

Big-horn Confrontation: Wilderness Harmony Endangered

by Cst. J.K. Mason, Cranbrook, B.C.

We could see the big-horn ram above us on the cliff, staring intently at something out of our sight, when it reared up on its hind legs and disappeared from view. The resounding crack a second later told us that something was definitely going on, so with camera gear in hand, we soon found ourselves photographing one of nature's most spectacular sights. Two Rocky Mountain big-horn rams were fighting it out for supremacy within the herd.

Each ram would stare intently at the other, and then, when ready, they would rear up on their hind legs and walk forward. Gaining momentum they would drop down on all fours and with a final lunge, would connect with their horns. The timing and force exerted were simply incredible.

This was the second year that Bill Demchuk and I had gone to the national parks for a couple of days of photographing wildlife. We go to Yoho, Kootenay, Banff and Jasper, simply because the animals are isolated, easily accessible, and provide many opportunities to photographers.

Unfortunately, another type of person is also attracted to the parks for the same reasons. Through the professional poacher and the international black market, the parks' trophy big game animals are attracting big money. The game animals: elk, moose, goat, sheep, deer and bear, found in the protective confines of parks, are exceptional animals that represent the last accessible uncompromised wildlife.

John Steele, a Banff Park Warden admits that park officials don't really know how many animals are lost each year in the four parks as a result of poaching, but from observations and headless carcasses found, he estimates around 10 animals each year.

A recent case, involving two individuals, Rankins and Shipsey, however, has shown the officers just how involved and lucrative poaching in the parks really is. William Rankins was a respected guide and outfitter from Cranbrook, B.C., which is about a three-hour drive away from the park boundaries. Michael Shipsey was an insurance salesman from California who spends about \$150,000 (U.S.) each year hunting the world's top game animals. His passion for blood sport, and his desire to be one of the continent's greatest hunters, soon led him to the Canadian national parks, which to him represented prime killing grounds — not places of tranquility and peace.

However, Shipsey needed an appearance of legality, so any animals poached in the parks would be laundered through Rankin's licensed hunting territory in B.C. before export to the U.S. Outside the parks, guided sheep hunts normally last two weeks, cost \$10,000, and usually have only a 50% success rate. Shipsey, however, wanted a quarantined trophy for the record books, so he paid Rankins \$27,000 that fall for a big-horn sheep that they shot, as it stood near the park highway.

Local conservation officer, Ken MacLellan said that a black market record