



MARATHON HUNT *for* Caucasian Tur

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"You must shoot now or you will not have the opportunity again," was the translation of what my local guide kept repeating. The Mid-Caucasian tur that was 350 yards away was an exceptional old warrior, a truly great trophy with massive horns. The long range and the 60-degree shooting angle were not of great concern, but a shot to vitals was not an option because another tur was standing directly behind him. My only hope was to wait until this regal animal raised his head and then try a difficult neck shot.

After almost 30 difficult days of hunting for three species of Caucasian tur, I was in the final hours of seeking my third and final species, the Mid-Caucasian variety. I had experienced the rugged Caucasian Mountains all

the way from the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan to the Black Sea in Russia.

Dagestan, Kuban and Mid-Caucasian tur are only species that most experts recognize as both *Ovis* (sheep) and *Capra* (goats), and after many years of trying, I finalized plans with Vladimir Melnikov of Profi-Hunt to hunt all three, and do so back to back. Vladimir reminded me of the difficulty of hunting a single one of the three, and he was not aware of anyone attempting to hunt all three tur in one trip. His final comment was, "Make sure you arrive in exceptional sheep shape for this 30-day adventure."

As the departure date approached, I was confident I was in suitable physical shape for the challenge, but my mental state was in far worse shape,

thanks to months of constant reports that all 2005 fall hunts in Russia were closed due to changes in and confusion between Russian government agencies. However, at Vladimir's urging, I departed in July for Moscow, with hope that all would be resolved before my first scheduled hunt or, at worst, before my scheduled departure from Russia in September.

I arrived in Moscow on schedule, but Lufthansa left my gun case in Frankfurt, Germany. After eight hours of nervous waiting at Sheremetyevo terminal, my gun case finally arrived. Profi-Hunt personnel got me quickly through the government bureaucracy, and soon Vladimir and I were on our way from Moscow to Baku, Azerbaijan. In the same day, we

completed a five-hour ride to Quba and another four- to five-hour ride during the night into the eastern Caucasian Mountains, arriving at a mountain village for a much-needed but short night of sleep.

Dagestan Tur

Early the next morning, rifles were sighted-in and horses packed, and we departed at 8:30 a.m. on a four-hour horseback ride upriver with the magnificent Caucasians extending 10,000 to 12,000 feet into the blue sky on each side. As I craned my neck to see the peaks and survey the steep and rugged slopes, I understood why the spectacular Caucasian Mountains are considered the most challenging place in the world for sheep hunting.

After a restful night in a comfortable hard-wall base camp, early the next morning Vladimir, eight guides and I started an eight-hour climb on foot with backpacks to establish a spike camp and start our search for

Dagestan tur. Before sunrise the next morning, after a quick breakfast of chai, cheeses and flat bread, we climbed to the peak, where we started glassing. Within two hours, Vladimir spotted 150 tur within 1,000 yards of our position. During the day, we kept track of the large group through a spotting scope and became convinced that six of the animals were exceptional trophies that were well worth a closer look. At 7 p.m. we were finally able to get within 600 yards of the large group. The six legal rams were lying down at the top of the ridge, with the younger animals and many alert eyes between us. We agreed that in this situation it would not be possible to close the distance.

On most of my previous sheep hunts, fog was an unwelcome change in weather. As we lay motionless behind a rock ledge, however, we noticed that a fog bank would roll in and stay for only five or 10 minutes before the wind would sweep the sky

A Trio of Turs

Dagestan Tur
(*Capra cylindricornis*)


Kuban Tur
(*Capra caucasica caucasica*)

Mid-Caucasian Tur
(*Capra caucasica x*
Capra cylindricornis)

clean, and then the process would repeat. Using the intermittent fog as cover, we made several successful mini-stalks, carefully inching down the ridge and eventually reaching a position 325 yards from the six big tur on the far ridge. There, we remained frozen in place for about 45 minutes, finally becoming worried about the fog not clearing and the approaching darkness.

The largest ram was lying down with his body turned at a severe angle to us and mostly behind a massive

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The author (right) and Vladimir Melnikov with two of the author's turs.

Marathon Hunt for Tur

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rock formation. My only option was a chest shot, but only 50 percent of his chest was exposed. As additional incentive to anchor the tur with one shot, Vladimir whispered, "If he is able to run 20 meters, he will go over a steep cliff, and you will not get a second shot. Also, it will soon be dark, so recovery tonight will be impossible. And getting to a wounded or dead tur tomorrow will be very difficult because of the steep terrain. So make the first shot count!"

After considering all factors, I replied, "I am going to take the shot and try for the chest." I got into a comfortable prone position, arranged a solid anchor for my Snipe Pod, and squeezed the trigger of my .300 Weatherby, sending a 180-grain polymer tip on its way at more than 3,300 feet per second. The shot was true. The big ram never stood up, but he lunged forward and seconds later came to rest well short of the cliff edge.

Lots of backslapping and compliments - "Great shot - great guides - great trophy." The picture-taking and caping started in a rush. We left the mountain peak with that fine 37-inch, 12-year-old Dagestan tur and started the long, steep walk down to spike camp in total darkness. When we arrived three hours later, we celebrated a bit, but after the long day we were eager to crawl into our tents.

Because the weather was unusually warm the next morning, one of the guides and I started the long trip down with the trophy so the cape and horns could be properly cared for and salted in base camp. Vladimir also had a tur permit and the following day took a very fine trophy. That evening, after welcome showers and a short rest for the hunters, we had a great meal featuring Dagestan tur and several vodka toasts.

Kuban Tur

Three days later, Vladimir and I were in the western Caucasian Mountains, spending the night in the city of Karachaevsk in the Russian republic of Karachayevo-Cherkeseya. After meeting with government officials and purchasing supplies, we made a harrowing five-hour drive in a rugged six-ton Russian truck up slippery slopes and over steep terrain that I could not believe a vehicle could negotiate. Late in the day, we arrived at our tent base camp at 7,000 feet.



Next morning we loaded horses and continued climbing to reach what turned out to be numerous spike camps from which we would climb and hunt over the next eight days.

The weather was unseasonably warm, which made climbing and spotting the Kuban tur even more difficult. On the fourth day I passed on a seven- or eight-year-old Kuban, hoping we would find a more impressive trophy on yet another mountain. Vladimir and the local guides worked hard during this long and difficult hunt, establishing many spike camps and glassing too many slopes to count. Even from a non-hunting perspective, it was worth the time and effort because I had an opportunity to view and experience the most beautiful mountains in the world, heights that few people, especially Westerners, have had the privilege to visit.

On Day 14, all the hard work paid off when Vladimir and guide Rashid spotted two lone Kuban turs, one of which had broomed horns in the 30-inch class. After a careful, hours-long stalk, I was in perfect position and less than 300 yards from the bedded rams, with the larger one in my crosshairs. We waited for what seemed hours for the larger Kuban to stand and provide an easier shot, but he was content and, thankfully, totally unaware of our presence. But thick fog was starting to roll in, and if we waited much longer we might well lose the opportunity. So I told Vladimir that for the second time in my odyssey, I would take a shot at a bedded tur. Just as I started to squeeze the trigger, the Kuban stood and stretched his 300-pound body, and a split second later my bullet struck. The ram leaped forward off the ledge, bouncing down the slope and ricocheting off boulders and shale for 200 yards before coming to rest on a rocky ledge far below - but still a long way from the bottom.

Vladimir and I took pictures of the 11-year-old Kuban and then started the caping process. After a steep, long descent in the dark, we arrived at our

spike camp and at 1 a.m. had a welcome meal of fresh sheep tenderloin. I was amazed by the skills of Vladimir and the locals in negotiating the steep, difficult and pitch-black mountain with heavy backpacks.

At base camp, Vladimir demonstrated that his skills were not limited to mountain slopes. He prepared a spectacular meal and even produced a fine bottle of French red wine to complement the main course of sheep meat.

Mid-Caucasian Tur

Within two days, I was out of the western Caucasians and on my way to the Russian republic of Kabardino-Balkariya. In Nalchik, I spent a comfortable night at a guesthouse run by the hunting department – great food, lots of vodka and a real bed! The accommodations and food were exceptional, equal to or better than many five-star hotels I have stayed at in Third World countries.

With 22 days of “orientation” behind me and two of my hoped-for three tur salted and drying, I felt both mentally and physically prepared for the final eight days. After four hours by vehicle and six hours of on-foot climbing, Max Vorobiev of Profi-Hunt, local guides and I set up the first of many spike camps. The magnificent El’brus Glacier, which locals call Ash-Gomakho, meaning “Happiness Bringing Mountain,” was visible during clear days and nights, and I soon learned that the massive glacier had an impact on weather for over 100 miles around. For the next week, happiness was indeed bestowed on us, despite our experiencing the most difficult mountains, extreme weather and challenging conditions of all my three tur hunts.

Although we were at somewhat lower altitudes, 8,000 to 10,000 feet, than on my earlier hunts, the mountains here were much more difficult to negotiate. I had brought on the trip a brand-new pair of Leki climbing poles and new but broken-in Meindl boots, and by the fourth day of the final hunt, the poles finally fatigued out and the seams and tread on the boots had very few steps left – about same condition as my body. The guides, especially, were pushed to the limit during this hunt and worked harder than I did. After negotiating numerous mountains and operating out of four spike camps, we had not found a mature Mid-Caucasian tur and were all getting dejected. But our perseverance and tenacity finally paid off – on the

final day, five rams were spotted 350 yards from our position.

With time running out and with Max’s words echoing in my head, “You must shoot now or you will not have the opportunity again,” the biggest tur finally raised his head, permitting a clear but difficult neck shot. After allowing for the severe uphill angle, the wind and the location of other turs, I took several deep breaths and squeezed the trigger. I heard the welcome “whomp” of the bullet’s impact and saw other turs scatter unhurt. Although my tur was hit in the neck and severely wounded, he made it over the ridge and disappeared. We followed a good blood trail but had to abort because of formidable terrain. Much to my displeasure, I had to start my journey back to Moscow to catch my international flight. Back in base camp, the guides assured me they would return to the mountain with climbing gear and “rescue” my tur.

As I boarded the flight for the long trip home, I had a deep sense of guilt and sadness that I was leaving Russia without a magnificent trophy that might well have been lost to the bears and eagles of the Caucasian Mountains. Back home, I received a call from government authorities in Nalchik and an e-mail from Profi-Hunt with good news: “The guides recovered your Mid-Caucasian tur, and it is a great trophy.”

Two months later, my good friend Reza Golsorkhi arrived back in New York from his own tur hunt and had his own great news: He had brought my Mid-Caucasian tur. As promised, the local guides had returned to the steep mountain and rescued my trophy. After the required drying period, it scored 160 1/8 SCI.

During the last few years, I have completed three or four sheep and/or goat hunts a year, and without hesitation, I can attest that tur hunting in the Caucasian Mountains is the most challenging and rewarding of any high-country hunt in the world. I must express my appreciation to Vladimir Melnikov and Max Vorobiev for their support and guidance, to the hardworking local guides and to the Profi-Hunt staff in Moscow for all their assistance during my 30 days in the Caucasian Mountains.

Even today I can vividly recall every difficult climb, narrow ledge and steep mountain peak that left a mark on my body or mind, or on which I left my own marks – a little sweat, skin, or blood. As many sheep hunters say, “You don’t realize what a great hunt you had until you have been home a few months.” 