

Planning your Sheep Hunt

Sheep hunting in Alaska is a major undertaking whether you are a novice or a more experienced hunter. Doing your research beforehand can make the difference between a successful hunting trip and another long hike with your rifle. Part of being a successful hunter is knowing which questions you should be thinking about while making your plans. The examples below are just a few of the things you will want to consider before beginning your hunt.

While most major mountain ranges in Alaska hold huntable populations of sheep, each range offers a different type of hunt, with different challenges and opportunities.

First off, do you plan to hire an air taxi to reach your hunt area, or are you planning on riding a four-wheeler or walking in? If you are planning on flying, what is your budget?

While there are some areas that can be accessed on foot and hunted with a general season harvest ticket, many of these ranges are well-known and experience extremely heavy hunting pressure. Others might demand a 15-20 mile approach hike to before you could even begin to hunt.

Conversely, many areas that don't experience heavy hunting pressure can only be reached by aircraft and as such require a \$1000-\$4000 per person ride in a small plane. If you plan to fly, be sure to discuss with your air taxi operator the type of aircraft you will fly in, how many trips it will take, how much the flight costs, and how far you should expect to (or will be able to) walk from the airstrip. Also, ask your air taxi operator about their policies about putting multiple parties of hunters at the same location, and if there are other competing operators that may also be using the same airstrip.

On the other hand, one can hunt many portions of the Kenai, Talkeetna, or Wrangell mountain ranges literally within a few miles of the road system, but these locations are usually well-known, and hunted heavily. Because of this, hunter success in these areas can be as low as 5-15%. However, success rates in some of the more remote parts of the Alaska or Brooks ranges approach 50%.

Second, what is your fitness and experience level?

The Chugach range is notorious for extremely difficult, steep terrain, while the Brooks has a reputation for easier walking. But, where one could expect to find sheep in relatively high densities in the Chugach, typically lower sheep densities in the Brooks mean that one might have to walk several miles between bands of rams.

Be realistic about your fitness level and conditioning program. Many sheep hunts entail carrying 50-100 lb. packs 20 to 50 miles total, with climbs of 3000' to 5000' vertical feet. Remember, nobody ever returned from a sheep hunt wishing they had trained less.

As far as experience level goes, are you planning on an early season August hunt, or are you comfortable camping in winter conditions that you could find on a September hunt?

Warmer weather in August means easier camping, lots of water, etc., but sheep are typically still on summer range at high elevations. Most hunter effort is focused on the first two to three weeks of the season. Later in the year, snow and cold temperatures keep many hunters out of the hills. Those that are hunting expect to contend with snow and subfreezing conditions, but can be rewarded by sheep moving to lower elevations as they transition to winter range, and sometimes less competition as fewer hunters are willing to brave September's weather challenges.

Third, do you want to focus on the best chance for success, or would you like to plan your hunt so that you don't see other hunters?

Many of the units that have high numbers of sheep and high sheep densities are well known and receive lots of hunting pressure, so even on a successful hunt one might reasonably expect to see multiple other parties, but there are other areas that, due to lower sheep densities, offer lowered success rates and a chance for true solitude.

Fourth, how much time can you spend?

Be sure to allow enough time to account for weather and rest days, if necessary. Don't forget that rams in many Units **MUST** be sealed within 30 days of the kill, or sooner if the permit requires. Give yourself enough time after your hunt to take care of this. Most ADF&G offices are open M-F for sealing, but you should contact them in advance to check for holiday closures or limited sealing hours.

Finally, what are you looking for in a ram? Are you looking for just any legal ram, or are you interested in trying to find an animal with a specific appearance or horn configuration?

For example, rams from the Chugach usually exhibit large bases, with deep-dropping horns, while Wrangell rams seem to have wide-flaring horns and tighter curl. Alaska Range rams usually have smaller bases than rams from other ranges, though exceptions are found from time to time. And, many of the most heavily hunted (accessible) areas produce smaller than average rams as many of the legal sheep are harvested each year.

Reading recommendations

'Sheep Hunting in Alaska' by Tony Russ
'Sheep Stalking in Alaska' by Tony Russ
'Quest for Dall Rams' by Duncan Gilchrist

Other resources

- Hunter success rates by game management unit are available on the ADF&G webpage at: <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=sheephunting.harvest>. Once there, use the 'advanced harvest statistics' link to refine your search by unit and subunit
- Contacting the ADFG office closest to your selected hunt area will help you get in touch with the biologists, researchers, and technicians who are most familiar with that area.
- Area office phone numbers are listed both on page 4 of the hunting regulation packet, and at <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=contacts.main>