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Alberta bighorn sheep killed near Longview sets world record

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(Photo courtesy of Boone and Crockett Club)

Ram tough, no doubt — but even the biggest bighorn sheep in the world is no match for an 1,800-kg car.

And this ram was the biggest. Not the biggest in the province; not even the biggest in Canada.

This unfortunate creature was the biggest bighorn sheep ever recorded in the world, and if not for an unhealthy appetite for road salt and the occasional taste of spilled anti-freeze, it's possible the curly-horned king of the ruminants might still be alive.

“It was the result of a vehicle collision,” said Reg Prostebby, of the 14-year-old ram’s untimely demise.

But what was bad luck for the sheep turned into the serendipitous score of a lifetime for ranch manager Todd Snodgrass, who found the dead animal off Hwy. 541 near the OH Ranch near Longview, and was allowed to keep the tremendous rack after he reported the kill to Alberta Fish & Wildlife.

“This ram and a younger ram had lived on the ranch where I worked since 2009,” Snodgrass told Boone and Crockett Club, an America conservation and hunting group that keeps records of North America’s biggest game.

“The older ram would go down to the highway a couple times a month, but the younger ram would rarely follow. We always wondered if one of these trips to the highway would be his last.”

This was back in 2010 — but it wasn’t until this past weekend that Snodgrass and the rest of the sheep-hunting world found out just how tremendous the old salt-licker really was.

With the official panel of judges located in the United States, taking the massive set of horns over the international border and back was just too big a hassle, and so Snodgrass accepted an unofficial measure of 207⁴/₈ inches — enough to place the horns as third largest ever collected.

In a community that counts both hunted and collected trophies, anything over 200 inches comes with serious bragging rights, and Snodgrass might have rested on his laurels.

But Prostebby, president of Wild Sheep Foundation Alberta was just too curious, and when he realized enough officials would be in Red Deer this past weekend for the annual convention, he asked for an official measurement of the No. 3 rack.

SUN+ with flexible steel measuring tapes, the expert judges carefully examined the Longview horns — and when they were finished, a new record of 2094/8 inches had been set.

“We made history,” said Prostebby.

That the new record-holder is another Alberta sheep comes as no surprise to Prostebby, who says a combination of conservation efforts and an ideal environment for bighorns has made our province a paradise for trophy hunters.

“Alberta is the mecca — it’s genetics, it’s habitat, and it’s who we are in Alberta,” said Prostebby.

At the weekend convention in Red Deer, five of the top ten bighorn sheep trophies were gathered under one roof, all from Alberta.

“That’s a remarkable achievement,” said Prostebby.

That included a rack that had been expected to break the old measure, recovered to great fanfare in 2014 on the Cadomin Mine property east of Jasper National Park, and initially measured at 2091/8 inches.

But freshly collected horns are required to undergo a 60-day drying off period, and the re-measurement showed the Cadomin rack had shrunk by four inches due to water loss. It ended up in fifth place at 2057/8.

Such exacting measurements are about more than bragging rights, as a 207-incher taken in 1924 is currently for sale in Utah for a whopping US\$95,000.

The value of such trophies has in turn helped Alberta with conservation, and each year, the Alberta government auctions off special licences for mule deer, elk and bighorn sheep, with bids regularly reaching the quarter-million dollar range.

It’s big bucks for big bucks — or in this case, big rams.

