

HUNTING THE BIG HORN

IN THE COLORADO DESERT.

By E. E. Bowles.



THE most wary and timid of all the big game animals of America is that branch of the Rocky Mountain sheep (or Big Horn) family having its habitat in

the mountains of that isolated and little-known territory designated on maps of the southwest as "The Desert of the Colorado;" a territory bounded on the east by the Colorado River, on the west by the Sierra Madre Mountains, on the north—well, by the southern line of Nevada, and on the south by the Mexican line; possibly 150 miles from east to west, and 250 from north to south.

As the coming of the white hunters, with their long-range guns, drove the Big Horns of the Rockies to the higher peaks, so the rush of the "boom" in southern California forced the sheep out into the fastnesses of the desert mountains, a literal *terra incognita*, save to prospectors and an occasional Indian. There they have remained comparatively undisturbed for years, increasing, until they are quite numerous, more plentiful than deer indeed, and as their present haunt is a waterless, treeless, barren waste of sand and rocks, there is no immediate prospect of their extinction. There are but few persons aware that in a day's ride from Los Angeles one can be in the heart of the mountain sheep country.

Some claim that the Big Horn of the Sierra Nevadas and the Rocky Mountains of the North are not so much larger than the wild sheep in the mountains of the southern desert, but as I have shot bucks, or rams, as you please, in the latter country having horns ranging from nineteen to twenty-three inches in circumference at the base, and from three to over four feet in length on the outer curve of the horn, it may be accepted as a fact that they are at least "big" enough to create an interest in their hunt and afford exciting chase.

Conceal their horns and they resemble nothing so much as an antelope, their dark gray coat of short hair shading to a light fawn, or almost white on the rump and belly. However, I believe they are heavier than an antelope; one big-buck that we got last spring on a scratch shot at 250 yards, dressed over 200 pounds; this, of course, without the head or horns. They must have derived their family name from their horns, for in no other respect do they resemble a sheep more than does an elk, deer or antelope. However, in the winter season I have often found, close to the pelt, a fine, soft, short gray fur, it cannot be called a fleece, it is too fine and soft; this is in addition to their heavy coat of short straight hair.

Not only are they wary and timid, but unlike a majority of wild animals, they are devoid of curiosity. Tie your bandanna to your cleaning rod, stick it in the sand or in the crevice of a rock and then lie back and wait for their curiosity to bring them within range, and you will never see a sheep; yet this trick is often successful with antelope, but with sheep the result is similar to the experience of our little Japanese cook, whom we had taught to handle a shot-gun; on his return from a weary and unsuccessful tramp after jack-rabbits his excuse was, "No ketchum, go quick."

Mountain sheep have the keenest sight and most delicate sense of smell and hearing of any animal it has ever been my good fortune to hunt, and I have hunted almost everything edible in the wild game line, except the caribou of the North. I am not a market hunter, my experiences having been confined to the necessity of supplying the usually scanty larder of a gold miner with fresh meat; therefore, anything I write is not from the view of an expert or a dead shot, but from that of an amateur who will take up any old gun and go into the hills after anything that will furnish his camp-fire with a roast or broil. I have read of these dead shots-read of them when I was a boy in books that I never left lying about the house, but whose contents I devoured at school behind the friendly

cover of my geography. Those books told of men who, without a tremor, saw a grizzly stand upright, and

"Watched the sway of the shoulders,
The paunch's sag and swing."

until the monster was within eight or ten feet of them, and then "coolly and deliberately planted a bullet in his eye." Since those trustful and believing days of childhood hero-worship I have met his bearship on his native heath, have roused the "grizzled monarch" from his lair, and I now say after mature deliberation that no cinnamon, silvertip, or brown grizzly bear is going to get within 10 feet or 100 feet of me, provided always, of course, that I see him first; but there is nothing sneaking or underhand about a grizzly bear; he will give you a fair stand-up fight if you are looking for a fight; the greatest fault I find in them is their extreme sensitiveness, their liability to take offense without just provocation. The report of a gunshot anywhere within the hearing of a grizzly is quite likely to cause him to hunt you up to ascertain if you were shooting at him. On the other hand, I have watched a grizzly pass within less than fifty yards of me, in an open bit of country, and all the attention he paid me was a sidelong glance which convinced him of my firm neutrality, so marked as to border on friendliness. I was not hunting bear. I patted my astuteness on its bald spot after he had passed and I had measured his nineteen-inch track. I remember once—but this is a story about sheep, not bears. However, here is a query I would put to professional hunters: Why is it when you take your shot-gun and go after quails, grouse, squirrels, or other small game, you are continually jumping deer, sheep, bears, or mountain lions, and the reverse happens when you take your rifle?

The mountains of the Desert of the Colorado are the most difficult hunting country of any I was ever in. The desert is not a level sandy plain; it is diversified with mountain ranges from eight to ten miles apart, the intervening country being sandy valleys covered with cactus, greasewood, ironwood and wild sage. The mountain ranges have a general trend from northwest to southeast, rocky, barren and precipitous, rising almost abruptly from the sandy plain to a height of from 2,500 to 5,000 feet. Entirely devoid of soil, waterless,

treeless, with here and there, in crevices of the rocks, a bit of stunted herbage or bunch grass on which the sheep wax fat. No forest or underbrush to aid one in approaching his game unseen; nothing but the bare, sun-burned rocks, under a brilliant sunlight and in an atmosphere so clear that with the naked eye a man may see another walking at a distance of five miles. Under such conditions to successfully stalk a Big Horn, with their sense of hearing, smell, and sight developed to such a remarkable degree, is a feat of which one may well be proud. I never did it—intentionally that is. I have "ran onto" bands of them with the wind blowing strong in my face, and it was then difficult to decide which was the more surprised.

The mountains are covered with bits of broken rock, which the elements have chipped from the massive formation, and one goes slipping, sliding, clattering along, and in the deathlike stillness of the desert, so absolute as to be oppressive, sound carries far. There is no sougling of the wind among the trees, no song of birds nor scream of hawk nor brawl of mountain stream; nothing but inanimate, grewsome, horrible silence, that has turned more than one poor fellow's brain, whose mummified remains we have found later, his swollen tongue protruding between his blackened lips, his clothing torn from his body in frenzy, his features terribly distorted in his last agony.

Knowing the customary haunt of the sheep you intend stalking, and with moccasins on your feet, you may be successful; I know it has been done; I have seen Indians do it. The grazing being sparse the sheep feed from bunch to bunch, some constantly moving, and the least sign of motion on the part of another object of that inanimate nature will arouse their suspicions. When the big buck leader tosses up his head and looks in your direction, you may be 1,000 yards away, lying prone upon your face, pated on the rocky face of the mountain, scarce daring to breathe, but you are in for it for he will stand like a statue for possibly an hour, never taking his eyes from you while the others feed on. You may resemble the many slabs of granite lying about, but I believe that he knows there was no rock or boulder in the exact spot you are occupying when he looked a short time before.

You watch him out of the tail of your eye from under your hat brim, and oh, how you want to sneeze, or scratch, or change your position, but you dare not; in dropping to the ground probably your rifle is under you, to give no gleam of metal, and now the hammer is eating into your thigh—you must move, ever so little—but it is enough; the statue stamps its foot and whirls, facing the direction the band must go and it never looks, but goes; you see a flutter of white flags and they are gone, only the leader, standing on the highest peak on the verge of the precipice to make sure—then he is gone. But do not allow him to make sure; remain motionless

proaching water, so it is better to select a spot some distance away along their trail which is always well-defined. Let them get broadside on, pick your animal, aim at the forequarters and let drive; if you do not get it then "pump lead," pump hard and fast, you may cripple one and get it later; if one drops behind or goes in a direction independent of the band, follow it, it is your meat; you have winged it; if the band goes out of range in a bunch you may as well indulge in any expletives that your religion permits or the occasion warrants, and go back to camp. The best time to find them under such conditions, although it does savor of pot



"PASTED ON THE ROCKY FACE OF THE MOUNTAIN."

for a short while until he disappears after the band, then you may follow, possibly with better success, but more probably not.

There are a few water holes and tenajos (tanks) scattered through the mountains, but only wild sheep, Indians, and prospectors know their location. If it is fresh meat you are after the surest way of securing a supply is to post yourself within easy range of some high ridge leading to the water; they always select the highest ground. You might take station near the water, but I have also tried that without success. Sheep redouble their caution when ap-

proaching water, so it is better to select a spot some distance away along their trail which is always well-defined. Let them get broadside on, pick your animal, aim at the forequarters and let drive; if you do not get it then "pump lead," pump hard and fast, you may cripple one and get it later; if one drops behind or goes in a direction independent of the band, follow it, it is your meat; you have winged it; if the band goes out of range in a bunch you may as well indulge in any expletives that your religion permits or the occasion warrants, and go back to camp. The best time to find them under such conditions, although it does savor of pot

shooting, is between early dawn and a little after sunrise. In the winter months they generally go without water for several days, but in the summer months they usually hunt water once a day. As an illustration of their keenness of sight and evident memory I will relate one incident. A friend of mine, Joe Davis, from Llano County, Texas, a good man with a horse, rope and gun, and a good man to have with you under any circumstances, and I, were prospecting and found a water hole in the Dos Palmas Mountains, where it was evident Big Horns had been watering for ages,

judging from the appearance of their trails. The small alkali spring was in a park-like place surrounded by mountains. This park was full of barren little knolls or hillocks from twenty to forty feet in height. About thirty feet up the side of one and commanding the water-hole, forty yards away, was a narrow shelf or bench covered with broken slabs of schist.

On this bench we erected a rude wall about four feet in height and with only two small loopholes, less than three inches in diameter, for our rifles. The cleavage of the rocks was smooth, and one flat stone on another made the wall close and firm. A few dwarfed greasewood bushes were growing around the base of the knolls, and, breaking the tops, we concealed the wall behind their red and green foliage. Then we went out on the trail one hundred yards and inspected our work; it was satisfactory; we had built blinds before, and we could only discover it by knowing its exact location. Understand that a blind was absolutely necessary, for the knolls were round and barren, save for the stunted greasewood, which afforded no more protection than would a currant bush in December.

The next morning we were behind our blind and the muzzles of our rifles in the loopholes before the dawn peeped over the curtain that night had looped up to the peak which towered above us on the right. With our backs against the rock we waited patiently for developments, and longingly fingered our pipes, but a smoke was out of the question, although the wind was in our favor. Through half-closed lids I watched the kaleidoscopic changes of the peak from pearl gray to rose, rose to pink, and from pink to silver just as Joe laid his hand on my arm. Silently he pointed up the ridge; there, a full mile away, silhouetted against the clear morning sky, was a magnificent buck. Motionless he "viewed the landscape o'er," and the prospect being evidently satisfactory he moved on, followed by one, two, three, four, five, six others from under the ridge, three ewes, two young bucks and a lamb.

On down the trail along the "hog-back" they came prancing, gamboling, and now and then stopping to nibble at some juicy bit of herbage; for half an hour we watched them, possessing our

souls in patience until they should be within range. Four hundred yards away the trail crossed a "saddle" in the ridge, hiding the quarry momentarily from our view; taking advantage of this we shifted our positions to a "ready," careful to keep the muzzles of our rifles within the loopholes.

Up they came out of the saddle, and for an instant the wary old leader stopped, looking straight at our cleverly constructed blind. Literally holding our breath, we watched him through the very narrow space in the loopholes not filled by our rifle barrels; one of the younger bucks, growing impatient, started on, but the old "boss" stamped his foot, whirled about, and the next instant they were out of sight only to reappear on the opposite side of the saddle going at full speed up the trail, and in less time than it takes to write it they had disappeared over the high ridge where we first sighted them. Silently Joe and I looked at one another; customary expletives could not meet the occasion, but as we drew out our pipes he said: "Don't that rasp you?" Then we went back to bacon and beans.

Now what frightened those sheep? It was simply impossible for them to see us behind our blind, a solid wall of rock hidden by bushes. A strong morning breeze was blowing directly from the sheep, so it was not possible for them to have winded us; several coyotes, that certainly have a keen scent, came down to the water hole, within forty yards of us, drank and played about for a time utterly oblivious of our presence. Later a huge wildcat also came and drank, rolled in the sand, then deliberately sat and made its toilet after the manner of a house cat; none of these keen-nosed animals scented us, even at that short distance, and, of course, we did not shoot at them.

The only plausible theory that I can advance is that the sheep recognized some change in the landscape, that the bushes had been moved, that yesterday or the day before none had been growing on the site of our blind; they were certainly not frightened at the presence of any other animals, for coyotes will not attack a mountain sheep unless it is disabled from wounds or age. I once witnessed a fight between a full-grown mountain lion and a big

horn buck. The lion, after repeated "jolts," crawled away bruised and whimpering, and, admiring the big horn's nerve, I allowed him to pursue his victorious way. Two or three rods farther on, in answer to his call, a ewe and lamb came down an almost precipitous bluff. It was a grand fight and I can testify was strictly "on the square."

Joe had one failing that at times was fatal to his success in bringing down his game, but only when there were a number of animals together; that failing consisted in shooting at one and watching the others at the same time. The day following our fiasco at the blind I

for he came directly toward us. His horns measured twenty-two inches in circumference. That an animal of their size can carry such horns seems almost incredible. Frequently I have seen the old bucks throw their heads back, resting their horns on their shoulders and swallow space at a terrible rate. The old story that they leap from high precipices and alight on their horns I believe to be a myth. I have chased many of them and watched for that spectacle, but in vain, although I believe they might do it without breaking their necks; but they are very sure-footed, and will go where you cannot follow, leaping and bounding from point to



A FAVORITE HAUNT OF DESERT BIG HORNS.

saw him bring down a lone lamb at 250 yards, and a few days after a ten-pronged buck deer on the run at 200 yards. However, we congratulate ourselves that we got the big buck that discovered our blind. Several days later we were going up the broad arroyo and discovered him industriously feeding on an ironwood bush in a bank about 200 yards ahead of us. We both fired, my bullet going into the bank just over his back and Joe's evidently passing between his fore legs. He leaped to the top of the bank, but Joe's second shot struck him squarely on the horn, turning him around, evidently crazing him,

point and shelf to shelf, where you cannot find a foothold.

Sportsmen may be curious as to what guns we use. Those who live in the mountains are not particular, any old gun will do; I have been using an old 44-caliber, black powder model of '73; it answers my purpose. I have taken the shot out of a 12-gauge cartridge, rounded a stick the size of a lead pencil, punched holes in a cake of soap, melted the No. 6 shot, poured it in the holes in the soap, and reloaded the cartridges with the slugs. With these I have killed both sheep and deer. I cite this only as an instance of what necessity

compels a man to do. But to take up the rifle.

The new smokeless powder, 30-30 or 30-40 models, are meeting with great favor, but I am one of those that love old friends the best. The new models are certainly good guns, but when one is after meat—I have my doubts. My objections are not those of an old comrade of mine, who said that the "drotted things killed so far that he had to salt the bullets, for fear the meat would spoil before he got to it." Neither that of another, who feared "a thousand-yard range might strain the gun." My objections are, that the small caliber steel or hard-pointed bullet, while it certainly penetrates, leaves such a small aperture that the wound does not bleed outwardly, making it almost impossible to trail your game, and unless struck in the spine, heart, or head, a wounded animal will sometimes go a long distance. On the other hand, the soft-pointed bullet shatters too much; it goes to the other extreme. I saw a running deer struck in the rump with one at three hundred yards, the ball coming out at the shoulders; only one ham was worth taking to camp.

There are yet numerous bands of Big Horns in the desert mountains of southern California, especially in the eastern portions of the counties of Riverside, San Diego and San Bernardino; no one hunts them save an occasional Indian or a prospector wanting a change from the everlasting bacon (Chicago quail), and he does not kill wantonly, only one for his own consumption. As an illustration that they are yet numerous I will relate one instance: Last spring two Chemihueva Indians came to my camp and wanted to buy or borrow some cartridges; they had two 44-caliber carbines, but had only nine cartridges between them. Of course, I refused them, as I was not at all anxious that they should hunt in that vicinity. They went into the Pin to mountains, three miles east of my camp, and the next night returned with the meat of seven sheep and one cartridge, and

yet an Indian is "no good" with a rifle at over 100 yards. There is not the slightest taste of mutton to the meat, and I prefer it to venison, which it very much resembles, only in my opinion it is more tender, sweeter and better flavored.

The desert has one advantage over the mountains of the north, and that is in the matter of climate; here one may sleep out of doors the year round without discomfort. Three pairs of good woolen blankets—one pair for a mattress and two for covering—together with a strip of 12-ounce or 16-ounce duck six feet wide by fifteen long, is ample bedding for the coldest winter months; in the summer—well, one may say that any bedding at all is superfluous. From November to April is the best hunting season; the other six months in the year are too hot. I have seen the thermometer in June register from 105 at midnight to 125 and 130 at noon in the shade in the coolest spot we could find about camp, and this for weeks at a time. One can have no idea of the power of the solar rays until he spends a summer on the desert. Of course, there is no humidity in the atmosphere to speak of, else man or animal could not live twenty-four hours.

If you are going into that country take burros; a wagon and team are troublesome, and one cannot get into the heart of the game country with a wagon. Take burros to pack your bedding and supplies, and another to ride, and you can go to the summit of almost all the mountain ranges, and the favorite feeding-grounds of the Big Horns. But under no circumstances enter that region without a guide; an Indian will do, and he will at the same time educate you in the mystery and delicate finesse of Big Horn stalking. The desert of the Colorado is an innocent-looking

little blank spot on the map, but on the surface of what it represents lie the bleaching bones of many men. There are correct maps of it, but they are seared on the brains of a few prospectors. You must be wary in the Colorado desert.



ABANDONED—TWO DAYS FROM WATER.