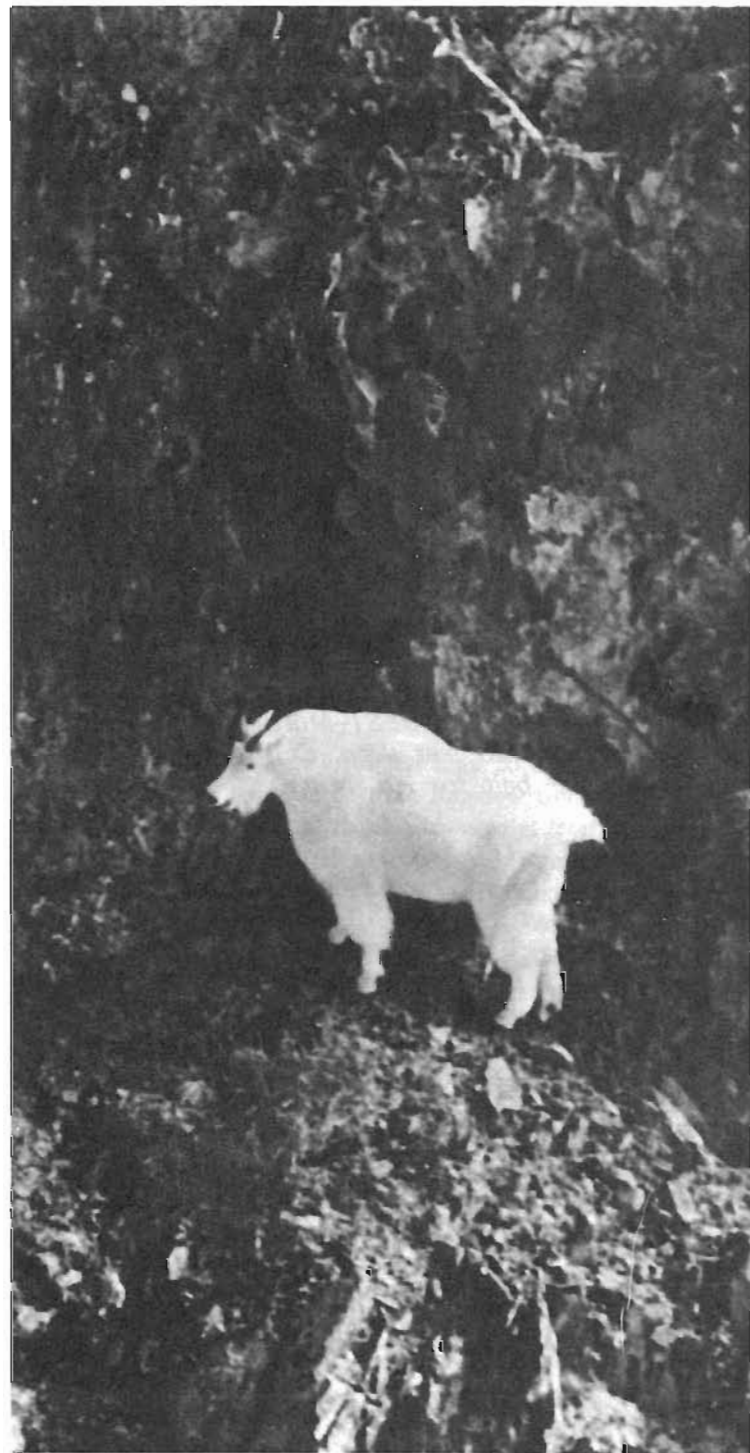


THE KODIAK GOAT

By Jack Alexander
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Kodiak

PROBABLY NO OTHER North American mammal has such an inaccessible and forbidding habitat as the mountain goat. In this rugged environment where level ground is almost nonexistent and where clouds, gales, snow and danger are always present, the goat lives and thrives. Being sure-footed, brave and rugged, the goat is able to garner a livelihood from the meager vegetation and to use the uneven topography for protection from both the elements and its enemies. These characteristics have justly earned this mountain dweller the reputation of being the toughest game of all.

In Alaska, goat distribution is limited primarily to the high coastal ranges where rainfall is extensive and terrain is rugged. Though much of Kodiak Island fits this description, mountain goats were not present there prior to 1952. During the following two years, 18 goats were transplanted and released near Hidden Basin, about 40 miles southwest of the city of Kodiak. This action placed mountain goats into an area where they may have naturally occurred if it were not for the natural barriers which exist.



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Transplant Takes On Tough Terrain

Since the introduction of goats, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service have continuously observed and recorded the growth and distribution of the Kodiak goat population. In recent years increasing goat numbers have been observed in areas distant from their release site. For this reason, it was decided a conservative harvest could be safely conducted. Since 1968, mountain goat hunting on Kodiak Island has provided a new and unique experience for many island residents.

Mountain goats belong to the same family as sheep, bison and muskoxen. This family has two very distinctive characteristics. Unlike many other game animals, both sexes possess horns. Their horns differ from the antlers of moose, deer or elk, which are shed each year. The horn is an outgrowth of the skull covered by a type of hardened hair material and remains with the animal throughout its life. On the horn, each year's growth is marked by ridges or lines. Thus the horn, which is normally salvaged for its trophy value, provides a valuable tool to the biologist in determining the age of harvested animals.

In addition to the meat and horns, the hide of a goat is highly prized. Pelage of the goat is a dense undercoat of white wool-like hair, and over this a cover of long, white guard hairs. The long hair on the back and upper parts of the leg gives this animal a very shaggy appearance. The under wool is very fine and rivals cashmere in softness and warmth. Indians of the northwest coastal regions collected and spun this wool into yarn to produce fine quality blankets. One such product, the Chilkat robe, is known worldwide.

The mountain goat fears few predators. Eagles may take a new-born kid, or an occasional goat may fall prey to a bear as it passes through a valley to another mountaintop. The goat's chief causes of mortality are starvation and parasitic infections which serve to weaken the animal and make survival through the long winter difficult. Goats often fall victim to rock and snow slides or an occasional miscalculation while traversing a rock ledge results in death.

Billies, as male goats are called, average from 200 to 300 pounds in body weight. It was reported that a billy weighing 500 pounds was killed in the early 1900s in Southeastern Alaska. The females, or nannies, are generally 10 to 20 per cent smaller than the billies.

The horn is about the only reliable characteristic by which a hunter may distinguish the billies from the smaller nannies. A billie's horns will sweep upward and back in a gradual curve almost straight up for about two-thirds of their length and then curve sharply backwards at the tips. A nanny's horns may be as long or longer than a billie's, but are generally more slender.

As with many northern animals, the breeding season occurs in November and young are born in June when conditions are most favorable. At birth, kids weigh in the neighborhood of five to seven pounds and normally remain with the nanny until the following spring. Twins are common in Kodiak goats. Surveys indicate that nearly 25 per cent of the nannies with kids have given birth to twins. Through the summer and fall, small groups of nannies with kids numbering in the twenties are a common sight. Billies are more solitary in nature and are found alone or in groups of two or three.

The four-year harvest of less than 20 goats indicates the difficulties in hunting Kodiak goats. Besides hunting a critter that is pound for pound one of the toughest animals alive, hunters must contend with weather and terrain that may be classified as the roughest in the state. Experience has shown that the white goat will absorb as much lead as elk or bear and a slug that would knock a deer tail over tines will hardly make a goat blink twice. In goat country one or two steps may mean a long hard fall, a ruined trophy or many hours of hard climbing to recover a carcass. The wise hunter will carry a rifle designed to anchor the goat on the spot. The .270 should be considered the minimum caliber for goat hunting. The 7 mm magnum or .300 magnum is even better if the hunter can handle them. This is one case where bigger is better.

Time has proven most transplants to be a mistake, but the introduction of goats to Kodiak Island appears to have been an exception. The population is now believed to be in excess of 200 animals and the trend appears upward. This population will safely permit a removal of at least 15 animals annually and still allow continued growth and dispersal. ■

Jack Alexander received his B.S. degree in zoology at Brigham Young University and did postgraduate work in wildlife management at Utah State University. He began working for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in 1966 and spent one year working on caribou and marine mammals out of the Anchorage office. In May, 1967 Alexander was transferred to Kodiak where he is now an area management biologist.

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