

Trophy hunter avoids trespass fee, saves auction

WHAT BOTHERS ME MOST about Oregon's successful bighorn sheep program is the way the public's wildlife has been used to enrich a private individual.

Charles Singer has profited handsomely from the fact that his 6,400-acre ranch sits astride the access route to the rim of Joseph Creek Canyon, as well as much of the land within the canyon itself.

The canyon lands north of Enterprise consistently produce some of this country's largest Rocky Mountain Bighorn trophy rams.

As a result, Singer has been able to name his own price when the high bidder in the state-sanctioned auction of the lone tag good for that area inquires about dropping by for a few days.

The price Singer named for his "trespass fee" this year was \$20,000.

He didn't get a dime.

Jim Tonkin, the Morgan Hill, Calif., contractor who was the only serious bidder for the 1991 Oregon Governor's Trophy Tag at last May's auction in Eugene, didn't mind paying \$25,000 for the tag itself.

That money, after all, will go directly to helping restore bighorn sheep to more of their historic eastern Oregon range.

It's a process that depends heavily upon an expensive helicopter trap and transplant operation.

The money paid to Singer for temporarily setting aside his no trespassing signs, on the other hand, simply goes into his bank account.

Tonkin didn't much care for that set-up.

"It was against Mr. Tonkin's sporting ethics to pay such an outlandish fee," says Elvin Hawkins, Tonkin's guide and owner of 'Spot Country Outfitters' in Medford.

Hawkins, whose previous sheep hunts had mostly

MIKE STAHLBERG



been with hunters drawing tags in the Steens Mountain area, had convinced Tonkin it was possible to successfully hunt trophy rams in Joseph Canyon without trespassing on Singer's property.

"He decided to do it the hard way," said Hawkins. "It was almost a situation where we set out to try to prove it could be done."

And they proved it.

TONKIN BAGGED WHAT appears to be the third-largest bighorn ram ever taken by a hunter in Oregon.

State wildlife biologist Vic Coggins of Enterprise gave Tonkin's seven-year old ram a "green score" of 192¾ points on the Boone and Crockett Club point system of scoring big game trophies. It's called a "green score" because horns must dry for 60 days, during which time they may shrink, before they can be officially measured.

The ram's horns measured 44 inches on one side and 43 on the other. They were 125¾ inches around at the base.

Tonkin shot the ram on Bureau of Land Management land tucked between Singer's Ranch and the Oregon-Washington border.

Hawkins used pack horses to haul in water and supplies via a long and difficult route. He set up a camp near the canyon.

Because it was impossible to carry enough water for the horses to remain for any extended period of time, he had to take the pack animals back out before returning with Tonkin.

The logistics involved in preparing for the hunt took nine days, Hawkins said. The hunt itself ended on the third day.

After Hawkins and Tonkin spotted the ram, they spent most of the day stalking into position. Knowing they might not get a second chance, Hawkins wanted a sure shot for his client.

"We figured if we missed, that group of rams would run far enough that they'd wind up either on Mr. Singer's land or in Washington," Hawkins said.

Tonkin's trophy just might have saved the tag auction program.

"THIS PROVES WE CAN find big rams for tag holders without paying huge prices (for access)," said Hawkins. "That's the exciting part about the whole thing. It has now been proven you can go into Joseph Creek Canyon and hunt on BLM lands."

The value of the Oregon tag "had unquestionably been beaten down by the fact there was this horrendously high access fee," Hawkins said.

The \$25,000 price Tonkin paid was the lowest ever, by far.

Frankly, it's a price that made the idea of \$10- or \$20 per ticket lottery for the Governor's Tag look pretty attractive. Such a lottery probably wouldn't raise any more money, but at least every Oregon hunter who really wanted it would have a chance at the tag.

I don't think any Oregon sportsmen really likes the idea of rich out-of-staters who happen to have trophy-sized bankrolls coming in and buying their way into the record books with our wildlife.

But many Oregon hunters have supported the auction approach because they recognize that it

virtually doubles the number of bighorn sheep that can be transplanted every year, thus speeding the time when more tags will be available for everyone.

If the green score on his ram holds up, Tonkin will have one of the 50 largest Rocky Mountain bighorn mounts in the world, according to a spokesman at the Boone and Crockett Club's Dumfries, Va., headquarters.

It would be third-largest taken by a hunter in Oregon. (The Oregon record is held by "Spot," a northeastern Oregon ram whose horns were scored at 202¾ after he died of natural causes.)

Peter Bollinger got a 200½ ram in 1989, after bidding \$47,000 for the tag and paying Singer a \$15,000 access fee. Todd Jacksik, who paid \$37,000 for the second Governor's Trophy Tag in 1988, took a ram scoring 197½ points.

Tonkin's sheep could nudge into fourth place the 192¼-point specimen taken by Todd Jacksik's father, Sam, in 1987, the first year of the trophy tag program. Bidding on that original tag stopped at \$56,000.

Last year, Palm Springs Investor Bob Howard bid \$46,000 for the tag and paid Singer another \$20,000, then settled for a young ram that scored only 162 Boone and Crockett points. That's well short of the 180 points needed to even qualify for listing in the record book.

HAD TONKIN COME HOME empty-handed, or even with a small ram like Howard's, the Governor's Trophy Tag auction would not have much of a future right now.

Once word of what Tonkin and Hawkins accomplished spreads, however, the auction could again lure trophy hunters who are prepared to make a big investment in Oregon's bighorn sheep program, if not in Charles Singer's bank account.

For that reason, the auction should be continued for at least one more year.