

A MEMORY never to be forgotten

by Lou Rupp, FNAWS Chairman



*Lou Rupp with his Mid-Asian Ibex taken
in a Kyrgyzstan camp during
November of 2006. Note the fur hat.*

As we settled down, I looked for a soft, comfortable spot in the wet rocks and as I lifted my binoculars for a better look across the valley, a thought crossed my mind which gave me a reason to pause. Having started hunting at an early age and later becoming hooked on sheep and alpine hunting, did I ever really believe, in my wildest dreams, one day I would be hunting



Kyrgyzstan Mid-Asian Ibex camp.

the crème de la crème of sheep hunting, the monarch – Marco Polo sheep in Tajikistan, half way or more around the world from my home in St. Louis. The pause was brief and a pinch was not required to bring me back to the realities at hand. A very pointed rock edge, digging its way into my backside was sufficient incentive.

The trip had been a year and a half in the planning and development stage due to permits availability and the fact that we were combining two trips into one. The first week of the trip was to be focused on hunting Mid-Asian Ibex (*Capra Sibirica Alaiana*), the largest ibex in the world, in Kyrgyzstan. The latter part of the trip was devoted to the Marco Polo Argali sheep (*Ovis Ammon Poli*) in Tajikistan. Details of the hunt were arranged through Vladimir Melnikov, owner/director of ProfiHunt of Moscow at the 2005 San Antonio Convention for the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep and the International Sheep Hunters Association.

The group making the trip consisted of well seasoned sheep hunters, FNAWS/ISHA Life Members Dave Myrup and Garth Hardy, both from the Salt Lake City area, and a recently retired, longtime outfitter, Dave Weins and me. What a group! Dave, Garth and I had enjoyed a Kamchatka snow sheep hunt together several years ago with ProfiHunt therefore, we felt very

comfortable putting the arrangement of the hunt into their hands.

During the spring of 2006, the three American hunters were focused on submitting their applications to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in Arlington, Virginia for the all important Marco Polo CITES Permit. Due to the fact there are always more applications submitted than permits issued, and the fact, no applications are accepted before May 1st each year, great emphasis was placed on having the postman deliver the application on, not before, the May 1st date which occurred on a Monday in 2006. On May 10th I received confirmation of my application, fee and my assigned PRT identification number MA125889-0. I was notified that the review process had begun. In the notification I was advised that the review process would take a minimum of 30 days, and could take as long as 90 days to complete the process, oh great! What if, for some unknown reason, they do not issue a permit for me or the other fellows this year? The waiting game is tough!

Finally, I opened the mailbox on August 26th, the bulky envelope, with the U.S. Department of the Interior's return address generated a warm smile of relief. Remember, there are no guarantees and normally there are only 40 to 60 permits issued yearly.

Knowing the hunt was now a go, it was time to start coordinating air travel

plans and forward all required personal information to ProfiHunt to obtain the required licenses, gun permits and international Visas, one for Kyrgyzstan and two for Tajikistan. It was also time to initiate the physical workout, get my body into sheep shape. As you get older, this workout becomes a little more difficult, especially in the early stages of the process. Getting your body in shape is extremely important on this hunt since you will be hunting at 12 – 12,500 feet in Kyrgyzstan and 13-15,000 feet in Tajikistan. Your cardiovascular condition must be good. No new major equipment purchases were required, just a check, recheck and reconditioning of current equipment. I make every effort to travel as light as possible. I do my best to eliminate or minimize bringing home clothes or equipment never used.

After much anticipation, the departure date, October 27th, the day after my birthday arrived! I was going to fly to Chicago and hook up with Dave and Garth and we would all connect to Turkish Air flight #1348 to Istanbul where we would meet up with Dave Wiens. You know Murphy's Law always seems to come into play when traveling on commercial airlines. This trip was no exception. Due to computer problems at O'Hare Airport, flights out of St. Louis were being cancelled or greatly delayed. Luckily, my flight was only delayed and eventually we took off, however, my connecting time in Chicago was greatly reduced. After an O.J. Simpson run through the airport to catch my Turkish Air flight, I think the door touched my backside as I got on board. What a way to start a much anticipated hunt.

Dave and Garth were already aboard and totally relaxed. I was just happy I caught the flight. We arrived on time in Istanbul and after a three hour layover Dave joined us at the airport. He arrived in Istanbul the day before and spent the night so we could

all travel together from Istanbul to Bishkek. Without any problems, we boarded the flight to Bishkek. There are only two flights weekly to Bishkek so it is extremely important that all your flights are on time.

Upon our 2 a.m. arrival, we were met by Vladimir Koshcheev of ProfiHunt who took us through the airport VIP service and assisted us through customs. Anyone contemplating a trip to anywhere in central Asia, it is highly recommended you utilize the VIP services wherever they are offered. After one experience I am sure you will agree with the recommendation.

Unfortunately Murphy's Law reared its ugly head again. My gun case arrived, however as I was told later, due to the short transfer time in Chicago the airline did not make the transfer of my luggage. I still do not understand how a gun case, which is always so sensitive, makes the transfer but normal luggage does not. The good news was, I always pack some clothes in my gun case. However, the bad news was, my heavy hunting jacket, boots and ammunition were all in my luggage. Unbelievably, somehow, somewhere at 3 a.m., the Kyrgyzstan outfitter came up with a partial box of ammunition and felt confident that any required replacement clothes could be provided in camp.

We now had a 12-13 hour drive to camp. Approximately, two thirds of the way to camp we transferred to two four-wheel old



Lunch on the way into Mid-Asian Ibex camp in Kyrgyzstan. Dave Weins is on the far right, and Vladimir Koshcheev is second from the right.

Russian army jeeps for the final distance to camp. Dave Myrup and Garth were headed to one camp, while Dave Weins and I were headed to a separate camp. The group split at the first military check point. We stopped enroute to check the rifles, making sure everything was on target. After clearing a second military check point and experiencing an extremely steep, narrow mountain road entrance into the final valley, we arrived in camp. Just prior to camp, we passed a heavily loaded old

the third one was home sweet home for Dave, Vladimir, and me.

Kyrgyzstan is geographically the size of South Dakota, located among the Tian Shan Mountains, the "Heavenly Mountains," that divide China from the Trans Ural Steppes. It is north of Kashmir and Afghanistan. We were going to hunt in the Boru-Albas River/Black Canyon area.

All transportation from this point was by horseback. The horses were not the size of the shaggy little ponies

encountered in Mongolia and China where a five foot or taller person had to worry about their feet dragging on the ground. These horses, although skinny, stood five feet tall at the shoulder, also, it needs to be mentioned that there is a "Kyrgyzstan Trick" to mounting the horse. You turn the left stirrup backwards, place your left foot into the stirrup and spring with your right leg, swing yourself up so you land dead center in the saddle.



A welcoming sign as you enter Tajikistan Marco Polo camp.

Hopefully, the horse stands still during this procedure, which was not always the case.

Back to my luggage not arriving with me, the clothes problem was quickly resolved when we settled in camp! Thankfully, I had packed a pair of long johns, hunting pants, shirt, gloves, and socks in my gun case. Somewhere in camp, we came up with a down filled jacket (a little large) and Dave had an extra Russian style fur hat. The problem area came with the pair of car wash style gum boots we found that were one size too small. Can you imagine climbing around in the rocks with these boots, which resulted in my toenails turning black and remaining that color for six months. Oh well, this situation was not going to ruin my hunt.

The countryside of Kyrgyzstan where we hunted for the week was much like that of a western state. Obviously, we were above the tree line.

One evening, our route back to camp involved traveling in a river for several hours following a deep, steep, canyon – simply beautiful. You would think you were somewhere in Utah, Arizona, or New Mexico.

Dave was successful in taking a fine Ibex on the second day and spent the rest of the week exploring the countryside, and nearby old mines, since the area had been mined heavily at one time in history. I took until the last day to score on my Ibex. We saw animals, lots of them everyday, but just could not effectively close the distance. Due to the length of my hunt, I got a chance to really see a lot of the countryside. The weather during the trip was equal to a mild November in the western states in the U.S., very enjoyable. There was snow up high which only helped the hunting.

We found a small group of Ibex in the canyons just above camp on the afternoon of day one, however, the

group's daily movement pattern took them from the bottom of the canyon up to the cliff's top early every day, where it was impossible to approach.

We returned to locate them again early on the second to last day but again they reached the cliffs before we could get into position. After playing hide and seek all day, we put them to sleep with plans to arrive the next morning before daylight, which is just what we did. We put ourselves in perfect position to get a shot as they moved up.

Once we rejoined Dave and Garth we had tallied up five Ibex taken and all measuring in the 39"-45" range. Garth Hardy was the lucky hunter who scored on a second Ibex. Another benefit of this first week of the trip was the opportunity for the hunters to start acclimating themselves to higher altitudes in preparation for the second phase of the trip.

Upon completion of the Ibex hunt,



Dave Myrup (left photo) and Garth Hardy (right photo) with their trophy Ibex.

the group returned to Bishkek, over-nighted and prepared for the flight Osh. Good news, upon returning, I found my luggage had arrived! Osh, a city with a 3,000 year history, is approximately 370 miles south of Bishkek and is located 150 miles from the Tajikistan border. It is the second largest city in Kyrgyzstan. Traveling to the hunting camp has become somewhat famous. During good weather conditions, the 4x4 wheel jeep ride takes 14-15 hours

depending on the attitude of the guards at thirteen control borders crossing points. A full supply of food, bread, cigarettes, etc. were carried with us to "grease the skids" of the guards at the control points.

We drove through the villages of Gulcha, Sary-Tash and the Kyzyl Art pass in excess of 13,000 feet, which is the border point between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The route we took was a dirt and gravel road which has not

had meaningful maintenance since the Russians pulled back in the early nineties. We were headed for the famous hot springs camp located in the Murgab region. Average trophy size taken in this area is 55 to 56 inches, with several 60-62 inch rams taken every season. In 2003, a 68 inch ram was taken. We arrived late at night and after the long day of travel, everyone settled in and hit the rack as soon as possible.

The next morning after breakfast and checking the rifles, everyone divided off for the hunt. Each hunter is accompanied by two guides and a driver. An old Russian 4x4 jeep was the transportation used to take us to the point where we started climbing.

While we were glassing from the top of the mountain, I noticed a red and white pole down in the bottom of the valley. I asked my guide the significance of the pole. His answer came as a surprise. "Oh, that's the border, the border to Afghanistan".

All hunting is done in the Pamir Mountain Range. When we caught sight of our first herd of sheep I could hardly believe the physical size of the animal. These sheep appeared to be almost twice the size of North Ameri-



International flare in Tajikistan Marco Polo camp in Murgab region.

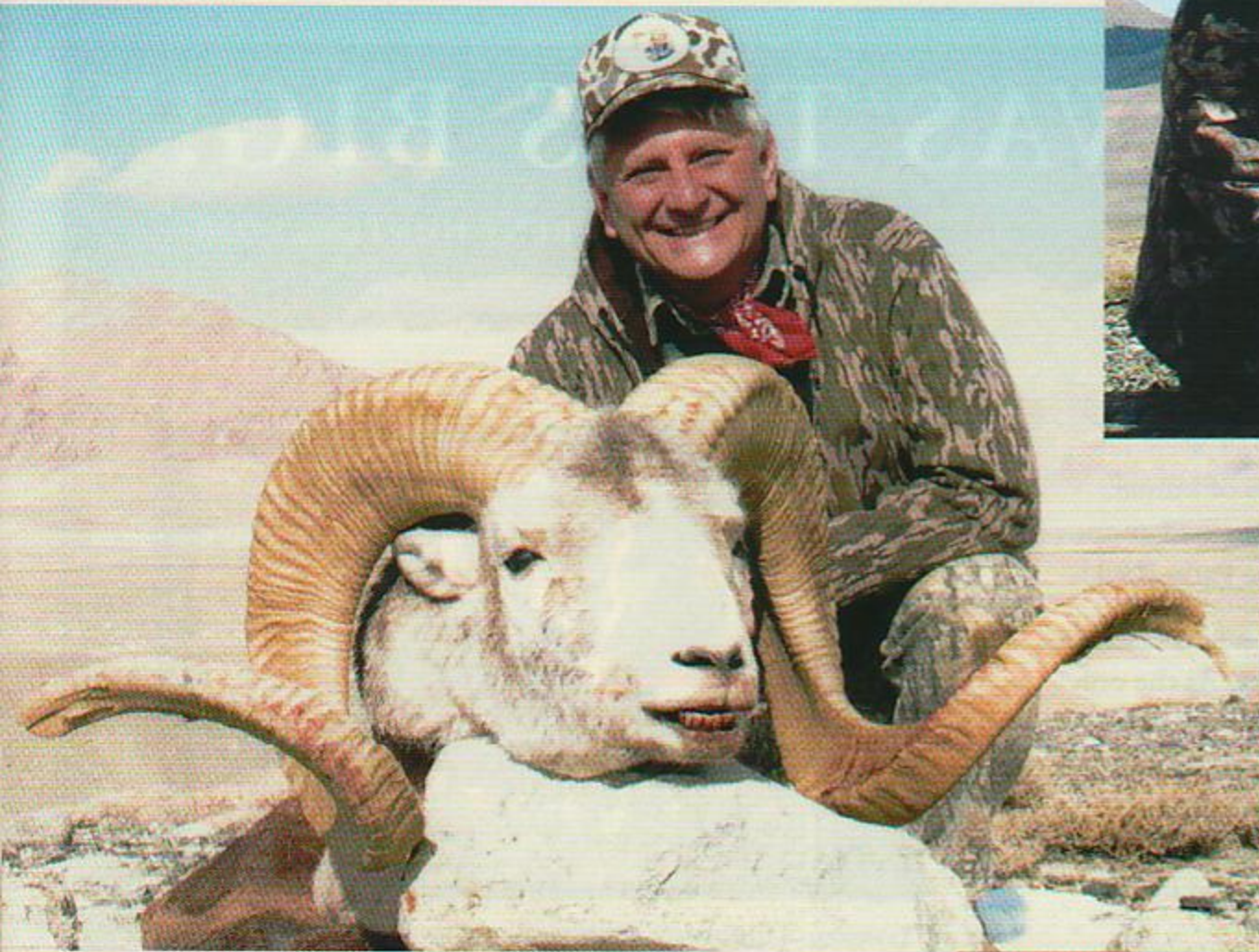
can sheep. The estimated weights would be in the 300-400 pound range as astounding as that sounds.

We spent the rest of the day glassing at great distance, but every attempt to move closer to the sheep resulted in a spoiled stalk due to smaller rams, bands of ewes, or wind direction. The country is so open, it is difficult to use the landscape to your advantage.

Just before dark, we came across two lonesome rams that instantly caught our attention. As we attempted to close the distance, the jig was up and they started slowly moving upward. They did not appear to be overly concerned since they kept stopping and looking backwards. This movement allowed us to quickly get into position. The range finder distanced the sheep at 580-600 yards but the shot did find its mark on their next pause and the larger ram was down. The measurement was done the next

day. The horns, which were worn off like most of those seen during the trip measured 57 and 58 inches. All four sheep taken by the group measured in the 55 to 58 inch range and had beautiful winter coats.

This story would not be complete without a description of the famous hot springs camp. Of course there was the hot springs and an indoor heated pool with water piped in from the hot springs, flush toilets, electric lights, and a great chef and waitress! There is nothing else to expect in any way, first class!



Lou Rupp with his Marco Polo sheep, 57" and 58", taken in November 2006, at Hot Springs Camp in the Murgab Region of Tajikistan.

(above right) Garth Hardy and Dave Myrup (right) with their Marco Polo sheep.

