridge. At a range of about 100 yard, William states that he sees six ewes, but from my vantage point, I can only see two. Blistering wind keeps our eyes teared as we strain to try and find a ram. After several minutes of eye strain we decide to back off and proceed further along the ridge to hopefully pick up the main group.

Wind becomes our friend as it blows steadily into our faces. Realizing that fact, we presume that if the Aoudad are close, they will not hear our approach. Slithering along the ridge to our right we move our advantage point a hundred yards or so. With trepidation, our belly crawl takes us to the crest. Cautiously peering over we catch sight of the band down below us at 250 yards.

Twenty to thirty Aoudad intermingle; some jostle. Others drop their heads to feed on the yellow dried grasses. We have the advantage. We are above them and they are totally unaware of our presence. Both guide and hunter peer through their binoculars trying desperately to spot the largest ram. Since all Aoudad support headgear, it is difficult to sort out the moving creatures. William informs me the location of the largest ram and then before I can locate it, he moves behind another animal.

Taking the safety off the 7mm, I focus my attention through the rifle scope. "How do you feel, are you confident?" William asks. Attempting to find the wandering ram is not an easy task and I reply, "Not really."

With no warning, in a nanosecond, the band of sheep bunch up tightly with every attentive head facing up the valley, to the left. Not one moves a muscle. Their gaze is intense. All eyes and ears pointing in the same direction, each of the Aoudad stand mesmerized. With the sheep packed into a solid mass, no shot opportunity is available. We watch in amazement. For over fifteen minutes, a head, a leg, a tail, seemingly not a hair moves. They reminded me of a group of muskoxen defending themselves against hungry prey in the frozen arctic. Today, even in Texas, it felt like the arctic.

From further down the valley, a few of the ranch's cattle wander passed the sheep in the direction of the Aoudad's stare. Once the cattle pass and only then did the sheep begin to

relax. A few heads lower to the ground. The majority still focus their attention in the direction of the mysterious intruders. As hunters, we never did discover the source of the Aoudad's inquisitiveness.

I believe a silent prayer moved toward heaven requesting that the sheep not move further away from our observatory. As if directed by the Lord above, the leading matriarch begins her upward trek toward the crest. Each member of the herd falls into line. Following the ewe's cue, they file singly toward our position. Moving 45 degrees towards our position, they close the distance from 250 yards to within 150 yards. William's task now is to ensure that I have the correct ram in my scope. Whispering the numbers, the animal fifth from the lead ewe, is identified as the shooter. This opportunity is enchanting. The group looks like the proverbial lineup behind the piper.

Light tan of the Aoudad's body fills my rifle's scope. Instinctively the kill zone is identified. By this time, trigger pressure is at the max. Instantaneously, the rifle's retort along with the thwack of the bullet tearing through flesh brings the herd's upward movement to a momentary halt. My target-ram crumples without taking a single step. Within a couple of seconds, the herd bunches and rapidly distances itself from the blast source. "He's down!" are the welcome words from William's mouth. I'm astounded at our fortune. I give thanks for our remarkable success.

Such success is required, by hunter's law, to be recorded for posterity. The miserable wind and severe cold is temporarily forgotten and my camera's shuttle begins to record our feat. Seeing that the mountains are not excessively high, although rocky and rugged, William thinks he can retrieve the old pickup and maneuver around the mountain, gaining enough elevation to reach the location of the downed animal.

As my guide disappears over the crest of the mountain, I reflect on what has just taken place. I shoot another few photos of the Aoudad and the surrounding environment. With the brisk wind whistling in my ears, I sit down, head in my hands and ponder the moment. Already, I imagine the life sized mount, complete in my trophy room. As a taxidermist, I had already exercised my faith that I would have a successful Texas hunt. On our way to Texas from Kelowna in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, Canada, we made an out of the way journey to Lebanon, Oregon to purchase a life sized Aoudad form from Research Manikins.

Examining the trophy, I noted the beautiful skin, free of any blemishes, save an entry and exit wound on its neck. There was a graceful sweeping circular curve to its horns. In my mind, it was majestic. Long flowing chaps and central draping chest hairs graced its well built, angular body.

After some time, the hum of the little pickup bumping over uncountable rocks, enter my hearing. Grunts and heaves soon see the entire Aoudad loaded unto the rickety vehicle. William's sharp eyesight notes a Javelina, trotting away from the frozen cattle trough, perhaps 300 yards lower on the valley floor. Its progression seems to be in line with an opportunity to secure another trophy animal. As it approached a similar distance from

which I had shot the Aoudad, my kneeling position gave enough stability to attempt the shot. Slightly before I anticipated squeezing off the shot, the unfamiliar rifle trigger fully engaged. Instantly, at the blast, the animal's forward motion ceased. It dropped, dead in its tracks. Another photo session follows as I examine the unusual pelage of the Javelina. Its hair is coarse, rough, and almost porcupine quill-like in sharpness. To say the least, its coat was unique. A whitish collar surrounding its neck must have led the South Americans to give it the name Collared peccary (*Pecari tajacu*). Unlike the Aoudad, which is not indigenous, the Javelina or Peccary is an indigenous species in Texas and throughout Central as well as South America. South America supports a population of White-lipped peccary (*Tayassu pecari*) as well.

Later that same afternoon, while I was completing the skinning of the Aoudad, the muffled roar of a small aircraft buzzed overhead. William, also a pilot, was checking on the cattle and the frozen water troughs spread sporadically across the property in the ranch's Zenair 701, manufactured by Zenith Aircraft Company. He tipped his wing and disappeared over the nearest mountain ridge. It seemed to me a fitting gesture to conclude a chilly day and a wonderfully successful Texas hunt.

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