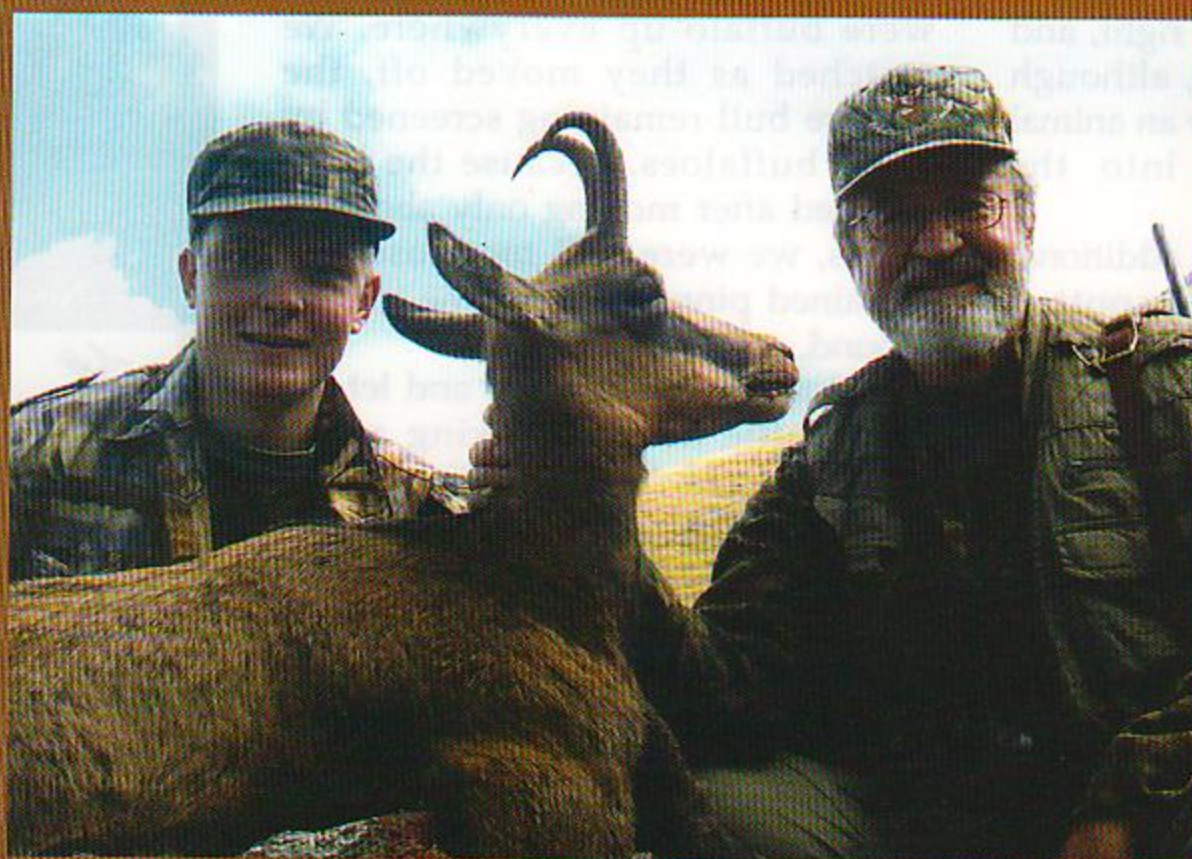


Caucasian Chamois

BY R. J. ROBEL
PAGE DESIGN BY MEG BENHASE



The author's hunting companion, Ned, and their interpreter admire Ned's Gold Medal Caucasian chamois.

Pursuing the goat-antelope of the high crags of the Caucasus Mountains.

Even as I squeezed the trigger, my mind was somewhat distracted. The bullet went true, 1 1/2 inches high at 100 yards. I was sighting-in my .270, a rifle built more than 50 years ago with an FN Mauser action and a slim 20-inch barrel. Jack O'Connor had inspired this one. A lightweight rifle I used for sheep hunting is stocked with a piece of tight-grained Turkish walnut and weighs less than eight pounds, including a 6X Zeiss scope secured in a sleek

Conetrol mount. The rifle liked the 59 grains of Hodgdon's 4831SC powder behind a 130-grain Speer bullet. That shot increased the three-shot group's diameter to three-quarters of an inch. But I wasn't content. Why?

I was preparing for a chamois hunt in the Caucasus Mountains of Russia. I had yearned for a chamois for many years and envisioned myself in the Austrian Alps, dressed in comfortable loden green clothes and carrying a single-shot rifle built

by a Ferlach gunsmith. That wasn't going to happen.

The chamois is native to the Alps, Apennines, Carpathians and mountains of Asia Minor and has been introduced into New Zealand. It belongs to a large taxonomic group that includes the Indian and Cape buffalo, sheep, ibex, muskox, antelope and mountain goat. Because of its close relationship to various antelopes and its goatlike appear-

the chamois is commonly referred to as a goat-antelope. It is a remarkable rock climber and can leap incredible heights and distances. Though the largest chamois trophies come from the Alps of Austria, Italy, Germany and Romania, I booked a chamois hunt in the Caucasus Mountains of Russia. Why?

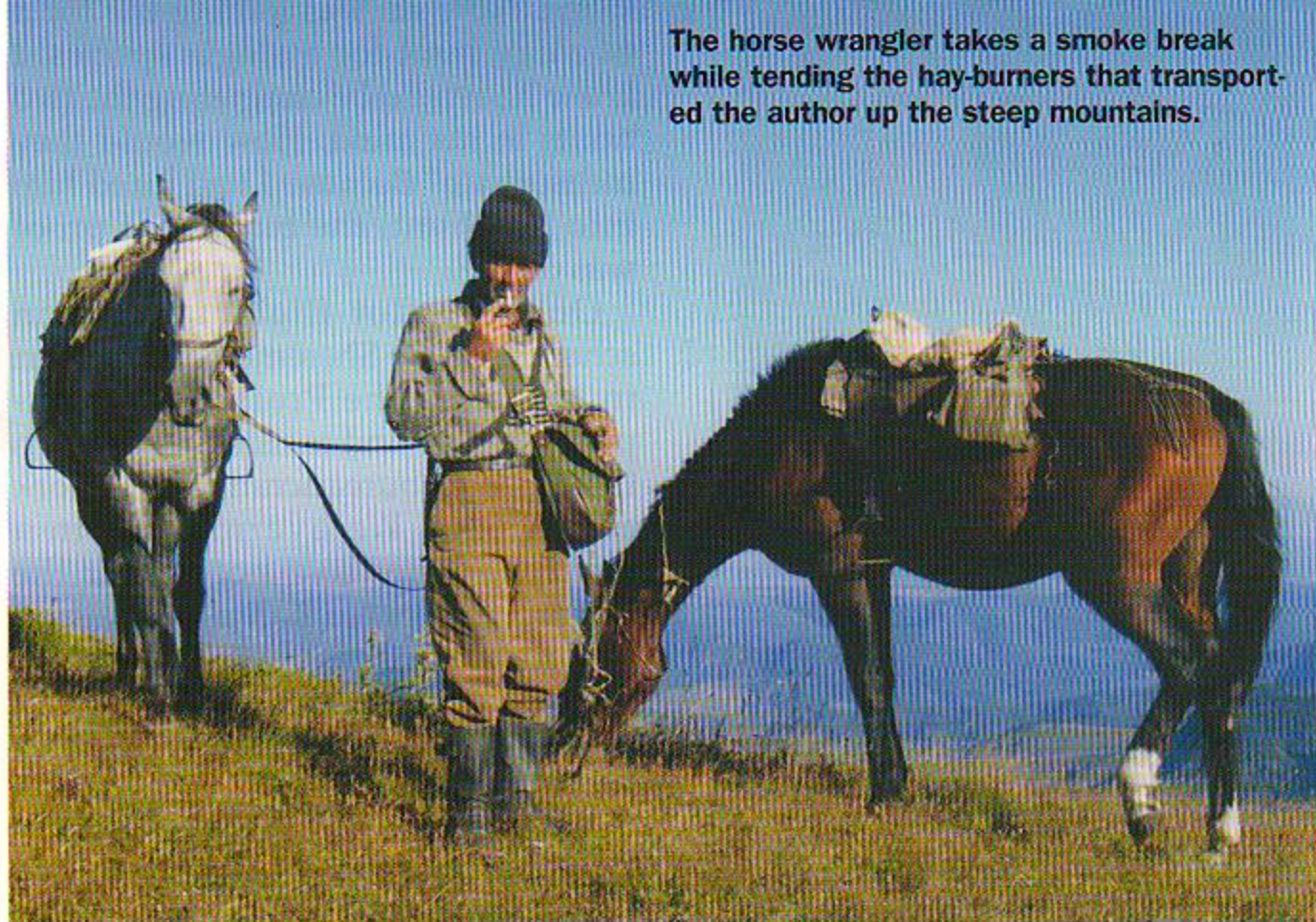
My longtime hunting companion and contact for a chamois hunt in Austria died before he could finalize arrangements for my pursuit of a chamois there. A change of plans was required. Visits to potential outfitters at the 2005 SCI Convention in Reno were disappointing. Two referred me to others, and a third failed to respond to a mail request for additional information.

As a last resort, I emailed Profi Hunt in Russia. Its website did not describe chamois hunting, but the group had organized two excellent trips for me in the past, one for Siberian roebuck in the Kurgan region of Russia and the second for mid-Asian ibex in the Kyrgyz Republic. The company's email reply

stated that it could arrange a chamois hunt for me in the Caucasus Mountains, where it organized hunts for eastern and western tur. In desperation, I agreed to its terms and signed a contract.

Three months later, I was questioning my sanity. There was civil unrest in Georgia and Dagestan, adjacent to the Caucasus Mountains, plus threat-

The horse wrangler takes a smoke break while tending the hay-burners that transported the author up the steep mountains.



ened terrorism along pipelines carrying oil and gas from the Caspian region to Eastern Europe. Had senility set in, or did I make a wise decision?

Ned, my hunting companion from Michigan, and I met in New York on Labor Day for our flight from JFK to Moscow. He had just returned from Zimbabwe, where he took several magnificent trophies during a 10-day

safari. Now he was joining me for a five-day hunt for a single species. I knew he would be comparing the two hunts in his mind. How would they measure up? Because I had lured him into this hunt, the burden of proof was on me.

Our Aeroflot flight landed on schedule at the Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow. The Profi Hunt interpreter met us and assisted us through the maze of bureaucratic paperwork at customs. We overnighted in a horribly expensive hotel near the airport and flew to Karachaevsk early the next morning. Transporting firearms on Russian airlines is a real hassle. Thank goodness our outfitter was there to assist.

A three-hour drive from the airport to the hunting camp was extended to nine hours with stops to collect supplies, obtain police clearance for hunting in the Karachayevo-Cherkesskaya Republic and visit with the director of hunting for the region. Arriving at camp after dark prevented us checking the zero of our rifles before starting to hunt early the following morning, a situation that caused us great concern.

Our guides had us sized up as soon as we alighted from our decrepit four-

wheel-drive vehicle. Ned's trim 62-year-old frame classed him as a mountain climber whereas my 72-year-old carcass relegated me to less-strenuous exploits. We were paired off with separate guides, Ned with Sergei and me with Salovat. Neither spoke English, but our interpreter usually was nearby to help us communicate with them.

The Caucasus range is one of the world's great mountain barriers and generally is accepted as the boundary between Asia and Europe. It's a grandiose, 750-mile chain extending generally from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea. It contains several peaks over 15,000 feet, including the 18,510-foot Mt. El'brus, highest in Europe. The high region contains several parallel ranges north of the main divide, some covered with glaciers. The mountains are an awe-inspiring mix of bare rock bluffs, forested areas and alpine meadows. The region has a fascinating history, including subjection to Rome, the Sassanids, the Arabs, the Mongols and, more recently, Turkey, Persia and Russia. Numerous invasions and migrations have resulted in a complex ethnic and linguistic mix. The area was Christian in the 10th Century and criss-crossed with major trade routes, including the

Great Silk Way with its caravanseries and cobbled caravan roads. I was not prepared to fully appreciate the cultural character of the area but was impressed with the three well-preserved, ancient Christian temples we visited after the hunt.

Ned's chamois hunt was exhausting but short-lived. Early the first morning, he and Sergei were glassing some rocky crags in the foothills when three chamois were spotted crossing the skyline over three miles away. They set out up the mountain in hot pursuit. Their ascent transcended about 2,000 vertical feet, thankfully across grassy slopes rather than up sheer cliffs. They found the three chamois grazing on a hillside just over the crest of the mountain. One of them spotted the men and spooked before Ned could get a steady rest for a shot.

Sergei was not pleased, but it was only the first morning of the hunt, so Ned was not concerned. The two retreated back over the skyline and moved uphill to a better vantage point, crawling the last 40 yards to a protruding cliff. One chamois was visible, lying down broadside and alert 160 yards out. The shot was taken sharply downhill, and the

chamois rolled down the mountain and out of sight. Ned and Sergei rushed forward and found the carcass lodged against a large boulder. Its symmetrical eight-inch horns were undamaged. The first day thus produced a super trophy.

Meanwhile, Salovat and I searched lower bluffs in vain for chamois. The day did prove how unprepared I was for climbing steep mountains. The mind was willing, but the body was not able. The problem was discussed and resolved over dinner that evening. Two horses and a wrangler were commandeered from a local herder to propel me up the steep slopes the next morning.

We were up at dawn and in the saddle soon thereafter. Both Sergei and Salovat were along; they walked while the wrangler and I rode the hayburners up the mountain. At the top, the two guides told us to wait with the horses while they went over the skyline to glass the bluffs below. It seemed an eternity before they reappeared. Through the interpreter they said, "Two chamois just beyond the rock outcrop. Shoot the darker one. It's a male."

My pulse rate quickened as I slid a cartridge into the chamber of my rifle. Crouching, I followed Sergei forward. Peering over a rocky ledge revealed the two chamois feeding away from us well beyond shooting range. Sergei just raised his hands and shook his head in disgust.

We proceeded along the ridge top, stopping frequently to glass the rocky outcrops below. After several unproductive searches, Salovat spotted three chamois near the treeline far below. He and Sergei studied the terrain carefully and jabbered to each other. Finally, it was decided that we would try to get within shooting range. I would go down the mountain with Sergei while Salovat stayed on top and directed us to the animals with hand signals.

The slopes were steep and slippery. I kept thinking that all those steps down would later mean a torturous uphill climb. We descended approximately 1,500 feet to reach the same level as the chamois. Despite the eyes of two guides, it was like looking for three needles in a haystack. We proceeded slowly, communicating by nods and gestures.

Sergei started to walk out on a small rock ledge to look down, but stopped in midstride, crouched and eased back slowly. Three chamois were among boulders 200 yards in

front of us. Palms down to signal caution, he motioned me forward. Crawling over on hands and knees increased my pulse rate. Sergei pointed to a rock outcrop from which I could shoot. I slithered ahead until my rifle barrel was beyond the rock, then searched the area below. I could not see any animals. Sergei finally pointed out the three animals, feeding among some brush.

"Shoot, shoot!" he whispered.

The neck and head of a chamois appeared from behind a boulder. Steadying the rifle's forearm on a rock with my gloved hand, I squeezed the trigger just as the animal's body became visible. When I recovered from the recoil, no chamois was in sight, but Sergei indicated that two had run off to the left. The third was nowhere to be seen.

After we'd waited for a couple of minutes in silence, Sergei reached for my rifle and motioned that he would go down and check things out. I should stay put. Twenty minutes later, he returned, shaking his head. He had found no trace of the chamois – possibly it had been a clean miss. I was devastated. "Why didn't I wait for the chamois to fully expose himself?" I muttered to myself. "Why did I try a

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shot at a moving target?" Oh, to be able to rerun those few moments and have a second chance.

Sergei motioned for me to stay on the ledge while he went down again to search the rocks. He was not convinced that the shot was a clean miss. But he could find no blood where the animal was when I'd shot. It was now late afternoon and time to head back to camp. I was totally dejected as I rode the horse down the mountain.

For some reason, we broke camp that evening and moved to the camp manager's residence in town. Sergei and Salovat planned to use dogs to search for the chamois the next day. I never saw anything resembling trailing dogs, but trusted that they knew what they were doing. I still wasn't convinced that the animal was mortally wounded, but the guides seemed to be thinking otherwise. They were not successful in finding it, but Sergei said he saw a blood smear on some vegetation. A smear of blood, however, does not a trophy become.

Rain and fog moved in. The elements reflected my mood – waiting while the men searched was demoralizing. By the end of the fourth day, I'd given up hope and assumed that I'd either missed completely or inflicted a superficial wound.

For the last day of our hunt, the area's director of wildlife took us to a region that had been opened for hunting only two years earlier. It was a two-hour drive from our lodging in town, and our vehicle broke down en route. During a three-hour delay for repairs, I checked the zero of my rifle from roadside, and at dark we arrived exhausted at a hunting lodge. Vodka and scotch were shared as we toasted each other and the international camaraderie of hunters, and consumed copious amounts of skewered beef loin roasted over burning logs in an open fireplace.

The terrain of the new area differed from the exposed crags we had hunted previously. These mountains, though steep, were covered by trees, primarily oaks and other hardwoods. The forested slopes, marked with expansive areas of bare rock outcrop, provided ideal habitat for chamois.

A group of four females and three kids was spotted early in the morning. The females were mature, with nicely developed horns, but I could not determine which female lacked a kid. Females were legal game, but killing one with a small kid was not acceptable to me, even as a last resort. The

director and his assistant were prepared to back me up on any shot that presented itself. He carried a sporterized WWII Nazi Mauser 8x57mm with a 6X Hensoldt scope whereas his assistant had a 7.62x39mm semi-automatic Russian Tiger sniper rifle with a 10X scope – incredible backup power.

My last chance for a chamois came in midday when the director located a yellow spot on the very top of a vertical column of rock. It appeared and disappeared but finally took shape – a lone chamois on a rocky ledge. The rangefinder said 305 yards, and my rifle was zeroed for 200. The shot was possible, but the range exceeded my comfort zone. A down vest folded under the rifle's forearm did not provide enough elevation. Adding the director's jacket helped, but not enough. The chamois kept watching us, silhouetted on the rock ledge, but he was becoming restless. Finally, I placed a backpack under the down vest and jacket, making the shooting support high enough and solid. Just as I settled the crosshairs on the chamois, it simply disappeared – forever. A minute late and a dollar short – the story of my life.

I had no trophy to pack for the flights home, but the Caucasus Mountains provided lasting memories. I have few misgivings about that hunt, but the hassle of taking firearms through Russian airports is becoming more than I can stomach. It's a combination of duplication, inefficiency and contradictory regulations that creates confusion and tests one's patience. If I never hunt in Russia again, it will be because of bureaucratic red tape rather than the quality of the hunting opportunities. 🐐

Postscript: Upon returning home, I was notified that the carcass of my chamois had been found by a shepherd. The bullet had hit low in the brisket, and the crippled animal had run downhill to seek refuge in timber, where it died. The carcass was partially scavenged by ravens and crows, but the skull and horns were intact.

Ned's trophy scored 22 2/8; mine went 22 7/8. Both exceeded the SCI Gold Medal minimum for a Caucasian chamois and brightened my recollections of a demanding trip into forbidding mountains.