

He was out of water. The snow would start soon. But he was on this mountain through a stroke of incredible luck that he wasn't going to waste. The 2015 Super Tag winner shares his perseverance

ON THE TRAIL TO THE PERFECT GOAT

Story and photos
by Will Russell

Opposite page: Will Russell won the 2015 Super Tag for mountain goat. It was a tag he used to harvest this billy, which landed in the Boone and Crockett record books as the No. 2 Wyoming mountain goat of all time.



Whether in a book, a magazine article, or spoken around a warm wall-tent stove, a successful hunting story is a combination of sheer luck and a whatever-it-takes attitude. My 2015 hunting season was just that, and my luck began in July.

JULY 6, 2015. There's a phone call from Scott Talbott, director of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. The conversation starts slowly, with him asking if I had drawn any tags and me thinking, "Why is the director calling me about my antelope tags?"

When he mentions Wyoming Super Tags... I LOSE IT, running around my garage, my house, whooping and hollering, "No way!" and "Man is this for real?" My wife looks at me like I have lost my mind.

I had won the 2015 mountain goat Super Tag. Truly an unexpected gift, I'll never forget that conversation with my wife and Director Talbott about what winning a Super Tag is all about.

Not only would I receive a mountain goat license — statistically the most coveted license in Wyoming — but I would be able to hunt mountain goats in any open area in the state during a two-month season. I had purchased one \$10 raffle ticket and my number was randomly chosen among 4,526 tickets sold.

Moments later my boss calls. He, too, received a phone call from Director Talbott — he had won a mule deer Super Tag. I couldn't believe what he was telling me — suspicion and fear set in that someone was playing a joke on us. I immediately call the director back to determine if this is a dream or a prank. Confirming it's not a joke, we agree that not only was it difficult to draw a Super Tag but to have two winners who work in the same office is astonishing.

JULY 7, 2015. I want to capitalize on the potential of my Super Tag. My goal is an older-class, long-haired billy or none at all. My philosophy in life is that once a goal has been set,

Will Russell had brought along enough food with him in October to stay in the backcountry until the end of the season if needed. He was able to notch his tag after 34 days of hunting.

it won't be altered. The pursuit will be just as important as the destination, even if it means going home empty-handed.

I contact anyone who knows anything about mountain goat hunting in Wyoming, including biologists from Game and Fish and the U.S. Forest Service. I cannot express how thankful I am to these individuals, especially Walter Scherer, Doug McWhirter and Aly Courtemanch from Game and Fish and previous mountain goat tag holders.

I gather maps, tips and suggestions, and then it is time to scout and explore.

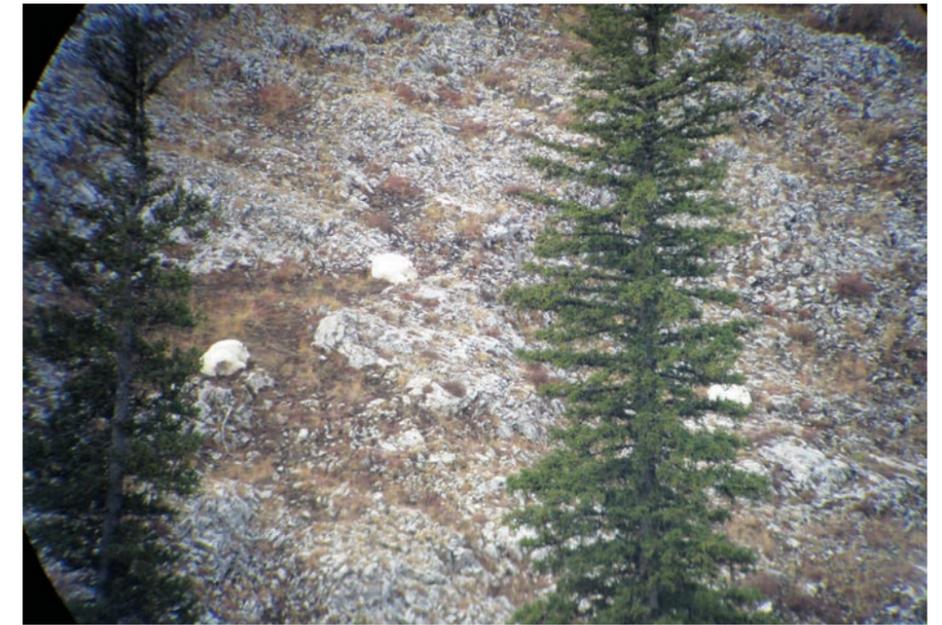
JULY 9, 2015 I know if I do the footwork prior to opening day it will pay off. I won't be using a guide so I will have to get out there and

cover some miles. I drive a lot in the next two months, sometimes over 400 miles in a week-end. And then I hike, for many miles. I scout hunt units 1, 2 and 3, finding a good number of billies to compare. By the time the season opens, I know which billy I want to harvest.

SEPT. 21, 2015. My first hunt is a nine-day adventure in God's country. Despite miles hiked and hours spent glassing I don't locate my billy. I go home to regroup, re-strategize.

OCT. 7-16, 2015. I pack enough supplies for 10 days. Re-energized, I head to my other units. I glass up several billies, even one or two that give me pause. But they aren't the Super Tag billy I am looking for.

OCT. 19, 2015. My wife and I are at a local cafe, scouring weather reports. My mountain goat season is starting to wind down, the pressure starting to build. We are back in the same area after a billy that's on the top of my hit list. However, a combination of down-pouring rain and no sightings has been discouraging to say the least. I am ready to pack up and leave but my wife talks me into staying one more day. There is going to be a break in the weather. Maybe my luck will change.



OCT. 20, 2015. From the trailhead we hike to a different canyon, farther up from where I had been glassing. Hopefully we will have better success in this area. After hiking for six hours we come to a perfect vantage point for glassing.

Finally, a goat! It is just a small white dot at the head of the canyon, it's a wonder we spot him at all. The goat is bedded between two boulders, making himself very inconspicuous within the huge landscape.

This could be it!

I can hardly contain my excitement. We rush down to the valley as fast as we can, taking short breaks to glass so we don't lose track of him. Despite the excitement of having found a goat, I notice my wife is starting to show signs of fatigue. I know it will be too much for her to continue. The goat is completely undisturbed, so we hike back to camp for some food and a good night's rest.

OCT. 21-22, 2015. I hike back up the trail in the morning. The weather report says it's the last day before another storm rolls in. When I reach the canyon the goat is where I left him. A long stalk begins that puts me 220 yards from the billy. After careful evaluation, I determine that — although respectable — he isn't the one I am looking for to punch my Super Tag. I hike back out, my wife and I clean up camp and head home.

OCT. 23-25, 2015. I have enough food to stay in the backcountry until the end of the season. Hiking deeper into the high country, more and more goats begin to appear, but drinking water is scarce. Finally, I locate three large billies at the bottom of a canyon. I nickname them "the three amigos." One is clearly bigger than the others. After a careful stalk, I am within 390 yards and can evaluate each billy. That night from the mountain top, I call my wife to let her know there is a new candidate.

OCT. 26, 2015. It doesn't take long to locate the three amigos the next morning. They have moved farther up into the cliffs from where they had been the evening before. At this point I am completely out of water and have not eaten a full meal for two days, considering all I have is dehydrated meals.

I start making plans to harvest the largest billy. I stalk to within 215 yards of the group and take pictures through my spotting scope.



When Will Russell spotted three large billies at the bottom of the canyon, he nicknamed them "the three amigos." He stalked within 215 yards of the group before he could spot the biggest one and prepare to take a shot.

Finally, everything feels right. I settle in behind my Kimber .338 Federal rifle, ready.

At the sound of the shot the goat hunches, lumbers forward, and flips over. Immediately I send my wife and friends a message on my Delorme: "Just shot my goat."

The flood of emotions is huge and unexpected. When I reach my billy I am in awe, not just of his size, but of the whole

adventure. I couldn't have asked for anything more. Despite all of the ups and downs, I feel a sense of being both privileged and blessed.

My billy is down at 1 p.m., however, the work of taking pictures, caping, deboning, and bagging the meat doesn't finish until 11 p.m. After all the work, I hike back to camp and curl up in my sleeping bag for one more night on the mountain. Sleep does not come



easy. Besides the lingering excitement, it has also started to snow. This doesn't bode well for my hike out, but it will bring much needed drinking water.

OCT. 27, 2015. Morning brings near-whiteout conditions. Despite the fatigue, I am determined to get off of the mountain. Communicating on Delorme with my wife and studying my location, we develop a plan. She'll call friends and outfitters to find someone to help pack out the remainder of my camp, then she will drive to the closest trailhead to pick me up. I cache what I can't fit in my pack and prepare for the hike out.

I have 10 miles to go, the conditions icy and visibility dismal.

The going is slow, a traumatic slide down a shale slope leaves me shaken, but I finally make it to the trailhead. The five most beautiful things wait for me: my wife's smiling face, a Subway sandwich, two Tylenol and a Gatorade.

OCT. 28-29, 2015. My wife contacts Kelly and Chad Christensen, owners of Rafter C Outfitters, to pack out what I cached on the mountain. The trip is joyous, everything is found in good shape, as I left it. My thanks go to Chad and Kelly for their help; they are upstanding guys. And I could not have completed this hunt without the support of my wife, daughter and mother-in-law.

I hunted for 34 days. After Boone and Crockett's 60-day drying period, my mountain goat officially scored 50 ⅔ net, ranking it as the second largest harvested in Wyoming. Wyoming's Super Tag raffle program allows the average guy a chance to go on an incredible hunt and adventure that otherwise would be outside their means. My 2015 season gave me that opportunity, and it can be described by one word — unbelievable. I am definitely putting in for a Super Tag again.

—Will Russell lives in Rock Springs, he continues to hunt and holds out hope for another phone call from the director of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

Opposite page: Will Russell holds up four fingers to show that he has now harvested four animals using the same .338 casing. He collected the brass after shooting his mountain goat and plans to reload it again at home.



It took Will Russell 34 days of searching to find a billy that he wanted to use his Super Tag to harvest.

Enter the Super Tag raffle

Wyoming's Super Tag raffle offers tags for the state's premier big game species. Hunters who win the raffle may hunt any open area for the species selected (with exceptions for moose and bighorn sheep) and get to keep all preference points they have for that species. Any requirements for waiting periods and once-in-a-lifetime tag restrictions are waived.

The Super Tag raffle was created by Governor Matt Mead and the Wyoming Legislature in 2013. In its first three years, the raffle has raised almost \$2 million, with proceeds aiding wildlife management across the state.

Two levels of raffle tags are available:

\$10 each — Super Tag, one winner each for bighorn sheep, elk, moose, deer, mountain goat, wild bison, pronghorn, black bear and mountain lion

\$30 each — Super Tag Trifecta, one winner chooses from any three species listed above

New way to win in 2017! For every five Super Tag raffle tickets, or every two Super Tag Trifecta tickets an individual purchases, their name is entered into a raffle to win a complete hunting gear package from KUIU, Weatherby and more. Purchase more tickets for more chances to win. Check the Game and Fish website for updates!

To enter, visit the Game and Fish website wgfd.wyo.gov/Hunting/Super-Tag.