

# Rivers Bend Outfitters

## Fishing & Hunting in the Columbia River Gorge

### Return of the Ram!

*With the help of good game management and financial backing from the hunting fraternity, bighorn sheep are once again thriving in the Deschutes canyon.*

*Registered Guide, Glenn Dee Summers is Oregon, Coast Guard licensed and insured. A registered fishing and hunting guide is your assurance that your guide has met all the necessary state registration requirements. [www.RiversBendOutfitters.com](http://www.RiversBendOutfitters.com)  
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Lying on a shelf and peering through 8-power binoculars, I had a close-up view of two small rams as they lay in the shade of an overhang chewing their cud mere inches from a 2,500-foot drop to the Deschutes River.

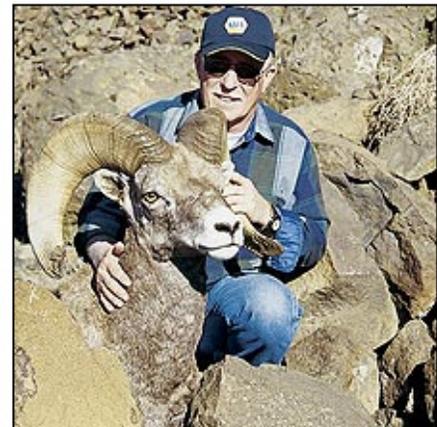
On the next ridge closer to the river, a dozen ewes and eight lambs grazed or lay bedded next to the nearly vertical slope. Day after day I watched rams, eventually employing a 30-power spotting scope. I was scouting the Deschutes River canyon for a friend and client who had drawn a coveted sheep tag for the area. That the sheep were even there is a testament to modern game management.

When the Europeans arrived in Oregon, California bighorn sheep lived in most of eastern Oregon, and Rocky Mountain bighorns populated the state's northeast corner. Wild sheep disappeared from the Deschutes canyon shortly after the pioneers appeared and were gone from the state by 1945, victims of diseases from domestic livestock and uncontrolled hunting.

Today's Deschutes canyon sheep story -- the fact bighorns even live there now -- provides us a snapshot of how modern wildlife conservation works. In 1993, 35 California bighorns were transplanted from the upper Owyhee River in Idaho to the east side of the canyon 17 miles from the mouth of the Deschutes River. A second release of 18 sheep from Oregon's Steens Mountain was made in 1995 on the west side of the river across from the first release point. And in 1999, 12 more animals were released at the west-side site.

The sheep flourished and the first controlled hunting season was held in 1998. Available tags have numbered from two to five per year since then. Since 1999, 71 sheep have been captured in the Deschutes canyon and transported to sites in Oregon and North Dakota. The current population is estimated at about 300 animals.

To get an idea of how popular and prestigious bighorn sheep hunting is, witness the winning auction bid of \$130,000 for an Oregon sheep tag at the annual convention of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep. Note too, that 90 percent of that money is returned directly to the state's wild sheep management program, where it is



*Gary Bilyeu's California bighorn ram from the Deschutes canyon scored 167 points.  
Photo by Glenn Summers*

joined by money generated by state hunting licenses and tags, auction and lottery tags and private hunter conservation groups to pay for restoration work.

### **ONE TAG-HOLDER'S STORY**

Retired high school German teacher Norm Tonn called me one day to say he had drawn a Deschutes canyon sheep tag. Drawing a sheep tag in Oregon is an once-in-a-lifetime event. He knew I kept track of the canyon's bighorns while guiding for steelhead and running my jet boat through the rapids on the Deschutes River and asked me to guide him.

Locating rams wasn't difficult, but they moved around a lot, and as with all sheep hunting, locating a ram is only half the problem. Finding one and getting within good shooting range is the kicker, and one hogback that drops into Harris Canyon offered the best opportunity for us.

When the season opened we motored downriver from my camp to debark at the mouth of Harris Canyon. It was just coming daylight when we left my sled and trailed up the canyon. We took our time hiking a couple of miles up the canyon, angling around ridges and finally up to the plateaus on top.

I had been seeing a pair of good rams at the head of one canyon, some ewes and lambs over on the wide-open reaches of another ridge and a pair of smaller rams that ranged down the ridge by a small cave. We spotted the two younger rams lying in the open but across a deep ravine between us, and then I saw the group of ewes and lambs feeding up the slope of a far ridge.

Two young rams were looking back up the ravine that lay between us. At first they seemed to be staring at Norm and me, then I figured it out. "Norm, I believe there are some sheep down below in the gut of this canyon right in front of us," I offered. "Those two little rams are watching something right below us. Let's just lay here and see what develops."

Soon a group of rams began to file up out of the canyon and onto the slope opposite of us. There were several good rams, with a couple of larger ones sporting broken horns. I picked out the best-looking set of horns and told Norm to "shoot the one walking above the rest and fourth back from the front."

Norm was packing one of his custom 9.3x62mm rifles (we call him "9.3 Norm") and he assumed a tight sitting position for the 160-yard shot. At the shot the ram he had targeted staggered and stopped while the rest of the rams fled the area. He shot again as the ram began to slide backwards and tumble down the ridge and out of sight into the canyon.

Ballistically, the 9.3x62 is between the .35 Whelan and the .338/06. It enjoys a fine reputation in Europe, and in Africa is looked on as nearly equal to the .375 H&H due to excellent sectional density and resultant penetration of its .366 bullet. Norm's 235-grain Hawk bullet put the ram down in good order. We were both tickled and shook hands over and over.

### **AIMING FOR TROPHY QUALITY**

The rams in the canyon are getting older and their horns are getting bigger. Witness that rams have been taken that record in the upper 160 and lower 170 range, using the Boone & Crockett scoring system.

One of the better bighorns taken just last season was a great ram shot by Gary Bilyeu of The Dalles. Gary's reaction to drawing his tag was like everyone's -- total surprise and absolute disbelief. Ironically, he received notice that he's drawn a tag not on a return card from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife but from his brother, who read the notification on the Internet.

Since The Dalles is only 15 miles from the mouth of the Deschutes River, Gary spent at least three days a week for three months scouting for his ram. Most of his scouting was done by driving back roads that put him within two or three miles of the Deschutes canyon. Then he spent hours glassing with binoculars and a spotting scope, attempting to find the largest ram possible. His second concern was planning possible stalking routes to get a shot at the ram of his choice.

Several local hunters who know the canyon and its sheep helped him scout, and then a near-calamity struck. Ten days before the season opened, Gary became afflicted with pancreatitis, an extremely painful ailment. Somehow he recovered enough to make opening day on Sept. 4, and although he was physically weak, he was determined to make good his hunt for a trophy ram.

His stepson, Richard Irving, and friend, Alvin Decker, went along to help. Between them they located three rams that first morning. Two were big rams and the other was smaller. They also had some competition that morning as another tag holder sought his ram in the same area.

The rams moved down into a shallow canyon and then rambled out of sight. Then all three hunters saw the sheep moving toward Gary's position. The wait for the rams to move into range was almost interminable.

Finally he felt the rams had moved close enough to shoot, and he rested his .25/06 over his backpack. He was shooting handloads: a 120-grain Hornady Interlock bullet backed by 51-grains of 4831. He chose the biggest ram, and with the first shot there was no reaction. He shot again and the ram collapsed and slid down a shale-covered ridge. The three held a ridge-side celebration right there on that steep slope.

At that moment Gary's painful condition was the last thing on his mind. He had taken a great ram that scored better than 167 B&C points. After pictures Gary needed the extra help to pack his ram up out of the canyon.

The best part of these stories is that the Deschutes canyon rams are back. With the help of good game management and financial backing from the hunting fraternity, there are rams in the canyon once again.

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