

To Afghanistan for the markhor

Sports Afield, May 2003 by [Mellan, James](#)

A harrowing high-country hunt for the world's most magnificent wild goat

The markhor is the largest and most difficult to hunt of the world's wild goats. He is also the most magnificent. An old male may carry horns more than 40 inches long, and 50-inchers have been recorded. Even small trophies can be impressive, thanks to the markhor's violently spiraled horns, his long, distinguished-looking black beard, and his shaggy, manelike coat, which in old age often becomes silver-gray.

A mature male may weigh more than two hundred pounds, yet he negotiates with ease the most precipitous cliff faces and spends much of his life on ledges and catwalks only a foot or two wide. His range, however, has never been extensive. Today, as in former times, the mark-- hor occurs only in central Asia, where the high Karakoram, Hindu Kush, and Pit Panjal ranges come together and are cleft by the Indus River system. It was on the western limits of this mountain vastness--in the Nuristan region of Afghanistan--that my markhor hunt unfolded.

Representatives from the official Afghan hunting organization that was to outfit my expedition were waiting for me at the airport in Kabul when I arrived there on New Year's Day. One familiar face was that of Sifat Mir, who had been my headman and interpreter on the two sheep hunts and would now accompany me after markhor. Short and strongly built, Mir was perhaps thirty years old, with close-cropped hair that looked comical on an Afghan. His face, while alive with good humor and a hint of mischief, combined in its bold features both the Indo-European and Mongolian characteristics of his people.

With Mir leading, I picked my way along the snow-- banked, slushy streets of Kabul, passing herds of goats and fat-tailed sheep as I completed my last-minute purchases. In the mud-wattled shops and tiny sales booths--some of them no bigger than a coffin standing on end--everything from penicillin to harem accessories could be had from the turbaned, Pashtu-speaking vendors.

We left Kabul the following morning. Mir, two camp servants, a cook, two drivers, and I were crammed into a couple of Land Rovers, along with all our gear and enough provisions to last us a month. The half-day journey

eastward to Jalalabad took us through bare, desiccated hills, grassy in places and boulder-strewn elsewhere. Bleak and colorless in the best of times, Afghanistan becomes the perfection of desolation at midwinter, when the ground underfoot is slush by day and frozen hard by night.

As we headed north from Jalalabad, the ash-colored hills grew higher and became spotted with dwarf evergreens.

Soon the snow-clad mountains of Nuristan were rising around us. The track wound its way up a steep valley drained by a swift glacial stream that piled its white water against huge boulders dislodged from the mountainsides. We left the cars and balanced across the frothing torrent on two parallel poles, each held in place at either end by an Afghan. Our gear was then shunted over by the men and carried up a steep footpath to the village of Sodu, which would be our base.

Sodu was the home of several Pathan families that lived in mud-walled huts with rough-hewn wood beams and bare earthen floors. The village seemed to cling, in typical fashion, to the steep mountainside, which at that point sloped from 6,000 feet abruptly up to 13,000. Snow was piled high on the peaks and blanketed the ground down to about 9,000 feet. At lower levels, it lay in patches among the stunted evergreens and was heaped up on the ledges. Only the 1,500 feet directly above the village were totally clear of snow. We had counted on these conditions, for only snow can drive the markhor down from the highest peaks.

Habib, the village headman, placed a hut at my disposal and kindled a fire inside. That evening, as the village gradually disappeared under a snowstorm, Mir called the elders of Sodu to a council in my hut. Huddled in a semicircle before the fire, they looked like Old Testament prophets-patriarchs with their full gray beards, stern, weather-beaten faces, and loose-hanging garments.

"We have come here to hunt for the oldest, largest male markhor in this valley," began Mir, standing before the elders. "One like this," he added, gesturing with his hands to indicate a horn length of about 40 inches.

"How long do you intend to stay here? One month? Two months?" asked Habib, obviously amused by our demand.

"Certainly not," Mir retorted irritably. "Ten days at the most. If we can't find anything in that time, we'll go somewhere else."

The old men chuckled and shook their heads.

"The trouble is," said Habib at last, "there are only one or two markhor of that size in the valley, and we don't see them very often."

The Hunt Begins

I awoke the next morning to the sound of water dripping from the melting snow on my roof. The sky was a deep, flawless blue, and the warm sun glistened brilliantly on the wet boulders. Mir, Habib, and I scrambled for an hour up a steep trail above the village. We headed into a region of truly horrendous cliffs and chasms, where all things seemed to conspire to give me vertigo. This was to be our hunting area.

All through that first day, the three of us vied for the honor of spotting the first shootable markhor. Many were the hours we wiled away, leaning against one boulder or another as we scanned the intricate network of ledges on those towering gray cliffs, which simply dropped off into nothing. Or we squinted through 30-power spotting scopes at some suspicious-looking speck perhaps a mile away. Many were the times when, by wishful thinking, we convinced ourselves that some distant object—normally just a rock—had spiraled horns. The few markhor we saw were females, youngsters, and small billies—nothing that would give a healthy itch to the trigger finger. Even so, it was a thrill to watch these markhor—to see the devastating ease with which they trotted along the narrow catwalks on those precipices that still give me a cold shock when I think about them.

Then, on the third day, while I was being terribly brave-glassing with my legs dangling over a cliff—the scuffle of hurried footsteps behind me announced Habib's approach. He had scrambled down from his vantage point much higher on the mountain and now leaned over my shoulder, jabbering in Pashtu and pointing frantically up the mountainside. It was one of those times when I didn't need an interpreter.

I swept up my rifle and fetched Mir, who had fallen asleep at his spotting scope. The three of us then rushed off at a trot, Habib leading the way. With only an hour of daylight left, there wasn't a minute to lose. We hurried along a frozen footpath that snaked its way up a steep ravine, weaving in and out among the boulders. Beside us was a swift stream, which thundered deafeningly, swollen by the day's melted snow.

Habib veered sharply to the right, left the footpath, and began scaling a very steep slope. He climbed about three feet with every step, as though he were still on level ground. Fifteen minutes of these Olympics reduced me to a gasping, aching wreck and even caused Mir some discomfort. Still Habib pressed on, not even panting, stopping only to marvel at my shortness of breath and assuring me repeatedly, "We are almost there."

Above us, a wall of cliffs was now looming up over the evergreens. From behind a boulder farther up the slope, Habib, who had forged ahead, was now gesturing frantically for us to climb up to him. By a truly adrenal effort, I struggled up those last fifty yards, then abruptly keeled over behind the boulder, clutching my chest as if shot through the heart.

"Get up! Get up!" hissed Mir in a desperate whisper. "There's a big markhor on the cliffs! Shoot him before he goes! Hurry!"

Somehow I heaved myself to my feet, rested my rifle-- a Winchester Model 70 in .300 Winchester Magnum-- on the side of the boulder, and began scanning the darkening cliffs above us through my 8-power scope sight. Though it was dusk, I could see the herd plainly enough--10 markhor lined up on a sloping ledge and cautiously picking their way along it. The sight of the old male when I suddenly spotted him made my heart take a flying leap and go mad. He was enormous, with massive, widely spiraled horns, a full beard, and a regal, studied manner of walking that placed him among all wild goats in a class by himself. This was the animal I had come around the world to shoot.

Though shaking with excitement and still breathing heavily from the climb, I wanted to shoot at once. However, with the light almost gone and with stunted pine trees obscuring all the ground between me and the base of the cliffs, I couldn't even begin to estimate the range. Whether to aim straight at the animal, or to hold on the line of his back, or to aim above him depended on whether he was 200, 300, or 400 yards away. And with the steep uphill angle thrown in to confuse me even more, I could only guess at the distance.

At last I squeezed off a shot while holding slightly above the animal. My bullet struck precisely where I had aimed it. In the gathering darkness, I could even see an orange spark jump on the cliff just over the billy's back. As the protracted thunder of my rifle rumbled menacingly from peak to peak and echoed in the deep abysses, the 10 markhor clattered away across the cliff face, hopping from ledge to ledge like acrobats, until they disappeared around the corner of the mountain. We straggled back to the village after

around the corner of the mountain. We straggled back to the village after dark, bone-weary and dispirited, looking and feeling like the victims of some terminal disease.

Imagine my surprise when, on the following morning, opportunity knocked again. We had just climbed up to the same vantage point overlooking a semicircle of precipices, which together looked like a deep gouge bitten out of the mountainside. Within five minutes of setting up my telescope, I spotted the same 10 markhor we had seen the evening before. Sure enough, the big billy I had missed was among them. Now we would have another chance at him. My relief surpassed even my excitement. I felt like a man relieved from the firing squad.

And so we embarked on another stalk, nursing our plots and schemes and high hopes like the three musketeers. Once again, Mir and I found ourselves racing each other up a 45-degree slope in a desperate scramble to keep up with our tormentor, the inexhaustible Habib. This time, however, there was no trail, and the mountainside eventually became so steep that we had to pull ourselves up it by hand, catching hold of saplings and small bushes that sometimes tore out by the roots. After climbing 1,500 feet in this fashion, we veered off to the left and followed Habib along the top of the very cliff face across which the markhor had been picking their way the previous evening. To my great anger, I now saw that the range had been only two hundred yards. I had misjudged it as being twice that far.

We presently came to a slit chasm, maybe three hundred feet deep. Looking across it, I could see the 10 mark-- hot browsing lazily among the stunted pines on the far edge of the chasm.

At a glance, I could see no excuse for missing. The light was excellent. I wasn't trembling from exhaustion or panting for breath. There was no wind at all. The angle of the shot would be dead level. My rifle was solidly rested up, with a rolled-up coat under the forearm and another under the stock.

Seen through my rifle scope, the old billy was quite a sight as he nibbled on various bushes, his long, magnificently spiraled horns laid back with the tips extending almost to his hindquarters. I'll always remember him in that pose. It was the postcard picture of a markhor.

But how far away was he? Once again, this was the imponderable. Between the markhor and me lay only a wide, deep chasm. There was absolutely

nothing between us but air—certainly not a jot of intervening terrain, which might have given me some impression of the range.

My only clue was the body size of the animal. Judging from this, I decided he was slightly over three hundred yards away. But once again the markhor was actually much nearer. Just as before, I over-corrected for range, this time holding on the line of his back. My bullet blew a puff of hair off the top of the old billy's withers and sent him flying. We last saw him climbing one cliff face after another as he led his little band to safety in some of the most rugged, formidable terrain imaginable. Once again, we found ourselves plodding back to the village in the crushed, dazed, suicidal trance that every hunter knows and must learn to cope with.

And indeed, we had little to console us after this second debacle. Opportunity had knocked twice. Surely we couldn't expect a third chance. Yet we kept hunting.

Last Chance

The tenth day dawned with clear skies and cold, bracing air. Sheets of ice had formed around the rocks and boulders in the stream below Sodu. The sun shone brilliantly on a new snowfall, and strong winds blew streamers of snow from the great peaks.

We decided to try our luck somewhere else that morning. From Sodu, Habib led Mir and me up a shepherds' footpath, which ascended a steep ravine banked on both sides by sheer precipices hundreds of feet high. Beside us, a churning stream swollen by melting snow thundered over one waterfall after another. We crossed and recrossed it, sometimes balancing on single logs that had been placed like bridges between the rocks.

Farther on, the ravine widened out so that we could glass the cliffs about us on either side. It was here that Habib and I spotted the same 10 markhor we had seen before and the same big billy I had shot at. I saw them immediately with my naked eye. The old boss of the herd stood on a single shelving ledge surrounded by his retinue of females. They were facing in every direction as they nibbled on bushes, obviously unaware of us.

We immediately dove into a snowdrift to get out of sight. Sitting half submerged, we kept watch on the mark- - hot, studied the terrain, and compared various stalk routes. After a delicious session of plotting and

scheming, conducted as always in suspenseful whispers, we agreed on a plan.

While Habib stayed behind and watched the markhor, Mir and I retreated very cautiously back down the footpath until the curvature of the mountainside hid us from every member of the herd. We then skipped over the stream, hopping from stone to stone, and sprinted across to the other side of the ravine, where a steep slope led up to the base of the precipices. Directly below the markhor, we soon found ourselves slipping and scrambling on an incline so precipitous that we could climb it only by getting handholds on rocks and bushes. The sparse ground cover, interspersed with a few stunted pines, was just barely sufficient to hide us from the markhor and them from us.

After climbing for a half-hour in this manner, Mir and I were pooped and still only halfway up the slope. The sun had disappeared in a leaden sky heavy with forebodings of snow, and a cold wind was now blowing down from the peaks. I paid a high price for having left my gloves in camp. My fingers, wet from the melting snow, became so numb with cold that I could barely move them. Worse yet, we hardly appeared to be making any headway.

I said to myself several times, while shaking with exhaustion and nerves, that I simply couldn't go on--not for another step. But every time I conceded defeat, a terrible fury welled up in me. Instantly I would hurl myself up the slope, clutching at rocks and tree trunks like a madman, sometimes tearing bushes out by the roots, though my fingers couldn't even feel what they were grasping. The proof of my own physical weakness threw me into such a boiling rage that I saw white flashes in front of my eyes. And that rage was all that kept me going.

Suddenly Mir tugged at the back of my parka.

"Stop! Stop!" he hissed. "They see us."

Sure enough. After all the misery of this "horror-climb-- never-to-be forgotten," I had blown the stalk. In my soul-- destroying battle to keep climbing, I had failed to notice that Mir and I had arrived at the top of the slope. The great precipice now loomed directly above us, monolithic and impregnable like Gibraltar. The tops of the scattered pines could no longer hide us. Little wonder we had been spotted. The markhor, all thoroughly alarmed by now, had formed themselves into a line on their narrow ledge and were obviously about to rush off. The range was only two hundred yards.

Shoot now or never! I told myself But I couldn't shoot. My trigger finger was too frozen to do the job. As though acting out a farce, I found myself sucking at my index finger in a frantic effort to get enough life into it to pull the trigger. This silly delay changed the whole outcome of the hunt. The big markhor--the very one I had missed on two occasions and that had almost become my main reason for living-- suddenly decided that his curiosity about the two figures floundering on the slope below him had been satisfied. He clattered off across the cliff face, taking his harem with him.

Overcome by exhaustion and the added burden of complete failure, I simply collapsed on the frozen slope and lay there trying to wipe all thoughts from my mind. But just then, precisely in that moment of crushing disappointment, Mir's whole manner underwent a split-second transformation. With no warning at all, he suddenly went wild.

"Look there! Look! Shoot! Shoot!" he kept repeating, as if a demon had gotten into him.

High up on a shelf, quite near to the ledge from which the herd of ten had just taken flight for the ends of the earth, stood a markhor no one had seen. He was all gentleman--huge, ancient, and with magnificent horns that completed three full spirals. I couldn't believe it, but here was a trophy that surpassed the fine old billy I had missed.

No paralysis of the trigger finger could stop me this time. As though in a single movement, and in half the time required to tell it, I rested my rifle against the trunk of a sapling, put the cross hairs of my scope on the markhor's lungs, and fired the one and only shot that I have ever squeezed off with my middle finger.

The markhor spun around, lost his footing, fell backward off his ledge, and plunged down the cliffs in a shower of snow and pebbles. He hit the frozen ground in front of us with a thump. His carcass even rolled down into the pines where we were standing and came to rest almost at our feet. After withholding her favors for so long, Fortune had not only given us the trophy, but had virtually dumped it into our laps.

As though this stunning change of luck had not been enough, Mir suddenly tugged at my sleeve and pointed at a ledge way up the mountain where a snow leopard--still the only one I have ever seen--was bounding away, his long, thick tail flying after him. He had probably been stalking my markhor

and had bolted at the sound of my shot. Be that as it may, he escaped around a shoulder of the mountain before I could get my sights on him.

The loss of one trophy markhor, the shooting of another at the very next moment, then the spotting of my first and only snow leopard and his subsequent escape--all of this happening in five minutes--was about all my nerves could bear. But there was still more to come.

Right after shooting my billy, as I was hunting around for his left horn tip, which had broken off as he tumbled down the cliffs, a huge rock weighing at least three hundred pounds broke off from the mountainside directly above me and, after plummeting a long way without making a sound, slammed into the ground beside me like a cannonball. Had I been standing just two feet to the right, Mir and Habib would have ended up dragging my own carcass back to Sodu along with that of the markhor. Yet in a curious, inexplicable way, this narrow escape from death added to the euphoria of our victory. Somehow it sharpened and brightened my impressions of that incredible day to know that it had very nearly also been my last.

Far away across the valley, ape calls could be heard repeatedly--it was Habib halloing at us, making the very cliffs echo with his congratulations. We decided to take the markhor to Sodu before skinning him. This turned out to be surprisingly easy. The snow-covered mountainside was so steep and the markhor's fur so smooth that his carcass simply coasted downhill like a sled without our even having to touch it. Mir and I found that by just sitting down, we, too, could scoot down the mountainside, tobogganing on our fannies.

Long after dark, we returned to the village--to wash-- bowls and clean clothes, to hot tea and a good stiff brandy, and later a supper of shish kebab made from my own markhor. Outside the snow was falling once more, heaping up on the rooftops. A muffled coziness settled over the tiny outpost lost among the towering mountains of central Asia. I wondered if there was another place better qualified to be called the "happy hunting grounds."