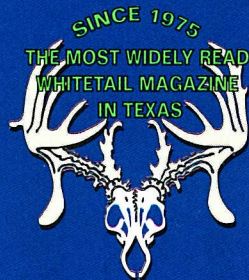


Journal of the

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Steve Ramirez photo

# North African Rams in West Texas

By Steve Ramirez

An onyx star covered sky began to give way to the early morning high desert sun as Rocky McBride and I climbed into his truck and headed out across the alluvial plain of the Marfa Basin. As we drove across the open grasslands toward the Davis Mountains, we began spotting groups of desert mule deer, pronghorn antelope and javelina. The sun began to glow on the east slopes of the mountains. The air was cool and crisp. It was the start of a perfect hunting day.

(continued on page 190)

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## North African Rams in West Texas

(continued from page 188)

As we passed through the small town of Marfa and moved on toward the mountains to our west, I couldn't help but think of all the history that had taken place in this beautiful land. The plateau that we were crossing was formed 35 million years ago during the Oligocene by the eruption of the Paisan Volcano. The Spanish explorer Juan Dominguez de Mendoza camped here in 1684, and many immigrants passed through here on the Chihuahua Trail. This was once the land of the Lipan and Mescalero Apache, and now it was there for Rocky and me.

Our destination this morning was to be the Chinati Peak. At 7,730 feet it is the fourth highest mountain in Texas. In the early part of the 20th century aoudad sheep were released in the Davis Mountains. Now some of the biggest aoudad rams in the world come not from North Africa, but from West Texas. These animals are completely free-range feral sheep and provide a challenging hunt.

I was lucky enough to hook up with Rocky. He has been guiding all his adult life in West Texas for mule deer, Coues deer, pronghorn, aoudad, javelina and his specialty, big cats. He's trailed cougar in Texas, Arizona and Paraguay; leopard in Namibia; jaguar in Paraguay; snow leopard in Central Asia; and tiger in Siberia. He is patient, skilled and knowledgeable. I would need to draw from each of these attributes before the day was through.

We began the day by glassing the steep mountainsides from the canyon floor below. The morning sun was just beginning to creep into the canyon, and each shadow created by rock or cactus seemed likely to me as a

possible ram that hadn't yet revealed itself. I was grateful that unlike myself, Rocky was accustomed to picking out tan colored aoudad against tan colored rocks at long distances. Before long he called out that he had spotted six mature rams on a ridge about a quarter mile up the mountainside.

It took a long time for me to find the rams that he seemed to see so clearly. All at once the sun caught the top of the largest ram's horns as they swept back over his shoulders. He was magnificent and he was staring right at us. We watched as the rams made their way to the top of the mountain. As the last of their silhouettes disappeared over the ridge, we loaded up and began the climb up the mountainside, hoping to catch them on the other side.

When you look at the Davis Mountains, they are very deceiving. They always look close, but no matter whether you are driving or walking it takes a lot longer to get there than you think. The bases of the mountains are covered with mesquite, prickly pear and cholla cactus, sotol and Spanish dagger. As you start the climb up your feet slide in the scree. The only thing to hold onto if you slip, is the aforementioned plant life. I can tell you from experience now that having Spanish

dagger behind you is a great motivator not to slide down the mountainside.

It's important at this point in the story to explain that I'm no wimp. I'm a former rodeo bull rider, a former marine, and I still run my marine corps three miles five days a week. I trained for this hunt by running up and down the Texas Hill Country, as well as weight training for upper body strength. The Cabela's guide listed this aoudad hunt as "physically demanding with some danger." They didn't lie. Rocky had warned me that the West Texas mountains were tougher than they looked. He didn't lie, either.

Rocky started up that mountain at a pace that made me wonder if he planned to have me shoot the sheep or run it down like one of those cougars he's used to chasing. OK, I admit that my last statement was a slight exaggeration. Let's just say that it quickly became apparent that he was a whole lot better at climbing than I was. Actually, I was doing pretty well until we reached about 7,000 feet in elevation. It was about then that I noticed that everything was getting thin around me. The vegetation had thinned out to a few tiny cacti and the occasional Mexican pinyon, and the air had thinned out so that no matter how hard I tried I just couldn't

draw enough of it into my lungs. Needless to say when we got to the top of the first mountain, the rams were gone. The only thing that would have kept them there might have been sheer curiosity as to what kind of creature was huffing and puffing behind them.

Rocky and I began glassing the mountainsides in an attempt to relocate the herd. The Rio Grande and the mountains of Mexico were just beyond the peaks we were hunting on. This is a vast and beautiful land and is worth the trip for the scenery alone. After a short while of glassing, Rocky spotted the big rams. In the time it took us to climb the first mountain, they had crossed over to the second mountain. They were still a quarter mile away and looking right at us.

We worked our way across a ridge between two mountains. Our chances of catching up to the first group of rams was remote, as the wind had shifted. As we passed a pinyon pine on top of the ridge, I suddenly spotted four rams about 400 yards to my right. The problem was that they had spotted me first and were galloping like horses across a steep mountain slope that I would have walked

(continued on page 192)



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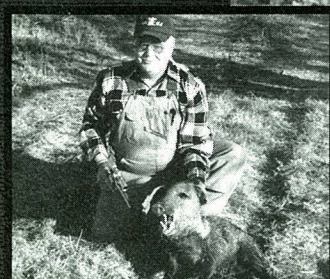
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## North African Rams in West Texas

(continued from page 191)

with great care.

Rocky and I commenced to doing the "dammit dance" and then after noting that those four rams were probably in Mexico by the time they slipped out of sight, we began glassing the mountain slopes once again. I sat on a rock near a twisted pinyon tree glassing toward the south and catching my breath. When I say catching my breath I mean regaining my composure. The elevation had really gotten to me and each step

was an effort. Rocky, on the other hand, was used to this stuff and had moved quickly to a ridge about 100 yards from my vantage point and began glassing to the north and east. Before long I noticed Rocky waving me forward toward his position. Grabbing my rifle and daypack, I moved as quickly and quietly as I could.

We snaked our way past another pinyon that barely held on to the cliff's edge. I found myself jumping from ledge to boulder along sheer drop-offs. Finally we climbed onto a

jutting ledge that reminded me of the ones that the cartoon coyote stands on just before it breaks off and he falls to the canyon floor. I looked around for any mean-spirited roadrunners. There were none.

Lying flat across the ledge with my daypack for a rest, I finally saw through my scope what Rocky had seen so easily. Four big beautiful aoudad rams were moving slowly across the face of the Chinati Peak about 450 yards across a small canyon between our ledge and Chinati. My Leopold scope was turned up to 9-power, but the rams seemed very small at that distance. Rocky told me that the last one in line was the best ram, and that we would just wait for them to come within range.

After what seemed to be a very long time the rams had finally moved within range and began to mill about a small twisted tree. Of course, they stayed under the tree's branches for some time eating mistletoe. Every once in a while one of the smaller rams would step out from under the branches, but the biggest ram just wouldn't show himself.

Eventually, as if on command, they began moving down the mountainside, this time with the big guy in the lead. The problem was that from the angle I had all I could see was head and horn in a moving frontal shot. Not the kind of shot I wanted to take at 300 yards. Just before he was obscured by a rock formation, he turned to look back at the sheep that followed him. Rocky said, "Take him," and I squeezed off while holding just at the top of the shoulder. The 180-grain Nosler partition hit the lungs and heart. He dropped dead in his tracks and slid about 10 yards before wedging between two boulders. The three remaining rams stood there looking at their fallen leader as if wondering what he was doing lying down so soon in the day. After a few minutes they calmly walked away retracing their steps up the mountain.

The 30-inch horns of my ram swept back over his powerful shoulders. His face had a few scars from fighting. He was old and beautiful. After a long hard climb down to him, I just sat there for a while and took it all in. A great trophy ram, a hard hunt in a hard and beautiful country. What else could I ask for? Life is grand, isn't it? 🐾

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by Humberto Gomez

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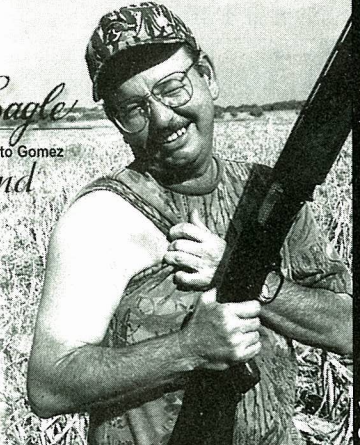
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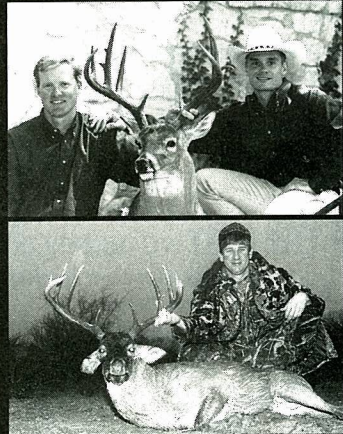


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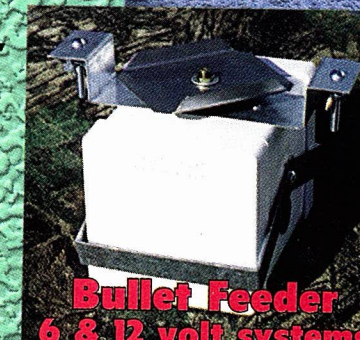
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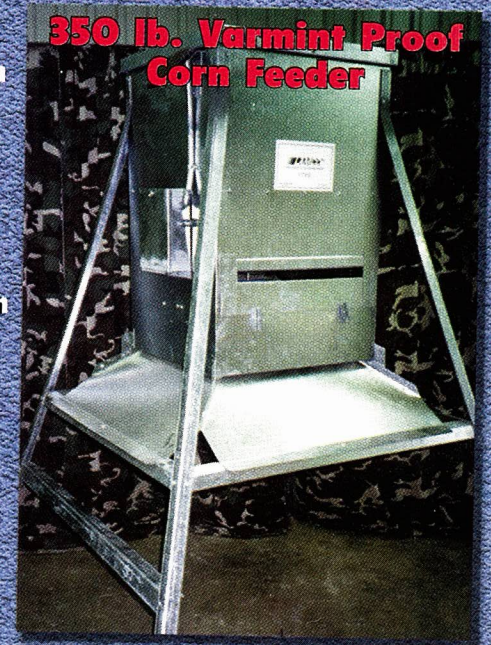
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