

A sunset over a mountain range with a lake in the foreground. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, with the sun low on the horizon. The mountains are dark silhouettes against the bright sky. The lake in the foreground reflects the colors of the sunset.

# ETERNITY SAFARI: REDISCOVERING TRUTHS WE ALWAYS KNEW IN THE PURE NORTH

BY JACK EVANS

We fly on seven planes further and further into remoteness. We ride on seven horses for two days into a heavenly valley. We take only four of them from our tiny campsite in the bottom and ride into the higher mountain draw up above. It sits behind a gate of gleaming cliffs that soar over the tundra like the hallucinated backdrop to we-know-not-what will unfold.



**T**he air is Northern-blue and glassy. Bare sunlight points down at us. There isn't a trace of artifice or human hands to be seen. But the second we enter the great mountain dish, we're spotted.

The sheep saw us. We hide into the ground, whispering, excited, rushing. He sits half a mile away. We hold still in the bushes and train our hunting eyes up vertically. We can define the ram in spotting scopes and binoculars: "I think that's him." Logan Young and Joël Potié read his age, his origins, his habits in a whisper. My father and I gaze open-mouthed at the scene.

For me, this gorgeous third day in the Yukon was unrolling before my eyes like a tour of a city from a dream. But at soon as I hear "I think that's him," it becomes an arena. The megalithic draw we've entered suddenly feels tighter – made only of the space between the sheep and I. He sits like a total regent on a sunlit pedestal, the top of an organ-pipe on the cathedral of a mountain. High rock towers and scree chutes surround him. Six other sheep graze around at all different heights and angles. The ram though, is sitting still, mutely upright, showing ringed horns more beautiful and more commanding than any headdress or crown. He blinks at us from

far and above. I sit in a willow clutch at the bottom of the draw and watch his head turn. He has one clattered, broken horn and another like an ornamental scythe sweeping low under his eye. I've never seen an animal so completely removed from my version of reality on the ground. He's impossibly wild, different, and distant – an ultimate prey animal with magnified vision and an ethereal resilience to the heights and winds and freezes. He is the leader of his group. He is the color of the clouds. I watch him, incredulous, until I realize, or remember: I want to get up there.



We all four agree, and get started at a crawl.

In all my hunting days, I've never taken up a stalk at this scale. Over six hours, we ascend a vertical stone maze until we're level in the sky with the ram but not close enough. There is an entire valley and a moat to cross to reach their mountain where we can only hope to get a shot directly upwards. Sheep hunting, it occurs to me, is very much over my head. But it is also a flat-out fantasy that I've come here to immerse in and learn. The sheep are stirring as if to leave. We crawl

as fast as we can.

Logan picks the path forward. Joël hangs back with glasses on the ram, signaling to us where his eyes are directed. My father climbs up the mountain behind me. He's sixty now, and of the hundreds of days we've spent in the woods together, this might be the first that I've noticed him move slower than me. I can already tell that this is the most physically extreme hunt I've ever been on, but I know that no matter of spirit will slow my dad down. I can also tell that he and I are already proud of each other – just to

be here. The sheep stands up.

Things start moving fast. Logan and I are 450 yards below him. This is a shot I've not taken before – trigonometry I can't figure. My mind whirs. How will we ever get closer than this? I feel the trigger and wonder where the bullet will land. I feel my heartbeat in the trigger. Out of silence, the whole valley explodes. The bullet plunks like a stone from a catapult behind the ram and it takes a step into an unseen escape route in the towers.

Logan and I charge closer, taking advantage of the loud confusion. We stack up prone over a moss-heap. I'm aiming my gun straight upwards. "He'll pop out on that side of the rock," Logan whispers.

"Leftside?"

"Right."

"Rightside?"

"No, the left!"

I have guided hunts and I know the harrowing rush of this moment-of-truth strategizing. I know how guesses, distance, judgements, direction and timing all get jumbled in the desperate whispers between hunter and guide as the vital opportunity of a shot looms. We fire questions back and forth to each other. We clarify:

"He'll come out here."

"Okay."

"Get ready."

But the shot is only mine, and I am not as well practiced as I suddenly wish I was. The ram steps out. In total contrast to myself, he looks calm. I fire and miss.

Doubt, that's called. It feels like a big empty landscape in my stomach on which sheep run off and the sun sets. I am hyperaware of my incomplete confidence. We run

forward again.

To me, a good shot requires intent. We line up a third effort on the ram. I envision the coup stick. I see the animal through the scope and want to touch it on the heart. Now, the calculation of drop and windage goes to the periphery of my mind. He appears angled, imperfectly – but it's what I've got. I fire.

"You shot a Fannin sheep brother!" Logan yelps.

"Yeah, once!"

The ram has vanished. Joël and my dad join us as we rush up the sheep's mountain until we can't breathe. What follows is a rushing mountain chase after the ram. I am sad and scared to have not killed him in a single shot, but impressed that he has taken me up to his terrain. We climb the towers, exhausted, and



follow him around the corners of the rock formations all lit up in evening orange. We lose some hope, then glimpse him again and catch him on a slope a thousand yards above the valley bottom. It is an overwhelming scene. I finish the kill and shed a tear when I hold this sky animal, like an eagle, in my hands by his crowning, life-defining horns.

We carry him off the mountain

in the dark, all of us battered, exhausted, and tie his meat and hide to the horses to ride them out under the dizzying spangle of the Northern Lights. They flash green above us, and I wonder what kind of beautiful world I've arrived in.

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At noon the next day I lay crumpled by the campfire. My dad staggers out of our tent.

"Today is officially: Robert Service Day," he declares. "We are not doing anything."

My dad and I have planned this great immersion for years. We aim to hunt sheep, moose, bear, caribou, wolf and pray to hunt wolverine. We'll travel by horseback and forget our worries of the modern world. We'll be like Mongols. For both of us, hunting is where essences of lives concentrate – ours and animals'. We do it for the disruption, and beauty, of confrontations within nature as it is. Killing is hardly the point of it for either of us – we came to spend three weeks just open to it all – so we celebrate the randomly-chosen Yukon poet's day by carving the ribs of the sheep. By the time they're smoked I somehow feel like I've been here for years.

The four of us are camped out on the lush tundra of the Little Wind River Valley. It is the untouched, gorgeous centre of my friend Logan's Midnight Sun Outfitting concession. We spend our days exploring it with our eyes up, to the highest heights. We ride silently through spruce-tree cities. We cross rivers in their shallows where the water is so clear that it just looks like





the rocks are shaking. In deeper channels the water is teal, because it brings that color down from the sky. Or at least that's the way things start to make sense to me here – not really by reasoning, but in the way the world appears as it's fed to me. I understand how native North Americans created such colorful mythologies to orient their lives. Without a book, a theory, or a voice

sunlight – from a mile away we can see its spiral and mass. This stalk, as slow and concentrated as the last, is all the more hair-raising for the animal at stake. He hears our human noise and alerts at the critical moment. Spotting for my dad, I watch the ram stand up and loom over him just before the shot cracks. I can only imagine the face he saw in the scope. Tomorrow will be Jack

our necks to see around her. A white and a black wolf glare at her disdainfully from the shore, then disappear. We hear a ghostly chorus of young wolves crying a few minutes later. It is a pure and strange sound like I've never heard before. It's musical, but seems to come from another reality.

Two hours later, a whole pack of wolves crosses a ravine in front of us and Joël and I watch the pups play and roll and bite each other. The mother goads them forwards. They're only just at the beginning of their lifelong wanderings. We try to sneak closer, only to have the white she-wolf mother suddenly appear at our side. We lock eyes and she judges us for a long two seconds, before turning and continuing towards infinite mountains to the south. Joël and I head east, smiling. We met with the wolf as unknown beings walking our separate paths in the same wilderness. I gaze out at the expanse she left for, wondering how she chose her path. Wondering how we choose ours.

We ride up the valley over lichen-spotted hills patterned like undersea coral. The weather gets slimy and I start to ride with my eyes down – until something bright pulses on the mountain.

A bear. It's barreling huge over the top of a bald hill, two hundred meters above our heads. It is massive, and it sweats silver light as it crosses the whole skyline in three pumping lopes. It totally fills our eyes, and Joel and I cossack-roll off our horses. Binoculars up – it's gone. We lower them. This hunt has already begun. Any bear hunt speaks danger, so our faces are stern. But there's a glimmer of thrill and



to tell you otherwise, what you make of things becomes more important than what can be proven about them.

For me, every second of this mostly-silent journey contains so much to learn. On the fifth day, we find a gigantic sheep around the mountain corner from our last encounter. Its horns beam in the

London Day, and we will spend it in quiet, deeply contented celebration of this sheep.

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On the eighth morning, Joël and I are hanging meat from a spruce pole when a female moose crashes into the lake beside us. We crane

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the bear's impression left in both of our eyes. We pull rifles out of our scabbards and tie the horses. This will be a test of our trust together, but even moreso, my trust in myself. That current shakes so much louder than the danger of the beast itself. We're climbing the hill.

It is a marathon in twenty minutes. It is a vertical, leg-burning heave straight upwards. We pace out eight huffing steps, then catch our breath. In my head and heart I try to prepare for this ultimate challenge. Bears are the most important animals to me. I deal with fear; I deal with images of the shame of disaster. Disaster could lie just over the hill. But I am in control of that,

I tell myself between gasps.

Joël makes no pretense of the severity. Trusting him, I hide nothing of my effort to mentally focus. By the time we make it up the searing climb I feel locked. I feel concentrated, my inner dialogue rested. My gun is loaded. Joël readies his, because this confrontation is going to be close. The bear could be just right there. One last gain of breath. We fix our angle of approach, and crawl the last few meters. Bigger than I thought: There it is.

The bear moves in the bushes ahead, and its movement is terrifying because it knows we are here and, like bears do, it's looking

for us. It finds us and raises its head and turns. It is a dragon; it is every overpowering beast you can imagine and more. It is better than us at everything we are trying to do. So I do my best, and with my rifle I focus, decide, and with massed determination I fire. The bear shudders and turns. I fire again. It goes down. And then it hauls its head up to the sky and I shoot again into its giant neck. It lays down and we are done with the fight.

I am surprised—it went so right, for me. I walk down the slope to meet the bear where it lays, dead or dying. I reach into its hot fur and pull its head around. The light is still in her amber eyes. Blood pulls



Within minutes the bear returned. Standing on his hind feet woofing and popping his teeth, the grizzly was determined to reclaim what he felt was his.

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from her pointed nose and streams onto my knees. I look her right in the eyes and my brain pulses and I weep. My heart contracts then feels like it will burst. I look up to Joël in tears and nod, and when I look back the shine in her eyes is gone. I hold her head and bloodied neck to my shoulder, to my chest. She lived a whole, pure, loved and raging life in this place. Where it ends, it turns to me and I become the carrier of

her days. I feel this, in a swell of enormous gratitude like I've never felt before. Not in any church, not with any person. Not even with myself. Taking a handful of snotty blood from her nose I am all praise, inside and out. Silent—the way that she speaks. I sit on this nameless mountain, the way that she lives. I run my whole hand through her hairs.

I feel like I will carry a bit of her bear life, which means little in the

worlds of people, but everything to me. And that is a private, secret bonding that cannot be invented or asked for but only claimed out of an embrace of chaos and the currents of love that continually set us on the hunting path. The magnets, God-placed, that pull us towards meetings of violence and bliss and the extremities of life, and death, that are constantly occurring beyond our human walls. What did I choose out of this? Nothing, it seems. I only





act. And in the act of following what feels right about hunting, and sometimes killing, I receive the blessing in many forms. This form, huge-scale, warm, as much a person as I am, breathed her last into my eyes because I took her life as she takes others. As something will take mine.

Because I am the one left alive, I take the moment it in for both of us.

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At the same time, my dad's shot a moose in a distant valley. We take the horses to him and do the long work of the disassembling. It's not much smaller than a young elephant and it takes more than a day of hard and heavy work to get it loaded onto the horses. On the slog back to camp I turn around and see my dad riding with bloody red moose antlers splayed out behind his packhorse. At sixty-two, leading a dinosaur-looking moose skull at the back of a horse that I know he can't ride very well, he seems incredibly, silently happy. And I am so proud of him.

The next day a plane comes to relieve us of the moose-load, to return Logan to camp to meet his wife and newborn son for the first time in months. I despatch a letter of crazily excited stories and discoveries to my girlfriend. Devin Hyde joins us in Logan's stead, and though it's his first season in the Yukon he seems entirely at home already. The plane lifts off to restore the total silence and we continue down the Little Wind valley, camping and hunting off of our

seven horses.

In the nights, we leave them to graze wild and collect them out of a cold steam each morning. Unsaddled, they look as right in this place as the sheep or moose, and it feels like an honor to have their help in hunting out here. They take us three days south, moving in a proud pack train. We turn the corner of a whole mountain range to enter a thicker forestland. Mist sags into it for several hours each morning, giving some unknown, barbarous thrill to our trek. We're camping in bog-clearings, boreal sinks. We're eating berries off the ground; eating moose heart. Eating bear. We're deep in this valley and I start looking askance at the date of my return home. How will I not stay out here? I wonder.

Joël and I leave a spike camp with an hour before sunset. The valley we enter feels like it exists in another geological era. There's a river in the



bottom of it that cuts out a perfect forty-five degree embankment on both sides. Each side is six stories tall. We saw two brother-moose across the cut and decide to stalk them. I know that we both know there's not one we'll kill, but we give it all our determination and joy. The clouds above are lit purple and pink and the sky looks more like Jupiter's than our own. Every drop of water from the river to the dew on the alder seems to reflect these colors. I feel lightheaded in amazement, until I remind myself that it's not so extra-terrestrial, this world. It's just the corner of our Earth that I'd always wanted to find. Joël and I charge up the colossal trench carrying our paltry weapons, and they might as well be spears because the giant moose lumbering in their time-ignorant intelligence might as well be mammoths. We make of it what we will.

In these places I feel like the hunt—the discovery of the world in front of us—is without an end. Places so old suggest that any beginning's imperceivable anyways.

We hunt caribou, stalking them up to a hilltop where their horns sway in a fog like totems of a forgotten culture. My dad and I each shoot one of the animals that has long made human life in the North possible. We gather up their meat and hides with a primordial kind of gratitude.

My human life in the North is getting more animal. While other great adventures in my life have brought intense realizations, mind-bending sights, huge changes to my



being or deeply educating lessons, this one is leading to something different. There's no obvious, graspable revelation in it. I have lost track of the days and feel like I've been out here forever. The boundaries melt away: worries, confusion, order and daily routine have all dissolved from my mind. We

My father shoots the wolverine he has hunted all his life, and we all eat pieces of its wild and precious heart. Joël and I ride out in the last two days to the furthest reaches of the land we'll cross on this voyage. Before we head out, the moon rises red in front of us, roaring with light like a laser. I can see it in all its

they are) are so pure, simple, quietly continuous and far to the beautiful North of our world, on this windless golden morning, that I almost want to cry. Who will know what's simply out here? Who will know how quiet the earth gets on its own. How full of life it really is without us. Floating seeds and little white flies glitter and

sway in the air all over this expanse. And the rocks hold up the soils for the lichens and the branches. And lakes pool just for the shimmering at different spots, different heights of their convenience. And none of it ever needed a mind like mine to live onwards, around this planet forever. I am a welcome visitor in it myself. Here, in the broad alluvial valleys is the pure experience of life if I've ever had it. Or somewhere between me and there.

Beyond me, before there. One day I will stay in that place. That place of observation and prayer. The Now, some may call it. The witnessed forever. Hunting, in its essence, takes me here—to where it can be

accessed. Because now that I have seen the red moon rise like another planet, and shared breath with a bear, and traversed an untouched land with kind and loyal beasts under my legs and walked in the skylines with caribou, I know that I now feel totally at home on this Earth. And my legs tremble with the love of that truth. WS



are exploring, inside and out. On the eighteenth day Joël and I roam pure yellow valleys almost wordlessly and I feel entirely at peace. I think: "Which way is the breeze blowing?" And the only seed in the air drifts past my face, responding. I think: "Thanks." Fifteen minutes later I'm thinking about owls, and an owl lights on a bush beside me, blinks and flies off. As I said, we make of it what we will.

definition, and for the whole ride I contemplate what it means to live on our planet, as opposed to any other...

On one of the last days I sit on a boulder over a whole trisection of yellow draws and hills-become-mountains. The mountains, in their coloured rows, without a scratch of hindrance on them (they don't even give the impression of ever having been seen by humans. So themselves

