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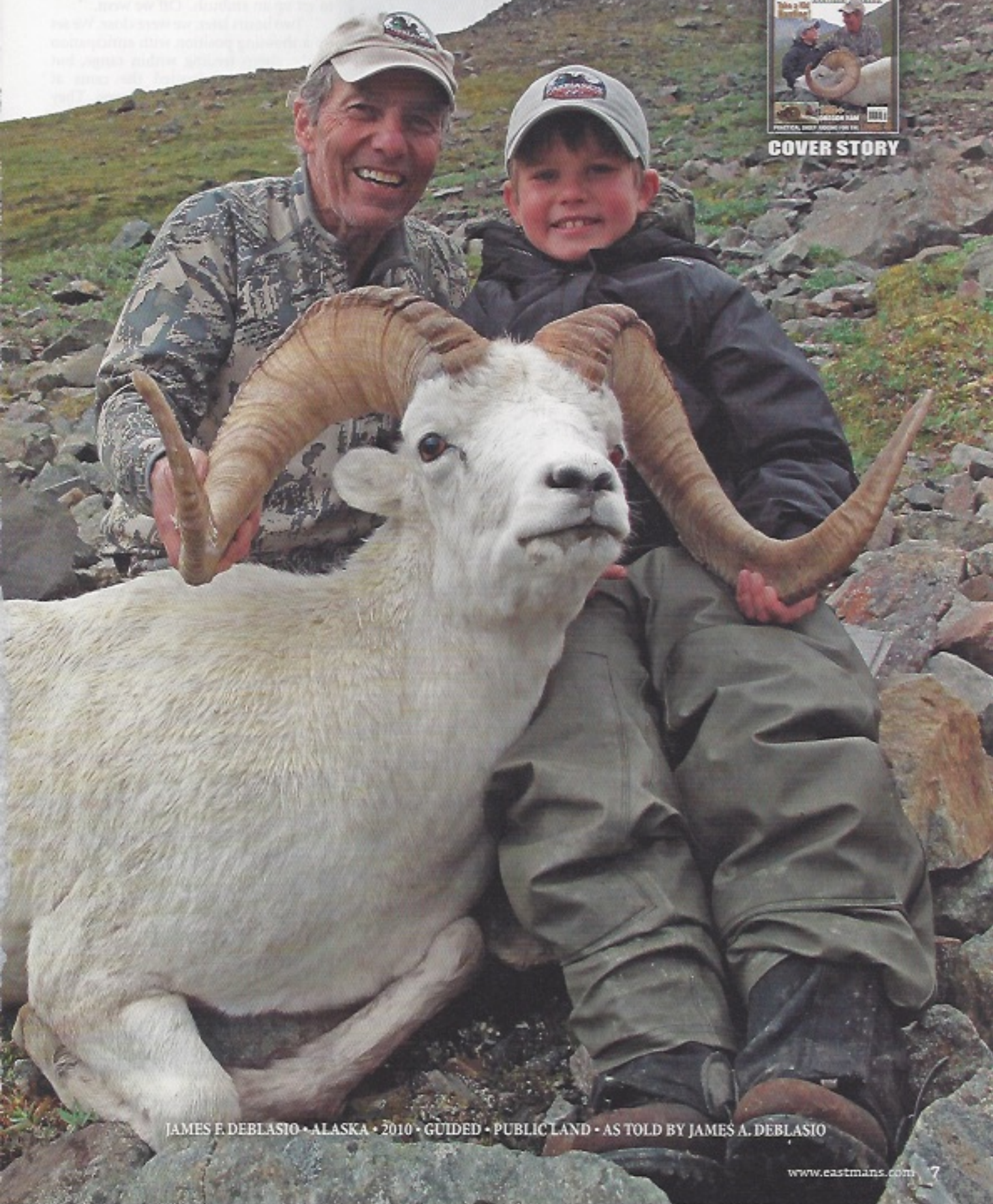
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PRACTICAL SHEEP JUDGING FOR THE LOWER 48

“At one point, Lance was shivering so hard I could hear his teeth chattering. James snuggled up to me on my backpack but never once complained.”



COVER STORY



JAMES F. DEBLASIO • ALASKA • 2010 • GUIDED • PUBLIC LAND • AS TOLD BY JAMES A. DEBLASIO



Clockwise from upper left: 1) James locked in a struggle with "the big one". 2) Victorious! 3) James poses with his gift ram.



and left for higher country. We hiked about five miles on the riverbed and started for the summit. In short order, James displayed that he was sure-footed, nimble and locked onto Lance's heels like a sheepdog. From the first morning until the end of the trip, James was all business.

Late that evening, Lance found two spots that would accommodate a dome tent. We set up camp, had dinner, and drifted off to sleep - then the rain came.

August 9: Brisk temperatures and rain periodically throughout the day. After two hours up the hill, Lance and James spotted seven sheep at 700 yards. We were in a shallow creek that provided minimal hiding cover. Lance studied the sheep and determined they were all rams but two were shooters. One of the two shooters was heavier and had longer horns. From 700 yards, Lance sized the ram at 39 inches - this was the ram for James.

We were pinned down for four hours in the rain, until the sheep got up and fed out of sight. Promptly, we were up out of the creek bed and on toward the summit - the going got steep, muddy, rainy and windy. We topped out in two hours, made camp, ate some hot food and got ready for the next morning's hunt. James snuggled into his sleeping bag talking about going after "my ram" in the morning.

August 10: Opening day of the Dall's sheep hunting season. Lance was up early and spotted the sheep about a mile below us. He determined the best approach to the sheep would be down the face of the slope, keeping a ridge between the sheep and us. We went down the face of the slope 400 yards and the sheep reversed their course and started toward us. This was bad news since we were exposed with very little cover. Soon, the sheep changed course and we were able to scurry back to the summit.

Once there, we studied the sheep for a while. The rams were heading back down the hill to feed and bed down on a grassy area, which would allow us to move to the right and drop off the slope to set up an ambush. Off we went.

Two hours later, we were close. We set up a shooting position with anticipation of the sheep feeding within range, but suddenly, Lance spotted the rams at 340 yards back across the canyon. They were looking nervous and traveling away from us, but they soon calmed down and started feeding away from us.

We moved 30 yards downhill behind a huge rock for cover. The rams fed uphill and bedded down 700 yards from us - effectively pinning us down. We lay there in the rain and cold for nine hours. At one point, Lance was shivering so hard I could hear his teeth chattering. James snuggled up to me on my backpack but never once complained.

At 6 p.m., the rain had stopped and the sheep started to move a little. The rams slowly worked their way downhill to a position below us. As soon as the sheep were out of sight, we moved closer. The move was perfect and the sheep came out 110 yards below us.

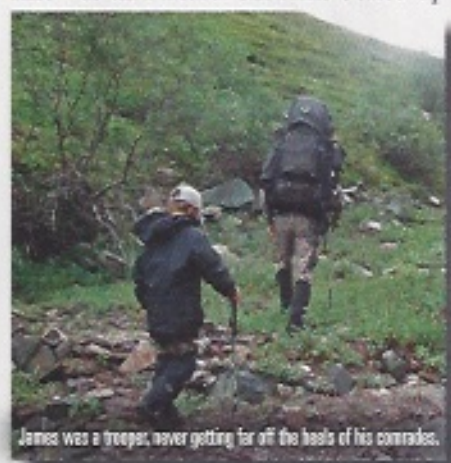
The rams were milling around in a group and wouldn't provide a good opportunity to identify the correct ram. Then, one of the rams spotted us and off they went. They ran down the hill, across the creek, and up a steep rock face and then stopped and looked back. Lance said, "James, shoot the last ram - 184 yards!"

James turned to me, "Daddy, is it the bottom ram?"

I asked Lance, "Is it the bottom ram?" Lance insisted it was.

I turned back to James and said, "It's the bottom ram, James."

Once second later, the crack of the rifle was all I heard. Six rams bolted up



James was a trooper, never getting far off the heels of his comrades.



James' equipment: Rifle: 243 Ruger M77 Mark II Scope: Nikon **Ammo:** Federal Premium **Spotting scope:** Swarovski AT320 20-60
Cams: Silva **Boots:** Iowa Sheep Hunter **Pack:** Barney's Pinnacle Pack **Rangefinder:** Leica **Knife:** Hardside Pivots **Camera:** Canon G-10 **Tent:**
North Face VE25, Hilleberg **Alak Sleeping bag:** Mountain Hardware **Raingear:** Silva Bear, Helly Hansen
About the author: James is 84 and lives in Boise, Idaho. He has hunted for most of his life, but says this was the best adventure of them all.

James will receive a pair of Nikon EDG 10x32 Binoculars for his cover story. For details, see p. 4.





David and son getting ready for the big shot.

the rock face and quickly vanished. James' ram was mortally wounded, traveling down and around the hill, where he collapsed.

James and Lance headed to the ram while David and I moved the gear. James had gotten his ram and was thrilled and proud. The horns measured over 38 inches long.

The photo opportunity for any trophy big game is only once. Lance and I both like to take time and try to get those pictures to reinforce the memory of the hunt. Hunting is all about great adventures and memories, and to have made so many with my son is what makes it even more special. With a small break in the rain, we spent 45 minutes taking hundreds of photos - James was all smiles, and so was I.

After the photos, James, David, and I headed for the summit while Lance and Talbot caped the ram. The weather took a turn for the worst, blasting the mountain with rain and cold winds.

We arrived at the summit at 10:30 a.m. We grabbed some snacks, crawled into the dome tent, got out of our wet clothes, and talked about our adventure. Lance and Talbot arrived with the cape and horns two hours later.

August 11: The next morning took us all a little longer to get out of our sleeping bags. Everyone was still thrilled and reliving the hunt. The weather had cleared that morning and we broke camp and started down the hill. James was dogging Lance the entire way down, nipping at his heels. By this time, James and Talbot were lifelong buddies and having a great time together. We were making good time going down the mountain and made a call on the satellite phone for an air taxi to pick us up at 5:30 p.m. We had to keep up a good pace to make it to the airstrip in time and the first plane landed just as we got to the gravel bar at 5:35 p.m.

As we flew away, we looked into the distance at where a special hunt had taken place. It could never be replicated, only remembered with great fondness.



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