

# YUKON Triple Slam

Tim Sundles

## On What Started Out As A Sheep Hunt



Nothing matches the adventure of a true wilderness big-game hunt, especially when it takes place in the most remote, unpopulated and rugged part of North America. I knew my gear and physical preparation needed to be the very best, as once the bush plane dropped me off, there was no way to run to town for replacements, or for help. This was my mindset as I booked a 14-day Dall sheep hunt, followed by an 8-day moose hunt, with Jim Shockey's Rogue River Outfitters. My plan was to showcase Buffalo Bore's upcoming .338 Win Mag ammo and to prove there exists a rifle cartridge that, when housed in a lightweight packable rifle and if properly designed, is versatile enough to make a 500-yard shot on sheep and powerful enough to authoritatively anchor a 1,500-plus-pound moose and dangerous game such as grizzly. Shockey's Yukon concession has all these game animals and more, as you'll see. The stunning scenery was a bonus.

Yukon color phase bore grizzly



Driving from my Montana home to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, I met up with Fred Lackie, who serves as the manager of Shockey's Yukon area and can only be described as Jim's partner. Also present were my noted sheep guide, Eldon Hoff and moose guide, Mike Pearson. Because I am kind I won't mention Eldon's age, but Mike is only 25 and also guides for Shockey's Pacific Rim bear outfit on Queen Charlotte Islands. From Whitehorse, Eldon, Mike and I drove north 4 hours to Mayo, and then flew east 120 miles on a single-engine Otter, to our base camp, aptly called The Forks, where the Rogue and Stewart Rivers meet.

At The Forks, we loaded up two Argo 8-wheel-drive vehicles and headed for our spike camp. We took enough gear, plus our backpacks, for an even more remote bare-essentials spike camp for sheep, if necessary. I could not help but notice the abundance of grizzly, moose, caribou and wolf tracks around the rustic old cabins at base camp. If this much game hangs around base camp, how much game will we see where we choose to hunt?

### ***It's Never Easy!***

It rained during our 6-hour Argo ride to spike camp, until we were completely soaked. We set up a drenched camp as it continued to pour all night and into the next morning, which was to be the first day of sheep hunting. So, what do you do when it rains on your sheep hunt and limits mountain visibility? If you are in a good moose area, you hunt moose, of course.

Later that morning, through my 10X binoculars, I spotted the single left antler of a bedded moose in heavy brush about a mile away. It looked fully mature, although I could not see both antlers. After a few seconds, it disappeared back into Yukon's brush. I told both guides, "There's a bull moose across the valley." After 2 hours of looking for this moose without seeing it, I suspect they figured I was visually impaired and suffering from moose fever. I regretted mentioning the phantom moose, but knew I saw a large antler in the brush. I kept hoping he would stand and show himself. Since the guides had no proof I actually saw a moose and since the clouds were lifting, we drove both Argos another mile up a canyon and started to glass the mountains for sheep, which is when Mike announced, "Hey Tim, your moose just stood up." I looked back and at roughly 2 miles I could see his huge pans through my Leica 10x42s. The weather still stunk for sheep hunting, so a closer look was in order.



***Tim and Guide Eldon Hoff posing before the real work began processing this monster Yukon moose***



***This mountain Caribou was worth the rugged stalk.***





Rustic cabin at "the forks" beats sleeping out in the elements any day.

As we closed to 200 yards, the bull proved to have huge paddles, good bottoms, heavy mass and long tines, but was just under the magic 60" spread. However, four out of five positives made him a "shooter" for sure. He bedded again and literally disappeared into the brush. I was beginning to hate Yukon's valley bottom brush. For two hours we waited ... and waited. Even though the rut would not start for another 3 weeks, out of concern for approaching darkness, I asked Mike to call him and see what followed. Mike called. The bull nervously stood from the dense brush, reappearing like a giant and decided to exit, stage right. This gave me a very sharp quartering away shot at 210 yards. Mike called again and the huge beast stopped, looking back at us. The brush was tall enough to obstruct the bullets path to his lungs and shoulders, so I was left with only a spine shot, which I took. At the rifles blast,

the great animal fell straight into his tracks — a sure sign of a severed spinal cord. The Barnes 210-grain tipped TSX bullet had now accounted for the first trophy of this adventure.

### **Majestic Beauty**

As we approached the fallen monarch, I was struck by his beauty, size and majesty. What an awesome creature! It was then I knew taking a single Yukon moose would not be enough for one lifetime. I asked Eldon and Mike to leave me alone with the bull while they retrieved the Argos. I needed time by myself to pay respect to the life I had just taken. Mike said "Okay, we'll leave you alone, but *please* hang on to your rifle and keep your eyes open for grizzly." I did not realize I was asking Mike to break protocol by leaving me alone in the Yukon bush, but I've always been a loner and grizzlies don't bother me one bit — when I have a good rifle and ammo, anyways.

After skinning, butchering and caping, we loaded the moose into the Argos and headed for spike camp. A satellite phone allowed us to contact Fred for a meat/antler flight out of The Forks the following day. It was 2 days before the Otter arrived and picked up our moose, allowing us to resume sheep hunting.

It rained the next 4 days, giving us no mountain visibility. This was truly frustrating. The morning of the seventh day found us soaking wet, standing around a smoky fire in spike camp, trying to dry out, which was not to be. Eldon, the consummate sheep hunter, was glassing what tiny bit of the mountains the clouds gave us from camp. Suddenly he said, "That's not a bad caribou bull." Again, if it rains on your sheep hunt, you find something else to go after.

Unlike moose, caribou are sharp-eyed, and the bulls are wary, as they are hunted 24/7 by grizzlies and wolves. As we approached, he spotted us at 600 yards and became alert. I found my first positive use of Yukon brush when we ducked behind cover and carefully picked our path. At 300 yards, we ran out of cover and at 286 yards (according to the Leicas) he decided to vacate. Mike mouthed a whitetail bleat and stopped him quartering toward us. This time there was no brush blocking a perfect double-lung shot, and as the .338 roared, the 450-pound bull fell without taking a step. I was impressed with the massive terminal damage delivered by the Barnes TSX bullet. We again skinned and quartered in the rain and headed to The Forks to await the Otter. Meat flights are normally very available, but with precious metals mining booming in the Yukon, mine operations have the available planes booked up, so it took 4 days for the plane to arrive, which was agonizing as 3 of those 4 days were good enough weather to sheep hunt — bummer!

Eldon only had 11 days to guide, so he flew out with the caribou, which left me and my moose guide to fend



**This single engine Otter was the only way in and out for hunters, supplies and trophies.**



for ourselves. Neither of us had much sheep hunting experience. However, Mike is smart, young and willing and I am ... uh, willing.

With the weather clearing, we were now seeing scads of ewes and lambs, but no rams. We backpacked into what could only be described as a mountain valley sheep paradise and lived on dehydrated food and froze every night, but still no rams. We decided to break our remote mini spike camp and return to our main spike camp and hunt from there. On our way, I spotted what looked like an animal obscured by that darn Yukon brush. I touched Mike's arm and said, "What the heck is that?" He instantly replied, "bear!"

I was not surprised by this grizzly, as we were constantly seeing big bear tracks and lots of droppings. I had no intention of killing a grizzly on this trip, unless the bear had great color, but this boar's beautiful color phase

was about to get him killed. Needing to demonstrate how well my new .338 loads worked, I wanted to shoot the bear at 500 yards, which was his distance. Mike, being an experienced bear guide was not having it. Shooting grizzlies is serious business, and anything that can go wrong often will, leaving hunter, guide and bear with a messy situation.

We closed the distance. My Leicas said 260 yards and Mike still wanted to get closer, which is wise when shooting grizzlies, but I knew my rifle/ammo combination and wanted a longer shot to illustrate the ammunition's capability. Laying prone and resting the .338 on my Kifaru Ultralite pack, I waited for the bear to offer a broadside shot. As we watched him dig a marmot out the mountain side, Mike asked, "If he runs after your shot, is it okay if I shoot him?" I responded, "No! I'll take care of it. He will run because I am going to double lung him, but he

won't get far." Smart bear guides are careful, and Mike was being careful, as 260 yards is more than double the normal distance most grizzlies are killed, but I never want my guide to finish something I start, and double-lung shots are certain death, except the bear normally runs 30 to 50 yards before learning of his own demise.

At the shot, my 210-grain bullet sped from the 22" at 2,900 fps. The bear spun and Mike hollered, "You hit him! Hit him again!" I chambered another round and as the crosshairs settled on my running target, I could see enormous amounts of blood gushing from both sides of the bear's rib cage and I knew he was done. He piled up within 40 yards. The Barnes Tipped Triple Shock bullet did extreme damage on entry and exit, just as they had done on the caribou and moose. Upon impact, the polymer tip is shoved into the bullet nose, and greatly accelerates expansion.





**white calcium lines are visible in the antler velvet.**



**Guide Mike Pearson and Tim taking a rare break to pose for the camera**



**A .338 Win Mag rifle with proper ammo is comforting when hunting dangerous game**

sion of the normally slow-to-expand Triple Shock bullet, just as the Barnes engineers designed it. Three fabulous big game animals had now fallen to three shots. Better ammo performance could not be asked!

I always experience mixed feelings about killing grizzlies. It pains me to see such a majestic top predator, turned into something dead at my hands. However, the beauty of this bear will adorn my home for decades and we will admire him for generations to come. This would not have been possible if he lived out his life in the Yukon, as most Yukon wildlife will never see a human. The tradeoff is worth it to me, although I doubt the bear would concur.

After waiting 2 days for another flight to haul my bear out, we did not have enough remaining time to pursue sheep. The only ram I was going home with was my Dodge Ram, and it would be filled with coolers of frozen moose and caribou, which Fred had been kind enough to haul to a local butcher so it was already cut, wrapped and frozen before I ever flew out of the bush.

The hunt was a tremendous success, and the new .338 ammo performed as I expected it to. I knew it was good when I loaded it up, now I know it works in the field, and any hunter should be confident when they use this ammo that it will get the job done if they put the bullet where it needs to go.

I made several new Canadian friends on this trip of a lifetime. Jim Shockey and Fred Lackie have a great game-filled Yukon area, excellent staff and equipment. I have never dealt with more friendly, helpful and professional folks in the hunting industry. If it was not for the delays caused by meat flights, I'm certain I could have killed a good ram as well. I spent 18 days in the bush and eight of those were spent waiting on meat/antler flights. Three trophies in only ten days afield is good hunting, especially considering it rained us out on many of those days. If Fred can figure a way to get the flight delays reduced, perhaps I can return to make that 500-yard ram shot. 🦏

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