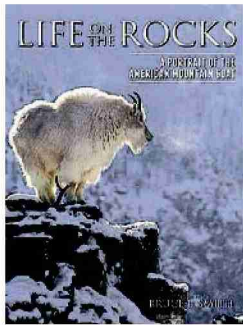


Life on the Rocks: A Portrait of the American Mountain Goat

Bruce L. Smith (University Press of Colorado, \$34.95)

The blurb: The American mountain goat is one of the most elusive and least familiar species of hoofed mammals in North America. Confined to the remote and rugged mountains of the western United States and Canada, these extraordinary mountaineers are seldom seen or encountered, even by those who patiently study them. Life on the Rocks offers an intimate portrayal of this remarkable



animal through the eyes and lens of field biologist and photographer Bruce Smith. Color photographs and accounts of Smith's personal experiences living in Montana's Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Area accompany

descriptions of the American mountain goat's natural history. Smith explores their treacherous habitat, which spans the perilous cliffs and crags of the Rocky, Cascade, and Coast mountain ranges. The physical and behavioral adaptations of these alpine athletes enable them to survive a host of dangers, including six-month-long winters, scarce food sources, thunderous avalanches, social strife, and predators like wolves, bears, lions, wolverines and eagles. Smith also details the challenges these animals face as their territory is threatened by expanding motorized access, industrial activities, and a warming climate.

Excerpt: Although nimble in the mountains by hoofed animal standards, North America's Dall, Stone and big-horn sheep (collectively called mountain sheep) possess neither the physical adaptations nor the raw ability of the mountain goat on cliffs and crags. While sheep

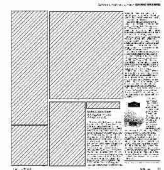
bound crisply across outcrops and slopes, the goat is a plodder and inclined to stick to steeper terrain. Leverage, friction and balance are the tools of his trade. The sheep are free-climbing scramblers; the goat is a technician.

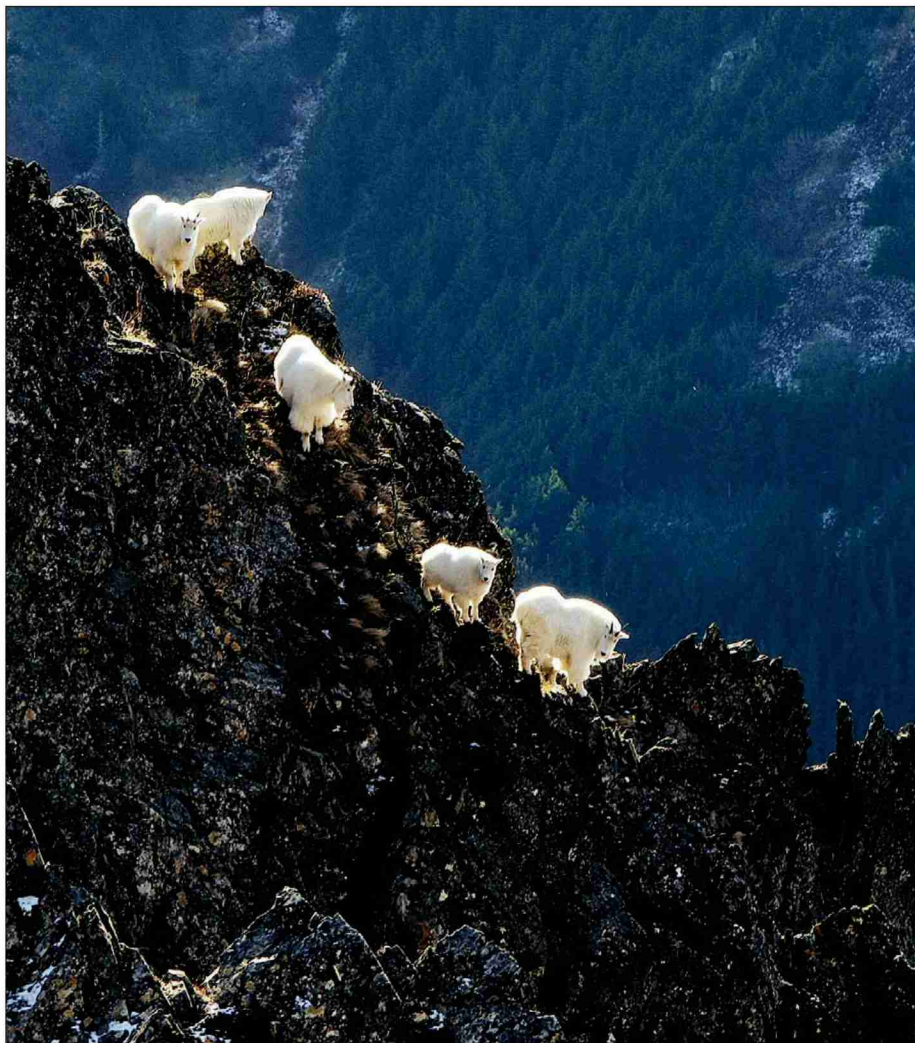
I've watched a goat climb to the top of a dizzying pinnacle and stand with all four feet together on a summit measuring only eight inches square. Then he raised a hind foot, scratched behind an ear, and shook the dust from his coat, unimpressed with the feat as I looked on in wonder.

The goat's outward appearance is marked by an extravagant robe of white. It's from late fall into spring that he looks his most elegant, highlighted by a full beard, pantaloons that resemble baggy basketball shorts, and a dorsal ridge of hair that when backlit casts a radiant halo befitting a beast living so close to the heavens. This outer pelage of five- to seven-inch-long guard hair sheds wind and snow and protects a dense insulating mantle of underfur (goats patented the concept of layering for warmth!) as luxurious as the finest cashmere. To my eye, they are among the most photogenic of subjects.

From May into August, goats metamorphose from this shaggy beast of winter into trimmer summer attire. Often last to shed is the guard hair of the pantaloons, scraggly remnants under the belly, and a goatee wisp of beard. With a fresh half-inch of wool adorning the rest of the body, the American mountain goat looks far from chic, if not comical, as the molt progresses. Only the Dall sheep of the far north shares an all white coat among ungulates. But unlike the goat, the sheep's closely cropped summer appearance changes little during winter.

When the goats began to shed their too-warm-for-summer dress in spring, indigenous peoples from Alaska to Washington plucked tufts of this fur found snagged on bushes. After twisting the wool into yarn, they wove blankets and garments prized for their beauty, comfort, and warmth.





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Mountain goats navigate the steep terrain on a ridge south of Hope Point.