

## Ups and Downs of 2020 – My Sheep Story

Chad Phillips (1982), Colorado

Hunt: Sept and Dec. 2020, S61, Colorado (Purgatoire River Canyon)

Let's start with a little background, in case you don't know me. I am a native of Colorado, grew up in Pueblo, and moved to the Denver area after college (graduated Colorado School of Mines 2004).

Growing up, my brother and I would tag along with my dad and my grandpa on deer hunting trips to the Greenhorn, west of Rye. Once we were old enough to hunt, we would go as hunters. These were an annual event for the most part. That's pretty much all we did at that time was deer hunt, and the hunting party changed from time to time also with various family friends and such. We carried elk tags or bear tags at times just in case we saw one, but never actively hunted game other than deer. We would go for archery some years and rifle others. I harvested my first deer with my bow as an early teenager.

During college, I didn't get to hunt much because of school, but would accompany my dad and brother on their hunts when I could. After college however, we began actively hunting elk a bit more, but continued to pursue deer. The point creep was already occurring in Colorado and our annual deer outings in the same area we always went changed to every other year, then every third year, and so on. This is not a deer or elk story, so enough of that, except one more thing...

On an elk hunt a couple of years after college, we saw Bighorn Sheep in the unit. We saw them one day driving back to camp for lunch on the road, and never having been that close or paid much attention to them, there was a huge "wow" factor. I told my dad I was going to start putting in to hunt them. I knew it was a long way out, so I merely collected points for several years, as I know many of us do. Some of you reading probably have a significant number of points more than I did when I drew my tag in 2020.

Fast forward to 2020, as this is where the adventure really begins. Early in the year, I submitted my annual draw application to CPW. I had been putting in for the BSAP program in S61 for the past few years. I decided to look a little before submitting. I noticed that the normal ram tags for S61 had a very high success rate, just slightly less than 100%, and there were 4 tags available, one of the largest number of ram tags of a single unit in Colorado. I was intrigued and did a couple of hours of research before submitting on my application. I basically left it as, it is a total crap shoot anyway, what the heck – S61 Ram it is.

A couple of months later, I received a text from a friend that draw results for sheep were starting to come out, he got his results, no dice. I checked my email and had no notifications, so logged into CPW and checked my status. My points were a zero. I texted my friend and told him my points went to zero, but my draw status shows pending, and was wondering if my +1 was just still processing. About an hour later... I got the email – draw was successful! I was so excited, I wanted to go that day, but knew the prep needed to be very thorough now. (I was a 10 + 3 on points, so this was year 14 for me).

One of my first calls was to a family friend (RW) who knew my dad. My dad passed in 2014, but I have kept in touch with RW and his passion and knowledge of the outdoors has given me a friend to call and talk through some things I have yet experience. He has hunted sheep, so he was a call I had to make in this process too.

In the following days, I reached out to people I knew that still lived in southern Colorado or people I knew that may have connections down around Trinidad to learn more about the hunt and the unit. I also posted on a few hunting forums to see if I could get more info. I knew from my research before the draw that this was on the Purgatoire River Canyon, and I would hunt the USFS areas and the Army's Pinyon Canyon Maneuver Site (PCMS) near the river canyon.

Through reaching out to contacts of mine, I didn't turn up much. Through the forums, I was able to connect with two people who helped me to give me a good rundown of the area. One had hunted while stationed by the Army in Colorado and knew the area, the second was a former sheep hunter in the unit. These two persons (Dan and MT) helped me immensely in leading up to this, so thank you both!

I also scoured the PCMS web info and was able to get in contact with the biologist, Rich Riddle, who works on the PCMS site. Rich was a great help as well. He gave me a lot of info early on as to where to hunt, what to expect, and stressed that if I was diligent and patient in a few key areas, I would have a high likelihood to harvest a ram.

Over the next few months, I continued to plan. I called CPW folks in the area, spoke to anyone I could about the hunt, and prepared myself for this adventure. This was a split season, hunting available in September and December. Based on all of the information I had received, I was planning for a 3 week December hunt. I was planning to skip September since it would be very hot, and I didn't want to lose the meat if I couldn't get to the animal fast enough. There was a likelihood of temperatures in the 90's and 100's.

For those that are not familiar with it, southern Colorado (east of I-25) in the late summer can be very HOT. This area also had a lot of juniper and pinyon, so not big trees for shade. Having grown up in Pueblo, and hunted some areas similar in terrain to this, I was fully aware of the potential for hot weather. This drove my original decision to forego September. Also, December was the rut and all sheep previously had been harvested in December on this hunt. I planned with family and friends to accompany me at various times in December, since I knew 3 weeks straight was hard for an individual to be there with me. But... Plans change.

As unpredictable as hunting can be, add in 2020 and COVID-19. What would a 2020 story be without COVID-19 right? Due to COVID, the Army was considering not allowing hunting on its facilities in Colorado. I learned of this in late July. This is where my plans began to change. I waited day by day to learn if the command at Ft. Carson would allow hunting on PCMS, as PCMS is under Ft. Carson's control. Days went by. On the last day to turn in my tag in the middle of August, I was close to heading to CPW to do just that. If the season opened Sept. 1 and I had a tag, there was a possibility of being out of luck and not hunt at all. After conversations with CPW, I let it ride. I made a change and decided with this

uncertainty I would be there opening day in September and hunt 2 weeks then and come back in December if unsuccessful. My brother-in-law (CT) was able to adjust his time off at work and join me.

As the days approached, I watched the PCMS page multiple times a day. Finally, a few days before the hunt, an exception was granted! Hunting was allowed under the Army's HPCON A and B level restrictions for COVID. (The Army uses HPCON Level A-D for the pandemic, A being mildest, and D being worst and the most restrictions).

I was down there a couple of days before opening day, set up camp, and scouted a bit. I treated opening day as a scouting day (with a rifle in hand) since I was solo, but given the right opportunity was willing to take shot. CT joined me on 9/2, and the hunting got more serious once I had a hunting partner. September was hot, dry, and hotter. 95+ degrees during the days, and little shade was brutal, but we kept hiking, glassing, hiking, sitting on a cactus here and there, hiking some more.... We did find sheep on a couple of occasions. We spotted 2 ewes on 9/2, and a larger group of sheep a few days later, in both cases near a lookout/glassing point. During my solo scouting, I saw 1 ram a long way across a canyon in the rocks but could not locate him later in the week as we checked back to the area. After a week and a half of being there, Colorado weather threw us a curve ball. A summer blizzard! Recall, I said it was 95+ degrees leading up to this. We were notified mid-week of the second week that the PCMS site would be closed the following day due to inclement weather coming in. I had a suspicion the closure would be 2-3 days (I turned out to be correct). Being that this would lock us out for the last few days of week 2, and we were not prepared for winter weather hunting in September, we decided to pack up camp and call it a few days early. We packed up camp in 99-degree heat, only to have the area get hit by a blizzard the following day. We got out before the snowstorm. This ended the September chapter of my sheep hunt, but I knew I was leaving some cards on the table by not hunting more in September after the storm passed. It left some uncertainty surrounding would I be able to get back in December?

I continued to study and prep leading up to December. As we hit mid-November, this COVID thing was springing up again with a vengeance. HPCON was still at B, but around the state schools going remote, restaurants mandated to close dining rooms, restrictions around every corner and changing quickly like back in the spring. I was nervous about the December 1 re-opening date for the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of my season. I had to ask hunting partners to adjust schedules to join me hunting because of others who were no longer able to make it. I was able to get my brother (CP) and brother in law (CT) lined up for the 1<sup>st</sup> 2 weeks of December and hoped this was enough time.

Finally December 1 was here, we were waking up early to drive to PCMS from Trinidad. I was able to check in to hunt! (PCMS requires a daily check-in and check-out due to it being a military site – this detail will be important in a couple of days). Here we go:

Day 1 – started on the north rim of the Taylor Arroyo. We glassed, hiked, glassed, and so on. Mid-morning we had reached a spot and seated ourselves at “the lookout” as I have decided to call it for now. My brother (CP) and I switched seat locations and he asked if BH Sheep bleat like domestic sheep, he thought he heard something but never saw anything. Unsure what he had heard, we switched seats to continue glassing. After another 45 minutes or so, I got up to move down the canyon and looked

over the edge, there were sheep right below us! I told CP and he came over and we looked them over. There were 12 sheep total, 4 rams w/ 2 shooters (one  $\frac{3}{4}$  curl, and one  $\frac{5}{8}$  and heavier bases than the  $\frac{3}{4}$ ). The angle was steep, and I wasn't sure how the heck to set up on them. I considered running down the ridge a little to get a better angle, but they started to step away from the cliff out into the open hill a bit. I ranged them, about 200 yds. I started setting up but took too long. They got spooked (insert expletive here). I blew my shot on opening morning. I don't know if we spooked them or the hunters across the canyon did, but it didn't matter, I screwed up and took too long. Lesson learned: if legal ram in the group set up for a shot and make the decision to shoot or not afterward. We finished hunting the day, but by 3:00 it was 50mph winds and almost whiteout from snow. We called it a day.



(Purgatoire River Canyon)

Day 2 – 20 degrees and 40-50mph winds. Cold and crappy but we stayed out dawn to dusk. No sheep today. I checked back on the PCMS and Ft. Carson HPCON info this evening. HPCON “C”. My heart sank. I decided to give it the night and see what it showed in the morning.

Day 3 – 3:45 AM. HPCON C. 4:00 Check In Time (via the webpage). It let me check in to hunt, I was going to hunt. We were on the road shortly after. The PCMS check-in website site delays entry or closes entry as they need to, such as the summer blizzard. The fact they didn't close it, I was relieved, but still

uneasy about whether I would be able to hunt the next day. We went to Taylor Arroyo, and after seeing nothing in the morning, decided to try the canyon to the north in the afternoon. About 3:00 we spotted a ram! He was behind a bush and I could get a good look, but it was a sheep with horns, and they appeared to be a half curl or a little more. All I could see was a white backside and a silhouette of a ram head through the bush. I lined up my scope on the bush and ended up watching a bush in my rifle scope until almost dark. An hour and a half laying on a cold rock looking through a scope is not super exciting, but hey, this was hunting and I was not going to make my Day 1 mistake and wait too long to set up. While sitting there, CP walked back and forth from east to west to try to see if there was a better vantage point, but he never found one. Finally, with last light, we moved east a little knowing there wasn't a shot available, could see him slightly better, but still obstructed by the bush. I decided he was a small ram, maybe 1/2 curl, and even though we put him to bed on the hill, wasn't going back there the next day for him. At the end of Day 3, CP headed home and CT joined me that evening.

Day 4 – Was able to check in again! The weather was slightly warmer. We hiked/glassed, but saw no sheep. Nothing notable today.

Day 5 – The PCMS info was updated to say HPCON A to C was allowing hunting! That lifted a burden and a lot of uncertainty of day to day. We checked in and got on the road. We stayed on the north side of Taylor again, hiking the rim and glassing from various vantage points and trying to find the sheep from Day 1. Around 11:00 we walked out and moved to another area to the west. We had only left the truck for a few minutes and around 11:45, "CRACK". We swore it was a gunshot, but I am still unsure what this was. I set up the direction it came from in case sheep came running up the canyon. We did pass a truck when we moved, so we thought it was them that shot, later would find this was not the case. We decide to work back to the east toward the sound and CT suddenly said, "do you see 'em". I did not. He had spotted 6 sheep on a rockslide about 150 yards west of the lookout point. We were a long way off. We hustled to get over there and suddenly, we were at 450-500 yards from them. I knew this was a stretch of my shooting ability and coupled with wind, decided we needed to close distance. They bedded, now was our chance. We hauled butt around a finger drainage/ravine where I knew we would lose sight of them for a bit. We got back to the edge, and they were gone, or at least we couldn't find them. After a few minutes we heard voices. Here comes another sheep hunter up the bottom with loaded packs. I was certain the noise and voices busted the ones we were watching out. We sat for a while after the hunter passed and watched but nothing. I told CT we don't have enough time in the day to move and have shooting light if we go elsewhere and I was frustrated we didn't stay on the 450 yd spot as they may have been spooked right to us, but things happen, let's hike out. We did cross the hunting partner (the Dad) of the other guy on the way out. Told him congrats for his son. He said they shot the ram at 7:20am. I asked if they heard any shots around noon, he said no. This really made me wonder what the crack sound from mid-day was. Anyway, we called it a day and decided to get back on the area from the lookout early the next day as those rams probably didn't go far.

Day 6 – Checked in online and drove from Trinidad again. I don't know how to describe it, but I had a calmness and confidence about this day. I knew rams were in the canyon, but where? I had decided we would go the lookout as there was the greatest amount of area to be seen from here, and with short walks east/west we could see the areas underneath us without too much trouble. We could also see the rockslide area, which sheep seemed to like, as we had seen them there in September and 2 times now in

December, they had to come back. I was determined to sit on the lookout for 2-3 days and just wait and watch.

Around 8:00, I was on the east part of the lookout looking east/south, and CT was west looking west/south. I heard a series of “cracks” from 8:15-8:30. It occurred to me this was probably rams fighting, but I could not spot them. Maybe the sound yesterday was this also? Very cool to listen to this today, even though I couldn’t see them.

At 9:00 I took a short walk, I saw nothing under our perch at the lookout to the west, but when I went to the east, sheep! A ewe and a very small ram, but sheep! Others couldn’t be too far away and they were feeding under us to the west. I went back told CT to keep his eyes open and what I had seen.

At around 10:45, having seen nothing, I took another short walk, leaving CT at the lookout. Nothing to the west, went to the east, but couldn’t locate the sheep. Then I looked straight down the hill. The sheep from the previous afternoon were at the base of the hill on the rocks right below me! I got to the edge and ranged them “226 YDS HCD” read on the display. I can do this.... I backed up from the edge so they wouldn’t see me or I wouldn’t be skylined on the ridge. I belly crawled to the edge but had a hard time getting pointed down due to the steepness (from the ridge to the bottom where the sheep were it was 400+ vertical feet). I arched my back up to raise my shoulder but needed a rest to make this work. I backed up, removed my bino pouch, it would have to do. Crawled up again and set up. The biggest ram of the bunch was about a  $\frac{3}{4}$  curl, so I focused on him. He finally stood up, but there was another sheep behind him. I told myself to be patient. They started walking and grazing. He stopped and turned but I was too shaky. I told myself “Chad – calm down, breathe”. After a few deep breaths, I opened my eyes and felt much steadier. I waited and had him in the scope. He finally turned, I clicked the safety off, I exhaled, told myself “squeeze”, and shot. The rest ran off but he stayed, he’s unsteady, and he’s down!

CT came over and he had spotted the sheep also right before I shot. He was trying to figure out where I was to let me know, and he said he pulled up his binos again and was looking at the sheep and then “KABOOM” it scared the crap out of him! He had no idea I was on them already but watched the sheep from a few seconds before the shot through the time it expired, which was very short. It was a strange coincidence he watched this unfold how it did, but neat he saw it!

Now it was time to go get him! The hike down to get to him was a little under 2 miles through a nasty boulder field. We finally got to him, took some photos, took care of business then a nasty packout, but worth it. We finished it with headlamps for the last 45 minutes and some crawling at times.







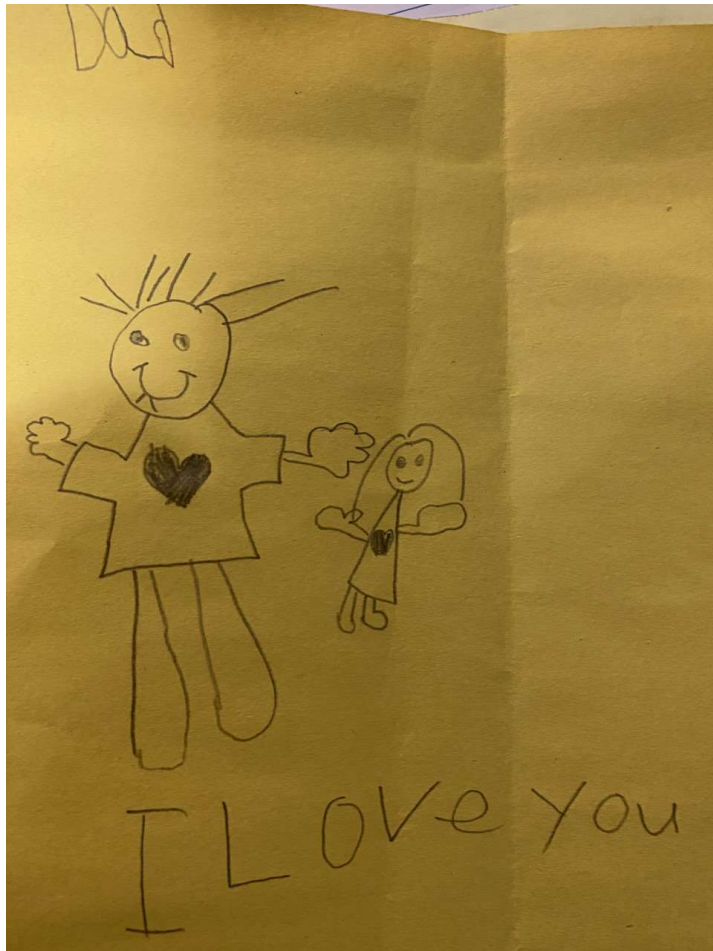


(Shot was taken from edge of cliff at arrow)

Now I am back at home with my wife and daughter, and I missed them dearly while away. We will spend the holidays together with family and friends and enjoy each other's company in these strange times of 2020.



I picked up my daughter from daycare on my day back home and she gave me this. It meant the world. She said she made it because I was coming home and she missed me.



This was certainly a trip I will never forget. It may not have been the biggest ram in that canyon, but I harvested what I was after, have a lot of memories, and a trophy! I did this as a DIY hunt. I was blessed to be able to share it with my brother (CP) and brother-in-law (CT). As with any hunting trips, bonds are strengthened and relationships grow. I also get a feeling of renewed love at home with being away.

The last piece that I want to share was very timely text message, literally right as I was leaving for my 3 ½ hour drive home: came from RW, my dad's old friend "Your dad would have been very proud of you."

Thank you for reading, and thank you to my wife and daughter for putting up with my crazy year!

(Note: I used initials mostly in case people didn't want their names in here. If anyone reads this and wants more info, you can call me at 303-263-8934, I would be happy to share)