

Colter Sears (ID) sent in the following report titled "Mid-Asian Ibex at the End of the Earth":

In November 2015 my brother, **Jeremiah Sears** and I traveled to Kyrgyzstan to hunt mid-Asian ibex, but our adventure began more than a year prior when we began researching hunting areas, outfitters, and agencies. Although there were a myriad of choices, ultimately we decided to book our hunt with **Artem Veselov** of **ProfiHunt**. I had contracted with Artem in the past on a hunt to Azerbaijan and knew that we would be placed with a credible outfitter. Travel preparations to Kyrgyzstan proved to be quite simple, as no visa is required for U.S. citizens staying less than 90 days and **Barbara Wolbrink** at **International Journeys** was able to secure our airline tickets quickly and at a very reasonable cost. As is usually the case, the waiting between the time of booking and our departure may have been the most difficult part of the entire trip!

In the spring prior to our hunt, I got suckered into joining my girlfriend's city league softball team. Although any serious mountain hunter would have to be considered an athlete of sorts, I demonstrated I lacked the grace and athletic ability required, as I managed to break my foot while running the bases during a game in June. The look on Jeremiah's face upon seeing me in my cast was priceless. "How are you going to climb? Are you going to be healed up in time for our hunt?" My brother's questions were familiar because I had already asked myself these questions over and over but my answer was still the same ... I don't know, but I'm going, come hell or high water! Hunting for mule deer in Wyoming's rugged Region G in September was a good test of my recovery and although my foot gave me considerable discomfort, I found that applying Vet wrap (typically used on horses) around my foot and ankle made climbing tolerable, albeit slow.

On November 6 we departed from Salt Lake City for the arduous two-day journey to Kyrgyzstan. After 20 hours of flying, nine hours in airport layovers, and a bone jarring 13-hour drive, we finally arrived at our base camp near the remote village of Ak-Shyyrak, approximately 14 kilometers west of the Chinese border in the Tian Shan Mountains. We were accompanied from Bishkek by the camp manager, our interpreter, and a very pleasant fellow hunter from Belgium by the name of Henri. Upon arrival, we were met by our guides and friendly hosts. The home of head guide Kulu was to serve as our base camp. The house was clean and comfortable, but as is typical in this part of the world, there was no indoor plumbing and the main heat source was a handmade stove in which they burned sheep dung due to the lack of other fuels in the area.

The following morning after

breakfast we checked the zero of our rifles and began loading the horses. It soon became apparent that we had brought entirely too much gear, as the guides instructed us to leave everything except the absolute necessities, which basically consisted of our sleeping bags, sleeping pads, our white camo, our rifles, and the clothes on our backs. Considering that it was November in the Tian Shan Mountains, I was pretty sure we were all going to freeze to death, but I think Henri was absolutely certain of it! Each hunter was appointed one lead guide and one assistant guide and with that we were off, riding north down a river drainage parallel to the towering peaks of the Tian Shan. The scenery during the horse ride to the hunting area was stunning ... which is good, because it took our thoughts from our stiff knees and sore rear ends, as the saddles weren't quite what my brother and I were used to. After about five or six hours, Henri and his two guides split off from the rest of the group while Jeremiah, our guides, and I continued down the drainage.

I was very impressed with the number of game we were seeing. This being our first trip to Central Asia, we had never seen a live Marco Polo sheep or ibex before and we were seeing groups of both around almost every turn. One particularly large group of ibex high on the mountain above the snow line and in the rocks must have numbered over 100 animals. After several more river crossings and another four hours of riding the light had begun to fade, so we led the horses down off a high grassy ridge into the bottom of a steep ravine where the guides informed us we would be camping for the night. As the sun sank behind the mountains, it became very cold. The guides built a fire from the sparse brush they were able to scrounge up and we all enjoyed hot tea with bread, salami, and canned fish for dinner. Our water bottles sitting no more than three feet from the fire froze solid while Jeremiah and I sat silently, listening to the guides talk and laugh with one another in their native language. Shortly after dinner, the assistant guides started rummaging through the saddle bags looking for

something, and I was very relieved when they pulled out a two-man tent and began setting it up. The people that live year round in this high mountain country can be described in one word ... tough! While Jeremiah and I slept soundly in our minus 5°F sleeping bags inside the tent, our guides endured the bitterly cold night on the ground with nothing but the pads from their saddles and worn out old sleeping bags and blankets that most people would throw away.

The morning was very cold, but it seemed to bring with it a renewed sense of purpose in the group. We were finally in ibex country riding high above our campsite from the night before. The small but sure-footed Asian



Colter Sears (ID) took this mid-Asian ibex in November 2015 in the Tian Shan Mountains of Kyrgyzstan. Colter booked his hunt through ProfiHunt.

horses negotiated the steep rocky slopes like it was second nature, ascending much higher than we would ever attempt to go on horseback at home. Eventually, we reached a point where the horses could no longer walk and from there we started climbing on foot. Throughout the day we glassed and climbed. Every few hundred vertical feet we would stop and glass. We were seeing groups of ibex all around us, but the largest ibex always seemed to have the vertical advantage and it was difficult to get close enough for a good shot. At one point we witnessed a small bachelor group of ibex with several males butting heads. We could hear the sound of their massive horns smashing against one another; it truly was a sight to behold. Finally we were able to get within 500 meters of a couple of nice billys along with several smaller males and females. It was evident that getting closer was not going to be an option as the ibex had us pinned down in our present location.

Against our better judgment, Jeremiah and I set up for the long shot with instructions from the guides to shoot both of the large males simultaneously on the count of three. At the sound of the rifles, the mountainside exploded with ibex running all over the place. It was difficult to keep tabs on the two largest ibex with so many animals moving all at once. Luckily, however, we were able to kill one of the two large males in the group. As my brother and the assistant guides climbed up after his ibex the lead guides and I started back down to the horses so that we could ride around and pick up the tired hunters. While waiting for Jeremiah and the guides to climb down with the ibex, we glassed across the canyon in the failing light and located a good billy in the company of a dozen females. Nothing was said, but at that moment I knew we would be going after him the next day. That night, as we sat around the fire, Jeremiah and I lamented on how foolish we had been to attempt a double, especially at that range, and we both vowed never to make the same mistake again.

The following morning, I found myself high on the mountain again with my guides in search of the billy we had seen the night before. Jeremiah and his guides had stayed lower so that they could keep track of the ibex and motion to us if the animals moved from where they were feeding. My legs were still fatigued and sore from climbing the day before and my foot was beginning to bother me more and more with every step. When I finally put eyes on the billy,



Jeremiah Sears (ID) with his mid-Asian ibex taken from Kyrgyzstan, November 2015. Jeremiah was hunting with ProfiHunt.

my heart sank as I realized how high up the mountain he was and how difficult it was going to be to get within range. One step at a time, we climbed up the extremely steep mountain face on the opposite side of a ridge from the ibex, my fingers and toes tingling as a side effect of the altitude sickness medication we had been taking. Eventually the ridge we were using as cover gave way to a sheer vertical cliff that was unclimbable, so we inched up over the ridge to check the distance between the ibex and us. 577 meters; even though my brother and I practice shooting long distances on a regular basis at home, there was no way I was going to attempt that shot after what had transpired the day before. I told

my guide we had to get closer, and so we began the long slow stalk along the bottom side of the cliff. Often times we moved on our hands and knees in the snow, all the while in full view of the ibex. On several occasions we would have to suspend the stalk and hold perfectly still for several minutes because the ibex had seen movement and were fixed on our location.

After two hours, we were able to close the distance to just over 200 meters. I quickly set up for the shot as the billy was staring in our direction and was obviously nervous to our presence. My 6.5 x 284 Norma delivered the bad medicine, but it took three well-placed shots to put the billy on the ground for good. Climbing up those last 200 meters to the fallen ibex may be the most difficult steps I've ever taken, but when I reached my trophy I had an extreme sense of accomplishment and joy. We set up my billy for a few photos and then the guides got to the task of dressing the animal while I sat back and took in the amazingly beautiful scenery from our perch high on the mountain. Back at base camp we were happy to hear that Henri had been successful as well, harvesting a very heavy and handsome looking ibex.

My hunt for mid-Asian ibex in the rugged mountains of Kyrgyzstan was a fantastic adventure that I'll never forget. The majority of my friends and co-workers can't understand why anyone would want to spend a small fortune traveling to the ends of the earth to go hunting for an animal that most "normal" people have never even heard of. Maybe they have a point ... but the truly wild places continue to beckon to me, and the allure of the next great adventure occupies my idle thoughts, and I know I'll be back.

