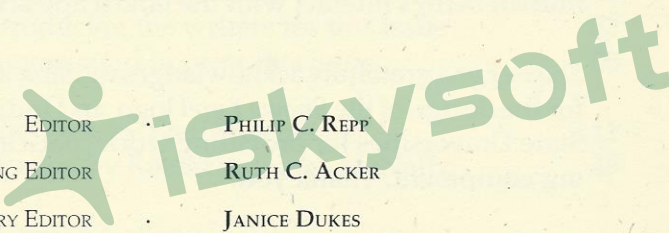


# SNOWY Egret



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## MOUNTAIN GOATS IN THE FOG

by Bruce Ransom

A sudden loud crunch on the hard snow above brought me to attention, and I instantly looked up to see two white forms bounding and bleating at each other as they emerged from the gray fog. By the time I realized they were mountain goats, playfully dodging and darting at each other, they noticed me sitting motionless on my log. With an immediate stiff-legged stop, they came to rest a mere stone's toss away.

Once they saw me, the goats abandoned their playfulness and shyly ambled back and forth in front of me. Holding my breath, I tried to act disinterested, but they seemed more curious about me than I was about them. I remained frozen for a while but couldn't resist chancing a slow turn to fumble my camera out of the pack behind me. They stopped and watched as I pivoted in my seat, apparently not alarmed by my even, deliberate movements. Camera in hand, I began shooting exposures at a frantic pace.

Both goats circled me carefully, negotiating around the small camp as if they owned the place, which I quickly conceded they did. The friskier of the two was smaller and had short, pointed horns. The other looked like the heavyweight champion of mountain goats, muscular, with very long horns that looked more

menacing the closer he approached. With deliberate, practiced steps, they both gingerly stepped over the guylines of my tent and examined my gear inside and out. I slowly stood and began imperceptibly to ease my way toward them as they nosed various items.

Then the bigger of the two goats approached my ice axe, sticking out of the hard snow. After nosing the ice axe, he dropped his head and scratched the space between his horns on the vertical, aluminum shaft. I had to agree that if you were a goat, that would be one of the hardest places to get to. Once I realized what he was doing, I quickly raised my camera to get a picture. Unfortunately, the sudden movement alarmed him and he instantly jerked his head upward, catching the adz of the ice axe between his horns. To my alarm, this catapulted the axe high into the air, twisting ever so slightly as it flew up and then down the slope into the fog and out of my sight. Eventually I heard it bouncing and sliding unseen, then clanging against some rocks before coming to rest in silence. This was disconcerting because I needed the ice axe to go further safely. Or even to go back the way I came!

The goat looked at me, seemed to shrug, then proceeded to my backpack, leaning against the log where I had been sitting. As he began licking the straps, I recalled stories of Olympic mountain goats chewing pack straps, clothes, and even boots in search of salt accumulated from sweat. I watched cautiously, afraid he might start chewing on the straps. I needed them, too, if I ever expected to hike out with my gear. When the smaller goat followed and started licking the pack too, I figured I had to do something to deter them. I stamped my foot as gently as I could, and they looked at me, seemed to ponder their actions briefly, and then moved on to explore something else.

Shooting frame after frame, I got braver and edged closer to my visitors. Curiously, they didn't seem to mind, so I slowly moved toward the bigger one, eventually getting close enough to touch it. But heeding its sharp horns, I resisted the temptation to reach out.

After running out of film, I just sat down, leaned back, and watched my new friends' antics. A few minutes later, they apparently got bored with me and my confining camp and ambled off through a short row of leaning trees, disappearing into the fog on the Hoh River side. Knowing that they could not proceed more than a foot or two in that direction—on the other side of the bent trees was the sheer cliff that ended four thousand feet below at the Hoh River—I waited a moment for them to return. When they didn't, I went over to see where they were.

The goats had disappeared into nothingness. I strained to see or hear any hint of them, but the fog had swallowed them up, leaving no trace. Trying to assure myself I hadn't dreamed them, I located their hoofprints in the snow, and confirmed that my ice axe was gone.

Very carefully I kick-stepped my way down the steep snow slope below the camp. Spotting the ice axe, I slowly eased myself down to it and with it in hand climbed back up to camp. I walked back over to the trees again, looking for the goats, but still no sign.

It eventually grew dark. I stowed my pack inside the tent for another damp night. Pushing my clothes into the sleeping bag's stuff sack, I slipped into the bag. I replayed the visit in my mind several times, soon falling asleep.

Since that first time, whenever my camp is enveloped in fog, I listen for the least little sound and instinctively look up in the hopes that the visitors have reappeared. I have seen mountain goats since, but always from afar. Perched high above, they peered down at me, keeping their distance. A couple of times I tried to climb up to them, but pursuit always proved futile. They effortlessly outran me, disappearing among the mountain's peaks and crags. I've learned that you must wait for them to come to you.

