

## (No Pins) and Needles !

A traditional bowhunter finds out just how tough Colorado mountain goat can be!

By Pat Lefemine

The mountain was steep, nearly vertical, as I kicked footholds into the crushed talus to keep from sliding back down the slope. Each step nearer the top of this pass became more difficult as the loose stone grade changed to a towering rock dihedral. Slipping the bowstring over my head and shoulder to free up my arms, I wedged my hands into vertical cracks and grasped tiny rock knobs to pull myself towards that seemingly unreachable peak. After hours of sore cut hands, exhausted legs and burning lungs, the steep mountainside began to round off to a summit where rocky pillars the height of flagpoles reached for the deep blue Colorado sky.

Catching my breath, I began to realize why many hunters put themselves through the rigors of hunting the mountains. The basin below me looked like a colossal amphitheater of jagged rock, with the stage descending into a valley of spruce and aspen trees. A series of creeks snaked down the mountains to join in a crystal clear stream that flowed through the basin until it became a waterfall. To the east, a golden eagle soared high above its nest while the afternoon sun cast its warming rays on the high peaks that have stood watch over the San Juan Mountains for thousands of years.

After admiring the majestic view, I searched for a relatively comfortable vantage point and sat down. With my spotting scope, I began glassing the surrounding cliffs, basins and grassy slopes for goats but, even for these sure footed rock dwellers, the terrain seemed too sheer.

I glassed every rocky outcropping, every crag and precipice, still, after two hours, no goats.

With the sunlight fading fast, I gathered my gear and started the descent back to camp. Climbing down from the cliff was treacherous. The footholds were hard to see, and the altitude was impairing my judgment. A fall from this height would mean certain death, so I inched my way down to a safe flat rock and rested.

Despite feeling sick from the thin air, I resumed my descent, slowly, down the mountain, until the grade of the hillside became less severe and camp was in view, five hundred feet below.

I'd pushed myself too hard for my first day at altitude and I longed for a hot meal and a warm comfortable sleeping bag. Even my cramped, one man tent looked cozy, but, as I neared it, there was something wrong... the tent was moving!

"Must be the effects of elevation on the mind," I said, rubbing my eyes.

There, it moved again!

With slow, silent steps, I stalked the invader. Around the tent were discarded food wrappers carelessly thrown about. Few hikers venture this high and if any had, I doubted that they'd steal my food. The rustling continued until I was just outside the tent door. Then, all movement ceased. There was a gentle breeze blowing against the smooth nylon

fabric of the rain fly, but all else was still. Apprehensively, I gripped the zipper and slowly began to open the door to the rain fly. Kneeling down to get a good look, I noticed that the screen door was ripped. I grabbed the hanging door and swiftly flipped up the tent flap. The tent erupted! Startled, I ran from the tent. There was something in there all right, but it wasn't human. After a few seconds of chaos, a loud tearing sound came from the back of the tent and three rotund Yellow Bellied Marmots ran into their hole.

Reluctantly, I peeked into the tent and my mouth dropped.

It looked like the morning after a fraternity party. Freeze dried food, powdered Gatorade and half eaten Granola bars were strewn over my clothes and in my sleeping bag. There was a hole the size of a football in the back of the tent. Even my bottle of honing oil had been chewed up, and the contents generously dumped over my socks and thermal underwear.

Reminding myself that all creatures deserve respect, I cleaned up my tent and sat down to a hot meal. The warm Colorado sun turned a deep red and disappeared behind the mountains to my west. A cool breeze had started through the basin and while reaching for my wool coat, I glanced back up the mountain and a warm shiver ran down my spine.

Goat!

I focused my binoculars, and watched as it descended from a high pass to stand characteristically perched on a ledge, a thousand feet above camp. As if surveying its domain from some high throne, it stood for a moment, turned and walked back through the pass.

The goat made me forget all that had happened that day, and while lying in my sleeping bag that night, listening to the howling wind, I thought about how special this trip would be.

Colorado is a state rich in hunting opportunities. With many species of big game animals available to hunt, it truly is a sportsmen's paradise. But while most of my hunting friends from the Northeast dream about hunting elk, or mule deer, I dreamed of bowhunting the mountain goat in the high peaks of the Rockies.

Introduced into Colorado in 1948, the mountain goat has increased in number, with the Division of Wildlife completing five separate transplants until 1972. Today an estimated one thousand goats inhabit Colorado's high mountain areas. Hunters fortunate enough to draw a tag, must be prepared for what might be the most difficult hunt of their lifetime. High altitude, steep climbs, rock slides and constantly changing weather, all add to the challenge of mountain goat hunting.

A few days earlier, I had arrived in Durango, Colorado, a small town built during the Gold Rush of the late 1800's. The town is a popular tourist attraction because of its western atmosphere, food and shopping. Perhaps, the most popular attraction is the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad.

Built in 1882, the train, powered by a 100% coal-fired, steam-operated locomotive, was originally used to haul gold and silver from the San Juan Mountains until the mines dried up in the late sixties. Today, the train is a popular mode of transportation for fisherman, backpackers, hunters and tourists because it runs through the heart of the 2,000,000 acre San Juan National Forest on its way to Silverton.

The morning after arriving in Durango, I boarded the train for the two and a half hour ride to my destination, Needleton. As the whistle blew and the train chugged its way out of town, heading into the mountains, I realized how old time hunters must have felt traveling to distant wilderness areas inaccessible by roads. The smell of burnt cinders from the locomotive began to fade and my mind wandered in anticipation of goat hunting. A tap on the shoulder by the conductor snapped me out of my daydream as he summoned me to follow him to the platform. "Needleton," he shouted, as the train came to a halt and I disembarked. With little more than a Bighorn Recurve Bow, a handful of cedar arrows, and a backpack, I waved goodbye to the passengers and began the long trek up into the Needle Mountain range.

At first the trail was gradual with a few steeply graded sections. I snaked up the valley, following the creek. Resting a few minutes after every one thousand vertical feet gain in elevation, it took nearly six hours of hiking to go six miles, however, my slow pace did not prevent me from reaching my goal of treeline before nightfall. As I entered the last stand of timber, there was a shout.

"Hello, are you goat hunting?" asked a man dressed in homemade camouflage wools, standing next to a tent.

"Yes", I replied, walking over to him.

His name was Dale Struble and he had drawn one of the Colorado resident tags. We immediately started talking about goats, and naturally, the first question out of my mouth was if he had seen any. He smirked, and said, "Yeah, I got a nice billy this morning!"

I was astonished; it was the first day of the season and he did it with a longbow, not a 30-06. After showing me his goat which we both green scored at forty four Pope and Young points, he went on to tell me how he'd arrived here a week early and had thoroughly scouted the area. On opening day, he stalked up on a band of goats, and made a perfect hit on the biggest billy at five yards.

After setting up my tent at his campsite, we stayed up all night going over topo maps, swapping hunting tales, and discussing the growing problem of the animal rights activists. We had become good friends in the short time we knew each other, and even planned a hunt together in the future. In the morning we said goodbye, and I headed up the trail for the next leg of my journey.

The trail grew narrower with each contour line until I was at its end. My destination was a basin at nearly thirteen thousand feet, only a short distance away, but it meant climbing a thousand feet of fifty degree terrain with sixty pounds of gear to reach it. After two exhausting hours, I reached the area nicknamed "Twin Lake Basin" where I set up camp, assembled my bow, and rested. The jagged peaks, steep slopes of loose stone, the treacherous looking cliffs and crags, made me realize just how difficult and dangerous this hunt would be. The rest of the day was spent relaxing, building up strength for the hard hunting ahead.

For the next two days, I climbed to the high peaks at dawn and spent most of the day glassing. From Mt. Eolus, one of the fourteen thousand foot peaks, I could glass three basins and most of the surrounding cliffs. From this vantage point no goat could escape

my detection. Still, I hadn't seen any. The biologist in Durango had mentioned that the goat population was between sixty and a hundred animals. Not many for such an expansive area; however, goats do not move much and once I located a band of them, there was a good chance they'd stay there for a few days. After an exhausting third day, I spotted a lone goat on Windom Peak, another fourteen thousand foot peak which lies opposite Mt. Eolus across the basin. After marking the goat's location on my topographic map, I planned my stalk for dawn. After supper I nestled into my sleeping bag and tried to sleep; however, the combination of altitude and the excitement of seeing a goat made sleeping difficult.

I woke the next morning a half hour before dawn, had some breakfast, and headed up Windom Peak. As the sun began to rise, a cool breeze rolled up the mountainside toward the goat. I made every effort to get the wind in my favor but, the only way of reaching the goat was from directly below it. After a hard six hundred foot climb, I crawled up a rock chute and onto the cliff, hoping to find the goat bedded somewhere nearby. But, as I had feared, there was no goat.

I glassed the area thoroughly, but assumed that the goat winded me and disappeared down the other side of the mountain to the cliffs and ledges for safety. While the sunlight crept slowly down the face of Mt. Eolus, across the basin, I sat on the cliff and looked out over the horizon. Watching the sunrise from this high place was spectacular. I pulled my camera out of my pack and snapped a few shots. The mountain silence was broken by the cawing of a raven, its oily black plumage glistening in the morning sun as it soared along the cliffs. With my eyes I followed the

raven through it's aerial acrobatics until it disappeared into the distance. Suddenly, My mind focused back upon hunting, because, standing in the sunlight directly across the basin was a large goat.

Fumbling in haste, I set up my spotting scope, and focused on what looked like either a mature billy or a very large nanny. Either sex was legal, and I wouldn't mind shooting a mature nanny if she didn't have kids with her. The black stiletto-like horns looked long, with good bases against the snowy background of the goat's white fur. With coal black eyes, the goat scanned the basin below and after a few moments, it started to descend toward the lakes.

Time was running out. In order to remain undetected by the sharp eyes of my prey, I'd have to reach the base of the mountain before the sun illuminated my descent. I quickly stuffed my gear into my backpack and scurried down the hillside. The goat, blinded by the early morning sun, seemed apprehensive to continue its descent when it reached a sheer drop-off. Determined to descend further, it walked to the end of the cliff and carefully placed one hoof on a small rock knob. With the other hoof, the goat stretched to reach a narrow shelf, less than a foot wide, and slid down the rock face until it's two back hooves were securely planted on the shelf. Walking along the widening shelf, the goat became very cautious, - like a whitetail winding human odor. At first I worried that the goat had detected me, but after a few moments I realized that the goat was bedding down.

Making a mental note of a landmark, I continued down the mountain until I was at the base. Cover was sparse, and my approach would have to be silent. I laid down my pack and stalked, boulder to boulder, watching



for any sign of alarm from the goat. When I was three hundred yards away, the goat stood up and stared in my direction. I froze in mid stride. For what seemed ten minutes, but was probably only a few seconds, my muscles quivered to remain motionless until the goat moved down the cliff, toward the lake, and out of sight.

Leaving everything behind except my bow, I approached, downwind of the goat. There was a series of rocks between the lakes and the cliff, which I used to cover my stalk down toward the goat. Everything was perfect. Although I couldn't see the goat, I knew it was there and the wind was in my face. I decided to sneak along the outer edge of the rocks and wait for the goat to climb out of the basin. There was only one path visible, and it would provide me with a ten to fifteen yard shot.

My excitement was building with each careful step. Only one more rock to crawl over and the path would be in range. I lifted my head to look over the rock slab and our eyes met! I was staring, face to face, with a large, Yellow Bellied Marmot, who'd been sunning itself on the boulder. Being somewhat upset at having been disturbed, it let out an insufferable whistling which shrilled like a car alarm going off at night. I hoped that it would run into it's hole so I could continue my stalk; but, instead, it held its ground and remained on the rock shrieking defiantly. I was beginning to dislike these little creatures of the mountains but, rather than try to run it off and chance spooking the goat any further, I let it complete the tirade; then it ran down its hole.

Motionless, I waited for ten minutes to allow the goat to calm down; then I eased into position. Unable to see below to the lake, I slowly raised my head above the boulder behind which I was crouching, and looked toward the water.

The goat was gone.

I looked across the lake, along its shores, and all over the rock filled basin, but there was no goat. Cursing that troublesome little marmot up and down for spooking my goat, I sat down on a rock beside the lake and rested. I couldn't believe that a goat could disappear like that. Other than the path, the only escape route was straight up a one hundred foot cliff and not even a Rocky Mountain Goat, I thought, could scale that.

"It's got to be around here somewhere," I said to myself while examining the hillsides. After glassing once more, I picked up my bow, and headed toward the opposite ridge. Just as I started to leave, a pebble came bouncing down the cliff in front of me, coming to rest at my feet. Jerking my head up to see the origin of the falling pebble, all I saw was the backdrop of the powder-blue sky beyond the sharp crags of the cliff. I fastened my eyes onto something strange, out of place amidst the rocky outcrops. It was the goat's head, peeking at me through a gap in the jagged rocks above.

At first, I didn't know what to do. There was little chance of making a successful stalk since the goat was aware of my presence; however, I couldn't give up, knowing that I was only a hundred feet below it and this was a truly impressive animal. My energy was drained, but I decided to make an attempt.

Not wanting to move while the goat watched me, I stared into the black eyes waiting for the animal to move. Goats feel safe from predators in the cliffs, and unless there has been tremendous hunting pressure, they may just watch you from a safe distance until you leave. If they lose sight of you, they become nervous and climb to the most dangerous and difficult

terrain available. This goat was no different. While I was a good distance beneath it, the goat did not feel threatened.

I studied the situation carefully while the goat remained perched on top of the cliff. There was a chance that, if the goat moved away for an instant, I could move in close to the rock face, and quietly climb up the downwind side to get above it. As long as the goat remained on top of the cliff, there was still a chance to get close enough for a shot.

Finally the goat turned its head and without hesitation, I made my move, and climbed toward the ledge. In minutes, I was on a long flat rock, above the ledge. The goat was still looking down while I carefully walked along the rocks behind it. A few more yards and I would be within my effective shooting range of twenty-five yards.

The goat was showing signs of concern, it turned away from the cliff's edge and started directly towards me. I crouched and removed an arrow from the bowquiver. All I could see were the long dark horns moving from left to right as my hand gripped the bow preparing for what would be an extremely close shot. Suddenly the horns stopped moving. The goat was looking in my direction. Fingers trembling, I kept repeating to myself, "Pick a spot." I watched the horns for movement, but they remained frozen, apparently facing in my direction.

Then the horns moved again. Not in my direction, nor toward one of the possible escape routes. It went back to the edge of the cliff, where it stood for a moment, then vanished. Walking quickly to the edge of the cliff, I couldn't believe my eyes. The goat had gone down a sheer one hundred foot dropoff and was now running across the basin. After putting about a quarter mile distance between us, the goat turned up a grassy slope, heading for one of the most rugged rock formations. A few minutes

was all it took for the goat to dash up the grass slope and onto a rock wall nearly three hundred feet high, and then onto the only ledge of that entire wall that appeared to be more than four inches wide.

Just watching made me nervous, the goat made it look easy. The wall was sinister looking. Sharp rocks like knives jutted out of its sheer face. Small ledges, which seemed large enough to walk on soon tapered down to a few inches, then disappeared. This wall would be a challenge to a seasoned rock climber with ropes, but, to this mountain goat, it was a piece of cake.

I sat down and was satisfied just watching the goat scaling the wall. I was completely exhausted. There was a constant pressure on my head that felt like a hangover and my legs were sore. Before I left home in Connecticut, I was running twenty miles a week and hiking with an eighty pound backpack. I was in the best shape of my life, yet up here at nearly fourteen thousand feet I felt like I was three hundred pounds overweight.

The goat was standing on the ledge watching me. It was as if it was playing a game, letting me get so close that my heart rate doubles, then running away at the last possible moment. I thought about mustering up the energy to walk across the basin and attempt another stalk, but it seemed too futile, and besides, the wall that the goat was on would be instant suicide.

A half hour went by and the goat began to pick at small clumps of moss, clinging to the rocks. Occasionally looking my way, the goat began to feel more comfortable and started feeding along the ledges. The intervals between glances grew longer and the goat made it's way down toward the wall's base, where it fed on the grass.

With my energy slowly returning, I began to consider another try for this goat. There were two possible routes. The fastest and easiest was to descend to the basin and try to sneak up on the feeding goat using the scant available cover. Judging by my first two attempts, that possibility held very little chance for success. The other possibility was to climb to the top of the mountain and work my way around above the goat, coming down just to the side of that great rock wall. If my strength held out, there was a good chance of pulling off this stalk. I took a last look at the feeding goat then started my ascent.

Angling toward the goat, I slowly gained elevation. The mountainside was steep, but relatively passable. My only obstacle was the giant slide of talus, but I soon realized that traversing this barrier was much easier than ascending it. After an hour of steady progress, I began my descent to the goat.

After climbing down three hundred feet, I saw that the goat was now feeding towards me. A group of rocks in the path of the goat would provide me with cover, but it would be difficult to reach them undetected. Each time the goat turned or put its head down, I moved towards the rocks. The goat was in plain view at eighty yards and moving fast. There was no way of reaching cover. My hand slowly moved across the bow to remove an arrow from the bowquiver. I positioned my body for the shot.

Ten more yards and the goat would be twenty yards away. It took a few steps forward and looked in the direction of the swirling wind. Heart beating fast, I gripped the bow and began my draw. At twenty yards the goat turned broadside. I had almost reached my anchor point when the goat broke into a run and disappeared through the rocks.

I thought the goat had caught me draw, but it stood in the middle of the grass slope, looking in the opposite direction. I eased down onto my stomach and crept across the grass slope with my bow cradled in front of me. Whatever had caused that goat to run was making it very nervous, yet, it remained on the grass slope next to the wall. I knew that my luck was running out fast and I would have to get to the goat quickly and shoot before it climbed up those cliffs.

Using the roll of the hillside, I continued crawling on my stomach, until I began to see the white edge of the goat's back. Again I was only twenty yards away. With the wind still swirling, I inched my way two yards closer. With every gust of wind, I grew more uneasy. Any second now, the wind was going to give me away and the goat was going to flee. I didn't have an arrow nocked yet, and to top that off, from under the brim of my leather hat, I could see the goat moving toward me. At fifteen yards, the goat lowered it's head and turned away. It was now or never. I flipped onto my back, and quickly nocked an arrow. Rolling onto my knees, I positioned for the shot. The goat turned it's head to the side as it fed - and spotted me. Immediately I locked onto a small clump of hair directly behind the shoulder and drew my bow. The goat exploded toward the cliff. Still locked onto the clump of hair, my middle finger touched the corner of my mouth and I released the arrow. It disappeared into the exact clump of hair I was staring at.

Perfect shot! It happened so fast, I never had time to get nervous. But now, watching the goat run away, I was shaking like a leaf. I never expected to harvest a mountain goat. It was a dream come true. But, as I continued to follow the goat, my dream turned into a nightmare. The goat was heading up that giant rock wall!

I watched it until it ran out of sight. Everything I had ever read about goats was coming true. They are tough. Even a perfect hit doesn't stop them immediately and this goat was no exception. I immediately backed away from the wall to get a better vantage point. The wall curved around the grass slope; I walked down the side of it but I couldn't see the goat.

If the goat fell from the cliff, it would surely be mangled. If it died on the cliff, there was a great chance that it would be inaccessible and I would risk my life trying to reach it. After searching back and forth along the base, it was apparent that the goat was hung up there somewhere on that wall.

I needed to get a distance away from the wall to glass it. Walking back to the spot where I had left my spotting scope, I glassed the hillside. From a half mile away it was difficult to determine where the goat was, but, after careful glassing, I spotted it. The goat was lying on a ledge, legs dangling over the side.

To reach it would be risky. It was only twenty feet from the right side of the wall, but from where I was, there didn't seem to be much chance of reaching it. I went back to camp, grabbed a quick bite to eat, and headed up the mountain with my backpack. After Two hours, I was a mere forty feet from my goat. There was absolutely no possible way of reaching that goat from where I was standing. I would have to scale the rocks to get above it, then carefully inch my way down.

Once above, I tied my bow to my backpack and lowered it down to the ledge. Then, I slowly began placing each foot, while gripping the rocks tightly with my hands, onto the tiny footholds until I was standing on the

ledge, next to my goat. It was a big nanny with long horns and a lush, snow-white coat.

I was proud of my achievement, but at the same time I felt a little sorrow. This regal monarch of the mountains had tested my physical and mental limits. It was her and me the entire time, no friends congratulating me, no spectators to witness my determination and no video cameras rolling to record the moment. I wondered if I would ever have such a hunt again, or if I would even want to. All I know was that sitting on that ledge with my goat would be a memory that would last a lifetime.

I managed to get both the goat, and myself safely back to camp, and after the usual chores associated with a successful harvest, I spent the rest of the afternoon on a ledge not far from my camp. While just relaxing and enjoying the panoramic beauty of the Colorado skyline, I was treated to a special surprise. A nanny with her kid ambled down a worn goat trail and began feeding a hundred yards away. The kid, with its little black knobs for horns, playfully ran around the nearby rocks, building strength and confidence for its long hard life in the mountains. The nanny, keeping a watchful eye on her offspring, fed on the grass before returning to the cliffs. They would need all the food they could store before the cold winter ahead.

It was the perfect ending to a perfect trip. I thought about returning to this area again to hunt if I was fortunate enough to draw another tag. But, something inside me said no. For right now, I wanted to preserve the memory of these last five days, not try to recreate them.



### **Authors Notes**

Mountain goat hunting in Colorado normally begins around the second week of September and runs up until the second week of October. As of the 1990 season, there were fourteen tags available for Colorado residents and one available for non-residents for the three archery only areas. Hunters may apply for one of the seven rifle areas as well, but, there is greater competition for these tags. Applications are available from the Colorado Division of Wildlife, Department of Natural Resources, 6060 Broadway, Denver, Co 80216.

Colorado goat habitat varies from one area to another. The Needle Mountains where I hunted are considered one of the toughest and most dangerous areas in the state. Elevations over thirteen thousand feet are common in the Needles, and almost all goat hunting takes place between twelve to fourteen thousand feet. Hunters wishing to hunt this area must be in top physical condition. The combination of high altitude and extreme physical exertion are to be expected. Nothing can prepare you for the high altitude except acclimating to it, but, by conditioning your body, the rate of recovery will be faster and the adjustment will be easier.